

Opportunities and Challenges of Theological Education and Missional Formation in the 4IR: A Paradigm Shift

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Abstract

In discussing the opportunities and challenges of theological education within a 'glocal' context, which in the context of this article is focussing on Africa, African Traditional Religions, other living faiths, post-Christendom, illiteracy, traditionalism, secularisation and the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR), are all part of a paradigm shift. Addressing this paradigm shift, the article will at least address the following three issues. First, the re-examining of some methodological aspects of our curriculums. The second aspect I would call human- (student and educator) centred awareness, or it can also be called 'knowledge-constitutive interest'. The third aspect of theological education has to do with the fact that theological education does not take place 'out there' but is a life transforming and very personal issue that has to do with praxis, a way of life.

Keywords

Theological education, fourth industrial revolution, theory, practice, praxis, paradigm shift

Introduction

When addressing opportunities and challenges of theological education and missional formation, it is important to take note of the following:

How can I write a module descriptor before I have listened to you? Your experiences will influence what we are going to do in this course (Ott, 2021: 8).

When writing from a South African perspective about the challenges and opportunities of theological education in Africa, *listening* is essential as we have started teaching and doing theology in Africa without really listening. It is also important to note that the first institution for 'formal' theological education commenced with St Mark in Alexandria, Egypt.

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St. Mark established this School in Alexandria, Egypt, as the earliest and most important institution of theological education in Christian antiquity. It encouraged the spirit of research and religious studies and contributed to establishing the first system of theological studies in the whole world. It was indeed the cradle of the Christian Theology which brought forth great men who resisted the heresies of their age and dazzled the world with their deep faith and eloquence (Twafik, 2013: 267).

Within this short remark on the commencement of ‘institutionalised/formal’ theological education, we find three important aspects or characteristics of theological education. The first noteworthy characteristic is ‘the spirit of research’. It is clear that from the very beginning research and theological education belonged together. We may not be involved in theological education if we are not involved in research, and we may not be involved in research if it does not benefit theological education. This is one of the biggest modern-day challenges and opportunities for theology. We have come a long way with research, and our research helps us to discover and know God in new ways in different circumstances, but I will attend to this when I discuss paradigm shifts later on.

The second important characteristic was the establishment of ‘the first system of theological studies’. In my understanding, this refers, *inter alia*, to the curricula that are taught. Within the African context, but also global Christianity, this is one of the many opportunities and challenges of theological education. The question is: Is the system of separate theological disciplines still applicable for our day and age, or do we need a new system? For example, must we teach the six theological disciplines in silos, or must we teach a more holistic and integrated theology? And what about the interdisciplinary work where ‘theological education should emerge from the academic ivory towers to create flexible and adaptable spaces for theological development and living faith that can make the universal Christian ideals a reality?’ (Oliver, 2021: 26).

This also links to the third important characteristic of theological education, namely, to bring forth men and women ‘who resisted the heresies of their age and dazzled the world with their deep faith and eloquence’ (Twafik, 2013: 267). This reflects not only on the information that is transferred in theological education but also on the formation of students. In essence, it is impossible to separate theological education and spiritual formation. The challenge is how do we include spirituality, and how do we assess spirituality within a higher education institution (HEI)?

In discussing the opportunities and challenges of theological education within a ‘glocal’¹ context, which in the context of this article is focussing on Africa, African Traditional Religions, other living faiths, post-Christendom, illiteracy, traditionalism, secularisation and the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR), we need to be aware of at least the following three issues.

First, we need to re-examine some methodological aspects of our curriculums. These might include but are not limited to, teaching methods, mode/s of delivery, and how to bring the Bible as normative text into curriculum design of the current realities.

The second aspect I would call human- (student and educator) centred awareness, or it can also be called ‘knowledge-constitutive interest’. This implies that neither the student nor the educator is standing outside the education process, but they are an integral part of the education process as persons with all their experiences, concerns and hopes (Knoetze, 2022b: 3). Both educators and students have implicit expectations regarding the outcomes of theological education. However, in many instances, these expectations are firmly influenced by the church or a specific denomination, and by a specific educational institution.

The third aspect of theological education has to do with the fact that theological education does not take place ‘out there’ but is a life transforming and very personal issue that has to do with a *praxis*, a way of life. When attending to the challenge and opportunities of theological education

as missional formation in the 4IR, the following are important questions to answer: How can theological education become an integral part of the life of the church in a way that the church will come to greater missional maturity? How can the life of the church and the students become part of the curriculum development in such a way that their experiences and reflections can contribute to the decolonisation and contextualisation of the curriculum to equip the church and society to make God's kingdom a greater reality in this world?

Paradigm Shift

According to Oliver (2021), the church is not only experiencing the influence of COVID-19 and the 4IR but also the fourth communication revolution, and the fourth revolution in self-understanding.

People no longer believe that our world is immobile or at the centre of the universe (Copernican revolution), that people are totally separate and different from the rest of the animal kingdom (Darwin revolution), and that we have Cartesian minds that are thoroughly transparent to ourselves (Freudian or neuroscientific revolution). [It is concluded] that “we are informational organisms (*inforgs*), mutually connected and embedded in an informational environment (the infosphere) which we share with other informational agents, both natural and artificial” (Oliver, 2021: 30).

In my view, this was always the self-understanding of the African people and other tribes or nations in the majority world, that they/we are mutually connected. Just think of the ubuntu principle in Africa. Might it be that *again* academics from the West and North are not taking Africa or the majority world seriously? Regardless, the point I want to make is that Christianity is experiencing different revolutions which bring about paradigm shifts.

For this article, I will work with the paradigm theory of Thomas Kuhn as described by Bosch (2011: 185–194). It is, therefore, presupposed to be a limited perspective on a difficult concept, but I believe it will help us in our ongoing discussions. With a clear understanding that Christian theology is always contextual, and with theological education happening on all six continents on earth, it is clear that our views of education and theology are only perceptions. Our perceptions or interpretations are deeply shaped by our self-understandings and our contexts. None of us enters education, even more, so theological education, as a clean slate, and no one is passively involved in teaching or learning. Each one of us always reinterprets what we teach to an audience or what we hear in our own self-understanding and context. For this reason, it is suitable to talk about ‘theological educations’. To complicate it even more, there is also not only one theology but also many different theologies.

All individual understandings are conditioned by a variety of personal factors, including culture in religion and religious experiences. Therefore, an individual's self-understanding will play a crucial role in his/her receptivity of theological education. Another important and related factor is the context or ‘frame of reference’ in which a student has grown up. This includes his/her experience and understanding of reality, history and his/her family, as well as context and continent within the universe. It is in this regard that Bosch is using the paradigm shift theory of Thomas Kuhn to describe paradigm shifts in the mission history of the church. With the acknowledged shift of Christianity from the North and the West to the Global World and, more specifically, the South, I am convinced a new paradigm shift is taking place, especially regarding theological education. From native Africans, there are serious calls for a paradigm shift of decolonisation and/or Africanisation of theological education, although not only of theological education but also of education on the African continent in general.

Bosch (2011: 188) acknowledged some limits to the paradigm shift theory of Kuhn but stated that he used it only as a kind of working hypothesis, as will be done in this paper. Kuhn argues that science does not grow cumulatively, but by way of ‘revolutions’. It starts when reality is perceived in ways qualitatively different from previous or contemporary ‘normal science’. Therefore

No individual or group can actually “create” a new paradigm; rather, it grows and ripens within the context of an extraordinary network of diverse social and scientific factors. As the existing paradigm increasingly blurs, the new one begins to attract more and more scholars, until eventually the original, problem-ridden paradigm is abandoned (2011:188).

Hence, a paradigm shift is always a struggle since it is not simply taking a rational or ‘scientific’ step. As argued before, there is no objective knowledge, people and their emotions are involved in the shift from one paradigm to the other. A paradigm can be defined as ‘the entire constellation of beliefs, values, techniques, and so on shared by the members of a given community’ (Bosch, 2011: 189). If we accept this definition, it becomes clear that Christianity is experiencing a paradigm shift, and African Christianity will influence the rest of the world. Other names for a paradigm shift mentioned by Bosch (2011: 189) are: ‘models of interpretation, frames of knowledges, frames of reference, research traditions, beliefs systems’. Being aware of these synonyms, the impact and implications of a paradigm shift in theological education to a decolonised or Africanised paradigm become clear. In 2014, Brunson and Knoetze (2014: 261–279) conducted research on theological education at the North West University. The conclusion of their research was that attention needs to be given to contextualisation, worldviews and hermeneutics. Here, the authors further indicate: ‘By recognizing, acknowledging, and accepting one’s own context, one can begin to realise that a few alterations are not sufficient, but a completely new hermeneutical key is needed to be relevant to the (new) “ancient-future” worldview in the context of Africa’ (2014: 277).

A paradigm shift in theology is different from a paradigm shift in natural science, in the sense that old paradigms never completely disappear and can even revive in time. However, this indicates that all theology is partial and culturally and socially biased. This, however, does not imply that theology or theological education is relative, just that it is contextual and that it ‘cannot be made logically or even probabilistically compelling’ for those of a different context. As such, there is a ‘creative tension between my ultimate faith commitment and my own theological perception’ (Bosch, 2011: 191). Bosch continues to argue:

For the Christian this means that any paradigm shift can only be carried out on the basis of the gospel and because of the gospel, never, however, against the gospel. Contrary to natural science, theology relates not only to the present and the future, but also to the past, to tradition, to God’s primary witness to humans. Theology must undoubtedly always be relevant and contextual, but this may never be pursued at the expense of God’s revelation in and through the history of Israel and, supremely, the event of Jesus Christ. Christians take seriously the epistemological priority of their classical text, the Scriptures (:191).

In this regard, the world church functions as an international hermeneutical community in which different theologies/theological educations challenge each other’s biases. Important is that we see our fellow believers not as opponents and rivals but as brothers and sisters seeking the Truth with us. Hence, a paradigm shift of

decolonisation or Africanisation at a Faculty of Theology is at least three-fold: (i) to address content (Africa contextualisation); (ii) mode/s of delivery – Open Distance Learning (ODL) and (iii) Programme and

Qualification Mix (PQM) diversity (new programmes – diplomas and certificates). Collectively, this three-fold approach puts a Faculty of Theology in the South African context with a history of more than 100 years in a transition phase (Knoetze, 2021: 2).

We may also say it contributes to a paradigm shift.

Global Church with a Missional Hermeneutic

One of the biggest challenges to the church in the global world is theological education and the way in which we use the Bible. In Africa, 85% of all pastors, priests or ministers have no ‘official or recognised’ theological education or training. The question is, how do we convince pastors, priests and ministers that they need theological education? There are many arguments based on biblical texts that are used by one group to convince people of the importance of theological education. But another group has just as many texts to inform people that theological education is not necessary; if we trust in God, He will take care, and the Spirit will give us the message. To responsibly address this dilemma, we need to move beyond a so-called ‘biblical foundation’ for or against theological education. Because, irrespective of what our arguments are, we have already decided what we want to prove, and our selection of texts will simply confirm our opinions.

This article is written from the understanding that theological education is a missionary activity of the church, with the implication that theological education will contribute to transforming lives to become disciples of Christ. However, it must be stated clearly that theological educators must always be aware of their own denominational bias, especially in an HEI where ecumenical theology is taught. The denominational bias of the controlling group may never contribute to or promote disunity or fragmentation among (African) Christians (Oliver, 2021: 28). From the example of the church in Africa, it is important to realise that a missional hermeneutic needs to include the recognition of the multiplicity of perspectives and contexts from where people are reading the Bible. This includes the decolonisation and Africanisation debates. But this may not lead to relativism. ‘It is important to point out here that “plurality in interpretation” is not pluralism as a hermeneutical ideology, nor is it a relativist charter’ (Wright, 2006: 40). It is from the perspective of theological education as a form of discipleship that I want to use Wright’s (2006: 31–47) description of missional hermeneutic as a unifying methodology and language and apply it to theological education to enable the different disciplines to converse meaningfully with one another. Working with a missional hermeneutic, I am convinced the different disciplines will be able to create new theological knowledge that will enhance the students’ experience of the discipline, and thereby contribute to their calling and understanding of the implications of the Bible for the church and society in their context.

From a missional hermeneutic of diversity, we need to move to a missional hermeneutic of coherence. Within the context of diversity, what does it mean to speak the truth in love? Wright uses Luke 24 to answer this question and explain his understanding of a missional hermeneutic:

Nevertheless, the words of Jesus “opened their minds so they could understand the Scripture” (Lk 24:45). In other words, *Jesus himself* provided the hermeneutical coherence within which all disciples must read these texts, that is, in the light of the story that leads *up to* Christ (messianic reading) and the story that leads *on from* Christ (missional reading). That is the story that flows from the mind and purpose of God in all the Scriptures for all the nations. That is a missional hermeneutic of the whole Bible (Wright 2006: 41).

From the above, we can agree that theological education should include ‘the academic, the pastoral skills development and the required spirituality’ (Naidoo, 2021: 69). However, we ought to know that there are different ways of integrating theological training, one size does not fit all. ‘[I]t requires intentional planning with all stakeholders, so that all goals are aligned from course purpose to programme as well as institutional goals’ (Naidoo, 2021: 74). To ensure a missional hermeneutic that is contextualised in a global world, we need a Trinitarian foundation of theological education to make it clear that God and not the church is the primary subject and source of liberating theological education. Where a missional hermeneutic founded in the Trinitarian God ‘part[s] company with radical postmodernity, is in its insistence that through all this variety, locality, particularity and diversity, the Bible is nevertheless actually *the* story. This is the way it is. ... This is the universal story that gives a place in the sun to all the little stories’ (Wright, 2006: 47).

Theory, Practice and Praxis

In a certain way it is stupid to call a lecture “too theoretical”. It depends on which kind of theory it transmits. And what I do with this theory – which previous knowledge and experience I bring to this lecture. And how I construct my “functioning” or “applied” theory as I listen to the lecture and reflect my life and work (Ott, 2021: 18).

Theological institutions in Africa are often accused of being too theoretical in their education, and students do not know how to minister to congregations in different contexts. Accusations like these ask for reflection on the relation between theory and practice/praxis. In any theological training institution, especially those at HEIs like universities, the lecturers have most probably studied theology in a classic format with at least the traditional fourfold curriculum of Biblical Studies, Church History, Systematic Theology and Practical Theology. After 5–10 years of study to obtain a master’s degree or a PhD, lecturers have accumulated a lot of theoretical knowledge, but they do not necessarily have any ministerial skills or experience. When lecturers are appointed at HEI faculties of theology only on academic grounds, without any ministerial experience, ‘something’ is missing in the tutoring. However, different disciplines and various lecturers may present distinct approaches to the relationship and integration of theory and practice. Ott (2021: 7) describes four distinct approaches regarding this relationship.

- The first is a ‘theory-application-model’. In this model, truth as a propositional statement established by sound biblical theology/study is established and then applied to a specific topic and/or context.
- The second can be called a ‘pragmatic’ theory. In this case, truth is what works in practice. The theory emerges from the observation of current practices.
- The third is what I call a ‘historical-interpretation’ model. In this instance, past theories and practices are explored to have a clearer understanding of current realities. Here, truth is then the accurate description and understanding of past realities.
- The fourth, and this is our concern, is educational – how theory and practice are integrated into the teaching and learning process. When we integrate theory and practice in theological education it is called *praxis*. This is the difference between education and teaching ‘about’ or ‘from within’.

Naidoo (2021: 67) describes the traditional curriculum as a unilateral theory-to-application method with theory being more important than practice. To make clear his understanding and the

importance of praxis, Ott (2021: 14–18) makes use of Groom’s book *Christian religious education* (1980). After discussing the Hebrew term *yada*, which refers to knowing ‘more by the heart than by the mind’, ‘not by standing back from in order to look at, but by active and intentional engagement in lived experience’, ‘involving a response of the total person’, ‘entering into a relationship’, and ultimately ‘obedience to God’s will’, he claims the biblical way of knowing, *yada*, can be called a ‘praxis epistemology’ (2021: 14). *Praxis* then refers to the whole life as ‘reflective engagement in a social situation’, to attitudes, values, virtues and character.

The deduction, then, is that the *praxis* of theological education is more than teaching different practices. Theological education *praxis* then

means more than simply [teaching] the skills and competences for leadership, for conducting worship services, for preparing a sermon or for competent performance as a counsellor. “*Praxis*” refers to our very being, our habits, which, in turn, shape everything we are, and we do. From this point of view, the dichotomy of theory and praxis are redundant – theorising is part of praxis and not the prerequisite thereof (2021:15).

As a missiologist, I would argue in terms of the *missio Dei*. When we are busy with theological education, we are privileged to participate in what God is busy doing in this world. Teachers have the privilege to be participants, not the main actor or the initiator; that role belongs to the Trinitarian God in his love for this world. Freire (2005: 51) defines *praxis* in terms of transformation since it is more than action and includes reflection. He states: ‘Human activity consists of action and reflection: it is praxis; it is transformation of the world. And as praxis, it requires theory to illuminate it. Human activity is theory and practice; it is reflection and action’ (2005: 125). *Praxis* then is ‘the embodied integration of theory and practice in the lives of theologians’ (Ott, 2021: 18), both students and lecturers.

From the above, it is clear that theological education and spiritual formation are not independent but rather interdependent. Knoetze (2022b) argued that spiritual formation is done best in partnership between the church and the theological education institution. This happens when the educational information is presented in such a way that it leads to formation, and where spiritual formation leads to a quest for more information, to a better self-understanding.

Fourth Industrial Revolution

Even before, but especially since COVID-19, the term ‘Fourth Industrial Revolution’ (4IR) has become part of our daily conversations. Before COVID-19, the discussion was on the possible influence of the 4IR on theological education, and how must we prepare to engage with this revolution. However, since COVID-19, the church has realised that it is not only an industrial revolution but also a communication revolution. The question is thus no longer on the possible influence, but rather on how to use it to the benefit of the communication of the gospel. Oliver (2021: 29) also describes the 4IR as the fourth communication revolution. The first communication revolution would then be language; the second, writing; the third, printing; and the fourth, technology-driven communication. The 4IR is indeed ‘characterised by a fusion of technologies that blur the lines between the physical, digital, and biological spheres’ (2021: 29). It is thus clear that the 4IR will have a clear impact also on theology and spirituality not only regarding communication but also spiritual formation. One of the regular questions asked by churches and theological institutions regarding technology-driven education is whether it can contribute to spiritual formation.

During COVID-19, all HEIs in South Africa changed their mode from face-to-face teaching to online teaching. Online teaching had many positive and negative influences on theological education in South Africa, as well as Africa, creating new opportunities and challenges. Some of the opportunities it created were that local churches could get more directly involved in theological education, through offering their uncapped data to students in their vicinity. Ministers from rural areas could suddenly attend some online courses as part of continuous education, which was not previously a possibility because of distance and time. Many difficult and relevant topics that were created by COVID-19 ‘forced’ theological faculties at HEIs to give guidance online to pastors in local congregations. However, this also reveals the great inequality in South Africa, and more broadly in Africa and the rest of the world (Knoetze, 2022a; Mawerenga and Knoetze, 2022). These articles confirm that many people from the majority world do not have access to data, and therefore, the different forms of technology-driven communication. This has the implication that in the context of total lockdown, these people do not have any form of communication with the outside world. This has also influenced many theological education institutions negatively, especially in Africa and other parts of the majority world, to the point where they had to close.

Lessons from History

When dealing with contentious matters like theological education, it is always enriching to be aware of what history may teach us. Without going into too much detail, I want to mention a few lessons, some of which have already been alluded to in this article.

The first one may be called the ‘wineskin factor’. From the Gospels, it is well known that you cannot put new wine in an old wineskin (Matt 9:17, Mk 2:22, Lk 5:37–39). Theological education may not be confined to any wineskin; although ‘The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being ...’ (Heb 1:3), we still discover God in new ways every day. There are always new people, new contexts and new understandings, although old structures and traditions seldom die off completely.

A second lesson from history is avarice for power and money. In many instances, theological training institutions (Bible schools and colleges), as well as faculties at HEIs, started off with a clear focus on accessibility and transformation of society, but soon they became preoccupied with status, money and power. The criteria used to be a good theological institution has to do with avarice. Unfortunately, the latter is also manifesting in the churches in Africa.

A third lesson we must learn is that God’s mission is more diverse than we can ever imagine. He is calling people in various contexts, for example, institutions, to be his servants, whether in ministry, teaching or as lay people. Therefore, it is important to always evaluate new structures and ideas considering a broadly ecumenical and evangelical theology with a clear focus on the trinitarian God.

Lesson four from history is the importance of the laity. Theological education must always have a clear focus on the laity. Whether it is equipping the laity for their ministry, or whether it is to equip people for professional ministry. All people are called to participate in the *missio Dei*, but how does theological education help them to become better servants and participants in God’s mission?

A fifth lesson history taught us regarding theological education is to have a clear focus on the youth. Many of the mission movements and orders were founded by young men and women, not by seasoned church leaders. This focus is true in the majority world, where the majority population is younger than 30 years of age, but it is also true in Europe where the population is aging. The global church needs to recognise that the youth is not the church of tomorrow; they are today’s church, and therefore, need to be properly equipped as believers.

The last lesson I want to mention is that the story of biblical theology is the story of suffering. Our theology is built on the Suffering Servant; the One who not only died but also raised from death. Our theology is a theology with a focus on those who suffer, and on a broken world. But our theology is also a theology of hope, of a transformed society, of a new life in Christ. And where we see such glimpses of God's kingdom on earth, joy triumphs over suffering.

When we are talking about theological education and planning our curriculums for new and different contexts, may these lessons give us guidance and hope so that we may work with love, from our faith in the trinitarian God.


Conclusion

This article reviewed the challenges and opportunities of theological education (in Africa) in light of the impact of COVID-19 and the 4IR. First, it attended to the methodological aspects of our curriculum, which included missional hermeneutics and paradigm shifts. Second, it looked at human-centred awareness, and thirdly, the very personal nature of theological education. Although the latter underlies the whole article, it especially came forth in the section that deals with theory, practice and praxis, as well as in the 4IR section of the paper. All three of these focusses are also informed by lessons from history. The most important principle we need to remember is that theological education belongs to God. Wright (2006) and Bosch (2011) stated that God's mission has a church, and may I add, God's church has theological education.

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Note

1. 'Glocal' refers to both the global and the local contexts.

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