Theological Education: Quo Vadis?

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Cuando teníamos casi todas las respuestas, se nos cambiaran las preguntas.¹

Circumstance

Two years ago the Department of Systematic Theology and Ethics of the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago submitted for a faculty discussion a proposal for a reform of the curriculum. Circumstances had it that the proposal did not gain momentum. The reasons for that were many, and the time of opportunity is no longer retrievable. The reflections I offer here are neither an attempt at reinstating that discussion, nor do I presume to be speaking in the name of the department in what follows.

I would like to offer instead my own interpretation of what occasioned that reflection and some of the implications I see flowing out of the submitted proposal. If it did not seize the opportunity when it was first discussed and thus lost its relevance, the circumstances that occasioned its appearance are still very much on the agenda.

The proposal grew out of a sense of inadequacy of the present model of theological education and called for a profound redesigning of the curriculum. It grew out of two presuppositions: the affirmation of our vocation as interpreters of the gospel, and the recognition of the circumstances that condition and shape what we do. The proposal itself called for a revamping of the whole curriculum with structural implications for the organizational chart of the whole school. Most importantly, it was a proposal that suggested the abolition of the departments and divisions and, by consequence, of the disciplinary organization of theology. Instead of the traditional disciplines it proposed four thematic fields that would cross the various disciplines with roughly one quarter of the curriculum being dedicated to each field.

A catechetical field would concentrate in the Christian heritage, from the Bible to the present, offering a sort of literacy program in the Christian and Lutheran traditions. A contextual field was conceived as an area of concentration designed to explore and probe the interface between the heritage and different cultural milieus in which the church is inserted. A constructive field would offer the opportunity for stu-

¹“When we had almost all the answers, the questions were changed.” Graffiti on the wall of the University of Bogota, Colombia.
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students to develop and elaborate their own theological position in face of the challenges of proclamation, outreach, and counseling. A fourth field, designated as training, was intended to offer students the practical exercises needed for ministry, including practica, C.P.E., teaching parish, and internship.

Although the reform proposed was rather profound, it was limited in scope primarily to LSTC in the context of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. What we probably failed to do at the time the proposal was presented was to show that the pressing need that called for it was not restricted to challenges that LSTC was or is facing alone, but to a new global scenario that is challenging and imposing changes in theological education on a worldwide scale. And as I am going to suggest, some of these challenges are already being met in some places, mainly in the Third World. That we should look at these places normally not identified with the venerable Western tradition should not surprise us in view of two facts. First, theology in the Third World is no longer subsidiary to the North Atlantic theologizing, and, second, the precarious material conditions in which these theologies are done magnify the problems theologies in the North Atlantic world are increasingly facing.

This realization is not a novelty on the international level, particularly among Lutherans. Some years ago William Lesher and Risto Lethonen, reflecting about the changing character of the international theological scene, proposed a major international consultation on Lutheran theological education. The idea of such a consultation resulted in a reworking of that original proposal which was submitted to the Executive Council of the Lutheran World Federation for implementation and approved at the Windhoek Council meeting in 1995.

Preparations are currently underway, with Lesher taking the lead in implementing it, possibly in 1998.

Bewilderment

"When we had almost all the answers, the questions were changed!" The graffiti on the wall of the University of Bogota expresses a sense of bewilderment characteristic of our present condition and can be particularly addressed to the theological situation. It brings to mind the inadequacy of one of the most influential methodological proposals in modern theology. I am thinking of Tillich’s famous method of correlation which suggests that questions arising from the situation interface with answers evincing from the Christian message. It took two decades after Tillich presented it in a systematic form for the method to be sharply criticized for its failure to see that the Christian message itself was full of questions and many times it was the situation that provided answers to them. Revisionist and feminist theologians were at the forefront of this criticism that has shown that new insights on the human condition, particularly those related to gender issues, brought about correctives to the Christian message. A case in point is the doctrine of sin. Feminist theologians have insisted that the situation of women implied a different answer than the one promoted by the mainstream of Western theological tradition.

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But even the idea of correlation itself, still maintained in the critical revisiting of Tillich's one-way street, supposed that answers would be produced for questions that could be formulated. But this is no longer as easily ascertained as it was even in the recent past. It does not mean that there are no questions, only that it has become harder and harder to agree upon them, particularly in regard to theology. Karl Marx's famous dictum that humanity can only raise to itself questions that it can answer has been in theology a problem in and of itself. Can we really have an answer, and above all a single answer for the religious quest? The inability of theologians to agree even on questions has been a mark of modern times when theological diversity, which always existed, has been in a situation where not only confessional communions are severed from each other, but diversity grows increasingly within them.

Let me give an example from the Lutheran theological tradition. It was in 1963 that the Lutheran World Federation held a worldwide assembly in Helsinki. The main theological item on the agenda was the adoption of a declaration on justification, the one central doctrine that the confessional writings call the article by which the church stands or falls. The document was under elaboration for years by the Commission on Theology. But even after being redrafted once more during the assembly itself, due to criticism that had been raised, the text was not adopted, and the Lutheran communion still lacks any normative text that translates the confessional declarations on justification for the contemporary situation. The disagreement was not on the centrality of the doctrine and its confessional status. The problem was related to different views of the human condition that the doctrine should be able to address. The basic message implicitly given was that we agree on the centrality of a doctrine as long as we don't define it, as long as it fails to meet the criterion of correlation.

This has been interpreted as a basic deficiency of the Lutheran communion. But let me suggest that the real failure, if there was one, was to pretend that a universally agreed upon definition of a doctrine should be at all possible. And the lesson really is that it is not, which ironically does not eliminate the need of a doctrine as a token of a given identity. On the contrary, “justification” became no less a shibboleth of Lutheran identity although and because it was not defined.

The case of the Lutheran World Federation is exemplary because it illustrates some of the basic issues that we face in discussing theology and theological education. It should be noted, however, that an important Joint Declaration on Justification is now being discussed between the Vatican and the LWF. Its adoption was twice postponed; the goal is now to have it adopted by 1998.

Past are the days in which centers of theological education would disseminate normative knowledge for the rest of the world.

Since the emergence of the West as the hegemonic location for Christian theological reflection. Since then and until the beginning of this century the majority of Christians in the world still lived in Europe or the U.S.A., despite the very aggressive and relatively successful evangelization of European colonies around the world, or the 19th century Protestant missionary crusades. The situation reversed itself during this century alone when most of the Christians are now found in the Third World. In the last 50 years since the creation of the Lutheran World Federation and of the World Council of Churches what we have is an increasing presence of worldwide voices that were almost totally absent from main theological discussions in the 1950s. The case of the Helsinki Assembly (as it was also the case with the New Delhi Assembly of the WCC in 1961) is not at all unconnected with the fact that different voices were offering also differing understandings of the human condition, and, therefore, differing interpretations of the meaning of Christian doctrines, or at least a lack of clarity as to their meaning. It was realized that their concrete meaning could only be obtained in the dispersed fragments of their usage within different cultural locations. It is within a location that, as Mikhail Bakhtin has insisted, an utterance "will have a meaning different than it would under any other conditions; all utterances are heteroglot, in that they are functions of a matrix of forces practically impossible to recoup, and therefore impossible to resolve."

Past are the days in which centers of theological education would disseminate normative knowledge for the rest of the world. Even the optimist rage of socially and politically oriented theologies that started in the 1960s to raise their prophetic voices were coming from the North Atlantic white and male cultural context. The 1966 Geneva conference on Church and Society, that launched nothing less than a theology of revolution and would mark a turning point in recent theological history, was anything but what could be regarded

7 And when did that happen? Probably not before the great schism of 1054 but certainly only fulfilled in the symbolic year of 1492, when the last Moorish stronghold in western Europe, Granada, was re-conquered, and Western Christianity was brought to the New World.

8 The fact that, among Lutherans, Europeans and North Americans are still the vast majority (almost 80%—although less so than in the past) should not serve as a disclaimer; it is rather a diagnosis that accounts for the fact that Lutherans have been slow in recognizing the challenges others are already addressing.


10 I still remember that in the early 1970s (when I was in theological school and Latin American Liberation theologies had just started to raise a dissonant voice) one could name a few journals and a handful of schools (most of them in Europe and a few in the USA) that would suffice for anyone to get acquainted with and know what was going on in theology.
inclusive by present standards. Prophecy defined the discursive practice of the defense of the oppressed and marginalized, but with the voice of those who did not share the condition of the ones being defended. This is no longer the case, and this is what now is different! There is no longer a center of dissemination, no longer a program like the ones some postmodernists call "master narratives." 11

The anemic project

What we have gained in assessing the present theological condition is the awareness that theological knowledge is a situated knowledge, and its value lies precisely in its embodiment. And this is a translatable knowledge, but one that requires familiarity with the context within which it emerges, and the painful awareness that translation is also treason, that faithfulness never fully succeeds in avoiding betrayal. It is in the acceptance of this dynamic ambiguity that something can be gained at all. It is in the pristine avoidance of ambiguity, in the search for a prelapsarian language, either by glossing over differences or by the bigotry of having my language game to be the only true one, that we have lost more than we have gained.

Let me give an example. In the Garden of Epicurus, Anatole France has an illustrative story regarding the language of metaphysics that I think can also be applied to theology, particularly under the present condition that I tried to describe above. The story is a discussion between two characters regarding a sentence found in a book on metaphysics: "The spirit possesses God in proportion as it participates in the absolute." 12 The discussion is about the abstract character of the language that metaphysicians develop in their attempt to overcome the mythical rootedness of the concepts they employ. One of the characters offers the following analogy:

I was thinking—thinking how Metaphysicians, when they make a language for themselves, are like knife-grinders, who, instead of knives and scissors, should put medals and coins to the grindstone, to efface the lettering, date and type. When they have worked away till nothing is visible in their crown-pieces, neither King Edward, the Emperor William, nor the Republic, they say: "These pieces have nothing either English, German or French about them; we have freed them from all limits of time and space; they are not worth five shillings any more; they are of inestimable value, and their circulation is extended infinitely." They are right in speaking thus. By this needy knife-grinder's activity words are changed from a physical to a metaphysical acceptation. It is obvious that they lose in the process; what they gain by it is not so immediately apparent. 13

The argument concludes by one of the characters showing to his metaphysician friend that the most the latter has accomplished is to efface with abstract conceptuality the concrete mythical signification at the origin of that statement, creating what he called not something superior to a myth, but "an anaemic mythology without body or blood." 14

The example I gave above about the doctrine of justification can serve also as an illustration of a similar process of efface-

13 France, 194-5.
14 France, 214.
mentation that plagues theology, as much as metaphysics, creating the double process I have described: the broadening ad absurdum of the exchange value of theological terms and concepts, and their simultaneous restrictions to semantic pockets controlled by experts and limited to myths that are no longer clearly inscribed or assumed. And I think we perpetuate this theological anemia the more we dissociate theological knowledge and theological constructions from their situations, or to phrase it differently, from the mythical and symbolic context in which they emerge and within which they gain life, body and blood, i.e., where they have use value before they gain exchange value.

What I regard as being the characteristic of our time is not that we are more or that we are less mythological in orientation, that our God-talk is more or less embodied. The point is that we in the post-Bultmannian era in theology have been able to overcome myths while sharing an array of mythologies that are not conversant with each other. And they are not conversant with each other precisely because we believed that we could leave them behind in the elusive search for a common narrative above and beyond the body mythic, the place where the metaphorical and the literal sense meet each other, where the literal is the metaphorical and the metaphor the literal, where justification is performance and performance is justification.

Claiming the tradition

This sense of fragmentation comes together with a greater sense of integration. The local and the global, concepts that can be set in diametrical opposition, are yet closer together than ever, as the neologism “glocalization” poignantly expresses. In the theological arena this has been well illustrated by the surprising recent ecumenical bilateral agreements among many church bodies bypassing the so-called “ecumenical winter” of the World Council of Churches. But simultaneously we also observe the tremendous multiplication of churches that have grown increasingly away from the consensus-building languages of mainstream denominations and of the Unit of Faith and Order of the WCC. And more than this: the new ecclesial and ecumenical formations often dribble the taxonomic practices that aim at classifying them according to some variables that would allow us to know the others before meeting them.

In this situation the question that concerns theological education is much more elemental than issues pertaining to curriculum, method, or pedagogy. It is a question addressed to the legitimacy of the theological enterprise, namely: who is the bearer of the tradition or the traditions? This ques-

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15 The double-sidedness of the phenomenon could be made more clear if we would carry the analogy further. If the metaphysician effaces a real coin giving to it a universal but negligible value, the restriction of theology to a language game could be compared to the use of play-money that equally has a negligible value outside of the play.

16 “It has become commonplace to claim that modernity fragments, dissociates. Some have even presumed that such fragmentation marks the emergence of a novel phase of social development —a postmodern era. Yet the unifying features of modern institutions are just as central to modernity—specially in the phase of high modernity—as the disaggregating ones.” Anthony Giddens, Modernity and Self Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), p. 27.

17 And let us remember that pluralism, or the “end of heresy” within Christendom can be dated back to the Reformation, roughly at the time in which European Christianity affirmed and expanded itself oversees.
estion about tradition seems rather pedestrian and might sound strange in the context of fragmentation I am addressing. I would like to claim, however, that it is at the core of what theological education is all about. It is the question of the handing over of a given story in time and space, i.e., of tracing the movement of the logos.

Let me suggest that three proposals that we have had historically should be revisited for both the promises and limits they entail. They represent roughly the main traditional branches of Christianity: Catholicism, Protestantism, and Orthodoxy. They can be defined as the magisterial, the hermeneutic, and the iconic model. Each one has its own way of claiming and defending faithfulness. And each one would regard the others as betraying the content of the faith by the logic implicitly adopted to elicit it. But it is also the case that each can be justified only internally. They are self-referential.

1. According to the first, the bearer of the tradition is the church represented by its teaching office, the magisterium. In the church the deposit of revealed knowledge is kept and administered by those who have been given the keys that access this knowledge. It is not a knowledge generally available, which prevents a broader or "democratic" intervention, for it is the teaching office of the church alone that allows for the correct interpretation of the scriptures (as the foundational if yet still internally undecideable narrative of the faith). The surplus of a not generally accessible revelation allows for an openness in the process of handing over the knowledge while simultaneously tying it up to the institutional formation in which it is deposited. In this understanding of tradition, theological education is most clearly subservient to the church, not only formally (pledging allegiance to the confessions of the church), but also materially (promoting the doctrinal content that the church upholds).

2. The hermeneutic model, associated with the Protestant Reformation, does not allow for any surplus of revealed knowledge to be available in any special calling or office. It relies on the idea that the basic biblical narrative is in itself a sufficient and clear foundation for theological interpretation to build on, and not an undecideable narrative. If in the magisterial model the bishop would be the bearer of the tradition, in this model it is the theologian who, not by special calling, but by scholarship and devotion, is able to regain the textual meaning of the narrative. This understanding of tradition unfolds three interrelated variations and concrete applications of the basic tenets of the model.

One, that could be called the canon within the canon, restricts the meaning of the narrative submitting it to a controlling paradigm, a center in turn of which the rest of the narrative gravitates and receives its hermeneutic key (e.g. the exodus narrative, the cross, justification by faith, the Kingdom of God, the lordship of Christ, etc.).

The second variation tacitly assumes a
With the present pervasive sense of relativism, where do we go for the truth?

demarcated canon to work prescriptively on present circumstances bypassing or minimizing other historical mediations, which has received the pejorative epithet of fundamentalism.

The third subtype expands the limits of a demarcated canon to include other "classic" texts that represent forgotten or marginal stories which need to be assessed to account for common experiences of groups not fully represented in the hegemonic narratives. Feminist, African, and Asian theologies have insisted in integrating (and at times even substituting) extra canonical narratives into those canonically adopted.

3. The third, the iconic model, is closer, but not exclusive to, the Eastern Orthodox churches and is largely affirmed also in the West by mystical movements. This is a different conception of tradition, for it builds its own self-understanding neither under the presupposition of a hidden reservoir of revelation, nor on the hermeneutic expertise of theological scholarship, but on the self-disclosing power of the religious representations. The representations, pictorial or not, are what maintain the continuity of the content. It is neither the magisterium, nor the hermeneutic scholarship, but the immediate exposure to the icon, in which the epiphany indwells, that yields the theological content of the tradition. The icon, the allegorical depiction of the Trinity, the figure of a saint, the apparition of the Virgin, or a mystical vision are not the object of a theological inquiry but the medium through which theology becomes equated with doxology.

None of these proposals for understanding tradition can be said to be irrelevant. None can be said to work without a strong understanding of tradition, and an affirmation of how the Christian story is being handed over, and what its content is. They all are still significant ways in which tradition is still of import as well as imported into the present. However, it is precisely their concomitant presence in a world that has become globalized that has raised the awareness of their relativity. Choosing one of these options is now no longer a self-evident assumption in the way it would have been for the traditional Catholics, Orthodox, or Protestants, who until not long ago functioned de facto if not de jure with the understanding of discrete spaces within which the self referentiality of a tradition was taken for granted. What has taken the place of traditional theological discourses is a heteroglot practice that has brought to the theological forum different and dissonant voices. Roman Catholics have raised the primacy of hermeneutics, Protestants have developed iconographies, the Ortho-

18 The old commonplace of the split between tradition and scripture as descriptive of the differences between Catholics and Protestants is therefore only a caricature.

19 The formula of the Augsburg Religious Peace—cuius regio, eius religio—remains as the bluntest statement of such a principle that demarcates a tradition within a given space. See my article “Re(li)gion: The Lord of History and Illusory Space,” in Viggo Mortensen, ed., Region and Religion: Land, Territory, and Nation from a Theological Perspective (Geneva: LWF, 1994), 79-95.
dox have appealed to the magisterial normativity of the Ecumenical Councils, and so on. But most important is the awareness that any of these understandings of tradition with its own internal referentiality now occupies the same space with competing understandings of tradition rendering it relative. This is what heteroglossy is about; the other is not elsewhere, but shares the same semantic field.

Departing from the main guiding principles for the understanding of tradition, without denying them, the present condition imposes a "complicating" factor on world Christianity. It disrupts the fundamental presupposition of all of the previously discussed understandings of tradition by challenging the presupposition they share in common, namely that there is a single principle, a logos around which the unity of a tradition is maintained and centered. It is enough here to mention the emergence of Pentecostalism or of the charismatic movement in mainline denominations to give to this heteroglot practice a sociological bearing. But what has happened with the emergence of liberation, ecological, and feminist theologies can be regarded as part of the same phenomenon that can be called as a messianic awakening. Different as these movements are in their proposals, they inhabit the same dissonant phenomenon of theological constructions raising the awareness of the unavoidable implication of treason in all tradition, that a translator (traduttore) is also a traitor (tradittore).

With the loss of a self-evident understanding of the theological tradition, what is gained is not only the promise of renewal in theological constructions, but also the risk of losing theological orientation and public responsibility. An increasing sense of a global table talk has made theology much more multicultural, decentered, but simultaneously it has also often been driven into the opposite direction of developing semantic pockets in which a theological conversation finds itself confined to untranslatable language games. In other words, I do not think we are either better off or worse under these conditions. Only the risk and the undecideability has drastically increased, and so has the stratification among different positions. Mainly two of these positions can be here identified: one tries to construct a theological Esperanto in face of the experience of fragmentation, and the other attempts to make its own idiosyncratic expression of the faith catholic. Different as they claim to be, both are united by the same disdain toward the embodied character of religious language in the variety of expressions it assumes. With the present pervasive sense of relativism, where do we go for the truth? Where do we go to establish a sound basis for theological education? Do we go back to one of the meanings of tradition and entrench ourselves in its grammar as a universal one? Or do we go beyond them to a meta-confessional level and declare that they are all the same, only their language needs to be cleansed from contextual impurities?

The common pneumatic origin of feminism, liberationism, and pentecostalism has already been recognized by Heribert Mühlen, "Der gegenwartige Aufbruch der Geisterfahrung und die Unterscheidung der Geister," in Walter Kasper, ed., Gegenwart des Geistes: Aspekte der Pneumatologie (Freiburg: Herder, 1979); and more recently by Michael Welker, God the Spirit, trans. John F. Hoffmeister (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), specially pp. 1-49.

These positions can be traced back to the Enlightenment's attempt to find a common ground for all religions to come together in a natural religion and in the supernaturalist reaction to the Enlightenment affirming the irreducible character of positive revelation. In this sense this is not a new problem.
A pneumatic theology?

After what has been said, how should one go about suggesting a program for theological education? Am I saying, after Napoleon, that theology is but a fable agreed upon? It might be, provided that a fable has a way of claiming a truth, much in the sense I suggested a myth is: a truth-claim without the requirements to be explanatory, or of demonstrating its inner consistency. Brigit Brophy stated it sharply: “I suspect the correct answer to ‘What have we put in the place of religion?’ is ‘What have we put in the place of believe in fairies?’” Although her analogy strikes a sarcastic chord, the point is well taken: There are truth-claims that belong to other categories than the one submitted to the modern canons of univocality. To do theology is to make truth-claims. But their nature is different.

What I am pleading for is not a revised theoretical status of the theological discipline, a new Christian Dogmatics, a new Systematic Theology, or a new Encyclopedia of the Christian Faith; I am not giving a new definition of its field or demarcating the boundaries of its legitimacy. I am trying to subvert the question and to ask for the theologian’s practice of doing theology. Instead of probing the object of the theological discourse or the theological discourse as object, I am interested in asking how is it being done when it is being done. This should be the fundamental question pertaining to theological education under the conditions I have described. Within the parameters of this question we should not be discussing theology as a discipline, as a theory of religious representations, or as a grammar of the faith. We should be rather concerned in seeing it as a heteroglot practice of people naming their relationship to God and the world and asking how theology is being done when it is done. The question is for the way one makes theological truth-claims about God and the world, and not about the disciplinary status of such claims. It is a question that regards the subject of truth-claims in their practice of claiming them, not the claims in themselves. Can we think of theological education as a practice of making utterances about God and the world and study how these utterances function, what empowers them, under which conditions are they made, what effect they have, and how they establish normativity? All of this instead of focusing primarily on the consistency, faithfulness, and explanatory capability of the utterances themselves severed from the subjects that make them?

In summary, why not a pneumatic (the act of voicing) instead of logic (the objective utterance) and, therefore, logocentric approach to theological education?

This is probably the most important and disturbing challenge for theology today when trying to work within any of the understandings of tradition laid down above. The surrendering of a logocentric understanding of tradition raises the fears that a lack of criteria will undermine any possibility for the discernment of spirits. This is the “complication.” Charismatic and Pentecostal movements have been for a while the target of this sort of criticism. And there is much to say in defense of these criticisms. However, the incapability of logocentric theologies in dealing with this phenomenon should be distinguished from the incapability of raising at all pneumatic criteria for the discernment of spirits. The divine and the

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23 A proposal for criteria for the discernment of spirits is elaborated by Welker, God the Spirit, around the concepts of justice, mercy, and knowledge of God.
demonic stand side by side in an often undecideable locations, as Luther knew so well. The logocentric traditions offer a way of avoiding this undecideability in providing criteria by which traditions can be discerned. These criteria were presented in the three options for understanding tradition outlined above. They fail, however, to recognize that the options might lie outside the parameters of the very tradition being claimed, and simultaneously inside of the same (heteroglot) semantic field. The Spirit shifts keys unexpectedly, produces irreducible differences. The pneumatic principle augments the risk, but it also offers windows of possibility.

A proposal

The late Paulo Freire,* well known Brazilian educator, ecumenist, and lay theologian, has been a seminal thinker for Latin American theology. The reason for the relevance of his thought for theology was his conviction that it is in religious language, in the talk about God and the world, that the naming of one’s world reached its most encompassing expression; and it is this naming that lies at the root of his program of bringing reality into consciousness (conscientização). The reference to God in this naming is what lends ultimacy to a discourse. His understanding of education, and theological education in particular, as a practice of freedom, entails a program for theological education which distances itself from the conventional attempts of redefining theology in terms of a discipline, which he called a “banking” form of education. Linking Freire’s insight of theology as a practice of freedom with what I presented above allows me to draw on three areas in which theological education is meeting fundamental challenges. And with this I come full circle, suggesting the implications I see for three of the thematic fields the Department of Systematic Theology and Ethics had proposed: the contextual, the constructive, and the catechetical.

The first has to do with the diversity of contexts in which theology articulates it-

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self. This seems to be an altogether familiar topic, a commonplace in contemporary theological self-understanding. Theology must be situated. But normally this situatedness refers only to different cultural matrices that we need to learn and be aware of. But this is only part of the challenge. The greater challenge is that the demand made on theological education is not only related to different but accessible cultural contexts, but to the fact that they themselves change the pedagogical practice as such. These contexts are determined by socioeconomic, cultural, and political conditions that often do not allow for the leisure of full time engagement in theological studies, as has been presupposed in the Western theological tradition. This intensive, expensive, and

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24 WA 31/1, 250: “God cannot be God without being first the devil... the devil will not be the devil before being God.”

* Freire died May 2, 1997.
heavy model, dominant in the traditional centers of theological training, has, at most, made adjustments to the increasing need of students who take part-time jobs. But the situation is different for the majority of Christians that live under the poverty level and don’t have any financial cushion to even try a regular academic program, not to mention move or commute to school. In this regard Asia, Africa, and Latin America have developed a number of “informal” theological programs to address this need. The success of these programs (that don’t substitute for but add to formal theological training) has been such that the gap between formal theological expertise and grassroots religious reflection has been closing and unexpected theological voices are suddenly heard employing different modes of utterance. When we hear in the First World concerns about growing theological and biblical illiteracy, we have the symptoms of a problem that is being already addressed elsewhere.

The nature of theological publications has also been changing. The so-called “big” theological literature, the books published by commercial publishing houses with their financial and legal constraints, has given place to a “small” literature: apamphleteering practice of theological production that is inexpensive and bypasses copyright restrictions. Much of it is eventually incorporated into the “big” literature and enjoys a longer life, but their origin and efficacy lies in their grassroots origin.

The second challenge has as its consequence that theology becomes an anti-disciplinary constructive practice. The growing fragmentation of theological disciplines, the specialization of knowledge, has not only created unsurpassable conversational barriers among the disciplines themselves, but has isolated the theological academy from other forms of knowledge.

Interdisciplinary proposals have been ways of addressing the problem of relating the different disciplines, but have left untouched or even reinforced the conception of theology as a fragmented disciplinary knowledge within the confines of the Western traditional disciplines. Theological education as a practice of freedom is neither a disciplinary nor an interdisciplinary endeavor, but an anti-disciplinary effort of constantly breaking away with disciplinary restrictions in recognizing forms of knowledge that defy classification within the traditional theological disciplines, challenging therefore conformity to the norms and regimes that regulate them. Not only are ethics, Bible, pastoral counseling, or apologetics enmeshed in a single theological argument, but myths, science, folk tales, literature, and ritual practices swerve their way into the discussions and need to be dealt with in a way it would sound preposterous for the valets of Western Wissenschaft. Constructive theology has become a poetic activity in the sense that poetry can

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26 Most Latin American theological production that has made it to the book market in the North Atlantic world has this pre-history. See Hermann Brandt, Gottes Gegenwart in Lateinamerika: Inkarnation als Leitmotiv der Befreiungstheologie (Hamburg: Steinmann & Steinmann, 1992), particularly pp. 96-105 (“Zur Gattung der ’Kleinliteratur’”).

27 Edward Farley, Theologia: Fragmentation and Unity of Theological Education (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), distinguishes the pre-modern understanding of theology as an unitary discipline from the present situation in which “theology as a discipline persists, but as specialities and discrete elements in the theological school. As a result, theological education becomes an amalgam of academic specialization and culture adaptation” (151).
be defined as a transgression of discipline and grammar in the search for images, metaphors, and allegories that will give shape to religious convictions. It is in the opening of disciplinary strictures that language is gained.

Finally there is also a catechetical challenge that addresses the theological agenda. Far from being a departure from the traditions, the new theological challenge is probing deeper into what is handed over. Catechesis means to sound forth or to resound an echo. By extension it means to amplify the sound and the whispers that inform existence. It is in this sense that it instructs, it gives shape to our being. It provides a language in and through which being can be housed. Those familiar with the Base Christian Communities in Latin America will be able to recognize them as catechetical accomplishments. Persecuted and excluded people found in the religious and biblical imagery a language to name their world, a world overtaxed by the “official story,” incapable of conveying their sense of hope and transcendence as well as of fears and demons. Tradition, whether handed over through the teachings of the church, through images and epiphanies, through the renewal of biblical studies, has been a decisive factor in people gaining language to name their world. But the emphasis lies in the naming and not in what is being named. This voice, once owned again, has been able to reestablish the mythical roots of the people’s imagination and connect the metaphors with literal acceptations. Metaphors become more than metaphors once people name the pharaoh, their desert experiences, the devil, their epiphanies, their crosses, and their resurrection.

This implies also a revisioning of the task of the educator. The word used in Latin America for the role of the theological educator engaged with the grassroot movement is asesor, which etymologically means the one who sits by (ad-sedere), and in the extended meaning is the one who assesses a given situation implying that the decisions to be made are left to the one being advised.

With these three challenges theology proceeds in any of the discursive modes described above—in any of the three “logics” ascribed to tradition (and any other we might isolate)—and it needs all of them in affirming the subjective practices it performs in its task of truth-telling, in its attempt at being faithful to the one who claimed to be the truth (John 14:6), but left with no answer the one who asked him what was the truth (John 18:38). The questions have changed indeed, but the answer remains still the same!