

Theological Education in an Interdisciplinary Context

In the Christian world the Church is the mother of academe; and the formal pursuit of knowledge began as an instrument for understanding what already stood revealed. The first doctors were the doctors of the church, and their high calling knew nothing of the diseases of the body, but only the glory of the Eternal. The great universities of antiquity were all established with one initial concern: to interpret the faith as the faith had been revealed. To make it clear; to make it relevant; and to make it *accessible*.

Our seminaries were often the precursors and the root stocks of our colleges and universities, and in time our colleges and universities were to reward their prescience by evolving a vast community of scholars in a body of disciplines designed to reflect, if not to embrace, every horizon of human experience and intellect. So, from the very beginning the theological enterprise here has been augmented by a parallel quest for truth proceeding in most cases from premises which are more provocative, and interests which are less parochial than theology alone.

I have said that theology represents an interior effort to make the faith clear, to make it relevant, and to make it accessible. The theological enterprise must obviously be an interior effort, it seems to me, because the unique nature of religion requires a response of both faith and commitment before revelation can take place on anything other than the most rudimentary level. In my life-long study of the religious enterprise, if any one learning has stood out above all the rest, it has been that a holy scripture is just a book, an altar is just a table, a prayer is just a recitation, and a tithe is just a gift of money until they are perceived from *inside* the religious experience which sacralizes them. And while we may "respect" a religion that is alien to our own experience, and while we may make every effort to avoid giving offense by word or deed to another's beliefs, there is a vast and bottomless pit between "respect," (which is an attitude of civility), and "understanding" (which is a mutual participation in an intellectual enterprise). Hence, it is inconceivable that the theologian could be someone not intimately involved in the faith and privy to the imperceptible nuances which shape and define its character. When Moses encountered the burning bush he knew how to behave because by faith and commitment, and by association he knew

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something of the character of God.

Moses' experience was of course, interior to the faith. He was a part of a larger experience shared with a vast company of like-minded believers. But a theologian must be something more than that. Being a true believer is a critical, but minimal condition to the theological task. The theologian must be a true believer with unusual insight and sensitivity; and he must have the power to translate his unique awareness into structures of faith for those whose spiritual perspicacity is less well developed.

When the Black Church was about to be born and its founders were struggling with the troublesome issue of what *kind* of church they would offer to the faithful dissidents who had placed their spiritual destiny in their hands, at least one of the church fathers had resolved the issue for himself long before it reached the agenda of discussion. Whatever else it would be, the new "African Church" would have to be a church of "plain doctrine having a good discipline." For, reasoned Richard Allen, "the plain and simple gospel suits best for the people; for the unlearned can understand, and the learned are sure to understand." Dr. Allen's dictum leaves little room for argument. The people, even the unlearned ones have a right to understand the doctrines to which they are called on to commit themselves by faith, and the task of theology is to clarify the faith which is the subject of their commitment. If it is objected that the subject of theology is by its very nature beyond reduction to simple-minded categories capable of being understood by the least of those who share the faith, the objection is no doubt valid, *if* the theologian himself is simple minded. But in the intellectual sphere as in the physical realm, nature abhors a vacuum, and the same effluvium which distinguishes its presence in the beginning marks its demise in the end. In theology more than in any other discipline, there is nothing so pernicious as the interpreter whose interpretations obscure rather than clarify the data of demand.

If the first task of the theological enterprise is to make the faith clear, the next order (and one of no less magnitude) is to make it relevant. Religion is intensely personal, but it is at the same time the most vital social or corporate experience man is likely to have. In consequence, man's understanding of God is mediated through man's understanding of himself in relation to his fellows in the context of history. If human experience is more than the mere concatenation of events, then religion is the belief in the meaningfulness of those events and the implications of divine and human involvement and concern. It is the task of theology to discover in the historical flux the divine imprimatur and human response; and to assist those committed to the faith toward an understanding designed to make that response more adequate. This is but another way of saying that the faith must be made relevant to the faithful, or faith itself is meaningless. The I-Thou relationship begins with the recognition that there is an existant "I", and follows a Cartesian-like formula to the discovery of an existant "Thou." History is an expression of the Thou. Man is permitted to participate in it and it is this participation that the theologian is called upon to set in perspective. When God asks "Where

wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth?", or when Jesus talks about the setting up of a kingdom in which it appears that there may be protocols of honor, the believer wants to know "What is my place in all this; and What must I do to maintain proper harmony with the Divine? The faith is as real as its relevance.

Finally, the faith must have a sure and certain accessibility, which is to say that there must be room in human experience for man to act, and reason to believe that what he does can make a difference. If the world is no more than a stage peopled with the stuff of puppets, then human destiny is pre-determined, and human responsibility requires no explanation and no guide. An accessible faith is one in which God and man are both actors—independent actors—each vitalized and moved by a free will, the divine will being the archetype with which man at his best will struggle for alignment. Accessibility is the moral dimension of the faith; the opportunity for man to work at his own perfectability, i.e. his own justification. But if man cannot justify himself there must be some other recourse to whatever it is that justification represents, and those most intimately knowledgeable about the ways of God might well be expected to shed light on the insufficiency of the one and the efficaciousness of the other. In other words, the general principles on which the faith is grounded must at some point achieve focus in the personal experience of the believer in a way that permits him to recognize himself as a principal reason for their existence. That is the principal failure of American theology with reference to the Black Christian. To the American theologian, the Black Christian does not exist.

With this brief excursus into this role-expectation of the theological enterprise, we may now return to our major thesis on theological education. We have said that the church is the mother of academe, and that the preparation of clergymen has characteristically been the precursor of the liberal arts college, or of what is now generally referred to as secular education. At another time it would be useful to examine whether *any* education is secular or sacred or whether it is not the *uses* to which education may be put that ought properly bear these labels. College and seminary have not always found a comfortable relationship with each other, and for whatever reasons, some seminaries have preferred complete isolation—not only from the secular institutions of learning, but from society in general in-so-far as that is possible. This "asylum syndrome" also has a long and notable history in the monasteries of the ancient church, and out of it has come some of the world's most significant achievements in science and letters, as well as a continuing stream of spiritual contributions more directly consonant to the faith. In more modern times we have had the rather common experience of secular institutions, which began their existence as seminaries, divorcing themselves from their seminary roots when the original seminaries became burdensome to the secular interest or involvement. The primary factors of separation have very often been money, thanks to our traditions of separation of church and state which limit severely the expenditure of public funds for religious interests. Thus, if small colleges could survive

better via the largesse of a benign federal establishment than through the uncertain support of a lethargic and (sometimes hostile) church denomination, the decision has usually come down on the side of the more certain survival. In consequence the separated seminary is probably the norm, although a rapprochement has apparently been worked out among the larger private universities, their related seminaries and the federal government which permits the seminary and its secular counterpart to remain substantially intact as cooperating units of a single institution.

The seminary/university relationship has been plagued by the suspicion that society in general and the secular university in particular are potentially corruptive influences inimical to the unique interests of the theological quest. The problem was not merely a matter of academic emphasis, or of social values, but one of orientation. It was a matter of orientation, and the magnitude of differences is illustrated by the fact that despite the so-called "monkey-trials" of a century ago, the issue was never laid to rest; and in 1981 church interests and school authorities are still debating in the courts what our children might properly be taught in the public schools about the origin of man! If we have not gotten beyond "origins" and what is proper to the understanding of little children, to expect a serious mutual commitment to a joint venture in theological preparation on the part of the church and society would seem to be deliberately oblivious of the realities we live with. But the realities we live with are often the very ones we want to change, and so there have been, and there are continuing efforts to bridge the chasm and heal the suspicions that make the seminary and the university antagonistic in their common search for truth. In the final analysis, reality is one, and by whatever means it is discovered or revealed, when its essence is finally understood, it will be the same truth.

It is the nature of man to know in part because he perceives in part. The six blind men of Hindustan who went to see elephant and then proceeded to make consummate judgments about what an elephant was like after having felt of his separate elements illustrate man's capacity and his weakness. Laying a hand on some part of the elephant, i.e., given the experience of a small part of reality, we are able by comparison and insight and by extropolation of that experience to make a judgment about the subject in its entirety i.e., about the whole of reality. The judgments we make on such fragments of information are not necessarily wrong. They are merely premature. Not enough of the facts are in to be final or conclusive. After all, an elephant *is* like a tree if you only perceive his leg. And he *is* very much like a wall if you only come in contact with his side. Certainly it is an achievement of no little significance for man to understand so much on the basis of such fractional experience and insight.

But it is only when you put the leg and the side and tail and the other parts together in a logically, functioning whole that the elephant himself emerges. It is at this point that man's weakness rather than his capacity is illustrated. "We see through a glass but darkly," says Paul, which is to say that we see imperfectly and in part. As we see, so do we judge and

make report. But we are also capable of seeing through the eyes of each other. Those six blind men who encountered the elephant each had a valid experience of an aspect of the real, which when fitted properly with what the others experienced might have yielded more than the sum of the discrete parts which set off the debate.

It is the capacity of men to see with and for each other, i.e., to share the intellectual quest and to build upon the corporate human experience that seems to me to hold its best possibilities for theological education. If reality is indeed whole, then the ideal way to perceive it and to understand it would appear to be from a holistic perspective. But if the human perspective is limited by the fragmentation of the human endowment, then man is thrown back upon the corporate resources of the race to get at the full implications of his existence, and to work through the meaning, if any, of his salvation, if that is indeed his appropriate life-agendum. This may be more than incidental to the divine scheme of things, for there is implicit in every corporate human enterprise a moral dimension which orders the schedule of human relations and holds in check the human proclivity for self-aggrandizement. The arrogation and manipulation of scarce values derived from knowing what is not generally known is as old as the office of the cultic priest and the enterprising magician; and its derivative practices still test, from time to time, the quality of contemporary religion and the integrity of contemporary academe. Nevertheless, it is clearly not a matter of cooperation between church and academe which produces the occasional pustles which pock the social visage: it is far more likely to be their indifference to each other.

It is probably clear from the foregoing that I find it difficult to imagine that the ideal theological education can take place in the absence of significant opportunities for interdisciplinary contact. Man is a creature of the world: indeed if the Psalmist is heard aright, man is the *feature* of the world! In either case, the ultimate task of a theological education would seem to be to provide exposure to as much of the whole elephant as can be managed, and to test the theological insight whenever possible against all those other Hindustanis who are similarly turned out to get some perspective on the beast. The world has grown exceedingly complex since those primitive days when theological education implied a call rather than a calling. However, the demands of the calling are today more rigorous than at any time in history, and the seriously-called cannot spare themselves in their preparation to respond from strength as well as from conviction.

It is particularly essential to the Black Church that the arena of preparational discourse be constantly broadened. Although we were in the church and of the church since the Day of Pentecost, (a heritage we have never forfeited), here in the West we were reintroduced to the faith through a circuitous route and a troubled experience. We lost ground, but the loss was not irretrievable. Perhaps we were merely experiencing God's waiting time. In any case, burdened as we were by the exigencies of bondage, we bore a constant witness with those meager resources we could command. In the swamps and thickets, on the isolated plantations,

and in the ebb and flow of city life, a voice was raised and the Black Church bore witness. When the first phase of our trial by fire was over, we too built seminaries and colleges to service the faith so long nurtured by the Black Church, and symbolized by the Black preacher whose preparation was no more than a spiritual coal laid against his lips.

Now, the Black Church has reached its majority. It can either move on to accept the new challenges laid upon it, or it can stagnate as an interim institution whose job has been completed and whose mandate for existence has expired. The challenges which lie before us are not to the Black Church *per se*, but to the faith. But the Black Church is a constituent of the faith, and its potential for leadership and for relevance will inevitably be tested beyond the bounds of racial parochialism, for today the whole church is enervated by doubt and by anxiety. The need is for a broad-based understanding of the world we live in and the quality and circumstances of that existence. In response to that need there is no distinguishing the interests of black theological education from any other. But the need of a thorough interdisciplinary grounding arises at precisely the point where the implications of "black" and "white" confuse the integrity of the faith by seeing it in racial fragments. Black theology supplies the missing fragment all others over-looked. It must now move on to consolidate the whole.

Religion deals with superlative values—values beyond which there is nothing of consequence to human interest. The interdisciplinary approach lends to the theological enterprise a broader company of minds, a larger perspective on the real world, an immediate engagement in social and moral experience which eliminates the need for the hypothetical, and which does not postpone the opportunity to test, to serve, to make judgments to shore up deficiencies and to reconsider the nature of the call and the parameters of the calling. The best education is where the best minds are, and the best minds are those ever in search for a more certain truth than what was bequeathed to them. The seminary and the university have much to learn from each other, for the truly disciplined mind is the mind with a multidisciplinary orientation. There is no other way to gain intellectual perspective than to cast aside the parochialisms which inhibit inquiry, and to follow the search for truth through whatever realms and by means of whatever instrumentalities the circumstances may require. In times past, when philosophy was considered the "queen of the sciences," theological education looked to philosophy not only as a toughening agent which could provide the rigorous disciplining of the mind clear and logical thinking demanded, but also as a sort of pansophistic inquiry which could in one fell swoop provide the sum total of intellectual experience considered necessary beyond the specialized offerings of the theological curriculum.

It is possible that given its own peculiar tasks, theology granted philosophy more than it deserved. If in academe there is a queen of the disciplines, it must be theology itself, for it is theology which accepts the greater risks as it asks and attempts to answer the more fundamental questions. The ends to which it is addressed ordains the conscription of

all lesser disciplines, even as religion which is addressed to man's most superlative interests subsumes all lesser values, or organizes them in an heirachial arrangement headed by itself. The most effective theological education today is no less in need of the rigors of philosophical inquiry but is also helped along considerably by a more intimate understanding of biochemistry, geophysics, international politics, the economics of survival, and the sciences of individual and group behavior. In a world of exceedingly complex modalities and relationships, the sorting out of human experience and human possibility in ways calculated to assist man in making the decisions he needs to make in order to realize the ultimate values to which human experience is thought to be addressed, requires somewhat more than the willingness to be summoned and the daring to respond. The extraordinary proliferation of religious interest manifested in the form of hundreds of new cult-like organizations since World War II suggests in its magnitude the problem of felt need beyond the level of the physical; and its variety is implicit of the lack of confidence, if not the inadequacy of conventional approaches to unconventional problems and issues.

For better or for worse, we are already launched into the century which is destined to be the first true "Century of Man." It may also be the last, and that possibility is precisely the root of many of the anxieties we have which ramify in, or express themselves as "problems" for which there seems to be no definable cause and no plausible answer. But it is not the fear of finality which so often overwhelms our institutions and compromises our reason and addles our behavior. As Christians, we have always lived in the shadow of eternity, and one of the uses of theology has been its effort to give perspective to eternity by making it a dimension of Divine will. In short, we have always accepted the notion that life on earth was less than forever, but that God himself was at the console of human destiny. Today we are less certain. Man's capacity for nuclear destruction may well exceed man's capacity for restraint, both moral and technological. And to the doubt that grows in the darkness of man's new options for nuclear destruction, there is the inevitable accretion of anxiety that derives from human adventures in outer space, genetic engineering, computer sciences and myriads of other unconventional areas of human involvement.

A few years ago we were confronted with the theological wisdom that "God is dead," a notion that never did quite catch on. But tomorrow's theological concern will have to deal with the fear that God, though not dead, has been usurped, a possibility that is infinitely more grim than the notion of Divine demise, and one which can hardly be dealt with unless theology learns a lot more about man in his full dimension than was ever thought necessary in the past.