

LEADING THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION: PROBLEMS, CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

In my more than 30 years in the work of biblical and theological training, both in Cuba, at the Matanzas Evangelical Theological Seminary and at the Cuban Council of Churches Study Centre, and also in Brazil, at the Episcopal Anglican Church of Brazil, particularly as Coordinator for 6 years of the Anglican Studies Centre, numerous challenges have emerged in the task of leading theological training. However, each context is different. It is not the same leading in Cuba and in Brazil. Each context has its own characteristics, but there are always common aspects, as well as ecclesial and social challenges, new and old, which affect the task of conducting theological training. The time I have to express my ideas is short, so I will try to be brief and direct.

The challenges of the context

In trying to identify the challenges of the context, we must say that, for us, the immediate challenge is to develop our theological training work in Latin America, a continent where social inequalities are still clearly visible in our countries.

And amid the difficulties that the current context imposes on our people, for our theological work to be relevant, it must be dynamic and creative. This means to be continuously open to the review and update of our pedagogical, biblical-theological, ecclesiological, missiological, liturgical and theological training conceptions. Therefore, we will better train our students to be prophetic consciences that move and challenge the churches to review and update their biblical and theological discussion; their ecclesiological vision, to avoid falling into rigid and inflexible schemes; the structures and conceptions that limit their missionary action; the liturgical creation, because it is the space to share and renew our relationship experience with God, so we must take care and make sure that our liturgy always reflects this experience and does not become something rigid, inflexible and lifeless; also review and update the conceptual and practical models of the ministry; as well as theological education itself, and everything that limits the evangelical commitment to life, justice and peace.

The ethical, pedagogical and theological challenges

After identifying the challenges and problems that come from our Latin-American and global context, it is also necessary to identify the ethical, pedagogical and theological challenges. And we can highlight several challenges and problems, but we would like to highlight the four that I presently consider more relevant and significant.

In first place, ecumenical theological education occurs in the midst of the tension that occurs or is occurring between what churches want it to be and the challenges that come from outside.

In the first case, i.e., what the churches want theological education to be, in many cases they would like theological education to reproduce the classical and traditional ecclesiastical institutional standards. This top-down view sees theological training cantered on the professional training of pastors. This is an approach that often is not in line with the pastoral

ministry profile in confrontation with their social, political and cultural context, and does not consider laity as a subject of the theological education process.

And this means that theological training should not only concentrate on the creation of a call to ministry, or on the training of pastors, but rather on contributing, starting from the reality of the students, to the seek an integral missionary vocation for all people of God; the transformation of our world into a better and more just world for all people.

In the second case, i.e., the recognition of the challenges that come from outside, we must start from the principle that theological work must be seen as the critical reflection that the christian community carry on based on its faith and experience. The counterpart of this theological principle would be the pedagogical proposal of Paulo Freire in his "Pedagogy of the Oppressed", which sees the philosophy of education as a theory of praxis and dialogue.

For Freire, the educational process is a dialogical, democratic and participatory process. In this perspective, theological training will always be exposed to the agenda that society places on it, in other words, inserted in its culture and exposed to economic, political, ethical, and social problems. A view that, on one hand, avoids creating conditions for escapism, and, on the other, prevents an irrelevant academicism lacking genuine commitment.

In second place, globalisation, in the global neoliberal context, makes religions to be no longer ignored. Our societies are multicultural and multi-religious. The different religions are no longer distant but are in the same society and even in the same city.

The Spanish theologian naturalised Nicaraguan, José María Vigil, comments in his book "Theology of Religious Pluralism" that in the era of globalisation the theologian can have a specific religious confession, but the theology that speaks to society and to the present world, must be a theology that can make sense to a receiver that is multicultural and multi-religious, because otherwise they would not be doing theology in today's multicultural and multi-religious world, but in a mono-religious world that no longer exists.

Therefore, in our globalised world today, interreligious dialogue, and a theology of religious pluralism, becomes urgent, relevant and pertinent, not only to theorise theologically, but to enable peace, justice, and human fraternity, thus contributing to provide a common answer for the solution of the great problems facing humanity.

Third, in our opinion, a problem and a challenge for churches and especially for theological education today are the issues related to human sexuality and same-sex relationships.

We know that reflecting on human sexuality and same-sex relationships has generated, and will continue to generate, tensions and divisions within churches and theological training institutions; however, we cannot escape this reality, under penalty of being irrelevant, because it is part of the way of being of contemporary society and of humans today.

Lastly, and without time to reflect further, the Covid19 pandemic constitutes one of the greatest current challenges to society, churches, and theological undertakings. Life has begun to be moved in the virtual world, as the new situation has finally thrown us into social networks, not just to see and be seen, but to live in a different way. Social media has definitely entered all the basic personal activities of our daily life, from basic shopping and work to religious service. Everywhere, there are existential questions about the meaning of

everything that humanity is experiencing. No doubt theological work should have a relevant and hopeful word about this moment.

Responding to the challenges

Therefore, we believe that, considering the journey ahead, our Latin American context, our particular contexts, as well as the global context, as well as considering the social, ethical, and pedagogical challenges of our present, we consider that in the not so easy task of having a leadership position, we must affirm a theological training that is: **transforming, contextual, conscientious, academic** without falling into academicism, **ecumenical and spiritual**, which biblically means service to God that is materialised in missionary work to our neighbour in his various forms, including going out to meet despised and marginalised social groups and categories, and lastly, **prophetic** towards the Church itself, being a critical conscience of everything that is unrelated to the truth of the Gospel, to prevent it from moving away from its identity and evangelical commitment to the kingdom of God and its justice.

I conclude these reflections by pointing out that the task of theological education and training is something that never ends. It is a path where the last step becomes the penultimate. There will always be problems and challenges that will continuously make us rethink the “knowing” and the “doing”. And this rethinking should lead us to a theological training that finds its identity and reason for being in the training of people committed to the mission that God has for us today, here and now, as collaborators in building humanity, an earth and new heavens.