

# Global Christianity and the Role of Theological Education: Wrapping Up and Going Forward

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We gather now to conclude ICETE's fifteenth international consultation for theological educators. We have belatedly celebrated ICETE's 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary (which occurred in 2005), giving praise to God and recognizing the leadership contributions some of His choice servants have made to the formation and nurture of this global theological education network.

We came together to contemplate the reality, meaning and implications of evangelical Christianity's global nature and the role of theological education in light of these phenomena. We have witnessed and experienced the increasingly global deployment and development of evangelical theological education, including its maturing expressions through the eight member agencies and numerous associates and affiliates comprising ICETE. We reaffirmed our conviction that theological education serves the global church, reminding ourselves of our high and holy responsibility to contribute to developing spiritually, intellectually, practically and ecclesially the godly and gifted leaders our Saviour has given to His church.

## **Christianity's New Global Contours and Context**

On our first evening together professor Andrew Walls asserted that the 20<sup>th</sup> century has witnessed the greatest shift in the demographic and cultural contours of Christianity since the first century. During the great European colonial migrations of the past 400 years, Christianity's broadest extent and fullest cultural expression were associated with and emanated from the West. Westerners have tended to view themselves as the only Christians – as least the only authentic ones. Moreover, Western Christianity, including its institutions of theological education, have too often been unwitting handmaidens to certain influences of the Enlightenment upon the formulation of its theological and world view, imbibing the Enlightenment bias toward compartmentalization or exclusion of the supernatural realm and its inhabitants and phenomena.

Since the middle of the 20th century, we have witnessed a dramatic reversal in patterns of demographic and cultural migration, accompanied by sometimes violent worldwide social and political repercussions and realignment. We have also witnessed the unprecedented growth of the church in the majority world according to patterns and by means largely unanticipated by Western missionary strategists. Christianity is declining in its former territorial heartlands but spreading such that it is now a predominantly non-Western religion – and it seems poised to continue this demographic and cultural reorientation for some time to come.

Thus far, too much of what passes for theological education in the West and, through its pervasive residual influence upon emerging majority world churches, the educational philosophies

and curricula of non-Western theological schools characteristically consist of transmission of intellectual content and theological dogma that is heavily Enlightenment-laden. Simply put, too often theology poses and answers questions that are irrelevant to constituent churches in many areas of the world while at the same time failing to address biblically urgent questions with which their constituent believers are confronted. Professor Walls calls for an awakening of theological schools to the true task of theology, namely, to bring the whole of Scripture to bear upon the questions and choices with which ordinary believers are confronted in their calling to live out the Gospel in their native context. Rather than memorizing *theolog-y* formulated in and for a distant context, scholars and their students must hone the discernment and skills of *theolo-gizing*. Moreover, theologizing must go beyond the enlightenment notion of a theology that engages and shapes the mind, to a more relevant and biblical notion of theology that forms the person and facilitates his living in and through Christ in community.

In a second plenary session entitled *Global Christianity: Whose Christianity?*, Dr. Lamin Sanneh extended and expanded the previous discussion regarding the nature and implications of Christianity's global character. He confessed an allergy to the notion of global Christianity, contrasting the universal and uniform expressions of other major religions, including Islam, with the observation that Christianity has consistently been brought forth by the Holy Spirit within the linguistic and cultural forms of those considered outside the pale of civilization. A notable evidence of this assertion is the consistent Christian embrace of indigenous words for God rather than the imposition of alien terminology among the world's ethnic groups. He observed that this pattern testifies, not to a clever missiological strategy, but to the fact that a sovereign, transcendent God Himself preceded the Gospel witness in the cultures the church encountered by His design. Thus, the God to whom Christianity witnesses is a God who is accessible to us in the language of the ordinary, the mundane. As Sanneh put it, there is nothing God wants to say to us that He cannot say through the means of simple, ordinary, everyday language.

This phenomenon reinforces the previous call for a repudiation of *theolog-y* – that is, devising and discoursing in obscure and irrelevant technical jargon – and an embrace of *theolo-gizing* – that is, relentlessly seeking to understand and disseminate the truth of God in contemporary language and context. Theological scholarship and theological education must be reoriented to this calling.

Dr. Sanneh asserted that one of the primary features of world Christianity consists in its capacity to cultivate indigenous ethical and cultural root systems. He proposed that the current worldwide expressions of the Christian church may be usefully considered in two major groupings: “heartland” Christianity (the receding Western paradigm of Christendom) and “frontier” Christianity (the nascent Christian churches of the majority world). He proposes that a major global challenge for Christianity (and, thus, for theological educators to contribute to) is mediation between “heartland” and “frontier” Christianity. He commends an exchange of “frontier” Christianity's strengths and resources (poverty, weakness, persecution/suffering, communal identity, to name a few) with those of “heartland” Christianity (wealth, cultural achievements, to name a few). I found myself wondering whether one of these exchanges needs to be that of the impoverished and truncated content and forms of “heartland” Christianity's theological education paradigm for truly indigenous “frontier” Christianity theological education patterns. Could we not benefit from a form of theological education that exchanges (or at least moderates) competitive and detached intellectual discourse for communal engagement that forms the person for ministry?

## **Theological Education and the Church**

Dr. Carver Yu rehearsed a painfully familiar and increasingly strident divide between the church and the theological school as to relevance and role. Not a few churches (ironically, most often under the leadership of theological school graduates) have initiated alternative forms of church leadership development, citing the following causes of disillusionment with traditional theological schools and schooling: excessively arcane and arid academic orientation, lack of orientation to ministerial effectiveness, disdain for relevant contemporary expressions of worship, failure in spiritual nurture, and failure to address the issues experienced by ordinary Christians. Theological schools, they allege, may produce certified professionals, but not effective church leaders.

The seminaries rejoin as follows: contemporary churches are mere assemblies of proliferated ministry programs; exhibit a growth-above-all orientation; are scandalously pragmatic; are led not so much by pastors as by executive managers and secularized lay leaders according to the tenets of corporate management dogma; marginalize theology; displace Christian worship with entertainment for seekers; abandon biblical preaching for entertaining story-telling; truncate the communion of the saints into small group dynamics; and have pandered to religious consumers in isolation rather than nurturing believers in community.

Yu asserts that the debate stems from two sides of the same problem which may be stated in terms of two questions: *What is the Church?* and *What is Theology?* Addressing the second question first, Dr. Yu commended Karl Barth's definition of theology as the science of critique (i.e., examination, testing). Theology's proper and necessary role, he posits, is to examine the Church's proclamation to assess whether it is accurate and faithful to the Word of God. Specifically, the church's proclamation is to be critiqued in terms of its relevance and prophetic representations to its internal and external constituents.

To the question, *What is the Church?*, Yu answers that it is the eschatological, charismatic, covenantal, Eucharistic community of saints. By eschatological he means that the church stands as witness to and firstfruits of the eschaton, the historical movement in which the kingdom of darkness is vanquished and displaced by the Kingdom of God. By charismatic community, he means that the church is called, endowed with all the spiritual gifts, and empowered by the Holy Spirit to serve by means of the structure and full expression of spiritual gifts rather than by mere authority structures. By covenantal community he means that the obligations and graces of covenant life are to be experienced, exercised and nurtured by the redeemed community. By eucharistic he means the church's perpetual expression of gratitude to God in celebration of Christ's death accompanied by its vow to sacrificially live exclusively for the redemption of the world.

Yu claims that, while it is theology's duty to examine the extent to which the church truly lives as the eschatological, charismatic, covenantal, eucharistic community of saints, these matters are mostly absent from or perverted within theological school curricula. He argues that the theological school fails if it does not help the church to maintain a prophetic edge with reference to these attributes. His examples of theological school failure included, (a) the sterile way in which church history is typically taught in theological schools as a series of church events in contrast to the compelling drama of the eschaton; (b) the preoccupation of biblical and theological studies with individualistic rather than communal understanding and application; and (c) the emphasis upon professional competence at the expense of calls to sacrificial service to Christ.

With particular respect to theological education in global context, Dr. Yu lamented on the lack of engagement by Evangelical theologians and theological school curricula with what he considers to be the paramount and most insidious virus infecting the worldwide Body of Christ in our time, namely, the mutually fused twins of unbridled market capitalism and liberal humanism that together breed radical secularization and radical narcissism. He called for full and vigorous engagement of these twin trends by a radical reorientation of how theology and theological education are conceived and carried out. Evangelicals and evangelical church leaders must not only "out-think" but also "out-live" (not quantitatively but qualitatively) these cultural pathogens in covenantal, eucharistic community. Accordingly, Yu urges that the conventional notion of excellence imbedded in theological education value systems and operationalized in many accreditation standards be re-defined in terms of achievements in formation rather than scholarship, regardless of the cost to academic credibility on an individual and institutional level.

### **Forming World Christians**

Carlos Pinto led us in pondering the question: *Forming World Christians: Our Task?* Citing his own informal survey of consultation delegates, he noted that 100% of delegates surveyed affirmed that the formation of world Christians is an essential task, though only 50% agreed that this constitutes a primary or exclusive responsibility of theological schools. When asked to define the

meaning of “world Christian,” the survey revealed two primary (though I would observe not mutually exclusive) sets of answers. Half defined the term as, “awareness of and sensitivity to the diversity of global Christianity. Nearly half of the others defined the term as, “the capacity to relate the Gospel to culture.

With reference to “forming,” Pinto commended Colossians 1:24-29 as an appropriate meditation and model. Specifically, verse 28 summarizes Paul’s relentless quest to, “present every man complete in Christ.” The context for the task of forming world Christians is globalization, concerning which Pinto proffered Hesselgrave’s threefold definition: connectivity between cultures, conflict of paradigms, and context of flux. He suggested that in order to carry out the acknowledged responsibility of forming world Christians in the context of globalization that theological educators must move beyond the aim to provide leadership for the local context to forming leaders who possess the capacity and commitment to think globally and act locally with a view to impacting the ends of the earth.

Pinto references his summary concept of a “world Christian” to I Peter 3:15. “World Christians” are those who are able to articulate within a given culture, in a persuasive and humble manner, an apology regarding the source, nature, and implications of their hope. Pinto cites four essential competencies with respect to this capacity. First, world Christians demonstrate ability to think critically and missionally through core components of a *Weltanschauung* (i.e., world and life view) with a view to redemptively engaging those espousing other world views. This requires awareness and personal resolution in truth and love of several key internal tensions within Christianity (e.g., pluralism – exclusivism with respect to Christianity’s position among world religions; soteriological restrictivism – inclusivism; tolerance – accommodation toward those of other faiths). Secondly, world Christians will be settled on the normative role of Scripture within Christianity and will demonstrate capacity to discern the unchanging meaning of Scripture while applying it appropriately and articulating it relevantly in terms of audience needs and contextual conditions. Third, world Christians will have a well-informed and developed ministry philosophy with respect to such matters of global Christian concern as mission emphases, mission models, vocation, and leadership, to name a few. Finally, world Christians will demonstrate biblically and practically balanced technological capacities and attitudes. From his own experience and commitments, Pinto then offered a number of personal and practical measures that leaders in theological education may undertake as means of displaying first, then encourage critical reflection, creative communication, compassionate interaction and confident leadership.

### **North/South Issues**

Dr. Chris Wright’s reflections on the topic, *North/South Issues: Addressing the Global Divide* referenced the well-documented and lamentable inequality of resources and opportunities between Northern (Western) and majority world (Southern) Christianity. His comments were arranged under the headings of, (a) biblical/theological considerations; (b) historical-contemporary observations; (c) strategic reflections; (d) and practical suggestions.

Wright observed biblically that the issue of resource disparity has been a factor in the life of the church since its inception. Citing numerous New Testament references, he illustrated that the principle of reciprocity is imbedded in Christian theology. Gross disparity is a biblical and theological scandal. He also observed that current manifestations of global mutuality in the Body of Christ marks a wholesome return to the polycentric, multidirectional nature of New Testament Christianity. Citing the polyphonic nature of New Testament theology (i.e., theological and ethical problems and errors addressed prophetically across cultures), Wright called for charitable but faithful prophetic North-South address of such errors as sexual ethics, prosperity, and Christian citizenship responsibility.

Wright noted that there are notable examples of progress to celebrate in terms of the global divide over the past 20-30 years. Areas of progress include, (a) the narrowing divide in terms of access to advanced educational opportunity; (b) awareness even among secular Western media of the vitality and significance of majority world Christian movements; (c) biblical and missiological re-

centering of the majority world church; (d) useful and robust forums (e.g., ICETE, Langham Partnership, Overseas Council, Lausanne Movement, World Evangelical Alliance) through which North/South disparities may receive attention and address. As progress is noted and celebrated, however, we cannot ignore that there persists uneven progress toward equity within the majority world, including virtually adjacent nations and communities.

Wright issued seven strategic reflections regarding the North/South divide. In so doing, he cautioned against the tendency toward extremism. He emphasized that the North/South divide is not merely economic. Rather, while the South may tend toward material poverty, the North suffers extreme spiritual poverty for which the South may offer resources and help. Meanwhile, economically privileged Christians should be educated regarding the economic disparities in order that they may receive grace that is available only through their reciprocal attitudes and involvements.

Finally, Wright offered four practical suggestions particularly relevant to the ICETE membership. ICETE members should expand opportunities for academically integral student interchange in both directions (i.e., North/South and South/North).

### **Globalising Theological Education**

In our final plenary session, Brian Stiller delivered an address entitled, *Breaking the Barriers: In Search of a Global Educational Enterprise*. From the story of Peter and Cornelius in Acts 10, Stiller observed that believers, easily caught in their own narrowness, are pushed by the Father to consider issues bigger than we thought we would encounter, persuading us to learn from those we never thought had anything to teach us. Stiller suggested that this biblical story teaches those who will hear that God is at work in many places and among many other people. As much as we may think we operate obediently within our calling, alienation can still rule such that we ironically develop forms of racism derived from what we believe to be biblical theology. Stiller noted that as with Peter's Spirit-prompted risk-taking that exploded his bias and narrow logic, so also may we be delivered from insidious forms of racism and insularity.

Stiller commended a missional paradigm as the appropriate biblical basis for theological education. He argued that adoption of a pervasive missional ethos constitutes a means by which God turns us from ourselves to others, suggesting that this leads to transformation of our institutions and provides endless possibilities for interchange within the global community through sharing resources appropriate to reciprocal fellowship. Stiller advanced the thesis that Christian educators do global mission best when we move from the security of our comfort zones emboldened by the assumption that others have something to teach them. Citing results of an Association of Theological Schools (ATS) survey of seminary effectiveness, he warned that theological schools that merely prepare manager-leaders for professional life may be propounding a hidden curriculum that undermines any possibility of producing globally engaged leaders.

### **Where from Here? Observations and Implications**

The story is told of the great detective Sherlock Holmes and his sidekick Dr. Watson pursuing a case which required them to camp overnight in a tent. In the latter stages of the night, Holmes called out to Watson, "Wake up! Look up, and tell me what you see!" Watson awoke and said, "I see the moon has nearly completed its traverse of the horizon. I see the constellations Orion and Ursa Major, and I see the planets Venus and Saturn. Holmes replied, "Watson, you idiot, someone has stolen our tent!" At the risk of overlooking the missing "tent," let me venture to propose some of the recurring themes I have heard throughout the week, then to offer several questions and issues which I believe have been highlighted by our interactions and which require our further individual consideration and collective dialogue.

1. We must dismantle the forms and correct the practices that permit biblical and theological studies to remain substantially self-emancipated and isolated from addressing relevant contextual issues (Walls, Sanneh, Yu).

2. We must continue with humility to take the initiative in addressing and resolving the issues which undermine mutual accountability, trust, and collaboration between theological schools and constituent churches (Yu, Pinto).
3. We must collaborate in forging a new concept of excellence that is not primarily referenced to conventional educational resources, processes and forms (Yu, Pinto, Wright).
4. We must take initiative regardless of region or station to pursue our biblical calling to equity, reciprocity, and mutuality with those in other global contexts and circumstances (Sanneh, Wright).
5. We must ensure that our educational programs prepare students for and link them to engagement as authentic and passionate “world Christians” in every dimension of the global Evangelical enterprise (Walls, Birdsall, Tunncliffe, Pinto, Wright, Stiller).

### Questions for Ongoing Contemplation and Collaboration

I have been asked to offer a few of my own observations and questions stimulated by the consultation. I submit four additional matters to you for critical evaluation and potential future collaborative deliberation:

1. In our coming together as an international network of theological educators, I observed that our focus gravitated more toward the theological nature and aspects of our task than the educational nature and aspects of our task. I would assert that both our plenary sessions and workshop program had more to say about what we teach (i.e., the aims, content, and scope of our theological curricula) than how we teach. There persists, in my opinion, an inadequately acknowledged and largely unexamined disconnect between our default educational methodologies and our understanding of our educational calling. Future consultations might explore the extent to which our default educational modalities and instructional methodologies are consistent with the aims of forming ministry leaders in keeping with the church’s identity as an eschatological, charismatic, covenantal, eucharistic community of saints.
2. If Western Christianity and, more precisely, Western theological education, could not perpetuate (and is now desperately striving to recover) the cultural penetration and expansion of Christianity in its own setting, what does this say about the true task of theological education? Theological education supports the engagement of the Gospel with culture, not the enshrinement of the Gospel in culture. In other words, theological education that is not animated by and oriented to the missional nature of the church endangers the church. I love Erwin McManus’ aphorism: *Institutions preserve culture; movements create culture*. Our ICETE family agenda must continue to examine the consistency of our aims and means with respect to our biblical and missional commitments.
3. I have been provoked by this consultation to wonder anew whether the very modality of theological schooling as we practice it is irreparably laden with enlightenment baggage – promoting the compartmentalization of reason and detaching our individual speculations about truth from the biblical call to becoming formed by and conformed to truth in biblical community? Dr. Sanneh observed that “globalization” is an inapt designation for the phenomenon of world Christianity. Globalization, among other things, connotes a tendency toward standardization and universalization. Christianity, by contrast, is thriving and expanding on the “frontiers” because of its capacity to find unique but authentic expression of the redeeming grace and truth of God within every cultural and linguistic context. Does not the nature and process of accreditation inherently (or at least characteristically) tend toward standardization? How can accreditation standards and processes become agents for fostering authentic contextual (rather than global, universal) expressions of educational integrity, relevance, and excellence?

4. The previous concern is elevated in light of the trends toward universalization of educational taxonomies and accessibility of theological schools to secular and governmental accreditation and recognition. I confess that as the leader of an ICETE member agency that exercises an accreditation function, I secretly wonder to what extent accreditation is merely a means to legitimize and locate ourselves within a higher educational taxonomy not of our own making, laden with values that may be inimical to evangelical theological education's calling to serve the church. To what extent have we uncritically raced for a place within a politically and socially devised higher education landscape (e.g., Bologna Declaration's stated aspiration of a "knowledge-based" society) to the detriment of our calling to serve the church? What adaptations and innovations are we as international theological educators called upon to make?

In closing, allow me to add to what I think regarding the nature and implications of the consultation by permitting me also to tell you how I feel as we conclude this gathering. I feel exhausted, of course, but I also feel exhilarated, invigorated, humbled, renewed, challenged, above all amazed and grateful. How could it be that I, the least of all the saints (I know Paul staked that claim, but it was temporal; I wasn't born yet) should be permitted to witness and participate in such a gathering? The bride of Jesus Christ is a beautiful thing to behold and here are assembled some of its brightest gems.

I call us to renew our commitments to affirm and strengthen the several mutually supportive networks we have encountered this week. The World Evangelical Alliance, the Lausanne movement, Langham Partnership, Overseas Council, along with ICETE and its constituent agencies offer untold potential for greater solidarity and synergy as we celebrate the joys and collaborate on meeting the challenges we have identified and those yet unforeseen. We have observed and discussed many issues and concerns that seem to defy definition, much less resolution. Nevertheless, I relate to Carver Yu's sentiment that truly prophetic critique also imbues us with hope. May I say it? I am hopeful about the future of worldwide evangelical theological education. What we are engaged in is vital, and the Lord is with us, brothers and sisters! Let us renew our commitments to each other and to the relentless pursuit of excellence. See you in 2009! Shalom – and Maranatha!