

Theological education, considered from South Africa: Current issues for cross-contextual comparison

**Author:**Christo Lombaard¹**Affiliation:**¹Department of Christian Spirituality, University of South Africa, South Africa**Corresponding author and email:**Christo Lombaard
christolombaard@gmail.com**Email:**

christolombaard@gmail.com

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Taking into review the newly published series of substantial multi-authored volumes on ecumenical theological education internationally, this article identifies, from the author's own experience in ecumenical theological education and from his publications in this field, the central issue of specificity, locality and context in theological education. This takes place within two broadly developing new and relevant trends: post-secularism and inclusive liberalism, briefly described and then related to theological education. In the light of these trends, some questions are asked on theological education, and a plea for greater interdisciplinarity is made. The article thus contains a considerable part of self-reflective material, based on substantial professional experience in theological education, which enables engagement with the new publications and newly developing international contextual features that will shape theological education for the foreseeable future.

Tomes, tones, times

Over the past 5 years, the Oxford Centre for Mission Studies via Regnum Press International in Oxford published in the *Regnum Studies in Global Christianity* series five books that are important for our topic here (cf. also Lombaard 2014a, in non-academic format):

1. Werner, D., Esterline, D., Kang, N. & Raja, J. (eds.), 2010, *The handbook of theological education in world Christianity: Theological perspectives, ecumenical trends, regional surveys* (http://www.ocms.ac.uk/regnum/detail.php?book_id=64).
2. Singh, D. & Farr, B. (eds.), 2011, *Christianity and education: Shaping Christian thinking in context* (http://www.ocms.ac.uk/regnum/detail.php?book_id=73).
3. Werner, D. & Phiri, I. (eds.), 2013, *Handbook of theological education in Africa* (http://www.ocms.ac.uk/regnum/detail.php?book_id=98).
4. Werner, D., Antone, H., Longchar, W. & Bae, H. (eds.), 2013, *Asian handbook for theological education and ecumenism* (http://www.ocms.ac.uk/regnum/detail.php?book_id=101).
5. Kalaitzidis, P., FitzGerald, T., Hovorun, C., Pekridou, A., Asproulis, N., Liagre, G. & Werner, D. (eds.), 2014, *Orthodox handbook on ecumenism* (http://www.ocms.ac.uk/regnum/detail.php?book_id=128).

The chronological starting point of this series of five volumes is, in fact, the 2011-volume by Singh and Farr, which brought together a selection from two decades of articles in the journal *Transformation*. However, the 2010 Werner, Esterline, Kang and Raja tome set the tone for this collection of volumes with its far-reaching grip on theological education from the perspectives of history, problematics, geographies, institutional arrangements and denominations. I found reflected within and reflected upon in that volume many of the crucial issues I had experienced (and had published on¹) during my career in ecumenical theological education:

- Four years at the Theological Education by Extension College in Johannesburg, where all ministerial training was carried out by post, at various pre-degree levels up to (then) a degree-equivalent diploma, serving a number of denominations across the southern African scene.
- Five years as telematic officer of the Faculty of Theology, University of Pretoria, where the intention was to transfer all degree and post-graduate courses onto the Internet as a mode of education supplementary to contact tuition, serving a few churches, and doing so within the university's local and the country's legal parameters.²
- And then, since 2006, at the University of South Africa, a mega-university now almost fully transitioned from a combination of postal and email course delivery methods to a fully

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1. Lombaard (1997:9–12; 2001:17–24; 2003:43–61; 2005:295–305; 2007:202–215; 2011a:49–65; 2013b:771–778; 2015b:2551–2556); Lombaard and Le Roux (2002:12–15); Lombaard and de Villiers (2004:68–80); Lombaard and Rabe (2005:412–431).

2. This also led to the establishment of the <http://teo.co.za/> web service.

electronic university, with students across the globe: in the case of my discipline, Christian Spirituality, only at post-graduate levels (cf. Lombaard 2015b:2551–2556).

To find at least some of the experiences during my years in these three very different, and by usual seminary and university standards non-traditional appointments – and many more too – reflected upon within such international scopes as the 2010 and 2011 volumes provided for, was an indication that critical-sensitive evaluation on a grander scale than before was a sign of our times. (Hence, too, the self-reflective tone of much of this article: it is only from substantial professional experience in theological education that fuller engagement with these new publications is possible. Such experience also provides a reasonable basis, along with the publications noted in footnote 1, for suggesting some outlines for theological education/ministerial formation within newly unfolding international contextual features).

With the tone set by these two volumes, this scale was both expanded upon and refined in greater detail by the 2013 publications in which the matters mentioned were explored in greater contextual depth that the concentration on the respective regions of Africa and Asia allowed for. This is no less the case in the 2014 *Orthodox Handbook on Ecumenism*, in which the focus is not as specifically on theological education, but more on ecumenism as it relates to Orthodox theology and institutions, although the significant second-to-last section of this volume offers ample reflection on issues related to Orthodox ecumenical theological education.

Overwhelming as these overviews are in their geographical scope, one, at the same time, gets a clear sense from these volumes that the diversities related to theological education are such that specificity – alternatively formulated: locality, alternatively formulated: contextuality³ – will remain one of *the* defining characteristics of theological education. As immensely valuable as generalised perspectives are in order from a distance to gain understanding, to discern trends, and then to make decisions and to encourage movement, these ‘greater worlds’ can in the minds and beings of most people – perhaps the most cosmopolitan amongst us are exempt from this – only happen *here*. This is also shown by the case studies included in these volumes. Always, the ‘greater worlds’ are domesticated in the *here*: the only possible kind of reception of the ‘greater worlds’ is *local*. The international Christian community is, with possibly the exception of a select few engaged in international ecumenical gatherings, always received in a small circle: the church and its education are ever *on-the-spot*.

Specificity, locality and contextuality place before the Church, in its broadest view, the issue of diversity – a matter which Naidoo (in press) will in a new publication examine in relation to theological education from various practical perspectives. Let us, therefore, here take a more

conceptual bearing – a stance that has the inherent capacity to recast thinking on diversity in theological education into a new mould, fit for the times in which we are increasingly beginning to find ourselves.

Post-secularism and inclusive liberalism (= love thy neighbour?)

It has been said a few times, also in response to Taylor’s important book *A secular age* (2007; cf. Goosen 2007; applied to theological education, Bergdahl 2010), that the idea of secularism as a non-religious orientation to life, most explicitly to public life, has over the past century been a more or less Western European/ised phenomenon; moreover, it seems from sociological points of view (cf. Berger 1999:1–19; essays collected in Nynäs, Lassander & Utraiainen 2012) even in that context to have been quite an elitist endeavour, found mostly amongst intellectuals and the leadership elites. No doubt it is valid that secularism in such a ‘pure’ form had dawned in Africa and Asia only amongst the educated classes, and even then, not very broadly. In the Americas, it seems the situation was not much different, even giving birth to what is in a sense secularism’s opposite: popular – that is, broad-based – fundamentalism (cf. Lombaard 2012:139–169, drawing on e.g. Dixon 1910–1915; Munson 2006:255–270). In the Far East, the configuration of religious values has played out much differently. In Europe, with its most extreme forms of official religious negation found in the Soviet-style anti-religionism and in the French *laïcité* principle, a sliding scale of popular attitudes to religion is seen across countries and regions, at times related to the history of association of the churches with earlier political ideologies and practices. On that continent, it seems at a broad sweep to be the current case that the countries where the more symbolically-oriented expressions of Christianity – Orthodox and Catholic orientations – had held sway earlier, the Church had taken deeper popular root than in countries more given to Protestantism, with the post-Soviet era Baltic countries providing an example of this tendency.

However, with the inkling of a new cultural movement being given influential expression to by Habermas (2008:17–29), with his article, ‘Secularism’s crisis of faith: Notes on post-secular society’ followed by, for example, Turner (2010:649–667), Nynäs, and Lassander and Utraiainen (2012) – although there had been precursors to Habermas – it seems that the era of strong preference for non-religious orientations in public life and amongst public and intellectual figures, is experiencing something of a change. With a pendulum that may have swung from implicit bias in favour of expressed religiosity in pre-secularist times to implicit bias in opposition to expressed religiosity during the secularist phase in Western/ised societies, a more natural kind of balance is now being sensed, or sought.

One way in which this is carried out, is through the relatively new concept relating to law and the place of religion in society, termed inclusive liberalism by Benson. Benson’s

3.1 I have recently been accused of being opposed to contextuality: Farisani (2013; 2014). I am in fact opposed only to *poor*, that is, not fully considered Africanisation/relevance/contextuality (Lombaard 2013a; 2015a).

argument, presented successfully in the upper law courts of Canada, and in subsequent publications and presentations internationally (Benson 2008:297–312; 2012; 2013a; 2013b:12–29), may be centralised around one point, from which various implications flow.

The central point is that the main gain of the French and American revolutions and their respective resulting constitutions had been that state and Church no longer stand in any special relationship to one another. Although initially intended as a political move to deal with religious, specifically Christian pluralism, in an inclusive way, what had in time come to be broadly understood under the concept of the separation of Church and state, at least in the influential French and American interpretations of this point, was that religion had to be barred as far as possible from all matters relating to governance. This, however, implied that the state had to *retain* a very special relationship to religion, namely that it assumed unto itself the power of exclusion. In such a kind of exclusive liberalism, a liberal state (that is one seeking expressions of freedom for its citizens, in all possible respects) restricts any matter of religious orientation from its ambits. Governance should be God-free. This interpretation of a liberal democratic dispensation has, however, in fact not shed the earlier, feudal connection between God and king. It has merely inversed the social order: whereas the state would until the late 18th century reflexively involve the Church (in one of its preferred forms) in as many matters of governance as possible, now the opposite would be administered by the state: religion would purposively be excluded. This constituted no true *break* in the tradition of Church-state relations, seen from the side of the state. The state still assumed for itself special powers over anything that had to do with religion. Faith remained a distinctive category for the state. The secular state would remain as far as possible officially distanced from religion. Clearly no full Church-state separation had occurred from the side of the state; the earlier intimate link had been retained by means of special pleading, with incorporation activities now replaced by detachment activities. Religion still attracted particular attention of the state, by simple virtue of the fact that it was *religion*.

A more natural expression of liberal democratic ideals, and a more just treatment of the citizenry in all its diversity, would be an orientation from the state's side in which religion played no more *and* no less a role than any other aspect of the citizenry's concerns (be they, for instance, dietary choices, sports club loyalties, or – a very modern issue – sexual preferences). This would be inclusive liberalism: where religion is found amongst all the everyday matters in individuals' and groups' identities and activities, as a normal part thereof, or not; not as a special case. On matters religious the state would have no special powers.

The implications this has for expressions of faith within society are far-reaching (including, as equally valid orientations, also expressions of non-faith, non-expressions

of faith, and non-expressions of non-faith). The link Benson's concept of inclusive liberalism has with Habermas's concept of post-secularism must be made evident: the position of religion within society is in both instances here 'normalised' to a balanced, that is a non-privileged and non-disadvantaged, station. Combined, these concepts of a post-secularist cultural climate and a socio-political orientation⁴ of inclusive liberalism have two direct implications for theological education, neither of which will be easy to work out in practice, and are here presented only as cursory introductions:

- That diversity within the 'universality' of religious expression is accepted within theological education.
- That interdisciplinarity be a hallmark of theological education and scholarship.

Diversity is (non-) 'normality'

That the Church is diverse, even to the point of intra-Christian contradiction, has often been lamented. On my part, though, I regard such diversity as something positive, both in the ancient and modern worlds (cf. Lombaard 2011b:60–62; 2014b:1–10), since diversity indicates both importance and relevance; little or no effort is expended by anybody to 'bring home' what is unimportant and irrelevant. That the Church, broadly meant, is theologically diverse, is a truism shown even by an unsophisticated abridgment of where some Christian expressions implicitly feel the heart of their respective theologies to lie⁵:

- Catholic church: God-in-Church.
- Charismatic and Pentecostal churches: God-in-ecstasy.
- Genitive theologies (liberation, feminist and ecological theologies): God-in-world.
- Orthodox churches: God-in-liturgy.
- Reformation traditions: God-in-Bible.
- Spiritual/mystic inclination: God-in-intimacy.

If this, although clearly oversimplified, already complex Christian constitution is placed into a matrix with theological, ethical, political, social and other contentious matters, the case for diversity speaks abundantly for itself. On, for instance, aspects of ecology, economy, politics and sexuality, the debates range – to name but one example of each – from global warming to third world debt to Russia and Ukraine and to homosexuality and ordination. The nature of the debates stretches from fairly placid, something akin to informed indecisiveness on global warming, for instance, to fierce, verging on schism: the latter best illustrated by the way homosexual ordination has been debated and/or practiced in US Episcopalianism versus African Anglicanism, with, for instance, British and South African Anglicanism treading quite differently in their respective contexts.

4. For an overt acknowledgement of the way in which a political framework (namely of a democratic constitution based on human rights) informs a theological position, see Snyman (2007).

5. Note the intensely-experiential aspect this entails for each of the denominations, which finds discursive expression in its theology, mission, education, et cetera.

The related questions, which are at times mild and at times extremely diverse, flowing from this for theological education include:

- How are these matters practically treated in theological education settings?
- Are they treated differently in fully ecumenical theological education settings as opposed to confessional theological education settings with an ecumenical outlook? (One can assume to know the way they will be treated within many confessional theological education settings without an ecumenical outlook).
- Can an attitude of tolerance, or perhaps better said, of true *appreciation* of different approaches and views be cultivated within theological education settings? The more so on difficult, controversial issues.
- If so, is such tolerance or appreciation only to the one side, that is, in one direction? Or can tolerance and appreciation be cultivated towards the right as well as the left?⁶ Put differently: can the concept of inclusive liberalism, which relates to the treatment of religion by the state, also be incorporated within theological education to become in time part of the 'inner workings', or the discernment, of churches on contentious matters? Can 'love thy neighbour' be *so* radical?

Cooperative education and scholarship

Within the developing culture of post-secularism, it is to be expected that the Church be looked at afresh from what had earlier become quite extensively secularised circles. As one instance: in fields such as social and development work, the nomenclature of 'NGOs' (non-governmental organisations) is ever more routinely expanded to now also include 'FBOs' (faith-based organisations), thus acknowledging the (normal/ised) role of religion in community upliftment programmes. Such changes place different expectations on theological education, on both the quality of the work done in this respect – nobody from the churches' side would want to feel looked down upon because of inferior training or abilities – and, no less, on the nature of the training. It will become increasingly necessary for theologians engaged in such cross-disciplinary⁷ work to deal meaningfully with concepts, insights and valid practices from the humanities, which I had twice before pleaded for (Lombaard 1999a:22–46; 2015a), as well as from other academic fields. In order to enter into equal relationships in which duties and respect for the quality of work are shared, theological education should include, within its already filled theological encyclopaedia, contents which enable easily enough later specialisation in fields in which such interaction can be fully undertaken. This should be done, not in a manner that 'sells out' the nature of the Church or of faith-motivated involvement in society (cf. Ruthenberg 2005). Neither should this happen to the Church's discredit, thus foregoing valuable service

6.I acknowledge here the influence in my thinking on this matter of the South African systematic theologian Danie Veldsman.

7.A more overtly confessional formulation might read, with a capital letter, Cross-disciplinary work.

and, in some senses also, missiological, educational and other opportunities. In a post-secularist cultural climate, theological education should therefore in content become more diverse and more rigorous, not only when measured to Church standards (although naturally always that too), but also when measured to cross-disciplinary standards.

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