

Theological education in an ecumenical context: Principles and procedures of the Pretoria model

C J Wethmar

(University of Pretoria)

ABSTRACT

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During the past three years the Faculty of Theology at the University of Pretoria was involved in a profound process of transformation. In this article, the historical background of the faculty is briefly described as well as the basic characteristics of the present-day South African tertiary education scene in which this process took place. This is followed by an analysis of the basic principles and procedures of the transformation process. Special emphasis is placed on the ecumenical ideal that inspired the development of the new faculty.

1 INTRODUCTION

It has been assigned to this paper to discuss recent developments in the Faculty of Theology at the University of Pretoria as a case study of some of the basic problems in the relationship between theology on the one hand, and church, university and society on the other. Special reference has to be made to the question whether the ecumenical nature of a faculty could contribute towards solving these problems.

The reason why the Pretoria Faculty is suggested as a case study relates to the fact that at the beginning of the current year, this faculty, which previously consisted of two relatively independent denominational faculties, operating parallel to each other, was converted into a single ecumenical faculty. The stated aim of this faculty, furthermore, is to, in addition to the present two churches, involve a number of other interested denominations as partners in the faculty.

This case is not presented here with the presumption that this model is either extraordinary or unique. It is merely described as one possible example, in the midst of many others, of the kind of problems and considerations encountered when an attempt is made to teach theology ecumenically.

Referring to the Pretoria model at this conference may be pertinent for two reasons¹. In the first instance it is indicative of the fact that the problems regarding the relationship between theology and the contexts in which it operates are not restricted to any one country or church in the world, but that they occur globally, even in such a distant country like South Africa, and ecumenically in most churches that have developed an institutional structure (Raiser 1997:54-60).

The second reason why the Pretoria model may be of interest at a conference in the Netherlands is the fact that, as will be indicated in due course, the Pretoria model developed partly out of the interaction between two traditions of Dutch origin which opposed each other, also in the Netherlands. The interaction of the traditions in Pretoria of course, took place in circumstances that differed entirely from those in the Netherlands.

In order to fully understand the Pretoria model of institutionalising theological education, one has to, briefly at least, take cognisance of the historical background of the faculty as well as of the present South African context in which it operates. With this information as background, a description will be given of the transformation of the faculty that has taken place during the past approximately three years. In a last paragraph a few remarks will be made regarding the relevance of ecumenicity for dealing with the problems generated by the relationship between church and theology.

2 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The Transvaal University College came into existence in 1908 and developed into a fully fledged university by 1930. In 1916 the developing university approached the Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk van Afrika (NHK) to participate in establishing a Faculty of Theology (Loader 1989:427). The NHK accepted this invitation in 1917, and made available one of the faculty's first three lecturers. Apart from the NHK the Presbyterian Church also became involved in the faculty. During the next few years, however, it was mainly the NHK which continued its support, with the result that it developed a predominantly NHK character (Loader 1989:428).

The Transvaal University College initially also invited the Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk in Transvaal (NGK) to join the Faculty. The NGK, which at that stage already had its ministers trained at the Theological Seminary at Stellenbosch, declined the invitation. They were concerned that a second institution for the training of clergy would jeopardise the

¹ This article initially served as a lecture delivered at a conference on *Theology between Church, University and society* organised by the section of Systematic Theology of The Netherlands School for Advanced Studies in Theology and Religion (NOSTER). The conference took place from June 5 to 7, 2000 at Hoeven in the Netherlands

unity between the four federated provincial NGK churches of the Cape Province, Orange Free State, Natal and Transvaal (Van der Watt 1989:6).

During the following two decades, however, the situation gradually changed, and in 1938 an agreement was reached between the University of Pretoria and the NGK, in terms of which ministers for this church would also be educated at the university (Kotzé 1989:59-81). The original intention was that both the NGK and the NHK would co-operate in an integrated faculty (Groenewald 1980:28). This, however, proved to be impossible, because of severely strained relations between the two churches, resulting from almost a century of controversy and misunderstanding between them. A tendency developed to seek that which divides rather than that which unites. And these dividing factors mainly proved to be matters of spirituality, general religious attitude, politics and culture (Scholtz 1956).

In the light of these irreconcilable differences the two groups of faculty members, representing the two churches, were allowed by the relevant authorities to function as two relatively independent sections of the faculty, and later on, in fact, as two separate faculties.

In order to gain a better understanding of this rather anomalous situation, one should also keep in mind that these two groups originally also represented different theological traditions. The first professors of the NHK faculty were trained in the state faculties in the Netherlands (Pont 1994:95-110). They were accustomed to the *duplex ordo* structure for theological faculties, which were applied at the state faculties in the Netherlands since 1876. These faculties made a clear distinction between state subjects, which were regarded as complying with all the requirements of academic rigour, on the one hand, and church subjects, which presupposed religious commitment and, therefore, according to this line of thinking, did not comply with the neutrality expected of true academic disciplines (Loader 1989:427). Because of the exposure of its first lecturers to this system, the Pretoria faculty was initially also organised along these lines (Loader 1989:425-428; Pont 1994:100). The result was that exegesis of the Old and New Testaments, General Church History and Science of Religion were to be taught without any ecclesiastical prejudice, while Dogmatics, Practical Theology and Local Church History were implemented as so-called church subjects.

This approach was rather mechanically derived from the nineteenth century Dutch scene into a South African context, which could not and did not really share the same intellectual and spiritual presuppositions. When initially introduced to the Pretoria situation, it was not done consistently, as the church still had a direct influence in the appointment and remuneration of faculty members. It was, therefore, no surprise that resistance against the *duplex ordo* gradually grew, and when the university in 1927-1928 suggested that this system should be fully applied, it was strongly resisted by the NHK, which at this stage started considering the option of organising its

relationship with the university by means of a contractual agreement. This was indeed achieved some ten years later when the NGK, as indicated above, also joined the Faculty.

While the NHK section of the new faculty initially had its roots in the state university system in the Netherlands with its *duplex ordo*, the NGK section was, from the outset, influenced by the model used by the Free University in Amsterdam. Most of the NGK ministers, who, since the turn of the century, studied abroad, had done so at the latter university, where they became convinced of the viability of a *simplex ordo* system of theological education (Pont 1994:102).

The result of the interaction between these two positions was that, when the dual Faculty of Theology was implemented in 1938, the contracts which both the NHK and NGK concluded with the university, in fact, basically reflected the onset of a *simplex ordo* as Dogmatics was included as one of the official university courses. During the next two decades, this situation was consolidated when Missiology and Practical Theology were recognised as university disciplines (Groenewald 1980:20). Only during the nineteen sixties, however, did it become possible to have separate departments for these latter two disciplines (Van der Watt 1989:17).

For the first just more than sixty years of the faculty's history, the basic course intended for the education and training of clergy was divided into three parts. The first three years were devoted to the study for a BA degree, in which a minimum of two years study in each of the two biblical languages was required. In this course, arts, humanities and social science subjects, were studied. During a second period of three years, a BD degree was followed. The programme was then completed with a post-graduate diploma course in the seventh year. During this final year, issues focussing on ministerial formation were attended to.

In the early nineteen eighties both sections of the faculty, after extensive negotiations with the relevant denominational bodies, implemented a so-called integrated course, in which the previous BA and BD phases were integrated, although the courses still retained their original designations. This integration was effected by introducing biblical and theological studies in the first degree. The advantage of this procedure was that it proved beneficial for the motivation of the students. The disadvantage was that the course became so diverse that it tended to be didactically cumbersome. It became clear that a more thoroughgoing integration was necessary.

3 THE PRESENT SOUTH AFRICAN CONTEXT

Up to this point, only a slight reference had been made to the socio-political context, in which the Pretoria Faculty functioned, when it was indicated what the reasons were for the rather anomalous situation of two theological

faculties existing in the same university. The scope of this paper and the space available does not allow dealing with this issue at greater length.

However, to understand the present situation and structure of the faculty, one has to take note that, just as was the case with the restructuring of the faculty in the late nineteen thirties, the major transformation of the faculty that took place from 1997 to 1999 was, to a large extent, stimulated by factors which are in the first instance of a non-theological nature. Which, of course, does not mean that there are not valid theological reasons for the changes that took place.

It is well known that the nineteen nineties in South Africa was characterised by a comprehensive political transformation. A new negotiated dispensation came about, and a new constitution was adopted. The state decided on a neutral stance towards religion. In addition to this, the tendency towards secularisation was growing stronger. One of the implications of all this, is that the churches are not as influential in society as they were, and financially are also less affluent than they were in the past.

The new constitution gave rise to new legislation in various spheres of life, including education. And this, of course, also implies a new policy framework for tertiary education in South Africa. An important principle that has been established in this regard, is that all educational institutions should be equally available to all the sectors of the pluralist South African society.

One of the mechanisms that had been created for the transformation of the educational system is the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA). This body was established in 1995 to develop and implement a National Qualifications Framework (NQF) with which all suppliers of education, and therefore, also universities have to comply. SAQA identified twelve organising fields in terms of which the NQF should be applied². A significant feature of this list of organising fields to take note of, as far as the structuring of theological education is concerned, is the fact that no reference at all is made to either theology or religion. It is SAQA's intention that these latter issues should be dealt with in the field of human and social studies.

In the light of the developments just mentioned, various churches have, through an ecumenical body called the South African Council for Theological Education (SACTE), started negotiating with SAQA, in order to ensure that the churches would be consulted as far as the manner in

² These fields are the following: 1. Agriculture and nature conservation; 2. Culture and arts; 3. Business; 4. Commerce and management studies; 5. Communication studies and language; 6. Education, training and development; 7. Manufacturing, engineering and technology; 8. Human and social studies; 9. Law military science and security; 10. Health sciences and social services; 11. Physical, mathematical, computer and life science; 12. Services; 13. Physical planning and construction.

which the SAQA regulations would be applied to theological education are to be concerned. The same approach was also taken by the Theology Faculties of South African universities. In close consultation with SACTE, they formed a Forum for University Theological Education, to ensure that they also had a mechanism through which the interests of the university faculties, in addition to those of the churches, could be adequately served as far as the administration of academic qualifications is concerned.

A further consideration that has to be kept in mind, is that the comprehensive reconstruction of South African society requires a redistribution of state expenditure. This implies that less money will, in future, be available to tertiary education, while at the same time, the number of people, requiring access to tertiary education, is rapidly growing. It is, therefore, also understandable that the government decided, in order to support rapid economic growth, that the natural sciences and technological subjects in university education should receive considerably higher state subsidy than the human and cultural sciences. The implication of this is that it has already become unavoidable for several universities, either to scale down their facilities for theological education, or to terminate them.

A vital dimension to the new national policy framework, is the emphasis on outcomes based education. This implies that the traditional distinction between academic education and practical training are not regarded as valid any more. Academic development should be strived for, in conjunction with the attainment of professional competence. This implies that, in tertiary education, the emphasis should not be on individual subjects, but on comprehensive programmes which requires that various subjects should be organised together in a coherent constellation of knowledge inputs aimed at providing the necessary theoretical development and practical skills, required to become a competent professional practitioner. A modular system of programme presentation seems to be the best suited to achieve this end. A credit system, on the basis of one credit equaling ten notional hours of learning, is linked to this modular system of learning. Notional hours are not "real" hours. They are the informed estimate of the average time an average learner, entering with the correct level of prior knowledge, would take to master the specific outcomes of a module. Time here refers to time on the task, including assignments, home study *et cetera*, and not just time used for direct tuition.

4 TRANSFORMATION OF THE PRETORIA FACULTY

From time to time, the existence of two Faculties of Theology at the one residential University of Pretoria had been criticised in theological publications (König 1978:326; Lategan 1989:108; Deist 1994:53-67). And although the criticism was not always entirely convincing, it was indeed indicative of an anomalous situation. One should, however, as has been

indicated above, keep in mind that the structure of the faculty since 1938 was the result of the influence of non- theological and even non-academic considerations. It was a pragmatic arrangement, to solve a complex situation, rather than a well considered, or in terms of a philosophy of science, well-founded construction.

By the middle of the nineteen nineties, however, it became clear to the university authorities that, in the light of the developments described in the previous paragraph, the dual structure of the Faculty of Theology was not tenable any longer. The two Theology Faculties were requested to seriously consider amalgamation. This required intensive negotiations between the two faculties themselves, between the two faculties together and the university management, and also between the faculties and their respective supporting and sponsoring churches.

In the negotiations between the two Faculties of Theology, all the considerations which kept them apart for more than sixty years still seemed to be virulent. The perceptions, regarding the NGK and its faculty that seemed to exist, were that they were characterised by a legalistic Reformed orthodoxy, pietistic or charismatic tendencies and left wing political sympathies. The perceptions regarding the NHK and its faculty that surfaced during the discussions, included that of a liberal theology and right wing political attitudes (Botha 1994:257-271). These perceptions were not new, but merely a reflection of a century and a half of controversies and misunderstanding between two groups of people in the same nation. These accusations and counter accusations are not mentioned here in order to discuss their validity or lack thereof. They are only mentioned to give an indication of the context in which the negotiations had to be conducted, and the obstacles that had to be surmounted.

Another element in the development of the new faculty that has to be mentioned, is the fact that already, since the middle of the nineteen nineties, co-operation agreements had been concluded between the faculty and a number of seminaries of various denominations. These seminaries include two Baptist seminaries, a Full Gospel one and an interdenominational one.

A number of similar agreements are being negotiated at present. According to these agreements, tuition takes place on the campuses of these institutions by their own lecturers. The study material and examinations are, however, supervised by the relevant members of the academic staff of the faculty. In terms of these agreements, the Faculty and each of the seminaries involved are mutually represented on each other's governing bodies.

Furthermore, while the negotiations between the initial partners of the faculty were under way, they also, aware of the fact that the present South African context requires an ecumenical faculty, initiated discussions with a number of other denominations, including the Uniting Reformed

Church, the Methodists, Presbyterians, Anglicans and Lutherans, to ascertain whether it would be mutually feasible to enter into some kind of co-operation between them and the faculty.

In the meantime, by October 1997, the internal negotiations led to the adoption of a formal declaration of intent to create an ecumenical faculty. By August 1998 the two Faculties of Theology and the University management agreed to a document, in which, *inter alia*, the following principles were formulated:

- * It is in the interest of the University of Pretoria and of participating churches that a Faculty of Theology should be maintained at this university.
- * The main task of the Faculty is to do theology and to educate candidates for church ministry.
- * Partnership with the churches and good co-operation between participating churches and the University is vital for the success of the faculty. The Faculty of Theology has an ecumenical or multi-church character.
- * The manner in which churches that are involved with the faculty co-operate with each other will be formulated in a formal agreement.
- * Church involvement will apply to all the phases of theological education in accordance with the agreements that the church conclude with the university.
- * Church involvement in the work of the Faculty occurs in two forms. These are of a general and particular nature respectively. The first is managed by an Ecumenical Advisory Body and the second by the relevant church committee.
- * The distinction between general and particular church involvement is determined by negotiation between the participating churches and in consultation between them and the University.
- * The number of academic posts for which each participating church will be invited to nominate candidates will be determined by the number of students from a particular church involved in the programmes of the faculty. This procedure must be reconcilable with the academic interests of the faculty.

On the basis of these principles the initial two denominational faculties were amalgamated into one ecumenical Faculty during August 1999. Further negotiations are under way in an attempt to involve other churches in due course.

The new faculty is organised in the traditional six departments of Old Testament, New Testament, Systematic Theology, Church History, Practical Theology and Missiology. Science of Religion is also taught in the latter department.

At the appointment of faculty officials, like the dean, deputy dean and the heads of departments, the overall involvement of a particular church is taken into account, in addition, of course, to considerations of academic and administrative competence. The basic aim is that, in this regard, one should have a balance of the relevant considerations of an institutional and academic nature.

The participating churches deal with their common interests in the faculty through the mechanism of an Ecumenical Advisory Board. This Board has an advisory function only and does not make binding decisions. In cases where particular posts are allocated to specific churches, in terms of the agreement of the university with such a church, that church may have representation on the university committee dealing with such an appointment.

A factor that complicated the transformation process, was the fact that it did not only have to deal with the institutional structures of the faculty, but simultaneously also with its academic programmes, which had to comply with new directives from government agencies like SAQA. After extensive consultations with representatives of various churches, with the South African Council for Theological Education and various other Faculties of Theology, the faculty decided to implement a new degree structure and corresponding new curricula. The previous structure of two consecutive three year Bachelor's degrees, one in arts followed by one in divinity, was replaced by a new one, existing of a four year Bachelor of Theology degree followed by a two year multidisciplinary professional Master's degree in divinity. The second year of the latter degree may include an in service training component for those churches that prefer that.

A vital feature in this curriculum is its modular structure, applied according to a credit system of one credit being awarded for ten notional hours of study. Modules in the BTh and MDiv programmes require eight weeks to complete. This mechanism is important for the ecumenical nature of the faculty's tuition. Two kinds of modules are used: those of a general church nature and those which are church specific. Churches are encouraged to use the first category as far as possible. They are, however, free to apply the second category, if they regard it as necessary.

Because of the fact that there are churches that do not require a six year training period for their clergy, an alternative degree structure is employed additionally. A three year BA (theology) degree is available, which can be followed by a one year BA (honours) degree. A selection of the same modules used for the BTh degree is employed to construct this alternative system.

When the initial discussions on the future degree structure of the faculty started, the university management initially suggested a *duplex ordo* system, according to which a distinction could be made between academic subjects and denominational subjects. In the negotiations, the Faculty did

not accept this suggestion, but rather opted for a *simplex ordo*, with a distinction between general church subjects and church-specific subjects. It was felt that the *duplex ordo* denies systematic and practical theology the academic status, which it does have within the scholarly community of theologians, both locally and internationally. It was furthermore felt that as far as the other theological disciplines were concerned, the *duplex ordo* in principle, disposes of the commitment of faith as context from within which theology is done. The faculty was aware of the fact that there has been debate on whether a theologian had to be a believer (Vroom 1990: 125-139; Dulles 1995:165-177). It concluded, however, that those doing theology in a purely detached manner, may be involved in some legitimate type of religious studies, but they do not reach the depth of insight into the tenets and implications of faith that is expected of theology. The designation *general church subjects* and specific church subjects was therefore accepted, in spite of the fact that it may be slightly misleading, because it refers to subjects which constitute the formal university programme, for which the faculty board and the senate of the university accepts final academic and institutional responsibility, and which are from time to time validated by external quality control measures, applied by reputable members of the scholarly community of theologians. It does, however, indicate that theology is dealt with in a manner which would comply with the identity and needs of those churches that are substantially represented in South African society. And furthermore it provides a forum in which a scholarly account can be given of those convictions and commitments, which the churches represent (Wethmar 1996:473-490).

Associated to the faculty, but not part of it, and by agreement having access to the facilities of the Faculty, are two structures that provide tuition and training in those aspects of ministerial formation, which does not and cannot form part of the formal academic programmes of the Faculty. They are, on the one hand, the Theological College the NHK, and the Centre for Continuing Theological Education of the NGK, on the other. The programmes they offer form part of the category "church-own programmes".

Having briefly described the basic principles and procedures associated with the development of a new Faculty of Theology at the University of Pretoria, a few remarks still have to be made on the notion of ecumenicity involved in this enterprise.

5 THE ECUMENICAL NATURE OF THE FACULTY

The strong emphasis on church involvement, which is a characteristic feature of the structures and programmes outlined in the previous paragraphs, requires a brief word of explanation. Not only has there recently been a debate on the question whether a theologian should be a believer – a question which has been answered in the affirmative above – but also

whether theology should be done in a church context. Quite a number of authors, both in South Africa and abroad, argue that should not be the case, because of the fact that the control, which the church wields through its demand for conformity to orthodoxy, inhibits the freedom required for any academic work worthy of that name (Du Toit 1995:38-57; Kuitert 1990:109-124; Van der Horst 1994:73-85).

Apart from having to say, that up to this point, the faculty, described in the previous paragraphs had not yet experienced this kind of inhibition, one could also argue that such an inhibition does not have to occur. It would have done so, if the confessional nature of the church had to be equated to legalism. But in a Reformed environment, that does not have to happen. Here, the church is seen as the church of the Word, and the confession as the way in which Holy Scripture exercises its authority in a particular historical context. Such a confession is a dynamic, relational and spiritual event that rather enables than restricts. It constitutes the freedom of assent to the truth of church doctrine, but also the possibility of dissent from it in the light of Holy Scripture. In order to fulfil its task in the church, theology should have a certain degree of freedom over against the official church. If it is to serve the church, in being the church of the Word, it should also serve the critical function of the Word over against the church (Wethmar 1999:71-89). The university is traditionally well suited for the exercise of this freedom. That would be the case even more when a university faculty of theology is able to involve churches from various traditions in what, perhaps, could be called a federal faculty, where theology is done in an ecumenical context.

The ecumenical nature of theology and theological education can be related to the catholicity of the church (Wethmar 1999:85). Theological truth is closely related to this catholicity. On the other hand, catholicity is dependent on the ultimate eschatological truth being envisaged and constantly aimed at. This truth, however, cannot be reached in this dispensation in a final consensus. It represents that fullness of truth, which belongs to God alone, and in which his creatures will share only at the end of the age (Macquarrie 1975:34). In the meantime, the church is on its way to this truth. Our insights at present, however important and decisive, are only provisional approximations of the final truth, and therefore, open to correction. This correction takes place in a dialectical process of dialogue between churches in which orthodoxy is established as a dialogical orthodoxy (Kasper 1972:131; Pannenberg 1993:152-164). In an ecumenical Faculty of Theology this purpose can be well served in a manner reconcilable with the university's ethos of academic freedom.

It is, however, important to take note of the fact that ecumenicity in this case is not indicative of confessional indifference. It does not imply non-denominationality, but rather denominations in dialogue. This

again implies that each participating church can have its students educated without alienating them from their church tradition, and simultaneously they can be trained to cope with the demands of being church in a plural society.

As has been indicated in the previous paragraphs, the transformation of the Pretoria Faculty has been stimulated by a number of non-theological factors. It should also, in the light of the considerations just mentioned, be possible to conduct it in terms of acceptable theological categories as well.

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