

Orthodox theological education: Some historical perspectives

“Let your light shine forth: Orthodox Theological Education in the modern world”

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The purpose of this paper is not to provide a historical survey of theological education in the Orthodox tradition, but to have a modest look at some of the more explicit ideas and some of the less explicit assumptions that have guided theological education in the Eastern tradition in general. The recent doctrinal agreement on Christology and the joint statements of the official theological commission between the Eastern Orthodox and the Oriental Orthodox Churches attesting to our one Orthodox Apostolic faith and calling for an immediate restoration of eucharistic communion are of quite unusual ecumenical significance. The Churches of the Eastern/Oriental Tradition, however separated they are by historical, cultural and geographical settings, however distinct they are from the other in liturgical-spiritual identity, have rediscovered that they hold the same Apostolic faith and the same theological-spiritual ethos in spite of 1500 years of separation. Against the relentless pressures of history we have continued to drink from the same sources and sustained our common vision of the Kingdom of God.

Perhaps we need to re-emphasize these common sources, because we have no other common ground, historically speaking, for a coherent picture of Orthodox theological education in the various local churches. The fifth century saw the sad divisions in the one Church of Christ. With these divisions, a highly dynamic period of theological and liturgical creativity was concluded to a great extent. The subsequent growth of Islam altered the socio-political and religious configuration of the territories where Christian faith had flourished. It further stunted creativity in several areas of Christian thinking. Of course, there were separate developments like the remarkable blossoming of theological, liturgical and missionary activity in the post-Chalcedonian Byzantine tradition or in the East Syrian tradition in the Persian empire. The fruits of these developments could not be shared among the churches because the Christian communities in the East bore the deep marks of division in their polemics and preoccupations. It was a rare occurrence that the writings of a "Nestorian" bishop of Nineveh, St. Isaac the Syrian (7th century) crossed over the doctrinal borders and got widely accepted in the Byzantine tradition. We missed a lot of such mutually enriching experiences in our separated existence. It should be remembered that it was the Eastern Church in general which had to carry the burden of early divisions and bear the negative impacts unlike the western church which found favorable socio-political conditions to

maintain its internal unity though at times at the expense of an authentically Christian sense of ecclesiastical authority. Without indulging in an unfruitful nostalgia for the lost occasions, we should gratefully acknowledge that our churches are now being led by the Holy Spirit of God to an awesome sense of our common life in the one Body of Christ. Orthodox theological education at all levels has the primary task of nurturing this common life for a creatively faithful witness to Jesus Christ crucified and risen.

Reviewing theological education in a historical perspective ineluctably raises the questions: What is theology? Who is a theologian? The Eastern tradition took up very early these key questions as decisive for the understanding of Christian faith and education. For example, in the brilliant anti-Eunomian writings of the Cappadocian Fathers, one encounters a profound reflection on the ineffable divine nature and consequently a total relativisation of any enterprise called theology, that claims to have a cognitive penetration into the essential nature of God. Referring to the experience of Moses, who earnestly desired to see the face of God, but was granted only a passing vision of the vestiges of divine glory ("the back parts") in Exod.33:17-23, St. Gregory the theologian "defines" a theologian:

"Our best theologian is he who has not discovered the whole, for our present chain does not allow of our seeing the whole, but conceived of God to a greater extent than another, and gathering in himself more of the likeness or adumbration of truth, or whatever we may call it" (Oration XXX-17).

Judging by what Gregory says about the nature of God, about theology and how "to do theology" in the first and second Theological Orations, this is perhaps a far too optimistic picture of a theologian and his role.

The question of the nature of theology has resurfaced in recent debates in the West in connection with various contextual and liberation theologies and the methodologies they require. This has spilled over to theological education as well with the question "what is *theological* about theological education?"

This is a clear shift from the supremely self-confident definition of theology and theologians' work taking its cue from Anselm of Canterbury's (13th century) conviction that theology is "faith seeking understanding" (*fides quaerens intellectum*).

Rational-verbal discourse of propositional theology was an outcome of this search for understanding. So the new change in western thinking should be welcome in so far as it is a radical re-examining of the course of theology and theological education adopted there for many centuries now. However, the present search is so disparate and disoriented that it is hard to make a coherent picture out of it. There are advances made to the apophatic and trans-rational Orthodox understanding of theology as a possible way for restoring sanity to theological reflection.

In a recent survey of the theological education debate in North America, David Kelsey of Yale Divinity School takes 'Athens' and 'Berlin' as two types which exemplify the dominant patterns of theological education in the modern western schools. (David H. Kelsey, *Between Athens and Berlin*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1993, Michigan, p.6 ff). 'Athens' stands for the classical Greek *paideia*, the heart of education as culturing the soul

and character formation. Christians in the Hellenistic culture adopted it unselfconsciously and considered Christianity as the excellent form of *paideia*. Insightful knowledge of the Good resulting from a cultivation of the virtues of the soul, and contemplation leading to an intuitive gnosis of the Good are integral elements of the *paideia*. The whole process is oriented towards life in community, in the *polis*, and not towards any private, solitary goal. All great teachers in the Alexandrian tradition like Clement, Origen and the Cappadocians were committed to the ideal of *paideia*, with a clearly motivated Christian content.

The 'Berlin' type refers to the bipolar pattern of education associated with the founding of the Berlin University in the early 19th century. On the one hand the research based *Wissenschaft* or the orderly, disciplined and critical research done by research universities which "always treat knowledge as an as yet unresolved problem, and thus always stay at research" (von Humboldt). The other pole is "professional" education for the ministry of the Church. Schleiermacher's argument for including a theology faculty in the research university of Berlin was that theological education was professional education like medicine and law and the ministry of the Church should receive the best possible education to be able to contribute to the well being of society. The place of the faculty of theology, however, always remained suspended between the demands of a cognitive-rational nature of scientific inquiry and the "profession" of a minister requiring a different understanding of knowledge and the object of knowledge.

The contemporary debate on theological education in western academic circles may be of interest to the Orthodox, because whether we like it or not, patterns of theological education today are heavily influenced by Roman Catholic and Protestant models. The way Orthodox theological schools are organized, the claim of theology to be a "scientific discipline" in a university setting, and the division of theology into branches like biblical, historical, systematic and practical, all show this almost total dependence of Orthodox theological education on western paradigms. This is perhaps inevitable to some extent given the sweeping intellectual-cultural domination of western powers over the rest of the world for the last five hundred years or so. However, it is high time that the Orthodox tradition rediscovers some of the insights of the undivided tradition in theology and spirituality not only for the sake of Orthodoxy in a provincial sense, but for the health of the whole oikoumene.

The patristic tradition refused to accept the suggestion that there can be a special *knowledge* of God which is accessible only to some, but not to all. This was a major element in the fight of the Cappadocian Fathers against the neo-Arian Eunomius and his system. Eunomius argued that God's *ousia* or essence could be known through the intuitive apprehension of the revealed name *Agennetos*, the Unbegotten, as representing the Father; this name radically sets apart God the Father from all that has come to be - *to gennema*. So, according to Eunomius, the Son and the Spirit do not belong to the same *ousia* of the Father. The Son is begotten. Though he is not equated with the rest of creation as he is *monogenes*, the only Begotten, and directly created by the Father, the Son is clearly subordinate to the Father and does not share a community of essence (*koinonia tés ousias*) with the Father. The Spirit and all the rest are created by the Son.

In thus accommodating the Christian Trinity to the current philosophy of the absolutely Simple One nature of God, Eunomius missed the mark of Christian faith. While

the Cappadocian Fathers insisted on the distinction between God's *ousia* and *energeia*, and taught that the *ousia* of God would always remain unknowable, incomprehensible and radically transcendent for all human conception, Eunomius claimed to have devised an intellectual-intuitive method by which the human mind could grasp the essential nature of God. St. Gregory of Nyssa and other Fathers took the position that the words and names arising from the human mind (*epinoia*) and as applied to God are signs that point to the experience of the operations (*energeiai*) of God and do not pretend to penetrate the *ousia* of God's mystery. Commenting on this in detail, Metropolitan Paulos Gregorios of New Delhi says: "The kind of indigenization that Eunomius attempted was characterized by a low regard for the Tradition of the Church and an over-high and uncritical respect for the contemporary philosophical trends. Such an approach is still a temptation for many modern theologians, though quite often today, theologians are not as philosophically astute and as logically consistent as the 'technologist' Eunomius" (Paulos Mar Gregorios, *Cosmic Man: the Divine Presence - the Theology of St. Gregory of Nyssa*, Sophia Publications, 1980, New Delhi-Kottayam. First American edition, New York, 1988, p. 36-37).

Christian faith does not require a system of knowledge and if there is no "special" elitist knowledge of God, then there is no special intellectual training for Christians. An exclusive and esoteric notion of knowledge would be against the principle of the Church as the Body of Christ and all the faithful as members of that body sharing the life of Christ equally and mutually. The totality of the Body as well as the participatory presence of each part of it are integral to the quality of truth bestowed on the church by the Holy Spirit. So, intellectually speaking, we cannot have an "expert" or "specialist" on God distinguished from a "lay" person, unlike a nuclear scientist who claims "expertise" in the interaction of high energy particles, distinguished from a lay person who can hardly understand the intricacies of the nuclear world.

What does it mean for theological education? Is Christian faith anti-intellectual? An important implication is that Orthodox theological education cannot share all the academic-intellectual assumptions of many of the university faculties of theology, where theology claims to be a science like other scientific disciplines with a claim on cognitive-propositional truth. In their epistemological pretensions, some of which might sound like the old Eunomian dialectic, these faculties have attempted to move the locus of truth from its essential doxological matrix of eucharistic communities to propositions and intellectual abstractions. In their quest for the certainty of truth, they have almost slavishly followed the changing methodologies of social and natural sciences. Now, when scientific methodology is at a critical juncture of re-examining its predominant paradigms, 'theology' is confounded. Theology as 'scientia' has not yielded any objective, tangible scientific truth. It cannot now find its own way, let alone give any moral guidance to the scientific disciplines in the university.

This is not to suggest even distantly that orthodox theology should take an anti-intellectual, anti-academic stand. On the contrary, the Eastern Christian tradition provides excellent examples of committed Christian leaders like the Cappadocians boldly engaging in a fruitful dialogue with the intellectual-cultural tradition of their day. St. Gregory of Nazianzus, the theologian, speaks of the integral and vital link between human intellect, human culture and the divine Word. The *logos* (word, speech, rationality, science, culture...) of rational (*logikos*) human beings finds meaning and fulfillment only in its indispensable

connection with the *Logos* of God (incarnate Christ, the divine wisdom). This is more than rhetorical play of words. Here is an attempt to link the distinctive quality of *homo sapiens*, the rational nature of humanity and all its creative achievement including science and technology to the wisdom and will of God as expressed in Christ the Word Incarnate. Human creativity is elevated to a new pedestal beyond mere critical rationality, and its certainty of truth is entrusted to the ineffable Reason of God, who in Christ has become one with humanity. A theological faculty which is committed to draw the implications of this foundational connection will have a distinct spiritual-intellectual quality. Its rootedness in God's wisdom and God's compassionate economy in Christ may help it to guide the quest of science and art for truth. Gregory the theologian offers his *logos* as a thank-offering (*eucharistia*) to God the source of all *logos*. What better model can we have than that of offering all human culture, intelligence, scientific research, technical know-how and all fruits of human creativity to our creator in thanksgiving. All our ethical reflections and concerns whether they are about genetic engineering, environmental deterioration, political-economic order of the world or poverty and injustice, should arise out of this fundamental act and attitude of eucharistic offering. Ethics divorced from true *theologia* is the source of the malaise of contemporary Christianity in many circles. Can our theological education be so conceived that it can help orientate all knowledge, research and scholarship to the ultimate act of thank-offering to God?

Although the patristic tradition stands firmly against any epistemological elitism with regard to the intellectual knowledge of God, it frequently uses expressions like ascent, ladder, stages and degrees with regard to the experience of God. Experientially there is a gradual climbing from a lower stage to a higher one. There is a ladder of spiritual *anabasis*. There are degrees of purification, illumination and divinisation. As St. Gregory of Nyssa tells us in his *Life of Moses*, Moses goes up the spiritual path over a whole life time, from being a shepherd who saw God as burning fire, then becoming the leader and liberator of Israel who saw God as the pillar of cloud and fire and finally becoming the spiritual guide of the people of God who "saw" God as "thick darkness" on the summit of Mount Sinai. Likewise, there is the possibility of a gradual rising to maturity in the life of every Christian. Here again it is remarkable that this is not reserved for the clergy or for monks, but open for all members of the Body of Christ, men and women, learned and illiterate, married and celibate. The patristic understanding of theology and theological "formation" is informed by this never ceasing, continual spiritual *anabasis*, never reaching the summit, never stopping on the way and never turning back. Guided and assisted by the Holy Spirit we realize our full human potential of the image of God by conforming more and more to the image of God in Christ and rising to his stature.

One of the major elements in the transmission of teaching in the ancient Christian tradition was the master-disciple relationship. In fact this was not anything exclusively Christian. All classical systems of education in civilizations like Greek, Indian and Chinese resorted to it. The person of the teacher becomes an illuminating presence for the disciple. Even in the transmission of intellectual knowledge like mathematics, the teacher is a spiritual presence that transforms the quality of the subject matter and that of the disciple (the connection in Greek between *mathetēs* [= student, learner] and *mathematics* is noteworthy).

As the monastic movement blossomed, theological-spiritual training was more and more confined to the monasteries, and the teacher-disciple relationship started to be

understood largely in the monastic setting. So, for example, in the sayings and stories of the Desert Fathers, we see the figures of the spiritual father and disciple in the context of spiritual communication/teaching. Later figures of Staretz and Elder also emerge in a monastic environment though the whole church profited from their presence and Spirit-filled gift of discernment.

As you are aware, the image of the Guru is central in the Indian philosophical-spiritual tradition to this day. The Guru epitomises the unified images of father, teacher and spiritual guide. The students used to live in the household of the guru as if they are children of the teacher until the completion of their education. This system of education is called *gurukula* (household of the guru). The physical and spiritual presence of the guru is the basis for all intellectual pursuits. Learning from the "face of the guru" (*gurumukha*) is foundational for spiritual-intellectual formation. As a newborn baby learns and grows gazing at the loving face of its mother, the disciple grows in wisdom and knowledge by learning from the luminous face of the guru.

One of the Sanskrit words for knowledge or learning is *vidya*. The word for scripture, *veda*, for priest, *vaidika*, and the European words like vision, wisdom and Wissenschaft have all the same root as *vidya*. Education is *vidyabhyasa*, an askesis (training, exercise) in the vision of God. It is truly an asceticism (askesis) in terms of the total commitment of body, mind and soul to the experiential knowledge of God through the guidance of the guru. This applies equally to the learning of theology and that of "secular" disciplines.

The Orthodox Church in India, rooted in the heritage of St. Thomas the Apostle as well as in the spiritual-cultural ethos of the country has followed the *gurukula* model in training the clergy until the introduction of the modern seminary system in recent times. Like everywhere else the current system runs the risk of becoming impersonal, developing a cleavage between the intellectual pursuit and the search for wisdom. Where texts and the instruments for their interpretation take centre stage and the person and face of the Father-Teacher become marginal, education falls into undesirable polarizations and dichotomies. The holistic nature of theological education will give way to reductionist methodologies. It is the almost total eclipse of the person and face of the guru in contemporary secular culture that has provoked a frenzied search for new gurus in many neo-gnostic New Age streams. Unfortunately most of these modern gurus prove to be of dubious nature. They seem to cater to the human lust for pleasure and power rather than the disciplined quest for the true *vidya*.

In conclusion, I want to make the following observations:

1. What we call Tradition today is the cumulative and dynamic experience of the whole Church as guided by the Holy Spirit. At the source of this tradition we see the creative and profound concern of our Fathers and Mothers in Christ for understanding the Holy Scripture, for spiritual ascent through the discipline of prayer, fasting and other ascetic practices, for expressing God's compassionate love to the world through innumerable acts of mercy and grace, for building up the one Body of Christ through corporate celebrations of liturgy, mutual forgiveness and reconciliation, and commitment to the cause of the poor and the oppressed. Creativity of the Spirit is constitutive of this great Tradition. Theological learning and teaching arise from the totality of this holistic tradition, and contribute in turn to its creative interfaces in new situations.

2. Great centres of Christian learning like Alexandria in Egypt in the patristic period arose as the result of a confluence of cultures. At Alexandria, for instance, African, Semitic, Asian and European cultures met in an unusually creative inter-penetration. Greek, Indian, Egyptian and Jewish spiritual-philosophical streams together formed the backdrop against which the powerful current of Christian reflection arose as the Alexandrian theological tradition. The daring shown by Christian theologians to take the gospel tradition for a fearless and fruitful encounter with the spiritual perceptions of humanity in other religions and ways of thinking needs to be recaptured in the ongoing tradition of Orthodox theological education. Having access to a sane patristic theology of creation and a profound insight into human nature as created in the image of God, we must not be shy to affirm the work of the Holy Spirit in all creation and gratefully acknowledge the common spiritual heritage which Christians share with the rest of humanity. There is no reason why the rich Orthodox tradition ever let any provincialism that is shaped by particular historical circumstances, to paranoically reduce its holistic character to some parochial theological ghettoisms. Can we really foster a theological education that is sustained not by the whole tradition but only by part of it?

3. A new awareness rooted in the compassionate *oikonomia* of God and expressing itself in love, justice, human dignity, creativity, mutual forgiveness and harmony of the whole created order is the only way out for humanity in the present crisis. The sacred *space* of creation as gifted by the Creator, has to be liberated from the greedy traders of humanity. The sacred *time* that originated with space, and given to us as a means for spiritual askesis has to be recovered from a false linear, progressist and exploitative history, invented by lusty human beings with no sense of *eucharistia*, thankfulness, for the gift of life. The implications of the Incarnation of Christ and the coming of the Holy Spirit are staggeringly vast for our understanding of a new order of space and time, the order of new creation. On a human scale, the agenda is overwhelming. But it is essentially the agenda of the Holy Spirit. We are co-ministers with the Spirit. Orthodox theological education is not *for* a ministry which is objectively understood as simply instrumental, professional, job oriented, and pensionable, but theological education *itself* has to be understood *as* ministry, a lifetime *leitourgia* with the Spirit for the sake of humanity and the whole creation.