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Re-tooling the Clergy Factories

BY J. I. PACKER

THEOLOGICAL *Colleges for Tomorrow* (CIO 7/6) is the report of a working party set up by the Archbishops at the joint request of the theological college Principals' Conference and ACCM (under its antediluvian name of CACTM) to examine the present problems of the theological colleges. The workers in question, whom those in the college business have naturally come to refer to as the Three Wise Men, were a distinguished trio: Sir Bernard de Bunsen, Principal of Chester College of Education, Professor Henry Chadwick of Oxford, and Dean Haworth of Salisbury, who for thirteen years was principal of Wells theological college. Aiding and abetting them was Canon B. S. Moss, who taught for six years at Lincoln theological college and is now the Chief Secretary of ACCM. The detailed terms of reference which the working party was given defined the problems of the colleges as 1. falling numbers 2. size 3. situation 4. 'experiment and variety' (i.e., where do the old patterns need a shake-up? 5. co-operation, both between college and college and between colleges and the centre (ACCM, which gives advice, and Church Assembly, which votes money). Though they had less than a year for their assignment, and therefore could not be as thorough in enquiry at some points as they (and we) would have wished (cf. pp. xi f.), the Wise Men have worked through their set programme with evident fairness and skill, and there is much shrewdness in what they have to say.

Their main proposals may be summed up as follows:

1. The 'comprehensive' principle of training together graduates and non-graduates, old and young, in the same college should not be wholly abandoned, but the principle should be accepted of having two distinct types of college—one catering primarily for graduates and undergraduates, located near and linked with a university where theology is taught, and one catering primarily for non-graduates and using new and experimental educational methods in the manner of an up-to-date college of education. The former would continue to put men through the General Ordination Examination, the latter would send men out with an alternative qualification yet to be devised (84).

2. The present 25 colleges should be reduced to fourteen larger units, with an optimum size of 120 and an absolute minimum of 80 students. Detailed proposals are made: those of most interest to evangelicals are that Ridley Hall and Wycliffe Hall should combine in Cambridge, Tyndale Hall and Clifton in Bristol, the London College of Divinity on its proposed new site at Nottingham should rise to more than 120 students, Oak Hill should expand on its present site to 90+, and Cranmer Hall should continue with 50 theological students forming a unit within St. John's College with its total of 195. Wells should join Queen's at Birmingham, Westcott House join Ripon Hall and Cuddesdon join St. Stephen's House at Oxford, and St. Aidan's and Lincoln together unite as part of an ecumenical theological college

based on Manchester. Worcester, Rochester, Cheshunt, and Chichester would go, though Chichester might link with Salisbury and Lichfield, who are designated to become, with Kelham and Oak Hill, the third 'self-contained' non-graduate college. These three would provide 300 places for students, while the other eleven colleges would between them take up to 900-950 (149-168).

3. Present distinctions of churchmanship should be observed in mergers. The working party has itself observed them, and has made a point of recommending three 'self-contained' colleges rather than two (Oak Hill, 'Evangelical'; Kelham and Lichfield-Salisbury, 'Tractarian' of different types) to meet 'the demands of legitimate variety, and of balance of churchmanship' (154).

4. GOE should be upgraded to become an LTh., and extended to include, as its second part, a deacon's examination before being made priest; thus postordination training would come to be standardised (though presumably an alternative to part two of GOE would have to be devised for men from 'self-contained' colleges who had not taken part one) (82-5).

5. Mixed student bodies, in which ordinands and non-ordinands work at theology together are, other things being equal, to be encouraged (106).

6. The desirability of married men having their wives and families with them during training, and of colleges enabling students' wives to secure a 'para-theological qualification' (*sic*), should be recognised, and possibilities explored (108).

7. There should be closer links between the colleges, individually and as a body, and Church House. One-third of ACCM should be college principals. The Chief Secretary of ACCM should be invited to the Principals' Conference. Two ACCM representatives should be put on each college's governing body, together with 'university representatives' (number unspecified). A Consultative Conference, made up of all principals plus two members of each governing body, should meet at least triennially, and all major questions of policy in training should be sieved through it. College constitutions should be standardised (188-193).

8. Colleges should be given ten years to make proposals satisfactory to ACCM and Church Assembly; after that, if nothing satisfactory has been achieved, financial support from the centre should be withdrawn. There should be a five-year review of progress (147, 170).

Behind these and the other proposals subordinate to them that the working party puts forward may be seen a concern for the raising of theological standards through closer links with universities and a greater use of the teaching facilities they provide—the concern which has already prompted ACCM to require all non-theological graduates in training to spend one of their three years doing theology at a university. The argumentation reflects a sensitiveness to tensions and anxieties which will undoubtedly break surface again and again as the report is discussed—anxiety, for instance, lest the proved value of the smaller unit for fellowship purposes be lost in the larger college, or lest the traditional independence of the college be destroyed through bureaucratic entanglement, or lest the open and uncommitted method

of university study prove ultimately incompatible with, and hostile to, the committed and confessional approach to theology which colleges will properly encourage in ordinands. We cannot discuss these things here, but we may in passing state our opinion that, in principle, these anxieties can be met, and to a considerable extent are met, by the lines of argument and analysis which the report uses.

In arguing, on both educational and economic grounds, for a large college with a large staff, the report picks up a line of thought which a number of evangelicals connected with theological colleges have been prosecuting (without, it must be confessed, the least public success) for more than a decade. The present writer is not the only one to whom this argumentation in the report will seem, not merely an unqualified success, but actually old hat. Two matters, however, need to be taken further than the Wise Men take them.

The first is the position of the principal in a large college. The inherited staff-structure in present theological colleges, a structure which goes back essentially unchanged to the days when they were founded, appears to be modelled partly on the parish (vicar and curates), partly on the prep. school (headmaster and junior masters), partly on the family (father and elder sons keeping the smaller fry in order). That this structure is still understood in a strictly hierarchical way is shown by the Lichfield salary scale (the agreed basis of theological college stipends), which sets sizeable differentials between the first four members of staff and pays those at the bottom of the ladder the stipend of a second curacy. Such a system, as is plain, can only work happily in a small college where the principal is on all major matters, pastoral and theological, a man of greater stature than his assistants, and where it is understood that assistants who show first-class ability will soon move on to weightier responsibilities elsewhere. But if, as the report rightly proposes, colleges are to have staffs of a dozen or more (for the staff-student ratio is to be 1:10 throughout), and a proportion of these are to be 'career academics' (99), who may serve for decades together and become acknowledged authorities in their own field, the traditional hierarchical pattern is obviously not fit for use: it requires the principal to be a superman and his colleagues to be yes-men, and neither requirement is realistic or proper. The report recognises the need for 'careful consideration . . . to be given to the structure of theological college staffs' (99). What needs saying is, first, that the old hierarchical pattern, both as an administrative form and as a habit of mind, must be replaced by some sort of parity pattern among the senior instructors, so that the principal's relation to them becomes like that of a faculty chairman in a university, or the leader of a team ministry of specialists; and, second, that the possibility of the principal being able to block the recommendations of his staff either by playing the council off against them or by simple inaction must be abolished by staff representation on college councils. Otherwise, constant friction on the staffs of the new large colleges is absolutely assured.

The second matter that needs taking further is the content of theological education itself. Granted that education, as such, admits of purely formal definition (knowing how to think questions through,

and where to look things up), the idea of being educated in a particular field—in this case, theology—necessarily implies acquaintance with a certain range of facts (or questions, if you prefer). How, in this case, should that range be circumscribed and defined? One would like to see it done functionally, in terms of the job for which ordinands are being trained, but the working party observed a self-denying ordinance at this point—the question, ‘what is an ordained minister for?’ was, they judged, ‘outside our scope’ (1). Accordingly, all through the report the Wise Men refer to theological education in formal terms only. They affirm that to provide ‘adequate education in theology’ is the first of a college’s three mandatory aims (the other two being to secure ‘community formation’, the deepening of faith and commitment by discipline and prayer, and to give ‘an adequate foundation of practical and “professional” training’, especially in teaching method (4)). But to tell us what constitutes ‘adequate education in theology’ we are given no more than this:

‘A man must not only know the Church’s understanding of the Gospel entrusted to it. He needs not only intellectual sensitivity and rigour in dealing with the debates of the past, the historical experience of the Church, and the controversies of today. He needs also to know how to communicate what he knows, how to relate theology to faith, how to enter into the contemporary dialogue, how to set forth and interpret the Gospel imaginatively and creatively in a time of much confusion and honest doubt. His theology ought to be such that it does not come to a stop when he leaves the college.’(4)

This is well said—very well indeed—but sooner or later one has to ask: what, in particular, does a minister need to know about God, man, and Christianity? More particularly still, can we take it for granted that a university degree or diploma course and/or GOE, as at present constituted, will give the would-be clergyman all the theological education he needs? There are at least two areas in which it is hard to think that any of these courses gives a thorough enough grounding, and both, for ministers, are quite fundamental. They are the areas which the Puritans called ‘doctrine’ and ‘application’, or, simply, ‘use’. Their more modern names are *systematic theology* (including *apologetics*) and *Christian spirituality* (including *personal ethics*). Only those who have taught the two doctrine papers in GOE (two lectures a week for the inside of two academic years) can know how hard it is to turn them into a systematic theology course, and it does not appear that in those university courses in which systematic, as distinct from biblical and historical, theology is attempted the question of method in systematics is given as central a place as it demands. As for the study of spiritual life in its birth and growth, this seems at present to be a non-starter in theological education everywhere, and ethics fares little better (an optional subject in some degrees, and a paper that flits in and out of the GOE syllabus). Surely an upgrading of ‘Doctrine’ into Systematic Theology (three hours a week for two years) is an absolute necessity for the Wise Men’s improved GOE, part one, just as a study of spirituality and ethics in depth is a ‘must’ for their proposed part two.

It must also be said that the suggested links between college and

university, if developed without due care, could be as much a bane as a blessing. This is said not in disrespect to the universities, but in recognition of those very qualities of university work—openness, cool analysis, ability to raise and pursue questions—from which ordinands are meant to benefit. The teaching one gets grooves one's mind, and experience has shown that university teaching in biblical subjects may be so narrowly and coldly academic as actually to incapacitate ordinands from using their Bibles in their ministry thereafter to any good purpose. It will be important, in developing university links, to avoid this danger by making sure that the college's own 'career academics', whose teaching will presumably be informed by a lively confessional commitment (no hindrance, let it be said, to rigorous and responsible academic work), will be guaranteed a due proportion of teaching, particularly in biblical subjects.

A further problem here arises from the prevalence in certain academic circles of a rooted prejudice against any biblical study in which the approach to problems is conditioned by the theological presupposition of the inerrancy of Scripture—a principle which is found controlling biblical work among both Roman Catholics and Conservative Evangelicals. An evangelical college might well hesitate to expose its students to be, in effect, indoctrinated against this commitment, for which it seeks to stand, through teaching which disregards, or dismisses *a priori* as unworthy of notice, all work done on the basis of faith in inerrancy. It is notorious that such things have happened, and in some places happen still. Careful watch will need to be kept on this aspect of the situation also. However, with these provisos we do not quarrel with the striking verdict which the Wise Men pass at the close of their own review of possible tensions in college-university links: 'Nevertheless, as with many a marriage, it may be better to endure the rows from time to time and the sin on both sides, than to miss the undoubted benefits of the match' (70).

There are some gaps in the report. One wishes that the working party had added a countrywide ecumenical dimension to theological training, by suggesting ways and means of regular joint work and interchange with non-Anglican colleges, instead of confining themselves to the idea of a single ecumenical unit in Manchester (Chapter VII, 131). One wishes too that they had opened fully the issue of co-educational training. Certainly, the colleges will soon have to face both these questions—perhaps one dare say, the sooner the better! But our final note should be one of appreciation for what is here, rather than complaint about what is not. In general, the proposals are admirable, and we hope that action along the lines proposed will soon ensue.

Not, indeed, that colleges should be press-ganged into accepting the Wise Men's proposals for their future without critical canvassing of alternatives—it might well be that in more than one case different mergers would be better means to the Wise Men's end than those that are here proposed; but action to secure larger training units, with more resources, a wider range, and higher standards, is long overdue, and ought not to be any further delayed.