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The Relationship Between Graduate Theological Education and the Worldwide Mission of the Church

WILLIAM J. DANKER

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In spite of a desk piled high with other work, this writer could not find it in his heart to refuse an editor requesting an essay on a topic of such potential significance and excitement as "The Relationship Between Graduate Theological Education and the Worldwide Mission of the Church."

We see this relationship as subject to the needs of the non-Western churches, the needs of the Western churches, and their need for one another.

I.

THE NEEDS OF THE NON-WESTERN CHURCHES

Most of the non-Western churches keenly feel their need for leadership training. The situation of the Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus in Ethiopia makes the point. This church, like many others in Africa, is experiencing phenomenal growth. From 20,000 members in 1958 it had mushroomed to 120,000 by 1970, when the writer made a mission study trip through Africa. This church is passing through a crisis of leadership development of the first magnitude. Training programs geared to an elementary school level were preparing pastors in tribal areas. However, a more advanced seminary in Addis Ababa had but nine students, and that in a church body presided over by a cabinet minister

and which also usually can boast in its membership five or six ambassadors to the world's great capitals.

One can only applaud the dreams and hopes of the Theological Education Fund, headed by Dr. Shoki Coe, now based in London, for graduate theological education at centers to be developed in the non-Western world. Sound reasoning supports this plan. To nurture genuinely indigenous churches, the TEF desires to enable non-Western ministerial students to receive not only their undergraduate but also their graduate training in the non-Western world. Dr. Coe and his associates see this as the best way to develop a church that will be in tune with the genius and temperament of its milieu.

However, for the most part such graduate theological programs in the Third World cannot be actualized at present. Even undergraduate theological education is still struggling for adequate resources in faculty, library, and curricular relevancy in most non-Western seminaries. While one rejoices over the recently established university departments of religion in such areas as sub-Saharan Africa and Asia, in most cases they, too, are understaffed and underfinanced.

In most areas promising younger leaders

in church and society still yearn to study in the West. This intense interest was reflected at the final meeting of the Commission on World Mission of the Lutheran World Federation meeting at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, in 1970. No sectional meeting was better attended or more keenly followed by Third World participants than that which dealt with the allocation of scholarships for study abroad.

For at least a decade the primary site of advanced academic training for the future theologians, bishops of the overseas churches, will no doubt lie in the West. Many of those destined to teach in the hoped-for graduate theological schools in the Third World will, for lack of other immediately viable options, have to be trained in the Atlantic Community.

If graduate theological training in the West is to serve the current needs of the non-Western churches, it will require a nice balance between the traditional and the progressive. The churches of Africa, Latin America, and Asia are, for the most part, conservative and Biblical as well as ecumenically open. If their graduate students return from the West freighted with an overabundance of theological and doctrinal novelty, they will prove incomprehensible to these churches. If on the other hand they return with a simple endorsement of the fundamentalistic biblicism all too common in Third World churches planted by missionaries of that strain, one may well ask, "Was this trip really necessary?" Dr. Ernst von Weizsäcker of the *Forschungsinstitut* at the University of Heidelberg in an evening colloquium at Concordia Seminary recently pointed out, "If an organism receives too much new information it will be perceived as mere

noise, and will result in chaos. If on the other hand the incoming information is merely confirmation of what is already known, the result will be boredom and death."

Leaders of many African churches today, in the experience of this writer, are actively seeking for their future leaders graduate training abroad that is Biblical, evangelically conservative in the best sense, and yet will equip them to lead their churches to healthy maturity and genuine progress, and all this in a climate sympathetic to the ecumenical participation which most of these churches have long practiced.

Both their traditional tribal codes and the fundamentalism that some missionaries have implanted incline many of the Third World churches to legalism in church life and dogma. The Spirit-wrought freedom in the Gospel guaranteed by the Word, as taught by Dr. Martin Luther, can make a contribution to development of Third World churchmen—and that without an ounce of proselytism, in the spirit of the Mission Affirmations adopted by The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, which view the Lutheran Church as "chiefly a confessional movement within the total body of Christ rather than a denomination emphasizing institutional barriers of separation." Loyalty to Lutheran principles as taught also by Dr. C. F. W. Walther in his *Pastoraltheologie*, where he pointedly quotes Dr. Martin Luther's rejection of all proselytism and commits true Lutherans to building God's kingdom, not their own empire.¹

Tribalism of one form or another is an

¹ *Americanisch-Lutherische Pastoraltheologie*, 5th ed. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1906), p. 27.

ongoing problem to many non-Western (and Western) church leaders. Overseas study is no guarantee in itself that it will equip the student to rise above his limited social nexus in all instances. But the odds are certainly all in favor of mitigating the malady by such a course.

II.

THE NEEDS OF THE WESTERN CHURCHES

The Western churches need the infusion of cultural traditions other than those of Europe and its derivative by immigration, namely, America. Hellenism has profoundly influenced the Christian church for good and for ill during 20 centuries. The church must always be grateful for some of the great gifts Hellenism has bestowed.² But by the year 2000 there is a good possibility in the opinion of David B. Barrett that for the first time since our Lord walked the dusty roads of Galilee the majority of all the Christians in the world will be non-Semitic and non-Caucasian as well.³ Why should they not have the freedom to throw off, when appropriate, the incubus of cultural Europeanism and pagan, pre-Christian Greek philosophical categories?

The future leaders of the non-Western churches are therefore assuming a cultural risk by studying in the West. They, too, might fall prey to the Hellenistic captivity of the church. In a sense, they may be hazarding the genuinely indigenous development of their own churches. But if both

they and their mentors in the West are aware of it, perhaps the danger can be minimized. The example of Japan's economic miracle may provide an analogy. While it has led to a superficial westernizing of their country, deceiving to the casual tourist, the discerning observer recognizes that the Japanese imitated the West only in the necessary apprentice period. Today it is clear that they are some of the world's most clever and discerning adapters. They have tenaciously clung to their own cultural values, and have subordinated Western technology and capitalism to social patterns more congenial to them. If the Christian church is to experience wide expansion in Japan, it will probably come about through a similar process.

Perhaps the presence of non-Western graduate students in larger numbers will pay other dividends. The more sensitive among Western theological professors and students will glimpse new vistas in the Gospel as they learn to view it from the perspective of non-Westerners in their midst. And perhaps some Western Christians will be spared a spiritual detour into exotic non-Western religions because they can find freshness and vitality in non-Western incarnations of Christian faith and life.

A deformed and imbalanced cerebralism deriving from excessive imbibing of Hellenistic philosophical categories fosters destructive logomachies deadening to the church and paralyzing to her vital mission. It reminds one of the monstrous cases of hydrocephaly—poor children with enormous heads—in the deaconess institutions of Neuendettelsau, which are kept carefully hidden from the average visitor. Orthodox rationalism and liberal philosophi-

² F. E. Peters, *The Harvest of Hellenism*. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1970); cf. esp. Chap. XVII, "Christianity and the Hellenic World," p. 614—46.

³ "AD 2000: 350 Million Christians in Africa," *International Review of Mission*, LIX, 1 (January 1970), 39—54.

cal religion are but different subspecies of a similar malady.

No wonder we witness a keen interest in visceral religion today. In the West a growing number of adherents of the standard brand denominations are "moonlighting" by attending meetings where spiritual experiences, such as "the baptism of the spirit" and speaking in tongues are eagerly sought. Faith healing is a frequent accompaniment. In Africa with its 6,000 independent "spiritual" churches we witness a similar phenomenon.⁴

The writer talked to some of the "prophets" leading these movements—and preached in their churches. Just as in the West, many Christians attend the traditional denominational church brought by the missionary on Sunday morning, and then seek something less staid by way of spiritual experience in the evening. But I also found that some of these prophets appreciate the opportunity for further study. Frequently both their general and their theological education is at a rather low level. Instead of condemning them in traditional polemical style, Missionary Walter Schmidt of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod has gathered a class of Ghanaian spiritual prophets who regularly reach large numbers of people and is instructing them in "How to Preach the Gospel."

Perhaps seminaries in the West could usefully foster encounter between exponents of Western cerebral and non-Western visceral religion, between those whose charismata lie in academically nurtured gifts,

⁴ David B. Barrett, *Schism and Renewal in Africa: An Analysis of Six Thousand Contemporary Religious Movements* (Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1968).

and those who are charismatics of a more volatile and electric type. Seminarians in the West generally learn about exorcism only in ancient church history. Even some Lutherans of Ethiopia and Tanzania, to say nothing of "spiritual" church leaders, practice it today. The proud spear-wielding, lion-killing, cattle-herding Masai are favorably inclined to the Christian church because of its ability to cast out of their wives the demons who exhibit a strange bias toward Masai females.

The need for reform of ministerial education at all levels is apparently widely felt today. There is hardly a seminary or divinity school in North America which is not reshuffling its curriculum. In Europe the German *Hochschulreform* is also affecting theological education. But is there enough input from non-Western sources and experiences? Cultural traditions that see religion as a total way of life rather than a system of metaphysical thought have a valuable contribution to make. The fact that the Bible has been the runaway number one best seller in Japan year after year while Western-style structures of church and ministry vegetate, embracing but one percent of the population, ought to tell us something. Meanwhile a completely indigenous Christian church like the *Yesu no Mitama Kyokai* founded in 1941 without benefit of Western mission boards is said to number 60,000 adherents in this baffling mission field. Have we nothing to learn from an investigation of its quite different approach to leadership training? Perhaps if Japanese succeed in reforming structures of church and ministry effectively, they may help Christians in the West to solve some of their problems in this area.

The competitiveness that is a hallmark

of Western culture may have introduced potent nontheological economic and social factors into the history of modern Western theological development. The German university professor has been a solo prima donna. His status and even his income (especially under the *Hörgeld* system) at times depend on the theological novelties or polemics he may introduce. Meanwhile the "publish or perish" system, which is not dead in American higher education, including theological education, can promote the pursuit of novelty and polemics for similar reasons.

III.

SHARING IN THE WORLDWIDE BODY OF CHRIST

The real ecumenical era is yet before the Christian church. In the past it has been largely interdenominational; in the future it will have to become intercultural. In the past it has been a Western-style organization controlled largely by Western church leaders and Western money. In the future, non-Western ideas and ways of church life will play a larger role. The exchange between Christians of many cultures in all aspects of faith and life is made possible under the ruling hand of God by the jet age. It promotes a circulation of people and gifts in a way the church has not known since it was a Mediterranean organism in the first century. And never has it been possible to practice *koinonia* on the present scale.

That exchange of gifts, the lifeblood of the church, is facilitated by the fact that the English language has become the *koine* of our global village. Non-Western hymnody is beginning to make its way into the West. The hymnal has long been a most

effective channel of ecumenical exchange. Music thumbs its nose at institutional barriers. The *East Asia Christian Conference Hymnal* edited by the late Dr. Daniel Thambyrajah Niles of Ceylon, well known in the West for many other works, is perhaps the most significant effort up to the present.⁵ At the Lutheran Theological College in Makumira, Tanzania, the writer secured a copy of *Tumshangilie Mungu*, a collection of Swahili hymns with indigenous settings which are regularly used in worship.⁶ Some of these may be adaptable to Western singing, but will probably require percussion accompaniment in African style for the best effect. But this could lead to the kind of high moment that occurred during Vatican II when the vaults of St. Peter in Rome reverberated to a mass accompanied by the driving beat of African drums.

Theological sharing is also beginning to occur. Yet 20 years elapsed before Kazuo Kitamori's *Theology of the Pain of God* was translated into English.⁷ It is a significant attempt to be both Lutheran and Japanese. John S. Mbiti of Makerere University in Uganda, recently visiting professor at Union Seminary, New York, is becoming widely known for his attempts to relate the message of the Bible to African culture.⁸ Kwesi A. Dickson of the Uni-

⁵ Distributed by AVACO, 22 Midorigaokamachi, Shibuya-ku, Tokyo, 3d ed. 1968, originally published in 1964.

⁶ Howard S. Olson, ed., *Tumshangilie Mungu: Nyimbo za Kiafrika*, 3d ed. (Makukira, Tanzania: Lutheran Theological College, 1971).

⁷ Richmond: John Knox Press, 1965.

⁸ *New Testament Eschatology in an African Background: A Study of the Encounter Between New Testament Theology and African Traditional Concepts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970). Cf. also *African Religions and*

versity of Accra in Ghana has published a symposium with Paul Ellingworth on *Biblical Revelation and African Beliefs*.⁹

Indian Christian leaders have long pioneered in attempting to express the Gospel in indigenous terms, some with greater success than others. Names coming readily to mind include A. J. Appasamy, Paul Chenchiah, Vengal Chakkarai, Sadhu Sundar Singh, Paul Devanandan, et al.¹⁰

Indigenous theology may be of primary interest to Western theologians' taste for the exotic. However, indigenous theology cannot be forced. After all, it took centuries in the highly cultured Mediterranean world. Besides, "theology" in the Western sense may not be so important a concern in those portions of the world which labor less under the burden of Hellenism. Conceptualization and rationalization are not the whole of Christianity. It is not without significance that the word *theologia* is not found in the New Testament. St. Paul himself put what we call "theology" firmly into its place in 1 Corinthians 13. Christians were known as "the people of the way." There is profound theology in the Bible, but the Athenian taste for novelty and philosophy is as much a danger as a help.

Non-Western Christians might prefer an emphasis on what could be termed

Philosophy (New York: Praeger, 1969); also *Concepts of God in Africa* (New York: Praeger, 1970).

⁹ London: Lutterworth Press, 1970. Cf. also Dickson's *Akan Religion and the Christian Faith: A Comparative Study of the Impact of Two Religions*. (Accra: Ghana University Press, 1965).

¹⁰ Robin Boyd, *An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology* (Madras: The Christian Literature Society, 1969). Also Kaj Baago, *Pioneers of Indigenous Christianity* (Madras: The Christian Literature Society, 1969).

"theo-dynamics" rather than theology. With the Semitic thought world they seem to prefer the act, the event, and the word insofar as it is also deed. A dynamic view of the church sets us free under the Word and the Spirit from all structural fundamentalism to find whatever forms will best do the job.

Cultural diversity may help us discover common denominators in basic functions of the church rather than in identical forms of church and ministry. The Augsburg Confession¹¹ has always given us this freedom, but we have sometimes been slow to exercise it in the West, especially in the German immigrant churches in America.

The much-discussed and controverted Welch Report of the American Council of Learned Societies listed the graduate school of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, as unnecessary because it contended that the present offerings could be secured elsewhere.

In Japan each academic institution attempts to find its own *tokucho*, its own unique and special characteristic. Concordia Seminary's graduate school has been termed redundant and desperately needs a *tokucho*. May we respectfully offer a suggestion?

We suggest that Concordia Seminary give serious consideration to specializing in the promotion of sharing between Christian scholars of the West and those of the non-Western world within the body of Christ bent on His mission. This could be its own unique *tokucho*. To our knowl-

¹¹ Theodore Tappert et al., tran. and ed., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1959); cf. Article VII, p. 32.

edge no seminary, no graduate school in the West has as yet made this its speciality.

The Welch Report urges the inclusion of non-Christian religions in the seminary curriculum. But since many other schools will presumably act upon it, this excellent idea by itself will hardly suffice to constitute a unique accent. We must include it, but also go beyond it.

Sharing between Christian scholars of West and non-West in joint action on God's mission is most congenial to the purpose of Concordia Seminary outlined in the historic inaugural address of President John H. Tietjen in 1969 titled "In God for the World." He blazed an unmistakable trail: "The purpose of Concordia Seminary has to be seen in relation to the church's mission and its ultimate objective of bringing life to men."

Concordia Seminary registered a significant increase in the number of overseas graduate students in the 1971—72 academic year. It rose from 4 to 15. The proportion of international students among graduate students in residence grew to nearly 25 percent. When furloughing missionaries are added, the figure stands at 44%. This provides a favorable climate.

The founding of the World Mission Institute in 1971 establishes a useful channel to finance and further the cause of sharing in the body of Christ on God's mission. In addition to providing scholarships to non-Western graduate students, the World Mission Institute hopes to gather funds for faculty sabbaticals in the non-Western world. The time has come to escape from the deep grooves worn between America and Europe. We have gained much from Europe in the past. But riches in insight and understanding

await us in the non-Western world. With the blessing of God and the support of generous patrons the World Mission Institute also hopes to provide travel grants for research and study in the Third World to Western graduate students at Concordia Seminary. Essential to genuine sharing in a theological community will be the presence of non-Western professors in growing number. A happy beginning was made 4 years ago with the coming of our colleague, Professor Wi Jo Kang, the first non-Western regular instructor on this faculty in the 134 years of its history. Outstanding non-Western scholars can be invited as visiting professors. Already 10 years ago we had hoped to invite D. T. Niles. But we lacked the funds. Meanwhile his death has robbed us of any further opportunity to share his God-given gifts in person on this side of the veil. We must not allow other such opportunities to escape us.

Professor R. Pierce Beaver, dean of North American professors of mission, has accepted an invitation for the fall quarter this year as visiting professor at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. His coming will interest many Western and non-Western students. In addition, his knowledge of potential candidates for non-Western visiting professorships as well as graduate scholarships will be a welcome dividend.

Ancillary disciplines in area studies, anthropology, and sociology are represented in various universities in the Greater Saint Louis area, including Washington University, St. Louis University, the rapidly growing University of Missouri at St. Louis, and Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville, Ill., across the Mississippi.

But more important even than area re-

sources is the will and the desire. The village of Neuendettelsau, Bavaria, would hardly have been first choice of a site committee choosing the best location for a center of diaconic and world missionary influence in the 19th century. But Wilhelm Loehe was there. And that was decisive. His burning missionary vision made Neuendettelsau the center of a mission outreach to the ends of the earth. In this 125th anniversary year of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod we recall with gratitude how much we owe to Wilhelm Loehe, who sent out the majority of the pastors who became charter members of the Missouri Synod. We need a new baptism with his missionary spirit.

Vision, dedication, concern can make the most of present resources and attract others that are needed to carry on a graduate theological program emphasizing the sharing of Spirit-endowed gifts in the body of Christ. This is an aim that suits the seventies.

American theological scholarship must be helped to emerge from European cultural overhang. European methods of historical-critical Bible study have been fruitful during the past century, but are they now reaching the point of diminishing returns? Already in 1969 Krister Stendahl of Harvard lectured at the Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago on "The Decline and Fall of Biblical Theology." He complained about the growing difficulty of finding teaching positions for new doctors in Biblical studies. Meanwhile the History of Religions Department at the Divinity School of nearby Chicago University was doing a land office business under the leadership of men like Mircea Eliade, Joseph Kitagawa, and Charles Long.

Stendahl himself lost the attention of his hearers when an auto theft was attempted on the street behind him in full view of his audience. This was, perhaps, a dramatic, unscheduled symbol of his admission that the action was shifting elsewhere.

Of course, Biblical studies must always play an extremely important and basic role in the curriculum of any confessional Lutheran graduate school. However, is it possible that methods other than European historical criticism may also provide valuable insights? Perhaps the observation and experience of non-Western societies and patterns of thought and expression may shed new light on that non-Western, essentially Asian book, the Bible. Prof. Kenneth Bailey of the Near East School of Theology at Beirut, presently completing a doctoral program in New Testament at Concordia Seminary, finds this approach productive.

Our Western graduate students should be enabled to spend more time in the non-Western world on research and study fellowships, even though their degrees may be earned at Western schools. Beyond that, within a decade some of our graduate theological students should perhaps be encouraged to take graduate degrees at selected schools in the non-Western world.

Present outstanding leaders in Third World churches have mostly been abroad and most studied in the West. Future outstanding leaders in churches of the Atlantic Community will include many who have been prepared for their roles by travel and study in the Third World.

This growing cross-fertilization with Asia, Africa, and Latin America is necessary for the North American church if it

is to avoid some of the dead-end streets into which many European churches have wandered.

In the modern missionary movement of the past four centuries the churches of the West have cast their bread upon the waters of all the seven seas. Now that bread is coming back after many days. Shall we be too self-satisfied or habit-bound to pick it up? Shall it lie neglected on our shores?

Or will we seize the opportunity to provide a fruitful, unique *tokucho* for graduate education at Concordia Seminary,

St. Louis, which will involve and enrich all the disciplines and which would make Concordia Seminary a busy port of entry for a missionary commerce in gifts of the Spirit exchanged between Christian scholars of the West and the non-Western churches? Such traffic would be appreciated by the mission-minded supporting constituency of our school and would help to revitalize and refresh churches in the West while developing leadership resources for churches overseas.

St. Louis, Mo.