

THE NEED FOR CHANGE IN THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION
PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

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XPICTOC ANECTH!

The World Conference of Associations of Theological Institutions (WOCATI) welcomes you all to this IV World Congress, co-organized here in Neapolis, Thessaloniki, Greece, by ETE, and the Department of Theology of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, on the subject: “*Theological Education: A Radical Reappraisal*”. In my mother tongue *kalosilthate* (καλωσήλθατε).

A Quick Flashback

The timing of this event, namely the year 2008, may not be accidental. All major events concerning theological education in our ecumenical era are linked – perhaps by God’s providence – with a year ending in 8! It was in 1938 in Tambaram Madras, India, during the International Mission Council’s Conference (IMC) that a categorical statement was made, i.e. that “the worst element in the entire enterprise of Christian mission is the theological education”. And this epoch-making remark actually started the process of integrating theological education within the framework of missionary and ecumenical movement in all its successive forms (TEF, PTE, and ETE). Ten years later, in 1948 the WCC was created, and after another ten years, in 1958 in another IMC Assembly, in Accra, Ghana, the “Theological Education Fund” was officially founded, the golden jubilee of which we celebrate today. And twenty years later, in 1978, the journal *Ministerial Formation* started to be published, and in Basel, Switzerland, an Orthodox Consultation called together for the first time the theological schools seminaries from the Orthodox churches all over the world to share information, to discuss some of the problems in ministerial formation pertaining to the situation of the schools themselves and the challenges of the contemporary world, and to see how theological education is related to the life and witness of the Church.

And again, in 1988, following an important consultation on “Doing Theology in Different Contexts” (in Prague), the idea of a world network, going beyond the traditional WCC (i.e. mainstream Protestant and Orthodox) constituency, in other words hoping to cover the Catholic and the Evangelical educational world, was conceived. And this idea, promoted by Sam Amirtham, director at that time of PTE, and the commission on Theological Education of WCC, members of which two persons later served as WOCATI Presidents (Choo Lak Yeow, who is among us today, and Barbara Sigmund Brown) gave birth to a legally established the following year in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, of a World Conference of Associations of Theological Institutions (WOCATI). Being, therefore, a child born from the Theological Education desk of WCC, WOCATI never lost sight of the ecumenical goal, despite its structural autonomy and independence from the ETE. Since the time I assumed the leadership of WOCATI in our last Assembly in Chiangmai, Thailand, in 2002, together with my colleagues in the Executive Committee, we set as a first priority to work closer with ETE, despite the fact that at some stage Geneva requested to withdraw its *ex officio* membership in the WOCATI executive committee. Therefore, Dr Werner’s appeal for a strategic cooperation between WOCATI and ETE, which can continue on a number of important issues even beyond this congress, is – at least on our part – wholeheartedly welcomed.

From its foundation WOCATI recognized the global interdependence in theological education, and that theological education belongs to the whole people of God, not only to the elite and professionals, be it priests, pastors, theologians, school teachers etc. That is why from the very beginning WOCATI tried to serve “the twin goals both contextualization and globalization in theological education” (*MF* 32 1989, p. 3). In the preamble of its constitution it was indicated that “theological education is a worldwide enterprise fundamental to the mission of the church. In its most immediate and concrete forms theological education is shaped by the religious, educational, social, political and historical traditions within which it exists. Theological education is carried out in a world which is increasingly being made aware of its interdependence and religious pluralism. Its context is both local and global and therefore, it can function more effectively within a worldwide framework” (WOCATI Constitution).

Trying to take further all the wisdom accumulated during the 50 years of ETE’s history, WOCATI extended its agenda to cover both the institutions working within the wider academic community (*universitas*), and those administered by the various Christian Denominations in a seminarian/confessional form. We understood our role and mission as a network, which initiates theological (and pedagogic) studies and reflections on the future of theological education around the globe. On behalf of our 24 registered member associations (and their institutions) we tried to promote the idea, that the aim of theological education in our modern and post-modern world must be three-dimensional: In addition to (a) the traditional role of serving the mission of the *Church*, as its prophetic conscience, and in some cases also as its ideological arm; it is imperative (b) that theological education enters into a constructive dialogue with all the disciplines within the *academic community*, aiming at safeguarding the integrity of the human person and the human values, critically watching the unprecedented evolution and growth of the secular sciences; finally, (c) Theological Education should serve the wider *society and the world community at large*, serving as an instrument of reconciliation, peace, justice, transfiguration of the society, and safeguarding the integrity of the God’s creation.

During the 20 years of its service, in addition to its effort to promote excellence in theological scholarship and research, as well as unification and correspondence in academic degrees, WOCATI also tried to reflect on such important issues as: “Women in Theological Education”, “Theological Education and Post-modernity”, “The influence of Cultures in Theological Education”, and most importantly “The Social Dimension of Theological Education”. We realized that our churches and their theological institutions are becoming more deeply aware of the vicious structures and dynamics of the economic globalization which results in poverty, marginalization, and oppression. We urged, therefore, our member theological institutions to struggle to overcome all forms of injustice, violence, marginalization and dehumanization, in particular those based on race, ethnicity, class, and gender; without of course forgetting our sisters and brothers with disabilities. Being in this blessed city, which received the first literary product of Christianity, St. Paul’s 1st Letter to Thessalonians, allow me to mention the name of the Great Church leader in whose spiritual jurisdiction this diocese belongs, the “Green” Patriarch Bartholomew, who constantly reminds us of our duty to respond to the enormous challenges of global warming and ecological destruction. WOCATI has placed high in its agenda the need to remind the churches and their theological institutions to work for a holistic spirituality and develop the necessary biblical, theological, and pastoral tools for personal, ecclesial, and social liberation.

Why do we Need a Radical Reappraisal in Theological Education

The theological education, at least within the framework of the ecumenical dialogue, has been our churches’ concern for many years. Its importance was pronounced right from the beginning, even before Tambaram, in the course of the quest of the divided Christians for the visible unity of the Church, as they sought to obey our Lord’s command “*that they may all be one*” (Jn 17,21).

WOCATI during this Executive Committee's term has focused its activities on making again theological education a significant channel for the pursuit of the great ends of the mission of our churches. It not only contributed to the deliberations of the last World Mission Conference, held here in this country exactly three years ago (Athens 2005) on the theme: "Come Holy Spirit Heal and Reconcile"; it also convened, one year later (Thessaloniki, January 13-18, 2006), an international symposium on "The Mission of the Church and the Role of Theological Education in it".

As Leslie Newbigin stated 30 years ago in the *MF* (4 1978, pp. 4ff), theological education to be truly Christian must show: "(a) obedient discipleship within the Christian community ...governed by the Tradition of which the Scriptures are the primary embodiment; (b) openness to the witness of Christians in other cultural situations as they seek to communicate the Gospel in the models of their cultures; (c) openness to the culture within which the theologian has to live out his discipleship". Only then can it become – through the necessary process of contextualization, conscientization, and liberation of course – a channel for spiritual renewal; and only then can it continue "to open up deeper understandings of the biblical Good News of God's Reign, so that we may live more faithfully in today's world", to use Ross Kinsler's recent evaluation (*MF* 101, p. 11)

All these years, however, we realized that the various theological educational institutions, both those of an academic and university level, as well as the various confessional ecclesiastical seminaries, instead of helping all people on earth to live faithfully in today's world and have life in abundance («ἵνα ζωὴν ἔχωσι καὶ περισσὸν ἔχωσιν» Jn 10:9), have in fact contributed to a consolidation and armoring of acquired confessional traditions, in many occasions to defending the institutional - and not the charismatic - expression of the Church, thus contributing to religious fanaticism. All these years WOCATI became aware of a lack of an authentic and profound *Pneumatology* in our praxis. Religious pluralism and the development in secular sciences, together with the norms and ideals of modernism, are still considered not as our Triune God's work in history, but as a revolt against the divine order, as if the "*Holy Spirit (does not) blow where S/he wills*" («τὸ πνεῦμα ὅπου θέλει πνεῖ», Jn 3:8).

Our situation in the 3rd millennium finds, dynamic theological educators, progressive missiologists engaged in honest inter-faith dialogue, and socially-oriented ecumenists completely detached, distanced, and in some cases even alienated, from pious, conservative, old-fashioned "traditional" communities – be it evangelicals, Pentecostals, Catholics or even Orthodox – in terms of strategic goals and vision. The former are normally preoccupied and influenced by modern views and ideas of the secular agenda, whereas the latter stick to a rather distorted understanding of our faith. I therefore take as a *sine qua non* priority to make *theology* again a central part in theological education! Immediately after its 2nd WOCATI Congress in Nairobi (1996), presenting in the Global Consultation of the ETE (Oslo) our goals, I insisted that the classical approach to *theology* is no longer valid. It is questioned from various quarters... at least it has run its course. Ever since the beginning of medieval scholasticism, and even after the Enlightenment, theology was defined as a discipline which used the methods of the Aristotelian logic. Rational knowledge was, and in some case is still, considered as the only legitimate form of knowledge. *Theological education*, thus, gradually shifted away from its experiential "Eucharistic...framework", i.e. away from its ecclesial, community, local context (*Towards Viable Theological Education*, Geneva 1997, pp. 66ff).

In the 21st century, and especially after 9/11, this costly "Eucharistic framework and vision" our theological education can not only develop gender sensitivity; not only articulate a new paradigm to equip the whole people of God; not only allow an innovative, experimental, people-centered approach; it can also ensure that the processes of formation be relevant and renewing to individuals and communities of faith. After all, our theological education can no longer be conducted *in abstracto*, as if its object, God (cf. theo-logia= logos/word about God), was a solitary ultimate being. It should always refer to a Triune God, the perfect expression of communion, a direct result

of the experience and vision of the Kingdom, which includes justice, peace, abundance of life and respect to the created world.

What comes out of such an affirmation is self-evident: our future theological education should primarily refer to reconciliation, and to communion as an ultimate constitutive element of being. In other words it should have relevance to the relational dimension of life, and therefore be in a continuous and dynamic dialogue, not only in the form of theological conversation among Churches or Christian communities in order to promote the visible unity of the one body of Christ, but also with people of other faiths. But to do this we need to develop an inclusive understanding of Christology, which in terms of mission and evangelism – and of theological education as its constitutive element – does not aim at bringing the nations and the people of other faiths to our religious (and sometimes even confessional) “enclosure”, but to “let” the Holy Spirit to use both us and those to whom we bear witness to bring about the Kingdom of God.

After all, this is how Jesus Christ understood himself in his famous discourse on the Last Judgement (Mt 25:31-46) a biblical passage in which all religious or confessional boundaries are dramatically brought down. There is neither mention of faith as a presupposition of salvation, nor of religious duties toward God in this passage; in fact there is nothing about what we normally consider duties. We are judged on those things that we are accustomed not to consider duties, any kind of duties, religious or otherwise. And this is how in the Golden age of Patristic theology Christology was developed.

The challenge of such and similar ideas for a “radical reappraisal” of theological education is in front of us all. In the next days prominent theologians, educators, and missiologists from all corners of the globe, from the East and the West, from the North and the South, from the archipelagos of the Pacific and the Caribbean and the dramatically hit areas of Myanmar and China, will all reflect on important issues pertaining to the future of theological education and ministerial formation.

A Final Word of Thanks

This World Congress, as you imagine, could not have been realized only with the poor finances of our Organization, unless we have had the moral and material support and brave subsidies provided by (a) the local church, to which I belong, the Holy Diocese of Neapolis and Stavroupolis, and particularly its bishop, Metropolitan Barnabas, for the hospitality in this city; (b) the world missionary agency EMW, which covered most of the travel expenses of the participants; (c) to the ETE desk of WCC, and in particular its Program co-ordinator Dr. Dietrich Werner for the enormous secretarial assistance; (d) the Research Committee of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, to the members of its faculty the president of the WOCATI has the honor to belong, and particularly its Rector, Prof. Anastasios Manthos, for morally and financially contributing to the work of the conference; (e) the Municipality of Neapolis, and in particular its Mayor, Nathaniel Ladopoulos, for providing their coach for our transport and this theater; and finally (f) the Holy Diocese of Demetrias and its Academy for Theological Studies in Volos, and in particular Metropolitan Ignatios, in whose premises and with his generous hospitality we shall end our week-long congress. I left out the young people of the local organizing committee, but shall give special thanks to them later in our conference.

To all the above, but also to all of you who honor with your presence this event, on behalf of all my colleagues in the organizing committee, I express my sincere and warm thanks.