EDITORIAL

Perspectives and Problems: Scholarship and Practicality in Theological Education

In this number of our *Journal* four Canadian scholars consider the need and the prospects for a thoroughgoing reform of theological education in this country. Writing out of three very different settings – Protestant Ontario, Roman Catholic Ontario, and Roman Catholic Quebec – they come remarkably close to unanimity in their appraisal of the present situation. All are convinced that the conventional patterns of theological education are no longer acceptable and all – though they may be afraid that it is not coming fast enough – see many signs that reform is on the way. Moreover, despite obvious differences in emphasis, as well as in theological stance and ecclesiastical allegiance, all seem to agree broadly on the direction that reform should take.

The purpose of this editorial is neither to repeat nor to controvert anything said by our distinguished contributors. It is rather to note how their discussion of reform highlights a problem long familiar to theological educators and to suggest a viewpoint from which that problem can usefully be considered. If, as there is good reason to suppose, the problem is inherent in the theological enterprise as such, we should welcome an invitation to explore it afresh.

The problem at least tacitly posed by our contributors can be simply stated. On the one hand, they are far from satisfied with the quality of Canadian theological scholarship at the present time. They challenge theologians both to improve their own scholarly performance and to share more fully in the common life of the scholarly world. On the other hand, they apparently agree that theological education is something more than immersion in the historical and cultural study of religious traditions and institutions. As they portray it, theological education is training in the practice of Christian ministry in the world. Thus they seem to be suggesting that theological education must, at one and the same time, become both more scholarly and more practical. But, as any experienced theological teacher knows, the tension between scholarship and practicality is already acutely felt in our divinity schools. If reform is to proceed along both lines simultaneously, we may be hard put to it to avert an unprecedentedly serious split within the theological community.

If Christianity really is what it has always appeared to be – an historic faith, which must be both confessed in worship and proclamation and put into practice in daily living – then presumably we must accept the risk of stressing both scholarship and practicality in theological education. Training in a Christian ministry of witness and service will readily be seen to involve both. But, as scholarly investigation and reflection and practical training are both intensified, we shall need to understand their mutual relationship more clearly than the

architects of theological curricula have commonly done, at any rate in the recent past. A brief editorial essay can hardly take us very far. But perhaps even a few notes on the terms of the problem will be of some use.

The beginning of wisdom may well be the recognition of a simple truth: that, while scholarship and practicality are both requisites of theological education, they are important for different reasons. The primary purpose of scholarly theological education is to define and clarify the Christian perspective on the world. The primary purpose of practical theological education is to facilitate the handling of concrete problems in the world. Both are necessary – the one because Christianity is a faith, and the other because Christian faith demands expression in the particularities of human life. But it is one thing to have a faith and another thing to know how to live it responsibly in particular situations; it is one thing to clarify the perspective of faith and another thing to become skilled in the handling of specific practical problems. Thus the duality of scholarship and practicality in theological education seems to be irreducible.

To say this is to exclude certain simplistic notions of a unified theological curriculum. It immediately becomes obvious that neither a basically scholarly curriculum with two or three practical appendices nor a basically practical curriculum with a few scholarly trimmings can meet the requirements of a comprehensive theological education. Or, to put the point in a slightly different way, it becomes evident that unity is not to be sought either in subordinating practicality to scholarship, by treating Christian action as the mere application of theological insights, or in subordinating scholarship to practicality, by treating theology as nothing more than an ingredient in practical solutions. The one policy expects too much, and the other too little, of theological scholarship. In the one case, theology is invited to usurp the role of the behavioural and social sciences; in the other case, it is tacitly assumed that there is no other role for it to play.

Once we have learned to distinguish clarifying perspectives from solving problems, we are ready to ask how each activity illuminates the other. But for the moment we can only pose the question and acknowledge its validity. Serious discussion of it will have to be postponed to a later occasion.

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