

Inter faith learning in theological education

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One of the major challenges facing theological education at the start of the twenty-first century is that of helping to equip the churches to respond to religious plurality. The societal and cultural contexts within which this challenge is to be addressed are very varied – one particularly significant difference being between theological education in the historic heartlands of ‘Christendom’, where religious plurality is being experienced as a relatively new phenomenon, and theological education in societies where the churches have throughout recent history lived as minorities among other faith communities. In any context, though, there are at least three interrelated dimensions of theological education which will need to be developed in the inter faith area: namely, learning about other faiths; equipping the church’s ministry with the pastoral capacity to engage positively inter faith relations; and exploring the fundamental theological presuppositions and implications of inter faith encounter.

Firstly, a knowledge of the beliefs, practices and attitudes of other faith communities is an important prerequisite for theological education in contexts where people’s lives have been shaped by different religious traditions, and such contexts are now found in virtually all societies. As the earliest theological school, that of Alexandria, provided an understanding of the dominant Greek philosophical traditions of the patristic period, so today an awareness of Islamic, Hindu, Buddhist and other traditions is indispensable for training in Christian theology.

A certain amount of understanding of other faiths can of course be obtained by textual and academic studies – it is notable indeed that missionary scholars were among the pioneers in bringing a knowledge of ‘Eastern religions’ to Western audiences through their translation activities. However, it is increasingly being realised that a Christian account of, say, ‘Islam’ may well differ appreciably from a Muslim’s own account of what her faith means to her. In fact, there is need of a two-stage educational process, described by Gavin D’Costa by the successive terms ‘auto-interpretation’ and ‘hetero-interpretation’. Thus, those being educated theologically need first to hear what Islam means to a Muslim, and then they need to reflect on that in the light of their own Christian faith. Without the former, theological education remains an introspective exercise without the challenge of the other; without the latter, it does not go beyond a religious phenomenology. Christian theological institutions need urgently to consider how they can create a relationship of collegiality with other faith institutions which will allow both auto- and hetero-interpretation to inform their teaching and learning.

Secondly, insofar as theological education is designed to equip men and women for pastoral ministry and leadership in mission in the churches, it has to develop within them the ability to navigate the complexities of inter faith relations with confidence, sensitivity and integrity. Such a navigational ability is not merely a matter of acquiring a set of skills; at a more fundamental level, it is the formation of a set of attitudes arising from a Christian orientation towards the other. This orientation has been described by Michael Barnes as an ‘ethical heterology’: a living out of the conviction that I and my community can only attend to God if we attend to the attendance on God of other individuals and communities. The practical import of such a heterology for ministerial training can be seen from two examples.

At the level of interpersonal relationships, a growing number of marriages involve couples of different faiths. From the perspective of religious leadership, inter faith marriages have often been seen as a threat to the handing on of faith to the next generation, and there is doubtless some substance in this concern. Nevertheless, the pastoral needs of the couple, and of their wider families, require a ministerial response which can engage sympathetically with the realities of another religion, and the development of such sympathy will rely on ministerial formation. At a communal level, in a world where many conflicts are linked, with more or less justice, to religious difference, it is essential that Christian pastors and leaders recognise that building bridges to other communities, committing to relationships of trust and understanding across religious divides, is part of the ministry of reconciliation. Such relationships will be more robust and durable insofar as they are rooted in an orientation which sees leadership in the church as not just defending the interests of the Christian community, but also having a care for the religious other.

Thirdly, theological education in and for the inter faith arena must include theology. This may seem a truism, but in fact it is easy for engagement with other religions to be kept apart from the core matter of developing credible ways to believe the faith today. When this happens, 'inter faith' may be seen either as a tiresome necessity imposed by the recalcitrant persistence of other religions, or as the latest enthusiasm opened to the church by the challenges of contemporary life. Serious recent theological reflection in this area, by contrast, links inter faith engagement to the heartlands of Christian theology – it is in the core affirmations of Christian faith that motivations for inter-religious encounter are to be found, and that encounter in turn reflects back on the church's understanding of that faith. Three themes in particular can be briefly identified as significant in this respect: scripture, mission and Trinity.

Studying the scriptures in a situation of religious plurality can recover an inter faith engagement which has been, as it were, encoded in the texts themselves ever since their original formation in multi-religious contexts. Thus Israel among the nations each following their own god, and the early church amidst the multiple religions and philosophies of the Roman Empire, both had to contend with what today would be called inter faith issues. In terms of theological education, this means that the inter faith agenda is at the heart of biblical studies, not isolated as an appendix to be considered when the substantive theological work has already been done. In a similar way, inter-religious encounter is to be seen as part of missiology proclamation and dialogue belong together within the church's evangelising mission. In practice, this poses a challenge to theology, which has often separated out dialogue and evangelism as alternatives practised by different persuasions within the church; there is ongoing work for Christians in developing a more integrated approach here. Finally, the mission of the church is itself a sharing in the mission of God, which arises from the heart of the Trinity, as the Father sends the Son and the Spirit into the world. It is striking that much recent theology looks to a Trinitarian pattern as a key resource for Christian engagement in inter faith encounter – the 2008 Anglican document *Generous Love*, prepared for the Lambeth Conference, for example, speaks of Christians maintaining a presence among communities of other faiths as signs of Christ's body, of transformation of society in the power of the Spirit, and of giving and receiving hospitality as a sign of the generosity of the Father. These are high aspirations to set for inter faith encounter, and the realities of Christian behaviour

often falls short; but the role of theological education is to set a vision grounded in the reality of the God and lived out in the complexities of our multi-religious world.