

Global Challenges That Affect Theological Education Today

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If I were to add anything to the title of this address it would be, "A New Zealand perspective". For the difficulty one encounters in talking about challenges of global scope in any field of inquiry is the impossibility of overcoming the particularity of one's own context and the perspectival nature of truth. Acknowledgement of this difficulty, however, should not reduce us to silence. As varying perspectives are put in conversation with one another mutual understanding is advanced and new possibilities are identified and explored.

It is in that spirit of dialogue that this paper is offered. It is organized around three situations from New Zealand, which will serve as windows on global challenges and become catalysts for reflection on themes that impact upon the task of theological education.

The first window concerns a recent decision by the Speaker of New Zealand's House of Parliament to review the prayer by which each sitting of Parliament is opened. ^[1] Members of Parliament are being asked to consider the desirability of having a prayer at all and, if the prayer is to be retained, whether it should continue to be prayed "through Jesus Christ our Lord" or whether it should be made less specifically Christian so as to reflect New Zealand's religious diversity.

The decision to review the prayer is triggering all kinds of questions: Is New Zealand a secular or a Christian nation, and what are the implications of that answer for public life? How does a post-Christendom society handle religious pluralism without disregarding historical particularity? How might the Church portray the Gospel as public truth, and not merely a matter of private belief, without reverting to a Christendom mindset?

Such questions are not confined to the New Zealand situation. They reflect a rapidly changing missiological context for the Church and for the task of theological education. At the School of Ministry, of which I am Principal, we are asking ourselves: How well are we equipping our students to grapple with this profound shift in the West from a Christendom to a post-Christendom phase of history? This question has implications not only for the kinds of issues that our students need to think about, but also for the skills and competencies many of them are required to exercise in a post-Christendom context. The so-called 'missional' and 'emerging' Church demands a certain style of leadership. Parish ministry is a very different ball game to what it was even twenty or thirty years ago.

In asking these questions, we are mindful too of a myriad of other missiological issues of a global nature. Some of our Pacific Island students, for example, come from small island nations that are literally being swallowed up by the sea. For them, climate change is not merely an inconvenient truth – it is a life-threatening reality. What does it mean to be missional in this context?

What does it mean to be missional in the context of the intensifying conflict between parts of the Islamic world and the West, the alarming incidence of religious violence, including acts of terrorism, the deep tensions experienced in parts of Africa and Asia through the imposition of Shari'a law, and the acutely pressing question of interfaith relations between Christianity and Islam?

What is the mission of the Church in the context of globalization, in which new economic associations and communication networks are being formed, and traditional political and geographical boundaries are being crossed? What is it doing to our notions of community? What deep tensions are manifesting themselves? Which biblical insights and theological doctrines may help us interpret what is happening?

Signs of global upheaval are all around us. Theological education can neither ignore these realities nor confine them to the margins of the curriculum, for they form an integral part of the context in which the *missio Dei* is located and to which the *missio Dei* is directed. Moreover, to the extent that one of the primary purposes of theological education is to form people to participate effectively in the *missio Dei*, as revealed in Jesus Christ and empowered by the Holy Spirit, it will seek to equip churches to critique, inform and transform their contexts and cultures, including those of a global nature. ^[2]

To this end, we should be encouraged by the launch this year of the International Journal of Public Theology and its sponsoring Global Network for Public Theology. As William Storrar says of this movement, there is a commitment not only to collaborative theological inquiry into public issues, but also to ecclesial and emancipatory ways of doing theology and employing research methods that include the marginalized as agents of social transformation. ^[3] On a similarly encouraging note, the University of Otago in New Zealand has just established a Chair in Theology and Public Issues. Having said that, the task of public theology is too important to be left to specialist networks and specially designated Chairs. It is high time that the disciplines of Dogmatics and Missiology are brought closer together, that the Church's understanding of mission is informed by its doctrine of God, and that the *missio Dei* is seen to lie at the heart of that doctrine. It is not a secondary step.

The second window or case study concerns that of a very hotly debated topic in my Church over the ordination of homosexual persons. After twenty years of divisive and inconclusive debate the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church finally resolved last year to bar the ordination of anyone who lives in an intimate relationship other than faithful, heterosexual marriage.

There were a number of factors which led to a binding decision eventually being reached. One of these was the growing influence exercised by Asian and Pacific Island voices. In New Zealand, the largest and fastest growing churches in the Reformed tradition are those comprising Asians and Pacific Islanders, reflecting immigration patterns of recent decades. A Pacific Island Synod and a Council of Asian Congregations were formed recently to encourage and facilitate mission in culturally specific ways. Their

formation was a consequence of a prior recognition of the importance of a contextual approach to theology, ministry and mission.

The growing influence of these Asian-Pacific voices is consistent with the massive shift in the centre of Christianity from the North towards the South and from the West towards the East. As Andrew Walls puts it:

On the one hand, the church is more widely spread throughout the world than ever before, the withering in its old Western heartlands more than compensated for by the new growth in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. On the other, the end of the great European migration, which took millions of Europeans to the rest of the globe and established a world order we once knew, has been followed by the great reverse migration. This has brought millions of people permanently from the non-Western to the Western world. These two events have transformed the Christian situation. ^[4]

It was noticeable in the homosexuality debate the extent to which the Asian and Pacific Island voices tended to support a swing in the Church towards a more theologically conservative position, especially when it came to the issue of biblical authority. ^[5]

The debate brought to the surface a crucial hermeneutical challenge: How does the Bible function as the Word of God in the life of the Church? In the face of a multiplicity of perspectives, some of which are mutually exclusive, what does it mean to uphold the Reformed principle of sola scriptura? How should we (a) address our differences, and (b) understand what it is that holds us within the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church?

Attempts to accommodate diversity and modify Church structures to reflect new multi-cultural realities have brought fresh problems and challenges. It would be a mistake, for example, to assume that within the Pacific Island Synod Samoans and Cook Islanders agree on all matters, and that within the Council of Asian Congregations Korean leaders see things in the same way as their Chinese counterparts. Tensions can and do arise from different cultural perspectives.

Further tensions exist between generations. When Christian migrants from non-Western countries settle in New Zealand, their churches provide more than a worship service in their own language; the churches serve a crucial role in preserving the culture.

But that which serves as an important function for a migrant generation, does not necessarily do so for their New Zealand-born offspring who, influenced by Western culture, often feel trapped between the ways of their parents and the ways of contemporary New Zealand. This inter-generational tension has a significant bearing on the process of identity formation among immigrant communities in the West.

We have experienced a flow-on effect of this in relation to theological education and ministry formation. In recent years a significant number of Asian and Pacific Island women, most of them New Zealand born, have been accepted as candidates for ordained ministry. But very few of them, upon graduation,

receive calls to serve in Asian or Pacific Island settings in the Presbyterian Church, where at grass roots level there continues to be resistance to the ordination of women.

These multi-cultural realities highlight an underlying tension between the necessary task of inculturation and the danger of cultural captivity. No culture is immune from this tension. In the process of contextualisation, the Gospel constantly runs the risk of becoming a prisoner of that which it is meant to liberate.^[6] Appeals to the importance of context and cultural perspective can easily become a means of avoiding the liberating judgement of the Gospel.

There is something to be gained here, I think, by reminding ourselves of the significance of the Reformed motto, 'Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda!' – the Church reformed and always to be reformed. The PCUSA website puts it well when it says of this motto:

Reform has a backward and a forward reference. It leads not only back to the Bible but also forward under the Word. The Presbyterian Confession of 1967 underscores this teaching: "As God has spoken his word in diverse cultural situations, the church is confident that he will continue to speak through the Scriptures in a changing world and in every form of human culture."^[7]

No culture or context is above the need for extensive transformation under the Word of God; no church is above the need for extensive reform. Attentive obedience to the Word revealed in Jesus Christ and testified to in Holy Scripture, and the rigorous academic and vocational disciplines that accompany this act of obedience, is a hallmark of theological education in the Reformed tradition.

The third window consists of an observation of changing patterns of worship. What were once regarded as norms of Christian worship and distinctive features of Reformed worship are fading. Various components of worship are moved around at will, in some cases renamed, and at other times omitted altogether. In such services, the preaching of the Word often gives way to a multimedia presentation, the Minister becomes the facilitator of a worship experience, and a Eucharistic pattern of worship is nowhere evident.

In the age of the internet, Ministers and so-called worship leaders access a wide range of musical and liturgical resources and tend to opt for what they think will work rather than what may be prescribed in a denominational service book. Designated worship leaders (often the musicians) have little or no training in the history, theology and practice of worship. And permeating all these things is a loss of conviction that Christ is the true leader and mediator of the Church's worship, and that there might therefore be some norms for Christian worship which are grounded in this conviction and which the Church is obliged to observe.

If I were to choose two words to describe many of the current trends and innovations in worship, they would not be 'Reformed' and 'Catholic'. They would be 'experimental' and 'eclectic'.^[8]

In this post-modern context, we find that many of our students are more familiar with Pentecostalism than Presbyterianism, with Rick Warren's 40 Days of Purpose than Calvin's Institutes, and with Hillsong

music than a Church hymnal. In part, this is a generational issue. We find younger students identifying less and less with a particular denomination.^[9] We also notice an increase in the number of churches renaming themselves with little or no reference to their denominational affiliation. The challenge this poses for the task of theological education takes the form of a question: In an era described by many as 'post-denominational', how effective are our academic and vocational programmes in equipping students to exercise ministry in ways that are fully conversant with the most important aspects of the Reformed ethos, history and tradition? How important do we believe this task to be?

Twenty years ago Edward Farley laid down a challenge to those of us involved in the task of theological education. Lamenting the fragmentation of theological education which he saw at the time, he called for a more integrated approach – for a recovery of theologia.^[10]

Twenty years on, the challenge he laid down is still valid. Integrating the academic components of theological curricula with the Church's commitment to the task of ministry formation and leadership development is seldom straight forward,^[11] if for no other reason than the goals and expectations of Church and academy are not always in alignment.

And now we have added challenges consisting of an interlocking mixture of missiological, ecclesial, hermeneutical and liturgical issues. I have highlighted a small handful of these. There are many more, of both a theological and pragmatic nature. I look forward to the discussions that will unfold over the course of this consultation as we continue to explore together what those issues are and how we might respond to them.

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Footnotes

[1] The Parliamentary Prayer: "Almighty God, humbly acknowledging our need for Thy guidance in all things, and laying aside all private and personal interests, we beseech Thee to grant that we may conduct the affairs of this House and of our country to the glory of Thy holy name, the maintenance of true religion and justice, the honour of the Queen, and the public welfare, peace, and tranquility of New Zealand, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen."

[2] Cf. Yau-Man Siew, "Theological Education in Asia: An Indigenous Agenda for Renewal", *With an Eye on the Future: Development and Mission in the 21st Century*, edited by D. Elmer & L. McKinney, California: MARC Publications, 1996, p.64

[3] William Storrar, "2007: A Kairos Moment for Public Theology", *International Journal of Public Theology*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (2007), p.5

[4] Andrew F. Walls, "Evangelical and Ecumenical: The Rise and Fall of the Early Church Model", *Evangelical, Ecumenical and Anabaptist Missiologies in Conversation*, edited by J.R. Krabill, W. Sawatsky & C.E. Van Engen, New York: Orbis Books, 2006, p.37

[5] This fits with what a number of commentators, including Philip Jenkins, have observed. Christian communities in non-Western countries, he says, are often struck by the directness with which Biblical texts seem to speak into their situation – whether it is the movement from oppression towards freedom in the Exodus, or the Beatitudes, wherein Jesus pronounces blessing upon the poor and the persecuted. The cultural strangeness of the Bible is far less apparent from the underside of history than it is from the top. Cf. Philip Jenkins, *The New Faces of Christianity: Believing the Bible in the Global South*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006, p.18

[6] Cf. Andrew Walls, "The Gospel as Prisoner and Liberator of Culture", *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith*, New York: Orbis Books, Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996, pp.3-15

[7] Anna Case-Winters, "Our Misused Motto",
<http://www.pcusa.org/today/believe/past/may04/reformed.htm>

[8] And I would concur with James Torrance's comment a few years ago that much worship today, especially in the West, "is in practice Unitarian, has no doctrine of the mediator or sole priesthood of Christ, is human-centred, has no proper doctrine of the Holy Spirit, and can engender weariness." Cf. J.B. Torrance, *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1996, p.20

[9] This is consistent with research on the religious beliefs of young people in the West. Cf. Savage, S., Collins-Mayo, S., Mayo, B. & Cray, G., *Making Sense of Generation Y: The World View of 15-25-year-olds*, London: Church House Publishing, 2006

[10] Cf. Edward Farley, *Theologia: The Fragmentation and Unity of Theological Education*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983; "The Reform of Theological Education as a Theological Task", *Theological Education*, Spring 1981, pp.93-117

[11] We are indebted to people like David Kelsey and Stephen Bevans, who have mapped out some possibilities for us, but the challenge remains. Cf. David Kelsey, *Between Athens and Berlin: The Theological Education Debate*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993; Stephen Bevans, "Theological Education for a World Church", *Australian EJournal in Theology* 4, February 2005.