

Reenvisioning the Theological Curriculum as if the *Missio Dei* Mattered

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PREAMBLE

This paper has been written with the intention of its being a stimulus to discussion in the context of a conference on theological education and mission. It is by no means a finished article. It is offered as an outline of an alternative way of looking at theological education, with the hope that it might provoke serious critical reflection on inherited patterns. At the same time, it is designed to encourage a rethinking of both the content and methods of educational practice, in the light of God's missionary activity and purposes for his people.

The paper may be shared with anyone interested in the future of theological education. It is not, however, intended at this stage for publication. I believe that it would benefit enormously from critical responses, and so would invite anyone who does read it to be willing to engage with the arguments and, if possible, to send me their candid opinions. To facilitate the communication, I include my email address at the end.

It is now over forty years since I began to be involved in theological education.¹ I have been privileged to be engaged in teaching, for short or long periods, on all six continents. However, in spite of what I have learnt from numerous contacts across the world about the nature and ways of doing theology – about, for example, the crucial importance of context, different processes of learning, the relationship between theological and other disciplines, the subjects of the theological enterprise and reasons for which it is undertaken –, I am not sure that I am much wiser about what patterns of education are the most appropriate.

In the brief compass of this presentation, I will attempt what my early professional training militated against, namely to begin with practice and then move to theoretical reflection; this, I believe, is a fruitful method. In this case, I intend to start with an outline of a theological curriculum,² adaptable to different circumstances and applicable to many forms of ministry, and then give a summary of the various assumptions on which it is based. Of

¹ My first engagement was whilst an assistant pastor in North London in 1963-6: I did some part-time teaching at a neighbouring Anglican theological college (Oakhill).

² As will be observed, it is only an outline. The reason for this is that I am proposing more a method than a strict syllabus. One of the major facets of the design is that it can be made contextually appropriate. Hence, it would defeat the object to make the content too prescriptive.

course, I recognise, at the outset, that the relationship between theory and practice is never uniformly in one direction: practice is always informed by theoretical commitments and theory is always influenced and tempered by practical experience. However, to reverse the normal procedure may help to highlight ways in which theological education in general has become resistant to fresh ways of thinking and stimulate the discovery of imaginative new patterns for the future.

Creating a distinctive design

The proposal, which I present here, is experimental and tentative. I do not know personally of any theological institution that has adopted a curriculum like this.³ However, for reasons that I will elaborate later, it seems to me that this scheme has an overwhelming logic about it, even though it may differ considerably from the familiar kind of curriculum.

I see the curriculum divided into four stages. Each will follow the other, build upon it and stimulate repetitions in different patterns and combinations. The basic principle is that there should be a cumulative learning process that involves the *whole* person gaining *understanding* and acquiring *skills* in a *community* of other learners.

Stage 1. Exploring the Context: Personal, Cultural, Social and Ecclesial

The programme will start with the accumulated experience and knowledge of the student. This stage is designed to probe the student's awareness of both the reality of the society in which s/he lives and the activities, role and place of the church in that society. Students will be expected to reflect, at first spontaneously, and then systematically and critically, on their own experience of the Christian faith, the Christian community and social reality. With regard to the Church, they will be asked to consider such matter as the way it operates in different situations, the range of its activities, the degree of participation by its members, the structures of leadership, its reaction to local and national events, its image as seen from outside, and the congruence of its activities with its declared goals. They will be asked to think about the kind of ecclesial tradition it represents: 'catholic,' 'orthodox,' reformed, anabaptist, free evangelical, 'peace-church,' charismatic or Pentecostal (or other). With regard to society, they would reflect on their experience of such things as (their own) education, family life, friendship, work, patterns of consumption, residential environment (urban or rural), recreational activities, political views, experience of the media. During this stage they would be introduced to an awareness of culture, in order to begin to understand how it may have shaped their own attitudes, the society in which they live and the role of the Church.

This stage may take the equivalent of about six months of full-time study. It will involve students in taking stock of their lives prior to undertaking a formal programme of theological study.⁴ During this period students will learn the skills of self-reflection, the ability to articulate, both verbally and in writing, their thoughts and concerns and the dynamics of working in small groups. They will be encouraged to study more about the history, life and traditions of the particular church to which they belong. Input will concentrate on grasping the disciplines and implications of cultural studies and social

³ Nevertheless, the Birmingham Christian College (UK), an independent college training people for a variety of Christian ministries, elaborated a proposal for a BA (Missiology) in the late 1990s, which attempted to put in place a number of the principles elaborated here. After much consultation, the University of Birmingham were not prepared to validate it, without demanding major changes, that would have emasculated the vision on which it was based.

⁴ One of the weaknesses of many theological courses is that they do not appear to consider the prior experience of the student to be significant in their educational programmes. It almost seems as if they were saying, to learn theology you must start with a blank mind. This is a pedagogical approach, which is not even practiced in primary schools.

analysis. They will be asked to undergo (voluntarily) a standard personality test (like Meyer-Briggs), to gain further understanding of the kind of person they are. Given the aims and objectives of this stage, class contact hours will not be extensive. Rather, time will be spent in field-work, small seminar groups and in individual tuition.⁵

Stage 2. Studying the Church's Mission

The main purpose of this stage will be to produce a theological rationale for the Church's task in God's world. It will be achieved by integrating biblical, historical and missiological studies.

Biblical studies will begin by being synthetic, rather than analytic, in character. That is, they will focus on the overall message and broad themes, rather than on issues of introduction and detailed textual analysis. Critical theories will be reviewed only in so far as they throw genuine light on the living message of Scripture. In adopting this approach, the programme will reflect the current interest in a canonical reading of Scripture and the emphasis on narrative, as methods of interpretation and understanding.⁶

Historical studies will look at implicit and explicit views of the Church's place in the world at different points in its history. It will seek to elucidate the relation between the Church's ideas and actions and the conditioning factors of given historical realities.⁷ In the process students will be helped to see how belief and practice have interacted in the past.

Missiological studies will explore the experience, thinking and action of the contemporary Church, both locally and globally, as it crosses boundaries (cultural, ideological, intellectual and geographical) with the good news of Jesus and the kingdom.

This part of the curriculum will follow paths not so dissimilar from the traditional structures of theological programmes. It recognises a certain division of theological interests into separate specialities – biblical, historical and systematic. However, each discipline will be studied from the perspective of the church's present calling. Moreover, the focus of the study will be the Christian community sent into the world, rather than abstract academic interests.

In Old Testament studies, the history of Israel, as the elect people of God, will be studied, paying special attention to the most formative periods – the call of Abraham, the Exodus, the giving of the law, the coming of the monarchy, the Exile and restoration. Major themes will be highlighted, for example: justice, suffering, wisdom, holiness, communion with God, idolatry, messianic promises, Israel and the nations. In New Testament studies, particular emphasis will be given to the themes of fulfilment, Jesus and the kingdom of God, discipleship, vicarious suffering, resurrection and new life, the contextualisation of the Church in the Greco-Roman world, the activity of the Spirit, the growth of the Church, diversity of ministries, persecution, Christology in context (for example, Colossians, John, Hebrews, 1 Peter).

Historical studies will be selective of the most formative periods of the church's growth and interaction with its political and social context. Thus, attention will be paid to the early apologists, the rise and consolidation of Christendom, the initial evangelisation of Asia, Africa and Europe, the 'pre-Reformation,' Renaissance and Reformation (including the

⁵ The teaching staff will spend less time preparing material for formal input, and more on direct engagement with the worlds of the students, their churches and social context. The students' ability to reflect analytically and critically on the world around them will be learnt through discussion, practical writing-tasks and feed-back.

⁶ There is no space to enter into a debate about the methodological validity or hermeneutical usefulness of the critical tradition in Western biblical studies. Suffice to point out here that the concept and practice of critical method can mean a number of different things. Sometimes, the word critical is used as a tool to try to invalidate interpretations that are not agreeable to the one using the word.

⁷ Two examples of this might be the reality and implications of a 'territorial' view of church-membership and the interaction between pioneer mission work and the colonial enterprise.

Radical Reformation and the Counter-Reformation), the rise of modern science, the struggle for religious toleration, the coming of democracy, the advent of atheism and secular thought, the birth of the modern mission movement, colonialism, the coming of the 'Third Church,' the decline of Christian faith in the West, the Church under Marxist regimes.

Missiology will pay particular attention to ways in which the Church has come to articulate its beliefs, beginning with the early summaries of faith and patterns of teaching in the NT, developing into the creedal statements of the third and fourth centuries and subsequent confessions of faith, including contemporary ones (for example, the Kairos Document from South Africa). It will be particularly interested to trace the ways in which Christians have endeavoured to insert the Gospel into the multifaceted reality of their times (translation, contextualisation, inculturation, indigenisation) and how they respond to the challenge of secular culture and influential religious faiths.

This stage might occupy the equivalent of one year of full-time study. The amount of formal input will increase, in that theological educators will be required to set the parameters and guidelines for the subjects. Thus, it is envisaged that this period will see the greatest concentration of class-time. However, at the same time, students will be required to do their own research and contribute presentations to seminars. In order to maximise the ground covered within the constraints of time, students will be given a choice of subjects to study on their own and together with their fellow students. Thus, class-time will be augmented by seminars.⁸

Stage 3. Engaging in Interaction and Consolidation

This stage, which will begin after the equivalent of approximately 1.5 years of full-time study, has two main functions: to learn how to apply theological reflection critically and constructively to the Church's calling within its context, and to raise further questions that will become the subject of the next and final stage. In a series of interdisciplinary seminars and small tutorial groups a first attempt will be made at integrating the student's own observations and analysis of Church and society in *Stage 1* with the conclusions being drawn from the biblical, historical and missiological material of *Stage 2*.

It will be particularly important that students keep, throughout their studies, a personal journal of their learning experience, noting down aspects of their study that have particularly caught their attention and raising questions for further exploration. This will be an account of a learning process. Every three months, they will be asked to produce for their tutor/mentor a short summary of the main points they have arrived at.

This stage should last about three months. It is designed not so much to study new material as to take stock of the journey so far and assess which are the important topics for further research and reflection.

Stage 4. Dealing with issues that emerge

At this point, the students will be introduced more systematically to methodological questions: for example, principles of interpretation, hermeneutics, philosophical assumptions, the use of historical and cultural analogies, the critical evaluation of historical developments, the use of social sciences as a mediation between the gospel and its insertion into specific situations in society, the use of case-studies, ethical theories.

Thus, students will be learning to reflect on their own experience, gain knowledge from recognised experts, evaluate the material they are studying, gain methodological skills, all in the interest of understanding and implementing the best mission practice for the Church

⁸ It is clear, as is true for any curriculum, that topics will have to be carefully selected. As will be seen, rather than being a mechanical process according to a pre-set syllabus the selection can be augmented in the last two stages, where notable gaps may have been detected (by staff and students).

in their situation. At this stage, recurrent or new issues will have emerged in personal and social ethics, pastoral counselling, personal spirituality, cultural conditioning and the renewal of the Church, which will form the agenda for this part of the curriculum. So, along with the required class-time, dedicated to methodological and research questions, the content of this stage will be set by the students and staff together. It should include one major piece of individual research of the student's own choice, reflecting, biblically, historically, systematically and practically upon a particular mission concern. It may well involve the student's own involvement in a mission project. This final stage should be completed within fifteen months, with the last six months being dedicated almost exclusively to the project. The whole programme would therefore last for the equivalent of three years full-time study.

The main point of a curriculum designed in this way is that it is flexible and adaptable. It is not intended that the stages be set within a rigid time-scale. This may depend upon the time available to a group of students in a particular locality. One important principle is that students should be allowed periods of exclusive involvement with particular subjects, so that they can concentrate on its different aspects in some depth.⁹ This may involve a fairly radical departure from normal timetabling. Each stage might be split into a number of different learning units (modules or courses), which happen either simultaneously or chronologically.

The four stages envisage a process in which the expansion of horizons and consolidation follow one another. The idea is not to complete a set, artificial syllabus, but to respond imaginatively to a continuing learning process. Regular assessment of the process would be a crucial ingredient of the curriculum, and might take the form of a residential, long weekend of the entire student body and teaching staff. Even out of the first cycle of the four stages, some key problems may have emerged, for example: conflict and its resolution, the exercise of power, attitudes to change, the nature and consequences of forgiveness and reconciliation. These can then be included as orienting factors for the next cycle, and so on. The courses would be both structured (with a number of required modules) and adaptable (for example, in the subjects shared in the seminars). This curriculum can be adapted to a number of different educational opportunities and contexts, i.e., residential, non-residential, full-time, part-time, extension, etc.

In the next section, I will consider the theological, missiological and pedagogical assumptions on which this particular design is based. At the same time, though I believe a scheme of this nature is fundamentally sound in fulfilling the goals for which it is designed, I want to recognise also that there are potential weaknesses and problems in implementing it.

Assumptions and principles for theological education

1. *The Nature of the Theological Task*

1.1 *The Western Captivity of Theology*

The Church around the world has inherited, from Western academic institutions, a tradition of doing theology, which, for reasons that will be explained later, is no longer adequate to the spiritual, intellectual and social challenges of our times. This theological enterprise has come to be seen as the norm for all serious theological reflection. And yet, it is now recognised that this tradition is firmly embedded in distinctive cultural characteristics that cannot any longer pretend to have universal validity.

⁹ Thus, different weeks might be given to one major theme, for example, *forgiveness* or *reconciliation*, which would be studied within an inter-disciplinary framework.

Theology in the West has been dominated by *the method of rational, historical investigation*. The object of theological work has been mainly either ancient texts or the conceptual thinking of other scholars. The purest form of theological research is carried out by a circle of professionals, whose main objective, apparently, is to survey critically the opinions of other scholars, in order to extend or modify certain hypotheses. Behind the method lies the assumption that real scholarship proceeds through the interaction of ideas about texts. Little direct application of the text to the contemporary world is carried out.¹⁰ The university library becomes the privileged location for doing theology and the academic journal the favoured mode of its expression.

Western theology tends to *separate theology from practice*. It tends to think in linear terms. So, 'applied theology' (such as ethics, homiletics, pastoral counselling and mission) is only possible after a long process of theoretical work has been undertaken, beginning with biblical and historical studies and moving on to systematic theology. The assumption seems to be that applied theology can only follow a process of 'pure' theology, in which thought is initially abstracted from the real world, so that it may be as impartial, objective and detached as possible and then, in this form, reinserted into social life.

There is a marked emphasis on *specialisation*. Theology is compartmentalised. Theologians have to choose limited fields to operate in. Under the influence of the natural sciences, the study in depth of any reality is deemed to be dependent on breaking it down into its component parts. As a result of this tendency, theologians are extremely hesitant about crossing the boundaries of different disciplines. However, this is hazardous for theology, for by its very nature it is designed to integrate knowledge and understanding. It is not uncommon for Biblical specialists and historians, even ethicists, to insist that they are not 'strictly speaking' theologians.

Theology has become *professionalised*. In so far as theology in the West is seen as an academic study, it considers itself to be on a par with other subjects whose purpose is to train professionals – such as law, education, psychology and medicine. There is a sense in which the norm for theological excellence is laid down by a 'guild of theologians,' who, through professional accrediting bodies such as the university faculty, lay down the criteria for expertise in the respective disciplines. Without exaggerating too much, it might be said that courses in theology, to be credible, need to convince the guild that the correct standards of procedure are being maintained.

The emphasis in Western theology then is on what the expert is able to teach in lectures, seminars, books or articles from his reservoir of knowledge. The best theological students are those who come closest to sharing the assumptions, grasping the methods and endorsing the claims of the guild.

1.2 The Irruption of the Non-Western World

In the last half-century a number of important considerations have begun to shake the self-assurance that Western theology's method and purpose is self-evidently right. Not least has been the growth and influence of theological thought as a deliberately 'contextual' enterprise, in which the intellectual tools of the theological disciplines have been put at the service of missiological discernment: for example, 'reflection on praxis' and 'the hermeneutical circle.' In the course of the development of this fresh way of doing theology, a number of traditional truisms have been challenged.

¹⁰ It is a characteristic of academic scholarship in Western institutions to approach the Biblical text first and foremost as an example of an 'archeological' text, i.e. a text from the history of the Near East to be treated like any other. The text becomes the object of the scholars minute examination, as someone with the expertise and authority to decide its meaning. The possibility that the text becomes the subject that interpolates the reader is not generally admitted as a valid methodological starting-point.

In the first place, the view that *value-free knowledge* is possible has been called into question. The beliefs that certain methods are free of all philosophical, ideological and cultural influences and biases, and that certain critical stances have acquired a confirmed scientific status are disputed on the basis of evidence to the contrary. Some approaches to biblical studies, for example, have been shown to be heavily dependent on now discarded positivist and rationalist assumptions.¹¹ Some theological constructs are indebted to particular philosophical systems like structuralism, existentialism, process thinking, game theory and deconstructionism. Each of these, in their own way, reflect a particular cultural influence and attempt to provide, within that contingent background, an explanatory framework for experience which transcends the empirical reality studied by the sciences.

Secondly, the tacit acceptance of a split between *theory and practice* is refuted. It is now much more universally recognised that the search for knowledge and understanding is context-dependent. It is related closely to the theologian's own *Sitz im Leben*: i.e., his/her range of commitments, system of values, life-style choices, etc. Even the attempt to appear neutral or uncommitted on particular issues represents a stance. The theological enterprise itself is now challenged to give an account of its practical purpose. Is it seen as an end in itself, a kind of aesthetic exercise in the production of well-rounded theological systems, or is it seen as a servant of the pastoral and missionary callings of the Christian community? Does the theologian measure the truth of theological statements by their plausibility to the sceptical and unbelieving secular mind or by their missiological effectiveness in evangelism,¹² the pursuit of justice, discipleship and spiritual growth? It is now a commonplace of much theological endeavour in the Church of the global South that the verification of genuine theology is determined not so much by criteria formulated within the parameters of the academic community, as by its ability to liberate people for effective involvement in society. If it does not have this effect, it is considered an alienated and alienating force.

Thirdly, theology needs to become more integrated with *the disciplines studying human society*. If it is true that the ultimate purpose of theological reflection is to elucidate the task of Christians in given situations, then there must be some interaction with the fields of study that have to do with concrete reality in its manifold instances. Theology cannot avoid the question whether the message of Jesus Christ is good news of salvation. If this premise is accepted, it has to have a contemporary reference-point: in what sense and circumstances is it good news? No adequate answer can be given to this question without understanding the contemporary reality which forms the context in which the message is to be communicated as good news. *In this sense, neither Biblical studies nor systematic theology on their own can be called theology proper. Only when they engage with every level of culture do they become part of a genuine theological undertaking.*

Fourthly, theology needs to be put at the service of a *learning process* that opens up opportunities for people of all backgrounds. Theological education is restricted in many instances to those who have reached a particular level of academic achievement, who can lay hands on sufficient financial resources for study and who share the cultural background of the educator. How is theological education to be made available to people who inhabit a 'non-book' culture, i.e. for those who have not succeeded in meeting the expectations of the normal educational process? Present patterns of theological education will probably continue to

¹¹ Interpretations and explanations of certain biblical material are passed through the prism of 'methodological naturalism': i.e. the view that scientific method may not entertain the possibility that a non-material agent can cause things to happen in the world.

¹² Much of academic theology is done in a University setting, where the legitimacy of a plurality of beliefs is taken for granted. This may be one of the reasons why apologetics as a theological discipline has fallen out of favour. Apologetics, however, when it is interpreted in terms of advocacy, has as one of its tasks to refute the arguments of the 'opposition,' not to accommodate the faith to its presuppositions.

reinforce the Western Church's alienation in deprived, urban areas. How is it possible for existing Western theology, given its cultural assumptions, to equip a genuinely indigenous leadership in all strata of society?¹³

2. *The implications for theological education of missiological approaches to theology*

Some theological institutions in recent years have begun to take these criticisms seriously and are encouraging more engagement between theological studies and social reality. However, what has tended to happen is that new courses have been added to an already over-stretched syllabus, for example sociology, development studies, urban studies, pastoral psychology, medical ethics, inter-religious studies and, of course, missiology. The problem is that the timetable cannot take the strain, for nothing already existing is allowed to drop out. These changes to the curriculum do not address the fundamental questions that have been analysed here. What is needed, in my judgement, is a 'conversion' to a different paradigm. I would see the following elements as implicitly necessary for theological education to serve properly the Church's obligation to respond in obedience to the *missio Dei*.

2.1 Theological and other disciplines should be integrated from the beginning of the course.

This process could happen mainly by relating disciplines together through a multi-disciplinary approach to themes and issues. In the case of biblical studies, for instance, this would mean spending a minimum amount of time on purely introductory questions, in order to concentrate on teaching interpretative skills by addressing specific hermeneutical issues.¹⁴ An example, in which I have been personally involved, is that of the study of violence. This lends itself to an approach from many perspectives – biblical, historical, social, psychological, inter-religious, juridical, conflict resolution, etc.

2.2 Theological studies will be constantly oriented to a reflection on the whole of life.

This will mean including, at every stage of training, field-observation and real-life case-studies. This will avoid the temptation to treat theology as a purely academic subject designed to provide answers to theoretical questions. At every step, theological learning will be applied to the Church's mission in the world. That is why the programme will begin by building on each participant's unique experience of the society in which s/he lives.

2.3 The emphasis will be on equipping people for ministry rather than on acquiring knowledge.

This implies that a major priority for participants will be acquiring a number of different skills related to mission. I would mention particularly: the ability to discover and understand the different facets of reality by learning to think about their own and other people's experience; the ability to convert knowledge, experience and historical investigation into practical wisdom, i.e. the ability to convert perception, insight, discernment and judgement into concrete action; the ability to handle issues of inculturation and contextualisation, i.e. to gain the experience of seeing how the Gospel should be inserted into contemporary situations; gaining an expertise in discerning the purposes of God through reading 'the signs of the times,' or judging the nature of the particular *kairos* or opportune moment in which the Church finds itself; the competence to distinguish the 'spirits,' i.e. to

¹³ This question was first posed some thirty years ago. In Britain, it was reinforced by the influential document *Faith in the City* (1985) of the Church of England. Unfortunately, the question has remained largely unanswered.

¹⁴ A good example of this procedure at work is Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (New York: Harper Collins, 1996).

discern what is genuinely of God and what is counterfeit and, thus, to resist certain temptations; finally the ability to understand and implement biblically-principled, missionally-directed and culturally-appropriate styles of leadership.

3. A summary of the main presuppositions that guide the missiological aims of theological education

3.1 The necessary foundation for the theological task in all its dimensions is Biblical realism.

In Christian terms, knowledge of what God has chosen to disclose of his nature and purposes depends upon a trustworthy source of information. The Christian church, with differing degrees of emphasis and qualifications, has always pointed to the written word of Scripture as being the deposit or fountainhead of this knowledge. The main reason for ascribing it a unique authority in conveying an understanding of God and his ways lies in the assumption that the text represents the considered view of witnesses to God's formative acts of salvation, specially chosen and prepared by the Holy Spirit. Prophets and apostles had an unmatched, singular, access to the mind of God in interpreting the things concerning Jesus Christ, the Lord of all.

Thus, the Scripture becomes the normative source for the knowledge of God. It is ultimately self-authenticating. However, the truth of its message is open to being confirmed by the principle of inference to the best explanation: i.e. it gives the most intellectually satisfying, morally coherent and existentially fulfilling account of experience in all its dimensions. It is the blueprint for the theological task, the court of appeal when disputes arise, a treasury of intellectual and spiritual resources for the believing community. Any theological curriculum has, therefore, to pay special attention to the foundation document.

As the history of Christianity shows repeatedly, appeal to the authority of Scripture is not straightforward; sharp differences over the meaning of the text have often divided Christians from one another. Therefore, much attention has to be given to sound methods of interpretation. There are three elements that need particular attention. First, the integrity of the text must be respected by listening to its message on its own terms. The first step in intelligent understanding is to use an inductive method of exegesis, which obliges the interpreter to enter empathetically into the world of the author without making hasty value judgements. Secondly, the interpreter must be aware of his/her intellectual, ethical, cultural and social assumptions and commitments. Interpretation involves a degree of self-awareness, involving an analytical and critical consciousness about one's predispositions before coming to the text. One's own understanding, therefore, has to be justified to oneself, as well as to other commentators. Thirdly, the interpreter must learn the hermeneutical skills necessary for relating a message originally transmitted 2,000 or more years ago to a world which has changed dramatically in terms of material production, scientific knowledge, moral sensibility and belief systems, and continues to change. Much has been written about and experimented with in terms of the 'two horizons' – ancient text and contemporary context. Concepts like contextualisation, indigenisation, adaptation and inculturation are employed to try to find ways of doing justice to this process. My own preference is to use the method of translation, extending it analogically from the field of linguistics to that of communication theory more generally.

3.2 The main ingredient for developing authentic theology is a grasp of the Church's mission in all its facets.

I understand the affirmation of mission to be the existential and conceptual framework necessary for all theology worthy of the name. If theology is about God, there are only two possible routes to go: either it is philosophical speculation about the possibility of a transcendent being, whom one infers from the religious experience of humanity, or it is the

exposition of material which claims to be a unique self-disclosure of the one, self-existing, infinite and eternal Being. In the first case, we end up with a theoretical construct like Hick's 'the ultimately Real,' that is completely inaccessible to cognition.¹⁵ In the second case, we have to do with the knowable God of biblical revelation.

There are excellent reasons, philosophical as well as historical and theological, for dismissing the first option as a theoretical hypothesis without substance.¹⁶ In the second case, we have to acknowledge God just as God has revealed himself to the world. This is decisively as a 'missionary' God, i.e. a God who is carrying out a specific set of purposes in and for the world he made. These purposes include the election of a community to be specially attentive to his voice and to carry out his wishes. It seems therefore logical that the task of theology – discerning the mode of being and acting of this God – and, by inference, of theological education is permeated through and through by a Biblically-grounded understanding of the mission of the triune God.

3.3 The theological enterprise demands the coherent integration of its many parts.

We have already spoken about theology as a never-ending enterprise. It has many distinct elements. There is the hermeneutical issue of the right relationship between text, the community's traditions of interpretation and the contemporary world. Theology engages with real people who live a concrete social existence, within a particular history and cultural tradition, and who have specific questions about the setting of their lives. There is the question about who are the subjects of theology: not only the professionally trained, conceptually and linguistically articulate, members of the church, but the ordinary believing disciple, seeking to reflect on the meaning of his or her faith in the midst of the dilemmas of life. There is the prophetic task of theology, namely its prescriptive as well as descriptive role in telling forth the requirements of an uncompromisingly holy and just God. There is theology as the articulation of the *sensus fidei*, i.e., the confirmation by the whole believing community of the rightness of certain formulations of faith and certain practical expressions of the Gospel.¹⁷ Finally, there is the weighing of the tension between the universal and the local in expressing the obedience of faith: the limits on freedom to interpret and embody the meaning of the apostolic message in different localities.

Doing theology implies keeping all of these aspects of the task in proper co-ordination and balance. The prophetic commission, for example, presupposes that there is a message with trans-cultural validity, able to discern just and unjust elements within specific contexts; all cultures are to be held accountable to a standard of good and evil that comes from beyond them. At the same time, to discern this norm within the universal Christian community may require a painful process of hermeneutical disputation. To help it resolve its understanding of the requirements of the missionary God in particular circumstances, the church has at its disposal a rich treasury of resources: a living liturgical tradition, commissions and study groups drawn from different churches and nationalities, individual 'charismatic' figures with heightened abilities to articulate the faith in creative and innovative ways, myriads of Christians trying to make sense of their commitment to Jesus Christ in the midst of the demands and pressures of daily life. Life in a universal fellowship demands a patient process of listening, studying and acting together and challenging one another,¹⁸ seeking unity in love

¹⁵ C.f., John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Responses to the Transcendence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989); *The Fifth Dimension: An Exploration of the Spiritual Realm* (Oxford: One World, 1999).

¹⁶ C.f., J. Andrew Kirk, 'John Hick's Kantian Theory of Religious Pluralism and the Challenge of Secular Thinking', *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue*, Vol. 12, 2002, pp. 23-36.

¹⁷ In some ecclesial traditions this is spoken of as the process of *reception*: the development over time of the acceptance by the believing community of a particular way of formulating belief or walking in the way of Christ.

¹⁸ Sometimes, in very serious cases, for the sake of fidelity to the Gospel, it may have to involve suspending communion for a time. Very occasionally, a church or churches appear to have violated a central Christian

and truth and valuing the contributions of all, irrespective of culture, ethnic background, gender or social situation.

3.4 An adequate understanding of the social and cultural forces that shape the human context of the Church's mission requires the acquisition of particular skills.

Some of the skills will be technical, in the sense of learning to employ the tools of different social disciplines; some will require the development of ordinary human abilities. In the first case, education in good mission practice will require some comprehension, at least, of the means of identifying social and cultural trends, of being able to evaluate lifestyle surveys and of understanding the underlying economic dynamics of modern societies. So, within the curriculum there has to be space for social and cultural analysis.

At the same time, participants in the programmes will need to refine their own abilities in the art of observation and discernment. As we shop, engage in secular jobs, watch TV and DVDs, search the web, participate in recreational activities, we need to be aware of what is going on around us and try to understand it by asking ourselves the right questions. Both casual and more intimate conversations will reveal something about the people of our communities. We must, however, be careful not to abstract ourselves from full human engagement in a way that becomes impersonal and exploitative of the other.

Conclusion

This paper is a modest attempt to re-envisage a process of theological education, which is deliberately responsive to the claim that proper theology, and therefore theological education, is through and through missionary in character. One final observation may be in order, it refers to the apparently wide gap between this approach and the more traditional, university-based style of education. There is no space here, though I hope we will pick up the issue in the course of the conference, to discuss the implications for University accreditation of a missiologically-informed programme. I would like to throw out the suggestion, however, that there is a real distinction to be drawn between a genuinely theological programme of education and one, which has as its presupposition the study of religion.

My own experience leads me to believe that, whether called theology or not, what happens in most secular universities is the latter rather than the former. Religious studies, as a coherent academic discipline, may well study the texts, traditions and history of the Christian faith, but it does it in the context of an assumption that Christianity (and all other world religions) has to be approached pre-eminently as one important phenomenon (epiphenomenon from an ideological perspective) within the totality of human cultural and social experience. The purpose of this kind of study is radically different from that which I have been outlining.¹⁹ It may be that both have their own rationale. However, they should not be confused. I believe that many theological education programmes fail, because they are trying to combine two quite distinct aims and methodologies. I would be fascinated to know what others think!

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conviction to such an extent that it becomes a *status confessionis*; a matter at the heart of the apostolic witness to Jesus Christ has been seriously compromised. Such was the defense of apartheid in South Africa; such might have been the legitimizing of torture (as happened in Latin America in the 1970s and 1980s) as a tool in the fight against armed opposition to the military governments then in power.

¹⁹ By way of understanding how contemporary intellectual sectors tend to deal with the subject of religion, the formal academic approach can be considered as part of the social analysis of today's societies.