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The Future of Theological Education in the Multifaith Environments of the North and South

Roger Nostbakken
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Most North American Christians of my generation were raised in a relatively homogeneous religious environment. The context was one of family stability, with the Church as a part of the life experience and the existence of other religions seen as belonging to different cultures in lands far removed from our own. In my case, as an example, both my aunt and my brother went to West Africa as missionaries to a political, cultural and religious setting wholly alien to our knowledge and experience, out of a sense of call to people of other religions. In those decades before the explosion of the ecumenical movement after Vatican II, even marginal contacts within the wide family of Christianity were tentative at best and freighted with hesitation and suspicion. We existed in an environment of Christian denominations living side-by-side in sometimes friendly, sometimes hostile, competition, hardly speaking to one another and certainly having no thought of dialogue with persons of other faith systems. In point of fact in the rural communities of Western Canada and most of the urban centres as well, other faiths were regarded as curiosities as best.

There were in fact persons of other faith in those communities nearby, sometimes in substantial numbers. The aboriginal peoples were confined largely to reserves and their indigenous religions were not taken seriously. One might try to win them over to Christianity but no thought was given to talking to them about their religious beliefs and practices. Indeed the Anglican and Roman Catholics established schools and missions on the reserves with the specific aim of education in Christian traditions and the intention of bringing these people out of what was seen as the ignorance and bondage of their traditions of spirituality. Many North American Aboriginals have
now some bitter memories of those mission school experiences with the often open hostility to indigenous language, culture and religion.

But there was also another large group of persons not brought up in the traditions of Christianity. These were the Asian immigrants, mostly Chinese, brought in to build the transcontinental railroad extending from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean. Those Chinese immigrants have left settlements in virtually every village, town and city in the Western provinces. Even today there is hardly a village anywhere on the prairies without a Chinese restaurant or grocery store or both. Although gradually integrated into the business communities these Asian immigrants were not seen as part of the religious community and existed almost entirely in alienation from any kinds of conversations among the churches and denominations of Christianity. Curiously, by and large, they were not even seen as subjects of outreach by the Christian churches and their religious traditions were objects of speculation if considered at all. There certainly was no thought of dialogue with them concerning the nature of their religious traditions.

An enormous change of perspective in these matters has taken place in my own lifetime. There is now no large or medium sized city in Canada that does not have its Hindu and/or Sikh Temples, its Islamic Mosques or Jewish Synagogue, its Buddhist groups and new religious movements existing along side of and sometimes in competition with the Christian churches. Not only so but there has sprung up an astonishing variety of contacts among these religious groups involving study groups, visitation to worship meetings, informal exchanges and occasionally deep and bitter conflict over issues of freedom and justice and the right of religious expression. We have in our community, for example, informal Jewish-Christian dialogue, Christian-Islamic dialogue, Hindu-Christian conversations, a new-found respect for indigenous religious observance, and inter-religious conversations of an unstructured character but existing nonetheless. The need therefore to reflect on theological education and training in a multi-faith society has growing relevance in North America as well as in Africa, Asia and Latin America even though the social political and religious contexts are obviously radically different. I suspect that we in North America have much to learn from the experiences of Christians in the East and the South.
It is also apparent that we live in an increasingly interconnected world in which no one of us is far from another. Almost all of our theological institutions in North America have many kinds of international associations through faculty, students and staff. Each year we have international students on our campus; each year some of our students are abroad in contexts different from our own.

The Religious Context of this Generation

Christianity as a world religion is in decline in those parts of the world which for generations have been its traditional centres of power, influence and population. If one notes the statistics gathered each year by the Lutheran World Federation one can track with some accuracy what has been occurring just among Lutherans. Here are some statistics of Lutheran population:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Europe</th>
<th>North America</th>
<th>Africa</th>
<th>Asia</th>
<th>Latin</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1984</td>
<td>50,468,783</td>
<td>8,819,917</td>
<td>3,872,916</td>
<td>3,431,271</td>
<td>1,201,706</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988</td>
<td>39,346,430</td>
<td>8,790,907</td>
<td>4,688,364</td>
<td>4,072,364</td>
<td>1,240,133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>38,777,788</td>
<td>8,643,062</td>
<td>5,616,351</td>
<td>4,601,438</td>
<td>1,246,076</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>38,475,712</td>
<td>8,658,509</td>
<td>5,720,534</td>
<td>4,485,078</td>
<td>1,252,283</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>37,829,209</td>
<td>8,685,509</td>
<td>6,125,809</td>
<td>4,382,550</td>
<td>1,177,245</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>37,622,275</td>
<td>8,654,933</td>
<td>6,235,575</td>
<td>4,558,520</td>
<td>1,328,189</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These are interesting figures. They demonstrate that for Lutherans at least we are in decline in Europe by significant numbers, virtually static in North America and Latin America but showing dramatic increase in Africa and Asia with the greatest growth taking place in Africa. ¹ Here the Lutheran population has almost doubled in the last 10 years. If one takes statistics for Christianity as a global religion the figures are remarkably similar. Christianity is increasing most rapidly in the so-called less developed countries by comparison with 90 years ago. For example the growth of Christianity was as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Christian Population in North/Western World</th>
<th>Christian Population in Third World</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In 1900</td>
<td>470,991,000</td>
<td>in North/Western World</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>87,000,000</td>
<td>in Third World</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In 1985</td>
<td>557,678,000</td>
<td>in North/Western World</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>685,610,000</td>
<td>in Third World</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Or put another way there were:
The growth of Christianity in the two-thirds world has been dramatic.

What the figures show is that Christianity has shifted dramatically in this century towards the South and East from the West and the North. In the LWF for instance both the President and the General Secretary are now from the Southern hemisphere. As examples of language distributions there are now about 207,000,000 Spanish speaking Christians, 196,000,000 English speaking, 85,000,000 German speaking. However, Christianity remains by far the world’s dominant religion in terms of numbers. It has, in fact, about twice as many adherents as the next largest religious group. According to 1985 statistics there were in the world the following numbers of adherents to religious groups projected to the year 2000:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religious Group</th>
<th>1985</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>2000</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>1,684,544,000</td>
<td>32.4</td>
<td>2,019,921,366</td>
<td>32.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muslim</td>
<td>817,065,219</td>
<td>17.1</td>
<td>1,200,653,040</td>
<td>19.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hindu</td>
<td>677,564,600</td>
<td>13.5</td>
<td>859,252,260</td>
<td>13.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buddhist</td>
<td>295,570,780</td>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>359,092,100</td>
<td>5.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese folk</td>
<td>187,994,026</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>158,470,664</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jews</td>
<td>17,838,060</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>20,173,560</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sikhs</td>
<td>16,149,890</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>23,831,700</td>
<td>0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tribal Relig.</td>
<td>91,130,380</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>100,535,850</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>World Pop.</td>
<td>4,781,123,975</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>6,259,642,000</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is apparent that Christianity is hardly in decline. Only Western and Northern theologians speak of the post-Christian era because of the decline in those areas. In reality Christianity exercises more power and influence in more countries and societies than has ever been the case in human history. The question is not so much how will Christianity survive but rather how will Christian churches now understand their mission and what shall be the criteria for determining how we enter into conversation with other world religions and with
that growing number who espouse no religion. According to
the World Christian Encyclopedia, "There are today Chris-
tians and organized Christians in every inhabited country on
dearth. The Church is therefore now, for the first time in its
history (1985) ecumenical in the literal meaning of the word:
its boundaries are co-extensive with the oikumene, the whole
inhabited world."  

But there are other realities of which we need to take ac-
count as well if we are to understand our world religious con-
text. For example, the number of atheists and non-religious
shows a virtually static and small percentage of world popula-
tion. The following figures are interesting:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Atheists</th>
<th>Non Religious</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1900</td>
<td>225,620</td>
<td>2,923,330</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1975</td>
<td>179,595,100</td>
<td>626,017,979</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td>210,643,540</td>
<td>805,784,853</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>262,447,550</td>
<td>1,071,888,370</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Christianity as a percentage of world population has re-
mained relatively constant in this century. Islam on the other
hand has grown from 12% of world population in 1900 to a
projected 19.2% in 2000. Hinduism remains about the same
and Buddhism shows a steady decline.

Furthermore, an increasing complication of any interfaith
dialogue rises from the complexity of Christian denominational
ism itself. One of the consequences of the mission work of
the Western and Northern denominations has been a massive
proliferation of non-white indigenous Christian denominations
in the third world. In 1900 there were 1,900 Christian de-
nominations. By 1970, there were 18,160 with 19,400 in 1975,
20,780 in 1980 and 22,190 by 1985. This has, of course, pro-
duced competition, rivalries and clashes among denominations
and confusion for the non-Christian. The remarkable success
and growth of the ecumenical movement mitigates this to some
extent. Nonetheless the number of new denominations being
formed each year vastly outnumbers the councils, fellowships
and transdenominational unions that have marked the past
several decades of Christian denominational experience.

A further complication arises from another phenomenon
and that is the appearance of what David Kaplan in The At-
lantic Monthly has called "the coming Anarchy" issuing from
the fragmentation of old political boundaries, the renewal of ethnic and tribal rivalries, the power of new regionalism, and the challenge to the social fabric of the planet as a result of scarcity, crime, overpopulation, tribalism and the growing imbalance of wealth and poverty in the world.6

One may on the one hand speak of an emerging global culture created by communication and information technologies, capital flow, and consumer product distribution networks world wide. Stock markets around the world are in constant contact, communication technologies have shrunk our world, and there is a growing sense of ecological and political interdependence. There is in one sense a “homogenized, globally shared reality that seems poised to become a single world culture”.7

But one may also speak of what has been called a “Lebanonization of the world in which small cultural communities assert their autonomy from—and sometimes in spite of—larger social units”.8 This sort of phenomenon with which we are familiar in all parts of the world, including regionalization and separation movements in Canada, raises questions about the kind of climate within which religious dialogues can take place.

Muslims and Christians who once lived in peace and harmony in the former Yugoslavia are now in bitter conflict. Protestant and Catholic remain locked in battle in Northern Ireland. The world in which we carry on the mission of the Church, the evangelization and re-evangelization of the world, is enormously complex. We are inextricably interrelated but often remain suspicious and mistrustful of our neighbours. Nonetheless, there is no alternative now—given our interrelatedness—to talking to one another with openness, honesty and persistence. It is necessary we carry forward the process already begun. Interfaith dialogue is in many respects a recent phenomenon. Theological education in a multifaith context is a new and virtually untried experience in North America. It has always existed in Asia and Africa in particular where Christianity has been a minority religion. Nonetheless, some possibilities of cooperation exist and to these we will now begin to turn.
The Globalization of Theological Education in North America

In 1986 the Association of Theological Schools in North America proposed that the 1990s be declared a decade of globalization. This arose from the realization of the truly global context of the Church. In the previous pages we have documented somewhat the extent of the Church’s global reality and its growing interface with other world religions. As Mark Heim noted in an article entitled “Mapping Globalization for Theological Education”, “… we face the fact the Church itself is spread like salt throughout our world and that most of its members belong to the majority races and cultures of Asia, Africa, Latin America. Adequate theological education requires us to recognize this reality and reflect it in our teaching and ministry.”

In the same article Heim notes several impulses towards the globalization of theological education. First the early church itself was concerned for the entire world known to the first Christians. This included parts of Asia, Africa and Europe. Secondly, the modern mission movement in spite of its colonialism and often patronizing approaches was responsible for the establishment of many if not most of the so-called younger churches in Asia and Africa. Thirdly, the ecumenical movement, which is largely an offspring of the mission movement, became the first forum in which a global consciousness of the Church began to be experienced. In seeking unity among the world’s churches the ecumenical movement has fostered contacts which have in some cases broadened to include other religions. Fourthly, the proliferation of departments of religion at secular universities has precipitated much interchange of religious perspectives at least in academic circles in North America. “World religions” is increasingly identified as a compulsory course of studies even at most North American seminaries. Fifthly, the “struggle against racial, economic injustice and political oppression or discrimination” has united people of many faiths and provided a basis of solidarity for those previously without apparent common interest. Sixthly, the growth of the so-called information age and its explosion of technology gives promise of linking all parts of the globe in a matter of seconds. When my aunt went as a missionary to West Africa
in 1937 we waited months to hear from her and during the war did not hear at all. Now I can speak to my friend Songsaré in Cameroun by phone if I wish. The ease of travel, the mixed blessing of television and satellite link ups, bring most of the world into our living rooms. So globalization is a realized phenomenon. The question is what goals do we set for ourselves in theological education, for example, as part of this process of globalization? It is probably true that the Northern and Western countries are the most culturally, racially and ethnically diverse countries in the world. It may well be that there is not the same desire in parts of Asia and Africa for example to pursue the goals of globalization we are setting for ourselves. Perhaps in Asia and Africa there may even be a need to resist globalizing trends in order to affirm and maintain distinctive cultural, racial and religious identities. As Mark Heim has noted, “We need to be clear that the agenda of globalization that we are discussing is a very specifically Western one, addressing the contexts of theological schools in North America and their needs to attend to the whole church and the whole world.”

Kosaku Koyama in a recent article entitled “Theological Education: Its Unities & Diversities” examines the global reach of Western theology and raises questions about the adequacy for Asia and Africa of the Western theological paradigms. He speaks of the uniformity of a Western educational “prestige system” which shrouds degrees with mystique and prestige and raises questions about the adequacy for Asia and Africa of a system which does not reflect the spiritual, religious and cultural heritage of its own context.

A Thai student, whether in Bangkok or Chicago, tries with heroic effort to understand the philosophical world of Paul Tillich. A Nigerian student seeks to comprehend Alfred North Whitehead. A Beijing woman studies American feminist theology....The “academic policy committees” of theological schools hardly discuss what is accomplished by submitting students to this one-way traffic system of mental torture...It is like pulling out a healthy set of teeth and replacing them with false teeth.

When we talk therefore about developing theological education in multifaith contexts of the north and south we need to recognize that both perceptions and needs may be very different depending on the contexts. Following the Conference on Theological Education in Southeast Asia held in Bangkok in
1956 at least two fundamental reactions to the dominance of Western theology should be noted.

First there are theologians in Asia, Africa and Latin America who feel theological education in those contexts must of necessity reject Western theological formulations. There is no reason why the experience of Western caucasian humanity should become the standard of theological expression. In many respects some of the tribal cultures of Africa may well be closer to the world of the Bible than Western experience.

On the other hand, while Western (or for that matter any other) formulations are not universal there is global significance in most and in any case theological education must avoid exclusivity. Furthermore, it is to be recognized that there is an intercultural nature to theology which while recognizing the past dominance of Western and Northern theology calls for a methodology of mutuality between East and West, North and South. Such a methodology is dialogical. “Today”, Koyama says, “we know this planet earth is one ark with all humanity aboard. How can we make a viable planetary community of humanity without knowing and appreciating the differing cultures and religions of the peoples?”

The globalization concern of the ATS in North America is a preoccupation of Western theological education. Nonetheless, because of the pervasiveness of Western theology globalization has relevance outside the West if only to recognize in Asia, Africa and Latin America the indigenization of theology. We live in a world of what has been called “agitated realities” in which the unities and diversities of theology are not settled formulae but form the context of theological education today.

Jürgen Moltmann in a recent article reflects also on the looming prospects of “Christianity in the third millennium” and identifies four “investments and liabilities” Christianity takes into the next millennium.

1. The blessing of the ecumenical movement and the curse of the new confessionalism and new nationalism balkanizing Europe.
2. The modernism of Christianity and its new fundamentalism and the consequent problematics arising.
3. The great expansion of Christianity in Africa and Asia and the persisting Eurocentrism of the traditional churches.
4. The rising power of other world religions threatening to
make Christianity once again a marginal religion and the corresponding challenge to interreligious dialogue.

Possibilities of Cooperation

Given the realities which we have addressed and given the increasingly complex demands of theological education, what realistically are areas of cooperation North and South? There are in the first place some necessary changes which need to take place in theological curricula. Many North American seminaries are now in the process of curriculum reviews, trying to assess and respond to what will need to be taught and what will be the nature and form of preparation for ministry in the third millennium of the Christian Church’s existence.

1. Curricular change

Every theological student needs to have some sense of the global culture and the global nature of the Church. This is necessary in order to transcend the tendencies towards what has been called an ethnocentric neo-confessionalism. People in congregations understand the Church in terms of their experience and must have symbols and languages meaningful to that experience in order for the Church to be realistically a part of their lives. At the same time it is necessary for the Church’s universality to be understood as transcending and encompassing confessional and regional identities. The situation in Central Europe is, for example, perhaps anticipatory of what can happen where one encounters an explosive mixture of Orthodox Serbs, Catholic Croats, Christian Armenians, Muslim Azarbaijanis, Orthodox Romanians, Catholic Poles, Protestant and Lutheran Germans, etc. The burgeoning of denominations in North America and in parts of Africa and Asia is further example of the need for global understanding.

2. Inter cultural experience

Most North American and European seminaries have students from Asia, Africa and Latin America on their campuses. Inter-seminary exchanges have normally been a matter of faculty from the North and West going to the Asian and African seminaries to bring our models of theological education, and of African and Asian students coming to our seminaries to learn
in our traditional eurocentric models. Perhaps the time has come to reverse this trend—to send increasing numbers of our students for a year or more to a two-thirds world institution and import some of those indigenous professors to our schools and seminaries. Unless we do something of this kind we will continue to exist in isolation from any profound or meaningful understanding of one another’s cultures and traditions.

3. The twinning of theological institutions

My seminary is at the present time seeking the possibility of a specific fraternal relationship with three overseas seminar-ies or Bible schools, one in Hong Kong, one in Germany, and one in Ethiopia. The impetus for this has risen from particular contacts by our seminary with the Chinese constituency in Canada, with the German community, and through pastors from Ethiopia studying at our seminary. As we explore these relationships we need to discover what form they should take. What is most helpful? At what stage should non-North American students come to us? Given the existence of some excellent theological schools in Asia and Africa, for example, is there really any reason for undergraduate students to come to our schools or should this be only at the graduate level?

Further, given the high costs of travel and accommodation, we need to address the most helpful way of assisting students who have minimal resources to have opportunity for such study.

4. Cooperation between departments of religion and theological seminaries

In North America the typical pattern is for departments of religion at universities to be distinctly separate from theological schools which may exist on the same campus. Departments of religion function as non-confessional programs in the objective study of religion as phenomena while theological schools are seen as confessional, denominational and professional schools having specific but more limited objectives than the departments of religion. The relation of Christianity to other religions tends not to be examined in theological schools in North America. There needs to be a specific effort made to develop a “simple religious literacy” of other religions at the same level as introductory courses in theology. Failure to
do this will mean continuing isolation in the global context of religious experience.\textsuperscript{19}

5. The development of specific programs

Given the newness of interfaith dialogues and the preliminary nature of intercultural explorations in North America we are only beginning to develop programs. Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota, has a new Global Mission Education Program focussing on Islamic studies which could become a model for the future. By concentrating on a particular world religion this program allows for both undergraduate and graduate work in Islamic Studies. A cross-cultural exchange program at the same seminary offers an experience in Zimbabwe in connection with the University of Zimbabwe and the United Theological College, Harare. Such programs are not yet common but they do offer promise.

6. The continuing globalization program at ATS

The Association of Theological Schools’ globalization program represents a concerted attempt by North American seminaries to address the challenge of theological education in a multifaith context. When this program was launched in 1986 an analysis was done of the patterns of student and faculty exchange, particularly of students coming to North America from abroad. At that time the overwhelming number came from Asia.\textsuperscript{20} The next largest number came from Africa and Europe with surprisingly few from Latin America. Of the Lutheran schools the largest number came to Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago and it was obvious that theological seminaries other than Lutheran drew the largest numbers. No pattern of enrollment emerged and the schools represented a spectrum from conservative to liberal. Of those overseas students at North American schools 50\% were from Asia, 18\% from Africa, 11\% from Europe, 9\% from the Caribbean, 8\% from Latin America, 4\% from Australia.
Theological Education

Designation of Countries of Non-Resident Theological Students by First-Third World Classification

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>First World (Western)</th>
<th>Second World (Eastern Block)</th>
<th>Third World Eastern/Developing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>U. Kingdom 62</td>
<td>Poland 16</td>
<td>Korea 217</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australia 39</td>
<td>Hungary 5</td>
<td>Nigeria 66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany 27</td>
<td>Romania 5</td>
<td>India 66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Switzerland 12</td>
<td>Czech. 4</td>
<td>Japan 65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italy 9</td>
<td>Total 30</td>
<td>Hong Kong 52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N. Zealand 8</td>
<td></td>
<td>Brazil 42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total 157</td>
<td></td>
<td>Taiwan 32</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In 1986 it was obvious the student and faculty exchanges were concerned primarily with cross-cultural rather than inter-faith exchanges. By 1993 it was apparent the concept of globalization had broadened to include attention to other world religions. Some major barriers also became apparent, perhaps
largest among them the financial. In a time of budget limitations and institutional retrenchments it is not easy to expand programs. Looking ahead, however, some specific goals can be identified as well as some specific problems.

GOALS
1. Recognition that the global reality will shape the context for the mission and ministry of the school. The mission statement will reflect the school’s intention to prepare persons for this context.
2. The curriculum will embody the global context of theological education. Students will be required to become competent in cross-cultural understandings through exchange programs in non western cultures.
3. The worship life of the community will incorporate liturgies, prayers and hymns from other cultures.
4. Faculty will be expected to have cross-cultural experience and show a commitment to global openness in their commitment of time and resources.
5. Administrative leadership will show sensitivity to and inclusion of the two-thirds world and seek linkages with overseas schools.
6. The budget of the school will show some commitment to global experience and seek to provide resources for students and faculty to participate in exchange programs.

PROBLEMS
1. North American seminaries remain dominated by North American and European cultural and religious experience. Few faculty have had experience in the two-thirds world cultures.
2. Language is limited usually to English or if a second language it is North European rather than Spanish, Portuguese, Asian or African. This seriously limits understanding other cultures.
3. The use of scholars from Asia, Africa and Latin America is important but a commitment needs to be made to building the resources of the two-thirds world institutions, especially in graduate programs.
4. Curricular revision cannot simply mean adding on cross-cultural and global courses. Traditional courses need to be
developed from cross-cultural and interfaith perspectives.

5. Exchange programs are expensive and there is significant culture shock especially for other students coming to North America. There is also a problem sometimes with regard to transfer of credits from one institute to another.

6. Some North American seminaries’ constituencies are limited by provincialism of outlook. There is growing resistance to immigration in some parts of North America and others are ideologically opposed to the importation of other cultural and religious perspectives.

7. Finances. This is a serious problem for most North American seminaries. In times of retrenchment it is problematic to think globally.

8. Theological problems exist with regard to commitment to interfaith dialogue. This remains a low priority for many, and for others a kind of Christian triumphalism prohibits serious interfaith dialogue.

Globalization is a North American concept viewed with some suspicion in the two-thirds world. Nonetheless it does represent a serious attempt by North Americans to broaden their understanding and open themselves to a common commitment to expand our understanding of both the nature and mission of the church.

Conclusion

Andrew Chiu in an article entitled “Ministry and Theological Education in Dialogue” talked about the necessity of professional theologians learning to listen.21 Theologians, as he points out, are traditionally “trained to become experienced speakers... but you will not find a course in learning how to listen... in any of our school catalogues.”22 Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his Life Together also spoke of the “ministry of listening”.23

Christians [he says] especially ministers so often think they must always contribute something when they are in the company of others, that is the one service they have to render. They forget that listening can be a greater service than speaking....But Christians have forgotten that the ministry of listening has been committed to them by Him who is Himself the great listener....24

Simon Maimela in a very challenging lecture given at a conference on religious pluralism some years ago also spoke of the problem of not listening.
to conclude that there is no salvation in the African traditional religion simply because the focus is not on individual sin and anxiety about personal salvation is to attempt to prescribe what salvation should be rather than to listen to what Africans say on this. If one listened, one might learn not to prescribe something for which an African has never felt any need—life hereafter (emphasis mine).

Those of us in North America remain in the position of needing to listen. We need to listen to sisters and brothers who have all their lives and through all their Christian history lived in a multifaith context. We need to listen to our brothers and sisters from other religious traditions who are moving in increasing numbers into our own previously relatively homogeneous cultures.

Only after we have listened can we enter into a meaningful dialogue. If we are genuinely committed to the unique place of Christianity among the religions of the world and if we are truly convinced that as Carl Braaten has said, “Somehow Christ is the place where the contradiction between God and humanity gets resolved”, then we need not be defensive when the truth claim of Christianity and the truth claims of other religions confront one another on the open market of ideas.

We need one another as we find ourselves in the variety of multifaith contexts in the world. We need to cooperate in developing our resources in this context. In the 1980s the late Bishop Josiah Kibira spoke of the need for “re-evangelization” of the northern and western countries. Perhaps now we are at the very least able to see the necessity of working together as we seek to carry forth the mission of the Gospel in this world of many faiths.

Notes

3. Ibid. 6.
4. Ibid. 3.
5. Ibid. 6.
8. Ibid. 115.
10 Ibid. 10.
11 Ibid. 12.
13 Ibid. 97.
14 Ibid. 93.
15 Ibid. 94–95.
16 Ibid. 94.
18 Ibid. 79.
19 Schreiter, “Christian Theology,” 120.
22 Ibid. 99.
24 Ibid. 97, 98.