

## **Theological Education in a Context where the Church Lost its Body**

According to the famous World Value Survey initiated by Professor Ronald Inglehart, Scandinavia is the area in the world with the most developed post-materialistic values. That is, the countries of Scandinavia score highest in the world regarding both ‘secular-rational values’ and, what they call, ‘self-expression values’ which emphasises subjective well-being; and top-of-the-class is Sweden.<sup>1</sup> Thus, the challenge for Theological Educators in Scandinavia is to be pioneers in conducting spiritual formation in a secular and individualistic culture.

### **The Church in a post-materialistic Culture**

The secular and individualistic culture in Scandinavia has generated a church that lost its body. With the metaphor ‘body’ I emphasise (a) that the Christian life concerns the whole of life, not just a spiritual dimension, and (b) that Christianity concerns life together in the Community of God where different members share their life with each other in one body. Of course, the baptist (with small ‘b’, as James McClendon used to say<sup>2</sup>) and free-church tradition has a mixed relationship with the modern world. Individualism and secularism are partly the result of the Free Church struggle with State Churches. It is a good thing that the Church is now separated from the power of the State and that church membership depends on personal conviction and not decisions made by the king or parliament (this fully happened in Sweden in 2000; in Denmark – this very secularised country – there is still a State Church).

The problem, however, is that these developments created a split that threatens the baptist vision of a congregation that is an embodiment of the future kingdom in this present world. Instead of a conflict between the Kingdom of God and the present order, secularism divided the one world into two different departments. The State was made King over economics, social institutions, politics and science. Jesus was reduced to be a King of another, religious and spiritual sphere, mostly understood as a private and inner realm. This is well known, and we know the effect. The relationship between Church and State/Society was no longer seen as a conflict between two economies, two sociologies or two types of political arrangement but

---

<sup>1</sup> The World Values Survey (WVS) is a series of intercultural studies on the basis of interviews with representative population samples from some 60 countries conducted in four major waves 1981-84, 1990-1993, 1995-1997 and 1999-2000. For information and material, see [www.worldvaluessurvey.com](http://www.worldvaluessurvey.com).

<sup>2</sup> *Systematic Theology: Ethics. Volume One*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., rev. and enl. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 19.

as a peaceful division between two areas where a huge part of the world belonged to the realm of the State.

A church that is something other than economics, sociology or politics is a fellowship of people who deal with spiritual matters. ‘Spiritual’ becomes something different from the bodily things which the State takes care of and so the Church has little to say about life in the body and about the concrete relationships that we have with each other in society. This is the first major problem for theology in our context. In a secular culture, theology is no longer understood as a holistic interpretation of life. Most parts of life are constructed within a secular, not Christian, frame of mind.<sup>3</sup>

The second aspect of the post-materialistic values which Ingelhard emphasises is subjective well-being and self-expression. The individual understands his or her life as a task for which he or she must take full responsibility. The person is no longer primarily part of a collective (the nation, a family or a social group); nor will he or she submit to absolute truth, a moral code or external authorities. The individual must choose his or her own destiny to gain maximum satisfaction, meaning and well-being.

This implies a very fragmented world where people are caught up in hectic movements between different locations. You live in one place, often as a small nuclear family, or even as a single person, and from that place you go to different locations for work and study. And when the evening or weekend comes you go to other places for various spare-time activities. For most Scandinavian families it is a struggle to have even one common meal together as a family. In this fragmented life, where all run between home, work and spare-times activities, it is impossible to have a holistic understanding of life. There is only one thing that is constant in all these locations where you meet different people, are supposed to play different roles and do different things – and that is yourself. So instead of understanding life from a religious or ideological point of view, you must see life from a personal perspective. It becomes a personal task to make

---

<sup>3</sup> Ever since the publication of John Milbank’s book, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), I have been challenged by what later became called ‘the Radical Orthodoxy’ and the critique of secular reason. See my article ‘Redemption without Actuality: A Critical Interrelation between Eberhard Jüngel’s and John Milbank’s Ontological Endeavours’, *Modern Theology*, 14:4, 1998, pp. 505-522. However, I suspect a tendency toward a new Christendom – a baptist theology must always be done from the margins. Compare my critical discussion of Nancey Murphy’s project in ‘Is Ethics Also Among the Sciences? An Evaluation of Nancey Murphy and George Ellis’s Theological Proposals’, *The Conrad Grebel Review* 19:1, 2001, pp. 25-37.

something important and beautiful of one's own individual life.<sup>4</sup> That's all you can aim for in a post-materialistic culture. However, individualism is not a claim that we are more egoistic today. The emphasis on individuality is intimately tied to the notion of individual rights and liberties. This implies respect and tolerance for other individuals and a wish that every person shall have the same opportunity for a good life as you have yourself. Our big problem is not egoism but, rather, our failure to construct a common life in Christ.

A fragmented life is the second major problem for Theology of the Church. In the hectic life of a normal Scandinavian family there is simply no time left and no strength for a life in common. Most churches thus accept that we must lose our body; that is our baptist identity as a communion in one body. Instead many Churches choose two different alternatives:

1. **The retreat:** The task of the Church is to offer religious rites and practices that help people to manage their lives. One weekend of retreat, ten minutes of meditation, therapeutic gatherings or an evening mass in the Church, offer a step back from the world in order to have the strength to continue normal life both in private and in public. That is the traditional Christendom. The Church is seen as something you attend once in a while when you make a retreat from normal life with the purpose of enriching normal life.
2. **Spare-time activities.** Those that try to find a place for the Church in a post-materialistic culture have to conclude that, since the Church is not a home or a working-place, it must be located in the spare-time section as a kind of 'club' to go to when we are free from work and family. We go there once or twice a week to experience activities for children and youth, to enjoy musical events or social fellowship or even to have great religious experiences. This is the worst sort of free-church life: a church that has been reduced to a spare-time club for those interested in religious activities.

---

<sup>4</sup> Of course, such an individual perspective is as ideological as any religious interpretation ever was. The difference is that we usually do not acknowledge the ideological depth of the liberal culture that we are part of. For a critic of this liberal ideology, see especially the works of Stanley Hauerwas.

## Why Theological Education has contributed to this Development

Theological Education has contributed to the development of a church without a body. Of course, this is a simplistic charge. Reality is much more complicated. Yet, in several ways, theological training and spiritual formation has been carried out in a manner that has reinforced rather than questioned a secular and individualistic culture.

### **1 *No resistance to individualism***

First, the obvious fact: theological institutions have only been educating individuals. It is the individual who chooses theological education, becomes enlightened in school and is given the mission to go back to 'reality' in order to change old local congregations. This limitation has several effects

- (a) The Church has lost the responsibility to educate its own leaders. Nowadays most churches look to institutions to train leaders, forgetting their own responsibility to make disciples.
- (b) The academy is part of an education system that easily creates a split between progressive individuals (and theologians) and traditional congregations. As educators noticed long ago, it takes extensive time and efforts to develop a leader for a company if the company itself is not part of the leader's development. Either it leads to conflicts in the company or the bright fellow will leave for a better job (or, most likely, both will happen). That is, if theological institutions do not encourage growth in congregations but just in individuals, they are wasting their time.
- (c) The reason that we can defend our strategy is that (perhaps against our own intentions) we reinforce the traditional division between ministers and lay people in our Baptist context. We strive to educate ministers that will become *the* important resource for renewal of the Church. In our perception it is the well-educated minister that has the mission to revive the congregation.

Secondly, our education focuses on training individual virtues. There are many good things in this. The Church needs creative and bright individuals. Yet, we fail to train the most important virtues, such as 'how to seek a common understanding of the will of God in a specific situation'. The important virtue in the Kingdom of God is not what I believe, but what *we* believe; not what my agenda is, but what *we* believe God wants our

congregation to do; and so forth. So our adoption of normal theological education means that we are losing some of the fundamental practices that have been central for the constructing and upholding of community in the Free-Church tradition.

## **2 No power of influence against secularisation**

The academy has also adapted itself to a life in a secular and fragmented society. It has, firstly, separated the theological subjects from each other: systematic theology is not exegesis; ethics is not church history; practical theology is not exegesis. But most importantly, the modern paradigm for the university has also separated theology from all other subjects in the academy. Thus, systematic theology is not economics, sociology or political studies. But what happens to this subject when it is neither biblical studies nor dealing with social relations, sex, power and money? Sadly, it often becomes an intellectual presentation of the Christian doctrines, sometimes very intellectually exciting but hardly affecting anything in 'real life'.

In contrast to the secular paradigm, theology needs to regain the conviction that to speak of Christ as King is to speak of a divine power that is different from the powers of the world. Thus, we cannot speak about the nature of God and Christ without understanding politics differently and thus try to find new ways to make decisions in the community of God's people. To teach ecclesiology is to speak about a God that challenges us to embody another economy and sociology where money, power and sexual relations are constructed in a peaceful and righteous manner. As exegeses demonstrates: the very first Christian community had to make a redistribution of their possessions and create a new kind of joyful sharing of the fellowship around the table.<sup>5</sup>

Of course, there is one subject where theologians deal with politics, economies and social realities and that is ethics. But in this subject we all too often forget the biblical and systematic understanding of faith and, instead, use secular concepts such as tolerance, democracy and human

---

<sup>5</sup> For some attempts of another interpretation of systematic theology, see John Milbank's proposal 'Theology as a Social Science', *ibid*, pp. 380-438, and Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C Bass, eds., *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002) and exemplified in Volf's book *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005). I have recently published an attempted to write a history of Moral Theology from the perspective of the practices which have been upholding the Christian vision in different periods of church history; see *Kristen moralhistoria: Sökan det efter det goda livet* (Örebro: Libris, 2006).

rights. This liberal culture has a lot of good things to teach us, but it cannot provide the important tools for a Christian interpretation of the world.

Thus, we have developed a theological education that fails to teach theological students the ability for a Christian reading of the whole of life. Our education is caught within a system that makes life fragmented. Theologians are left with a theological section dealing with spiritual dimensions (a retreat from real science) or technical knowledge concerning how to develop activities in 'spare-time' churches. One example of this is to reduce the subject 'Spiritual Formation' to the development of the inner life of individual leaders instead of seeking to construct the 'Life in Common' that God intends for those belonging to the Kingdom.

## Some Suggestions for another Strategy

In the year 2000 we had the opportunity to start a new theological education in Malmö and Copenhagen in co-operation with Örebro Theological Seminary (situated in the centre of Sweden). Malmö, in the far south of Sweden, and Copenhagen were, that summer, connected to each other by a twenty-kilometre long bridge over the sea. This was the context for creating a new type of theological education: a new Scandinavian area full of confidence in the future and one of the most secular areas in the world.<sup>6</sup>

What resulted was the Scandinavian Academy of Leadership and Theology (SALT). It has since been enlarged with the inclusion of the Baptist Seminary of Oslo, Norway. I have been co-ordinator of this network of institutions since then. So this is the context for this article: how to create theological education in this context that can give spiritual training for leaders in the Scandinavian churches?

1. In SALT we have tried to develop a church-based education; that is, every student has two places of education (the academy and the local church) and two personal mentors, one in the academy and one in the church. That means that, in order to accept a student, we require that they are connected to a local church that accepts being a place for training and being part of that educational process. We are still struggling to develop many more tools in order to reach a maximum

---

<sup>6</sup> There are signs that we are at the beginning of change. Recent studies among youth in Sweden signals a resacralisation in the younger generations. See the sociologist Magnus Hagevi's works (summarised in 'Sekulariseringens slut?', *Sociologisk forskning* 4:2005, pp. 35-42). If Hagevi is right, an adaption to secular reason is even more disastrous for theological training in the future.

interaction between academy and congregation (technical developments help us in this area).

2. Holistic spiritual training requires that the student doesn't just discuss and experience life within the church. We need students who serve people in all different situations in society. Theology must be a reflection of the congregations' mission in the world, especially to the least ones. What a tremendous effect it has on a course in systematic theology when there are students working with alcoholics, youth or immigrants. That helps the theological teacher to remember what the important questions are for those who want to believe in God in today's Scandinavia.
3. We need to develop a more integrated curriculum. The most difficult thing for a theological student is to put everything together in a new and more fruitful synthesis of faith and life. But in this task our schools often give them very little help. We give students pieces of information divided into different subjects and then ask them to put everything together by themselves in a new synthesis. We must change this! In SALT we have taken some small steps. We often use problem solving learning or, at least, teach with a reflection on the practices of Church Life and Mission. Secondly, we have a process of integration running throughout where the students must reflect on their developments as leaders and theologians. And we have begun a test in every semester where the students are examined on whether they can apply the knowledge they have acquired from different courses to one concrete problem.
4. Finally, we need to ask what are the common practices we need to uphold in our Theological Education if we want to have good spiritual formation? 'Practices' is a popular word made famous especially by Alasdair MacIntyre.<sup>7</sup> And it is very useful since it reminds us that the most important formation of our life happens by those practices we have in common in order to reach those things we aim for within a specific community. I have been challenged by reading Dietrich Bonhoeffer over the years. In 1935 he was called by the Confessional Church to start one of their new institutions for Ministerial Training in Finkenwalde. In order to accept this position, he required that he be allowed to start a community in the midst of the training centre. In this experiment, which was allowed for two years before the Nazis closed the centre,

---

<sup>7</sup> See MacIntyre's now classical definition of practices in *After Virtues: A Study of Moral Theory* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1984), p. 175.

Bonhoeffer created a context for theological education centred around the practices of a life in common. Among the common practices can be mentioned: (a) Confession to each other before celebration of the Lord's Supper, (b) daily prayer, (c) service to church and society, (d) meditations in private and in fellowship, (e) never speaking of a brother not present in the fellowship and (f) celebrations around the meal, the piano or just playing ('a Lutheran monastery').<sup>8</sup> I'm not sure that these are the most important practices we need to uphold, and probably our challenges are not the same all over Europe. But all institutions should ask themselves which practices they need to uphold in their spiritual formation. In Scandinavia our challenge is primarily to create a context where we develop practices that counter our tendency to interpret even Christianity in a secular and individualistic manner; that is, practices that help us to create a life together in one body.

**Dr Roland Spjuth** is the Coordinator for the network of the Scandinavian Academy for Leadership and Theology

---

<sup>8</sup> For a vivid description of this period in Bonhoeffer's life, see Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography* (London: Collins, 1970), pp. 314-491, and Bonhoeffer's own reflections in *Life Together* (*Works: Vol. V*, Augsburg Fortress, 1995).