PEDAGOGICAL ASPECTS OF THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION IN THE 2020S: THE PRACTICALITIES OF INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE, EDUCATION AND FAITH STUDIES

PART II

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Abstract. This paper is part of a two-paper series. This second paper discusses the role of interreligious dialogue, interreligious education and interreligious studies in theological education. The paper discusses interreligious education and how its collaborative approach enables theology students to learn the dynamics of different religions by being taught by teachers from differing religious faiths. Religious education with school children also benefits as key differences between similar religions being taught in local communities can be understood. The paper explains how, at the societal level, religious tolerance of someone else's religion becomes embedded as a universal right. The second section of this second paper discusses interreligious multi-faith development work. There is a strong emphasis on how theological education should be of value to the local community where the learning takes place, alongside using a partnership approach to deliver public goods. Multi-faith education concentrates on a collegiate approach to development, which in practical terms is local regenerative work. Another societal benefit of interreligious multi-faith development work is more nuanced. In an interreligious approach, harmony and trust are built up by differing religions, not trying to compete. The focus is on collegiate interreligious theology education and partnership development work in order to deliver social goods.

Keywords: theological education, interreligious dialogue, interreligious education, practical theology, interreligious studies

INTRODUCTION

For many teachers, theological education is a moral endeavour designed to enable students to develop with the acquisition of social and spiritual human capital (Sosler: *Christian Scholar's Review*, 12 March 2021). Teaching is a complex task requiring the observation of nuanced relational information and continuous assessment of evaluative judgements (Madden 2020, 125). To perform this vital task, theology practitioners must engage with theological continuous improvement professional development (CIPD) to explore the complexities of learning and teaching (Di Cara et al. 2019, 4). Ongoing professional learning also performs another function of importance to teachers, which has a particular resonance with religious educators. Theological CIPD enables teachers to discover beliefs and/or assumptions they have about certain religions, which could be influencing their pedagogical choices. For teachers of any religious persuasion, theological self-understanding encourages religious educators to seek out new approaches to teaching theology, such as hermeneutical communicative pedagogy (Madden 2020, 126). Hermeneutical learning is based on three pillars of a hermeneutical task. These are interpretations of religious texts, the social context surrounding the learning and the biography, finally, the lived experiences of the student (Pollefeyt 2020, 1; *See* also Hintersteiner and Pranger 2019, 5). This pedagogical approach utilises dialogue, enabling students to contextualise their faith perspectives to understand the meaning of what are some societies' sensitive issues. There are protracted religious debates globally about, for example, being allowed to remarry, gender equality during religious services and/or pro-abortion or pro-life (Dozier *et al.* 2020, 7). Theology practitioners, being better equipped to make pedagogical choices, introduce new challenges. How do religious or educational institutions support teachers in their enlightened role? A theology educator's role, which must be understood and delivered in an ever-changing, global, pluralistic social landscape, is often quite challenging (*See* also Vikdahl and Skeie 2019, 120).

INTERRELIGIOUS EDUCATION

There are numerous interreligious and intercultural divides in many societies globally. This is why the Council of Europe (2020) recommends the inclusion of "the religious dimension of intercultural education" in its teacher training module (Council of Europe 2020, 5). Primary school children, typically aged 6-10, and secondary school children, 11-16, need to be mandated and equipped to provide an inclusive curriculum of education. The interreligious education must enable school children to mutually understand and respect people with different religious beliefs, recognising that all religions are equal (Elf and Kwaku-Odoi 2019, 15). Learning a language would be very useful at this time. Allowing school pupils to engage with other religiously diverse students can help prevent children from being poisoned by stereotypical attitudes and prejudice (Gill and Marshall: G20 Interfaith Forum 2020, 6-7; ter Avest 2021, 8). Interreligious education tends to enable class discussion on social issues from different religions' perspectives, engendering multiple faith learning. Theological education enables pupils to develop critical thinking skills and complex personality aspects. For example, empathy, open-mindedness and an inner calling to embrace religious diversity.

> The involvement of religious leaders and faith/interfaith actors and communities in inclusive curricula, enabling students of different religions, faith traditions, and beliefs to become more conversant with diverse religious and cultural narratives, positive values and humanising practices. (Gill and Marshall 2020, 7)

The Netherlands has a progressive approach to religious education. Article 23 of their Constitution ensures that all people have the right to establish a school providing an education which reflects their religious beliefs. People's "pedagogic educational convictions" are also equally enshrined (Kienstra *et al.* 2019, 594-595). A process of contemporary secularisation has provided a religious education impetus to support more cultural and religious diversity. Religious education of young children from multi-faith backgrounds may

require multiple pedagogical approaches in the same classroom (Ahs *et al.* 2019, 216). After appropriate classroom observations, theology educators may consider the following techniques to facilitate learning. Gauge the perspective of the pupil, take account of local conditions, giving opportunities for face-to-face learning, this will help garner family and community support. Make contextual links with lived experiences of the learner, provide relevant examples of religious teaching and how they may apply to the pupil's life (ter Avest 2021, 12). This will give the student the opportunity to demonstrate their ability to appraise their understanding of different religions. They would also be able to describe any commonalities and key differences between one religious practice and a different set of beliefs (Maheshwaran and Sier 2019, 26; Tamir et al. 2020, 10).

A large proportion of students at a confessional or non-confessional school are likely to be non-religious. The reason being primary and secondary school children attend their particular school for reasons of, for example, atmosphere, convenience, identity, location and quality of education (ter Avest 2021, 3). Religious doctrine was hardly one of the main reasons pupils attended the school they were at (Kienstra *et al.* 2019, 595). Many denominational schools have a large culturally, ethnically and socially diverse population, a significant body of which have no interest or understanding of religion. The presence of a pluralistic classroom population challenges religious education teachers in numerous ways. Interreligious teaching often involves teaching students without knowing their religious commitments (Kienstra et al. 2019, 596; Luby 2019, 129). To maintain a sense of neutrality, interreligious education should not have an impetus to change a student's perspective or religious belief. The religious education should provide contextual examples to enable the student to make their own choices about religion. The religious education should also provide the scaffolding to enable students to be able to make comparisons in their own lives and/or that of others. The emphasis on neutrality in theological education is important. One critique of

religious-related or interreligious dialogue is that it conveys individualistic views of a particular religion without discussing the broader picture (Vikdahl and Skeie 2019, 121).

The UK have a societal grouping category called BAME (Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic) which is proving problematic. There are similar concerns in the US, with the grouping African American. Some people object to being referred to as BAME or African American, as they feel such groupings fail to recognise their individual cultural identity (*See* Aspinall 2020, 87). In theological education, such pluralism can act as a barrier, preventing multi-faith group formation, strain community relationships and create tutor group tension. A critique of pluralism is that it can fail to recognise, individual members of an ethnic group might practice different religions. Pluralism, if mismanaged, can homogenise all people in a societal category as belonging to the same religious doctrine (See Berling 2020, 4).

Religious didactics expresses the scientific relationship between teaching and learning in research, whereas the term religious education is predominantly an English-speaking phrase. Due to the reality that the majority of issues regarding RE are considered in English, the phrase religious education is value-laden. The reference to the English term RE, by definition, carries a certain amount of baggage in terms of power relationships and a dominant ideology (Rothgangel and Riegel 2021, 1). The societal benefit of conducting research into religious didactics is that it might identify learning aspects which influence the effectiveness of theological education. There could be communication issues, particular pedagogical approaches, teacher or student attitudes or motivations, which affect the embeddedness of the religious learning (*See* also ter Avest 2021, 2; Sosler 2021). Curricula content or design could be skewed for or against the inclusion of classical interpretation, compared to the secular interpretation of religious texts. Research into religious didactics could discover that participatory learning pedagogy in majority Christian faith settings results in increased acceptance of other religions. Whereas active learning pedagogy might result in

students with negative entrenched mindsets, in predominantly Buddhist, Hindu or Islamist settings, or vice versa (Maheshwaran and Sier 2019, 26). This is a practical application of the nine tasks typical in the scientific discourse as described by Rothgangel and Riegel (2021, 3).

There appears to be a knowledge gap regarding research on the effect of practising a 24-hour Jewish religious Shabbat or a Catholic Christian Sabbath. This excludes observation of experiential learning in Sabbath, or Shabbat, which detailed any homiletics or clerical work which was done during the period. Most research has barely considered Sabbath, or Shabbat, as an embodied religious experience, on being internalised and educating the practitioner (Carter 2020, 2). The failure by Catholicism manifests as making little attempt to fully understand what Shabbat means to followers of Judaism, perpetuating ongoing division. The lack of impetus towards a multi-faith pluralism, a meta-conjoining of Christianity and Judaism, reveals an inter-religious blind spot which weakens Jewish-Christian relations. There would be real benefits in conducting comparative theological research of Christianity's Sabbath and Judaism's Shabbat. Carter's (2020) articulation of this failure of Catholicism is quite stark. This theological deficit caused by Christian policy failure must be addressed.

> In view of this gap in the research, I suggest that if Christians are serious about learning about the Sabbath, and how it is lived, what is needed is the incorporation of empirical research into Christian theological reflection—a practical theological reflection examination of the Sabbath. (Carter 2020, 2)

The student affairs approach to theological education has an in-built focus upon capacity building, community concerns, democratisation and social justice. Interreligious tutorship should enable students to apply creative, innovative solutions alongside trained practical intelligence to resolve particular social problems (Glanzer *et al.* 2020, 35). The student affairs mission statement continues, articulating that societal problems will be resolved by

religiously educated, developed individuals, mobilised to effect social improvements. Theological education needs to adopt extensive use of democratic methods, providing a firm base, manifest as contextual scaffolding utilised to enlighten belief in democracy. "In an increasingly pluralistic higher education system, the ends of promoting democracy and secular psycho-social understandings of developments were all ends on which all Americans could potentially agree" (Glanzer *et al.* 2020, 35; *See* also Trotta and Wilkinson 2018, 18). Interreligious education along the lines of the student affairs tradition has clear community empowering, democratising benefits. Its American origins as an offshoot of theological education create a critical cautionary question encapsulated as follows. Does the student affairs emphasis on pluralism translate into effective functioning, multi-faith active community participation work? ('holistic development', Dotsey and Kumi 2020, 352; 'social action', Maheshwaran and Sier 2019, 29).

There is an expectation that theologically educated people are able to perform the administrative tasks required at their place of worship (Lawson and Schreiner 2021, 12). This means multi-faith religious higher education needs to include training on the commerce required, consistent with the religious make-up of tutor groups. As part of increasingly pluralistic religiously diverse university campus enrolment, higher education religious teaching needs to have flexible curricula (Roy et al. 2020, 5). Many multicultural multilingual people, who practice recognised faiths, need to be catered for. These enrolled students should receive key parts of their training, the administrative paperwork in their religion's native language, often this will not be English. Many higher education theology degree courses have made learning a second religious language a mandatory requirement. "This basic equivalence of faiths as political theology allowed them to easily add Judaism to their accepted religions, which they have all studied in high school as part of civics or civil religion" (Epafras and Brill 2020, 18).

INTERRELIGIOUS MULTI-FAITH DEVELOPMENT WORK

Multi-faith groups are often called upon to mediate conflict resolution and transformation activities to bring armed conflict to an end. Minority followers of certain religious groups' feelings of discrimination or social inequality are contributory factors to military action or social conflict (*See* Muggah and Velshi, *World Economic Forum*, 25 February 2019). Theology graduates need to be equipped to avoid the community transformation pitfall of engaging with faith groups as a default option. Conflict resolution groups do not need to have religious representation *per se*, nor is there any necessity to have only a secular peacebuilding response (Trotta and Wilkinson 2019, 11). One of the reasons why this might happen in conflict negotiation, or in an urban regeneration community transformation setting elsewhere, has particular resonance. A religious leader of any faith is unlikely to be immediately accepted by the local area. There will be a perception in some quarters they only represent their own religious followers in the area, not the whole community (Trotta and Wilkinson 2019, 11). Theological education will enable students to assess the risk of such an interpretation gaining traction and devise action plans to address the challenge. This is why it is imperative theology students work with multi-faith groups to obtain community buy-in of leadership arrangements. Interreligious educational role play can be used to demonstrate the benefits of shared discourse, from people from different faiths supporting a common purpose. Multi-faith intra-generational older people and youth forums can be developed to transfer digital literacy and traditional skills between people of different ages and religions (Sandberg 2020, 422). Globally, interfaith groups can help resolve tensions regarding climate change, environmental, health and other United Nations Sustainability Development Goals (SDGs). Multi-faith integrated programming across different sectors can help devise and implement effective, holistic low or no-cost interventions, for instance, water purification tablets (Trotta and Wilkinson 2019, 17). Interfaith initiatives need to

ensure they reach marginalised people, especially Dalit women, who suffer constant gender discrimination.

A public theology approach to religion is beneficial to a community as it provides a political justification of religious education. Another justification is that public theology acts to teach and understand religion from a local political perspective. This is a very useful utility to have for multi-faith work in often poverty-stricken areas, working for people with very limited life chances. Public theology can be defined as multi-faith engagement in public debates, where multi-religious values provide an alternative approach to complex societal issues (Herbst 2020, 30). The concept of public theology is very diverse in its effects, being able to be active in multiple contexts. Theological education using this concept would have a particular focus on recognising community sensitivity for the prevailing local conditions in play during engagement. Using public theology, multi-faith religious students would practice civil religion, coupled with liberal and political theology, effectively the constituents of a public theology practice troika (see Herbst 2020, 30). There must be practical theology, which concentrates not on conceptual ideals, but on the service delivery of community content for the people. Public theological education highlights the importance of a multi-faith approach to partnership development work, for instance, coordinating a response to the COVID-19 global pandemic (Corpuz 2020, e237). There will be theological differences between faiths these need to be openly aired and welcomed. Different religious representatives should support and enrich each other, without one faith standing in opposition to another, preventing community progress. Students trained in a public theology practice troika tradition will be enabled with dialogical skills to obtain societal buy-in to deliver community remits.

The interreligious dialogue aspect of theological education also explains the need for social justice in religious practice (Berling 2020, 8). Some of the people the clergy or their multi-faith equivalents in other religions meet are some of the most marginalised people in their community. This marginalisation may

be due to multiple intersecting inequalities, for example, class due to income, gender and race (Crenshaw 1989, 141; 1991, 1245). These people could be asylum-seekers, disabled, LGBTQIA+, homeless, displaced, elderly, mentally ill, poverty-stricken, sex workers, who need help from interfaith groups (Elf and Kwaku-Odoi 2019, 16). Theological education, practised as a 'sacrament of the stranger' encounter, is particularly beneficial to cope with helpers' feelings of taking a risk (Suna-Koro 2020, 63). Practical theology needs to be rooted in interreligious dialogue, community activities, inequality eradicating, and sociology of justice regardless of a person's religious beliefs (Maheshwaran and Sier 2019, 28). The G20 Interfaith Forum provide further justification of religion's remit to help the most marginalised members of society, for instance, by using multi-faith educational initiatives (Welsh: *Devex*, 19 November 2020).

> By engaging with religious leaders and faith/interfaith actors, G20 leaders, national governments, and their international partners can strengthen the 2020 G20's vision of "global cooperation to forge mutually beneficial solutions, face challenges, and create opportunities for all" (Gill and Marshall 2020, 2)

The social impact of theological education is quite complex. When considering social impact, should the focus be on what work was delivered by the theology graduate organised community group; or has social impact and changed the way the theology student views other religious beliefs; or is the social impact the student has become much more enlightened, much more community transformative, a changed agent. This list is not exhaustive. (Magezi 2019, 114). There are significant benefits in theological education which induce students to become agents of change, also personally transforming the practitioner for multi-faith work. The affinity with practical theology is clearly apparent; a reliance on pragmatism does not mean that the value of education lies in its utility value (Sandberg 2020, 418). In this sense, a social impact of practical theology is a conceptual tool which can be used to resolve a particular problem. This is much more pragmatic than practical theology, being a

philosophical tool with which to critique an alternative approach. Such a use of practical theology would be a negative outcome of social impact, more akin to an abuse of the educational process. Another social impact of religious education is it enables theology students and young adults to identify what their motives are. This is a realisation of the usual social justice issues, which can animate theology learners to want to help marginalised communities and people (Manley-Tannis 2020, 163). Occasionally, a certain type of theological education does not cut through with a particular tutor group. This might indicate a need for pedagogical change so that students are able/motivated to engage with theology. Another social impact of theological education is that whilst internally transforming students, it can also simultaneously be reshaped by the process itself (Sandberg 2020, 419).

CONCLUSIONS

Theology teachers are aware of the importance of faith formation and practice development whilst delivering their calling, or an interfaith equivalent. Religious educators acknowledge they have a dichotomous position of being both a theological learner and teacher at school (Madden 2020, 137). A theological educator requires self-awareness (Palmer 2007, 42) to realise their limitations and/or their positionality, conscious or subconscious, regarding certain religious practices. This theological self-awareness helps in identity formation, openness to different faith perspectives and courageous contemporary communication skills (Mikva 2020, 134). Contemporary in the sense of being able to know when and how to challenge a student, who might be misinterpreting their religion. Courageous in the sense of coming to terms with new religious languages and practices, to transfer knowledge in pluralised, secular and sometimes disrupted settings (*See* also ter Avest 2021, 9). Practical theology, interreligious dialogue and learning in the

community, religious educators are supported in all three by ongoing theological CIPD (Madden 2020, 137).

It has become evident that the widely held intention of developing more interreligious dialogue is not an issue just for theological specialism. Religiously related dialogue is crucial for the critical enabling of pupils, so they have a generic scaffolding by which to learn from lived experiences. Regardless of a pupil's religious beliefs, group work, forward planning, problem-solving, and reflection are essential skills for all stakeholders interested in theological education (Vikdahl and Skeie 2019, 127).

Interreligious studies would help theology teachers consider abstract or philosophical thought, for instance, what it means to be dead (Pollefeyt 2020, 6). Pedagogical approaches could include performative texts, for example, ancient Greek epics, poems and stories. Other faiths also have deeply embedded beliefs and customs when a member of their community dies. There is visual culture, interfaith tutorage must educate religious teachers in the meaning of death, which may be artistically present in monuments and sacred sites (Osewska 2019, 354). Interfaith education will encapsulate various concepts of afterlife: Christianity preaches Heaven and Hell; The Muslim faith believes life is temporary, coupled with a Day of Resurrection; Buddhism has a concept of rebirth, reincarnation, so death isn't the end of their existence; which is quite the reverse of atheism, who see death as the ultimate end of life, full stop (Wheaton, *Marie Curie*, 29 January 2021).

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