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Theological Education: The Ecumenical Dimension

THOMAS COATES

This article was originally presented as a lecture at the Consultation on Ecumenical Affairs of the Lutheran World Federation, Tokyo, Japan, May 5, 1971. The author serves as professor on the staff of the Lutheran Theological Academy, Seoul, Korea.

Seismic changes are taking place in the world and in the times in which we live. Social structures, economic systems, bodies politic, literature and the arts—every area of our modern culture is being hit by the shock waves. It would be fatuous to suppose that the cosmic changes that are occurring in every area, on every level, of contemporary life could leave the church untouched, immune. The "solidarity with the world" which so oft finds expression in current theological parlance means nothing at all if it does not mean that the church is integrally, inseparably involved in the world of *change*—in the elements of that change, in the ordeal of that change, in the outcome of that change.

Now, if the church is shaken by the forces of change, it is self-evident that her theological education program will inevitably share in the impact of those forces. And because those forces are worldwide, and because their impact is churchwide, we are confronted with the relentless but salutary task of reexamining Lutheran theological education in an ecumenical dimension.

We must approach the ecumenical aspect of the theological education from two points of vantage. In the first place, the-

ology is directed toward, and must find expression in, the world, the OIKOUMENE, in the basic sense of that term. And so theological education must be ecumenical in the sense of being world-related, equipping God's servants to be the servants of men in the milieu of their own culture, on their own ground, in the combat area of their daily struggle for existence. For theological education to be ecumenical means for it to be thrust into the OIKOUMENE, the place where men live and labor, into a world that is corroded, broken, lost, but a world that still is God's and that, in a fuller, finer sense, should also be man's.

Too often and too long have the schools and seminaries of the church provided a kind of ivory tower for the pursuit of theology as an abstract science, for the cultivation of theological scholarship as an end unto itself. But now we find that too often theology's ivory tower has become an ivory ghetto—walled off from the noise and grime of the secular city, ensconced in splendid isolation from the world that surrounds it, from the world that needs it, from the world to which it belongs.

And so, if the church is to make its

theological training, education, and scholarship relevant, it must make it ecumenical. And that means *encounter* — encounter with the world as it is, and with men as they are — whether amid the modern secularism of the West or amid the ancient cultures of the East. Ecumenical? Of course, for the OIKOUMENE is the scene of encounter — for the church, for its theology, and for those in whose hands and through whose voices theology must come alive.

The encounter between theology and the OIKOUMENE will be multiform and multi-directioned: toward the forces and causes of social change; toward the problems and tensions of contemporary man; toward the new and transcendent vistas of the space age; and toward the insights and influences of the great world religions. The natural sciences, philosophy, psychology, sociology, anthropology, the fine arts — with all of these theology must enter into a new and vital relationship; all of these will provide resources for the kind of theological education that will make for effective service and witness in the modern world; all of these belong to the OIKOUMENE within whose orbit the church must do its task.

That task, however, requires a concerted effort, a united witness, a common purpose. Separatism, division, unseemly competition have too often muted the church's kerygmatic voice and palsied its diaconic arm. The field is so vast, the problems so great, the needs so compelling, that the church simply cannot afford the luxury of either fragmentation or duplication of its efforts. As Steven Mackie has said: "If the churches are committed to an ecumenical approach, to do together what does not

need to be done separately, then theological education is clearly one of the most important things which must be done together."

And so, in the second place, theological education must also be ecumenical in the sense of being related to the total church — responsive to its needs, enlisted in its cause, committed to its task. Here, then, in the universal church, we see the OIKOUMENE which provides both the context and the stimulus for Lutheran theological education.

This is not to say, of course, that Lutheranism should in any way yield or weaken its own confessional integrity, or sacrifice its unique theological heritage on the altar of a false ecumenism. We fully concur with the sentiments of our Indian Lutheran brethren, as stated by the Gurukul College Council in July, 1960:

If we believe that Martin Luther made a distinctive contribution of enduring value to the understanding of the Christian Church and its faith and life, we ought to make continuing provision for a channeling of this rich heritage into Indian Christendom.¹

In the same vein, the objectives of the Korea Lutheran Theological Academy include the following statement:

To cooperate with other agencies in the interest of theological education and research in Korea, and to make a distinctive Lutheran contribution to such cooperative endeavors.²

"Distinctive Lutheran contributions" ob-

¹ James A. Bergquist, *Patterns of Theological Education in India* (Madras: Diocesan Press: 1969), p. 20.

² "Lutheran Theological Academy: Objectives" (Korea Lutheran Church, Seoul, 1971), p. 1.

viously include such factors as the long and solid tradition of theological scholarship, the rich heritage of liturgy and worship, the strong emphasis on education on every level of Christian experience, and, of course, the resources of the Lutheran Confessions.

The Confessions, however, are not to be a wall that shuts out church and seminary from exposure to or contact with other parts of the Christian Church. Rather, they are to be a bridge—a bridge of contact and interchange with other Christians. On the one hand, through the Confessions we may convey to them and share with them those particular theological resources that we have received from God. On the other hand, these ecumenical contacts may well supply us with new spiritual insights and new elements of strength for our own theological endeavors, so that we may “shore up” those areas in which in the past we have been weak.

Lutheran theological education, therefore, which is both confessional and ecumenical, is properly viewed as a vital, integral part of the *missio Dei*. This is indeed a dynamic concept; it makes of theological training an exciting, refreshing, ongoing enterprise. Thus conceived, theological education will not become the “dead end” that a well-known Asian theologian has judged it to be, but it will be open to constructive change, to fresh insights, to new structures, to responsible experimentation. And all in the service of the Gospel, as a conscious instrument of the *missio Dei*, as the staging area for the DIAKONIA in which the Gospel must find its concretion.

The emphasis in current theological education is therefore on *totality*. Theology

is an exercise which involves the *whole* people of God—not just a corps of specially trained professionals. It is, moreover, concerned with and directed to the *whole* of life. It is being said, with increasing insistence, that theology is not something that we *learn*, but something that we *do*.

But what does it mean to “do theology”? Quite simply it means living the Christian life in the midst of the problems and tensions of the “real world.” It means transferring theology from the realm of arcane theory into the marketplace of everyday life, of facing up to the problems of “rapid social change,” and of bringing to these problems the insights and the judgments that theology alone can provide. It means, in Bonhoeffer’s simple but trenchant phrase, “being there for others.”

This leads quite naturally, then, to the new concern for lay theological training—not as a kind of stepchild of the church’s educational program, but in a role of parity with the education that is geared to the professional ministry. To that end the church is being called upon to commit its best resources to the task—the resources of its most qualified teaching personnel; the resources also of a carefully planned curriculum, including courses that are to be shared with those who are studying for the ordained ministry.

This theme appears time and again in contemporary ecumenical discussion. Steven Mackie in his stimulating study *Patterns of Ministry* declares:

The argument no longer starts with the need for a professional ministry and leads on to the precise requirement of theological education. Rather it starts from the existence of the Church, or from the charac-

ter of theology itself and goes straight to the theological education of the laity (the ministry being simply considered as a special group with special needs).³

This approach is well summarized by an Asian theologian who is quoted by Mackie as saying:

What I would like to see happen is not the so-called laity taking over the function of the clergy more and more, but all Christians taking part in the mission of God in the world on an equal basis but in different ways.⁴

In this spirit the Northwood Consultation on Theological Education (July 1967) brought this observation:

The committed Christian who is *not* ordained expects, and is right to expect, from any course of theological education the same elements that are required in ministerial training. (a) He should be taught to pursue rigorously the quest of truth. (b) He is right to expect theology to be related to the mission and life of the Church as well as to contemporary society; and he will hope to receive some spiritual formation by participation in a committed community. (c) He is also right to expect that he should be equipped for any ministry to which he is called.⁵

The fact that the inclusion of the laity in seminary training is far more than a mere theory is shown by the fact that of 400 theological schools in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, 56 percent are carrying on some kind of theological education program for the laity.

³ Steven G. Mackie, *Patterns of Ministry*, (London: Collins, 1969), p. 70.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

⁵ "Theological Education": Offprint from *Study Encounter*, Vol. III, No. 4, (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1968), p. 3.

As a corollary to this development, we are witnessing a current emphasis on "new forms of ministry"—"ministry" in the broader sense of that term. No longer is the term "ministry" conceived solely or preeminently in terms of the ordained clergyman serving a residential parish. There is a new and burgeoning interest in "special ministries" and in the "tent-making ministry."

There is of course nothing new in these versions of the ministry. Churches in many parts of the world have long made provision for special forms of ministry—e. g., institutional and military chaplaincies, campus pastorates, rural evangelism, etc. What is new is the current movement to put these ministries on a par with the so-called parish ministry and to broaden the seminary curriculum to include training for these extra-parochial types of ministry—not as a grudging concession to the spirit of the times, or as "optional extras" to the central, parish-oriented preministerial program, but out of deep conviction that these ministries, too, are vitally important aspects of and channels for the *missio Dei*.

Training for such special ministries obviously is not confined to academic courses, but also includes various types of "field experience"—both during the course of the school year and by special training and work experiences during the summer vacation period—in factories, in social service activities, in rural development projects, etc. In this way, too, theological education is emerging from its vine-covered seminary enclave into personal, direct encounter with the OIKOUMENE, into actual involvement with people—God's people—in their work and in their homes,

with all the needs and tensions, all the problems and hopes that beset them. Parenthetically, we might add that such "on the spot" encounter with life in field and factory, in commerce and industry, in ghettos and slum areas, in courtrooms and police stations would be experience of incomparable value also for those whose vocation is toward the conventional parish ministry. Can we envision a better or clearer "ecumenical dimension" for theological education? Does not the parish pastor also need to know the OIKOUMENE?

When we echo the noble missionary cry, "The world is our field!" we need to ask ourselves: "What do we really mean by *the world*?" Too long have we used this missionary axiom to mean the "world" of other continents, of other races, of other cultures — far distant from our own homeland, separated from us (I was tempted to say "safely separated") by intervening oceans.

No — when we say, "The world is our field!" we mean the world beginning next door, in our own neighborhood, our own community, our own workshop, or school, or store, or farm, or club. The world begins with our own particular Jerusalem. Then, as He will, when He will, whither He will, God will direct us to the broader OIKOUMENE — all Judea and Samaria and "the uttermost parts of the earth."

Now it is obvious that if the OIKOUMENE itself is our field, and if theological education is to equip men for service in the whole OIKOUMENE, both near and far, then those who are engaged in the common cause of bringing the Gospel of Christ to the OIKOUMENE should join forces, as much as possible, for this basic

yet ever-changing task. We are to be "empire builders," not in the sense of building our own ecclesiastical or institutional empire — as too often, alas, has been the case in the past — but in terms of building the worldwide empire of God's reign in the hearts of men. And so, in the field of theological education, the call is for cooperation, not isolation; joint planning and action, not fragmentation and duplication — always, of course, in a manner and measure consistent with our own theological convictions, and at no sacrifice of our own Lutheran confessional heritage. But I am convinced that these guiding principles still leave wide — and ever-widening — areas for a truly ecumenical approach on the part of Lutheran theological education. Thus, the Northwood Consultation brought this recommendation:

Joint planning and action for theological education is demanded alike by our common calling and our common situation today, as also by the developing cooperation between the churches. Ecumenical education, in which teachers and students of different church traditions join in the common task, is an instrument of great value in the actual processes of theological thinking and learning. Denominational schools and church programs should take steps to plan for a coordinated or united theological education, while providing at the same time for any special confessional instruction or training that their churches require.⁶

This leads, then, to an examination of the areas in which ecumenical cooperation in education is already taking place, or holds the promise of future development.

⁶ Ibid., p. 4.

We do not propose at this time to submit a catalog of all such activities, since these are already widely known and have been extensively described and documented, e.g., in such works as Steven Mackie's *Patterns of Ministry*, and in the reports issued by the World Council of Churches and by the Theological Education Fund. It will be instructive, however, to indicate the avenues of approach which are currently being utilized or explored.

The first is cooperative or joint seminary training on both the undergraduate and graduate levels. On the inter-Lutheran scene a significant breakthrough was achieved here in Tokyo in 1966 when—after some years of consultation—the Theological Training Program of the Nihon Ruteru Kyodan (the Missouri Synod-related Japan Lutheran Church) joined with the Japan Evangelical Lutheran Church in establishing a cooperative theological training program—sharing the same dormitory, dining hall, library, and classroom facilities, the same courses, the same teaching personnel, etc., on the new campus in Mitaka, while each group retained responsibility for the recruitment, counseling, and eventual placement of its own students. (Significantly, this inter-seminary amalgamation began even before the two Lutheran bodies were in official altar and pulpit fellowship—although this fellowship was effected in the following year.)

Similar approaches to inter-Lutheran seminary training are underway—with most encouraging results—in such widely scattered areas as Mexico, New Guinea, Taiwan, India, and Africa, and with certain aspects of the work also in Hong Kong.

A new concept in the area of inter-Lutheran theological education is the embryonic Asia Center for Theological Study (A.C.T.S.) proposed for the campus of the Japan Lutheran Theological Seminary. Conceived and directed by Dr. Yoshiro Ishida, former Asia Secretary of the L.W.F., A.C.T.S. is designed to offer graduate courses in theology, through the medium of the English language, to students from various parts of East Asia—and beyond, for that matter. For it is hoped that in the course of time students also from North America and from Europe will find in A.C.T.S. an opportunity for graduate study in the midst of an Asian environment, and also that missionary candidates from Western lands might here receive some on-the-spot orientation within the actual milieu of Asian life and culture.

In a more immediate ecumenical sense, we might point to examples of cooperative theological training between Lutheran churches and other Protestant bodies. These two examples may suffice at this time: One is the affiliation of the Lutheran Theological College (Luthergiri), Rajahmundry, together with three other Protestant schools, in the newly established (1964) Andhra Christian Theological College. The second is the Tamil Nadu Theological Seminary in Madurai, which represents a merger of a former Lutheran and a former C.S.I. Seminary.

The concern for preserving confessional identity within the ecumenical context of these programs is cited in the report quoted by the Rev. James Bergquist, with special reference to the Andhra plan:

Arrangements were made for instruction to be common for students from all churches, with special denominational

classes required twice a week in order to provide for special doctrinal and practical emphasis needed by the Churches. There was also introduced an organization — not a building — called a "hall," with a dean appointed in consultation with the respective churches. The purpose of the hall is to provide a focus for denominational identity within the ecumenical context, to give the students a continuing sense of "belonging" to their home churches, and to provide an organized means through which churches and their officials might keep in contact with their students.⁷

Further emphasis on and support for the "hall system" is contained in the following recommendation presented to the Consultation on Theological Education in India (Oct. 15—21, 1969):

The Lutheran heritage can be received and passed on in joint regional seminaries through an arrangement whereby a church or churches through representatives on the staff:

1. Maintain dialog among staff and students in regard to issues arising from various differences among the churches.

2. Provide counsel for all students, but especially for students of the churches concerned, in reference to problems of understanding the various approaches.

3. Provide an avenue for instruction in worship, practices, history, and teaching of the churches concerned, primarily to their own students.

(Currently this arrangement is called "hall system" at Andhra Christian Theological College and Tamil Nadu Theological Seminary.)⁸

⁷ Bergquist, p. 8.

⁸ *Proceedings of the Consultation on Lutheran Theological Education in India* (Madras: Diocesan Press, 1970), pp. 67—68.

Another and more modest example of Lutheran ecumenical involvement, and yet one that may well bear emulation elsewhere, is the current program in Korea, where Lutheran theological students take the majority of their courses at Yonsei University in Seoul — either in the Yonsei College of Theology, in the case of undergraduate students, or in the Yonsei United Graduate School of Theology, in the case of post-B. D. students. At the same time Yonsei will accept courses which are taken at Lutheran Theological Academy, such as dogmatics, Reformation history, and liturgics. In a reciprocal measure, the Lutherans supply a visiting professor each year to the Yonsei graduate theological faculty.

A new version of the ecumenical dimension in theological education is the establishment of federated seminary programs. In describing this type of arrangement, Steven Mackie reports:

An alternative pattern is the *federal* one, where the separate schools come together to share their educational resources but do not merge their separate identities. This pattern . . . is being widely hailed as the pattern of the future, especially where it is combined with the university link. . . . It is now indeed the avowed policy of the American Association of Theological Schools to encourage the formation of seminary "clusters." . . . In each cluster the seminaries would retain their separate institutional identity but would function together for all educational purposes, and would be jointly linked to a nearby university.⁹

A noteworthy example of this type of federated seminary operation is to be

⁹ Mackie, pp. 100—1.

found in Mexico City. Beginning in 1965, the Lutheran, Anglican, Baptist, and Union theological schools have joined together on a common piece of property to establish a seminary community. Other examples of federated or coordinated schools are to be found in the Federal Theological College of Southern Africa; the Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, Calif.; Christian Theological Academy, Warsaw; the South East Asia School of Theology; and Tamil Nadu United College, South India. The benefits of this kind of ecumenical cooperation in theological training are obvious and manifold. In modern seminary development, cluster is better than cloister!

As a corollary of the federal approach to seminary education, another idea which is fast gaining favor—in places as widely separated as Louisville and Hong Kong—is that of the consortium. According to this system, theological schools in a given area (sometimes including Roman Catholic schools, as in St. Louis) provide for a plan of cross-registration, whereby students may enroll in courses in other institutions, with the credits being transferred from one school to another. This permits certain institutions within the consortium to specialize in certain areas of theological or related study. It also provides for a readier interchange of instructors among the institutions concerned. Such cross-fertilization, on both the instructor and student levels, is bound to have a salutary, broadening, and deepening influence on all who are involved. This, then, is still another fruit of the ecumenical spirit in the enterprise of theological education.

The link between theological school and university is one which is receiving in-

creasing emphasis. More and more seminaries are locating within the geographical orbit of a university, not only that their students may take a wider variety of courses, enjoy the use of the university library, and engage more effectively in research projects, but especially that the theological student may be exposed to the academic, scientific, and cultural milieu of the university and have a far broader range of encounter with the world in which he must carry on his ministry. In a unique manner the university provides for dialog between theology and other fields of human learning, e. g., philosophy, sociology, literature, political science, or even—especially in Asia and Africa—direct encounter with the systems of other great world religions.

The location of theological schools adjacent to or in the vicinity of universities has already been accomplished or is presently underway not only in well-established theological centers like New York, Chicago, and Berkeley but also in such developing areas as Ghana, the West Indies, Fiji, and the Philippines. For that matter, we need look no farther than suburban Tokyo to see this plan in operation, for within the past few years both Tokyo Union Theological Seminary and Japan Lutheran Seminary have relocated their campuses to property adjoining International Christian University. The beneficial results of such academic proximity will be increasingly manifest as time goes on.

"Ecumenical" is also the word for theological study which is carried on in Departments of Religion maintained by some universities, especially in North America. Moreover, in Germany, the Scandinavian

countries, Switzerland, and elsewhere in Europe ministerial education has primarily been the province of theological faculties in state universities. The relation of such theological study to the respective churches is in itself a subject which deserves fuller exploration. We mention it here, not to pass any value judgment but simply to cite its ecumenical import.

Any review of the ecumenical aspects of theological education would be incomplete without reference to the Serampore University system in India. Serampore is the only university in India authorized by the government to grant B.D. and M. Th. degrees. As of 1967, no less than 32 theological colleges in India, Ceylon, and Pakistan were affiliated with Serampore, including seven Lutheran divinity schools. This provides an excellent pattern for ecumenical cooperation in theological study with retention of both the identity and the unique heritage of the Lutheran schools which share in this arrangement.

In close relation to the university linkage of which we have been speaking is the "house of studies" plan which is gaining increasing favor, also in Lutheran circles. An example of this pattern of university-related theological education is Westfield House, Cambridge, England. Dr. Martin H. Franzmann, now retired from Westfield, describes the program as being twofold: external and internal. According to the external program, he writes:

Students, after taking a first degree at a recognized university, read theology at the University of Cambridge, for a B. A. Honours degree, while concurrently receiving specific Lutheran orientation at the House itself. . . . The external program includes a final year, or possibly two years, in a

larger Lutheran theological seminary overseas prior to ordination.¹⁰

As an alternative, Westfield House offers an "internal program" of four years' duration, leading to ordination, in which almost all courses are given at Westfield House by its own instructors and guest lecturers. Additional courses may be taken at the university. This course also involves a final year or two in a larger Lutheran seminary overseas prior to ordination.

The house of studies plan, which is widely followed by other church bodies, might well be considered as a viable approach to Lutheran theological education within a university orbit, especially in those areas in which a full-scale program is not feasible or warranted.

Recruitment of students has also, in recent times, come within the purview of the ecumenical approach to theological education. Thus, the Association of Theological Schools in South East Asia several years ago inaugurated a 4-year experimental recruitment program aimed at students in secondary schools and universities. Similar cooperative recruitment efforts have also been reported from Africa and Mexico.

The last decade has witnessed real progress in the formation and activity of theological college or seminary associations, both on a national and on a regional basis. National associations are now found in such countries of the "younger church world" as Nigeria, Malagasy, Bolivia, Brazil, Indonesia, India, Taiwan, and Korea. In addition, regional associations have been formed in Francophone Africa, East Africa, Southern Africa, the Near East, South East

¹⁰ Letter from Martin H. Franzmann to Thomas Coates, March 23, 1971.

Asia, North East Asia, and both Northern and Southern Latin America.

The value of associations of this kind is cited in a T. E. F. report as "their catalytic function in developing a regional integrity in theological study and education." The schools in a given country or in a given geographical region have so much in common in terms of culture and historical background that rich benefits will assuredly accrue from associations of this kind. On a practical level, these larger groups can devise standards for accreditation, plan for specialized conferences, work together in curricular development, provide textbooks, and publish theological journals (the number of which has already grown so long that we cannot list them here).

Additional inter-seminary ecumenism in terms of cooperative study and scholarship among the churches in Asia, Africa, and Latin America include such plans as short-term exchanges of instructors and students; inter-seminary conferences; joint consultations for theological teachers; cooperation among theological libraries; learned societies for the study of such areas as Old Testament, New Testament, Church History, Worship and Church Music; etc. In addition, Christian Study Centers have been established in Bangalore, Tokyo, and elsewhere for research, study, and dialog with non-Christian religions.

An equally significant development of the ecumenical dimension in theological training is the inter-seminary program of joint community service experiences for

theological students. The Northwood Consultation recommended joint projects of this nature in "hospitals, prisons, youth centers, projects relating to migration, refugees, immigrants, etc." Industrial training programs, e. g., in terms of summer internships for theological students have been fostered through inter-seminary cooperation in Osaka, Manila, Hong Kong, and elsewhere.

In Hong Kong, Dr. Victor Hafner reports that five seminaries (Anglican, Roman Catholic, United, and two Lutheran) cooperate in sending their students each week into some problem area in the community: e. g., in rehabilitation centers for drug addicts, juvenile offenders, and unwed mothers, in prisons and orphanages, in addition to visits to Chinese community organizations, labor unions, government offices, etc. These "on location" encounters are supplemented by lectures and student group discussions relative to their experiences. The same group of Hong Kong seminaries also sponsors a joint pastoral counseling program for pastors in office in the church bodies which they serve.

And so the list might go on and on, as the ecumenical dimension of theological education becomes ever longer and wider. Thus we pursue the endless, compelling, lifting task of equipping God's servants to proclaim His Word, to live His life, to serve His people in the OIKOUMENE that is His.

Seoul, Korea