Theology and Culture(s) in Higher Education:

An African Perspective in a Global Context

Yvon Christian Elenga, SJ

Three years ago, in the pick of what was called a "big recession of the 21st century", many analysts raised the question of the correlation between the efficiency of market economy, particular cultural realities and ethics of responsibility. The point occurred as a concern about the approximate knowledge economists had on the collapse of many economic standards. To use John C. Haughey's words, one can ask: "Where is knowing going?"[1] It is now a commonplace to seek for a better combination between what one learns and how one makes it useful for his/her life with the articulation of good education and great value.

If we consider knowledge as something academic circles can provide and even promote, how can theology and culture(s) participate in a shared process of this human development? Of course there is a clear distinction between these two forms of knowledge. Yet they all are part of the "Christian humanism" that has shaped the dynamics of dialogue between reason and faith, philosophy and theology, church and culture. I am aware that the nature of these relationships has changed because history is on the move. This change does not erase the permanently addressed issue related to the performance of higher education. Indeed, as I will insist, this level of education remains one of the institutional contexts which can raise the question about model of knowledge, nature of relationship between disciplines, and perhaps role of education.

As you can tell, the agenda here is wide and unexhausted. I would like to share with you some key challenges as they are met in the African context. The localization of the problem is not a start of solution of any sort. It brings just new light to ways of confronting and exploring the necessary correlation of theology and culture(s). Since I am addressing the theme as a theology teacher, I need first to map out directions. The General Congregation 35

states: "Serving Christ's mission today means paying special attention to its global context. This context requires us to act as universal body with a universal mission, realizing at the same time the radical diversity of our situations. It is as a worldwide community – and, simultaneously, as a network of local communities – that we seek to serve others across the world. Our mission of faith and justice, dialogue of religions and cultures has acquired dimensions that no longer allow us to conceive of the world as composed of separate entities; we must see it as unified whole in which we depend upon one another."[2] Can theology and culture be studied in a Jesuit tertiary institution in avoiding an ideologization of mind? I would like to address the question by going back to the tradition. I will then suggest ways to better approach the problem.

The Spirit of Tradition

In his well celebrated De Magistro, Thomas Aquinas treated some discussed questions about teaching. Teaching, he writes, is all about three activities: "legere, disputare, praedicare". In his mind, it was clear that reading (legere) the Bible or any of the ancient texts such Aristotle's or Cicero's was a way of being in connection with fundamental texts. Debating (disputare) was a way to expose of a subject in academia. Questiones disputatae constituted the content of the debate. But the debate was not just restricted to academia. Confronting some theologians in the University of Paris, this gave him also an opportunity to defend the doctrine. Praedicare is the proper defense of Christian doctrine. To reach a mode of invention and knowledge, Aquinas continues, the one who teaches guides the one being taught in a process of conceptualization and development.

Ignatius of Loyola, who understood quite late the importance of higher education, saw the crucial role of education in the effective change of culture.[3] When he then came to understand that universities and colleges could provide a "more universal" good, he outlined their objectives in the "improvement in learning and living".[4] It was fundamental to Ignatius

that the function of a university of a college was to share knowledge. For a university or a college must go further in knowing. He also saw the place of these goals in the studia humanitatis. Humane letters of the Middle Ages (grammar, rhetoric, logic, dialectic) became an indispensable requirement, during the Renaissance Reformation, for the study of theology. "The learning of theology and the doing of theology require (especially in these times) knowledge of humane letters and of the Latin, Greek and Hebrew languages […] Under the heading of human letters is understood in addition to grammar, what pertains to rhetoric, poetry, and history".[5] The curriculum of this Ignatian perspective was expanded by the Ratio Studiorum of 1599.

The medieval conception of a university did not insist upon a production of new knowledge. Though one could mention the contribution of the successive centuries by Galileo, Copernicus, and so on, they were not initiated by universities. Perhaps it is in The Idea of a University (1850) that one finds John Henry Newman's characterization of a modern university: "The view taken of a university in these Discourses is the following: That it is a place of teaching universal knowledge".[6] Later in the mentioned book, he writes: "It is a place where inquiry is pushed forward, and discoveries verified and perfected".[7]

Such a perspective in the understanding of the university does not say much about the goals of intellectual developments or the functional priorities. M. P. Gallacher has noticed at least three models of priorities. 1) The German Model insists on research and emphasizes the role of a "specialized professor". 2) The British model puts particular accent on teaching in view of moral and intellectual development. 3) The Spanish model (of Ortega y Gasset) that defined culture as "the vital system of idea of a period".[8] I could probably extend this list of models since the history of universities is not limited to their original motives of their foundation. The development of institutions is subject of a series of social, political, and cultural changes.

3

Indeed, what commentators have called a crisis of identity in university could help redefine goals and models. John Paul II's Apostolic Constitution on Catholic University, Ex corde Ecclesiae (1990), has these lines: "By vocation, the universitas magistrorum et scholarium is dedicated to research, to teaching and to the education of students who freely associate with their teachers in a common love of knowledge." The pope adds: "A Catholic university, therefore, is a place of research, where scholars scrutinize reality with the methods proper to each academic discipline and so contribute to the treasury of human knowledge".[9] This brings new light in the debate. For decades the transmission of knowledge from the ancients was the focus of education, as was the transmission of the depositum fidei so important in the teaching of and research in theology.

<center>Tradition and transmission</center>

So far I have just highlighted the map of the matter. As one can note, the implication of theology and cultures in the configuration of university life is part of internal organization. As a scholarly disciple, theology has developed method, themes, and has even engaged in dialogue and/or confrontation with other disciplines. We all know its object. Questions have been raised and addressed concerning the relevancy and the authority of its language. Now that scholars do admit the history of theology covers a range of aspects, how can culture be part of this productive activity? Is theology just "a form of cultural activity"?[10] I am tempted to use the word culture from the Unesco definition, which I find very operative:

> Culture may now be said to be the whole complex of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features that characterize a society or social group [...]. It is through culture that man expresses himself, becomes aware of himself, recognizes his incompleteness, questions his own achievements, seeks untiringly for new means and creates works through which he transcends his limitations.[11]

The emphasis here is not on culture as a body of knowledge. Rather is it on the creative imagination of people of a given society. Such an imagination carries an impact on lifestyle, life-decision, and religious aspects of life. It is in this line that culture becomes a

source for theology, far beyond an apologetic work of transmitting a depositum fidei. As Gallgher stresses, inspired by B. Lonergan's Method in Theology: "[…] The core of an intellectual calling now involves being an interpretative intermediary between what is received in a living tradition and what is evolving in a changing culture".[12] As source of theology, culture is the incorporating element that correlates the religious substance and the cultural expressions of a given society. It is in the realm of culture that senses of values meet the challenges of transmissibility. By this I mean the way institutions such as colleges or universities can provide all humanistic studies. With this background, the Ignatian tradition has highlighted a pedagogy that assumes and combines educational process, creative culture and art of discernment.

The African Context

From the African perspective, since the so-called Independences, many events have structured the political context and determined the cultural imagination in such a way that one should not envisage a relevant analysis of the continent by stressing only over the collapses of states and institutions or economic uncertainties. Many analysts have used this paradigm of the crisis or pathology to approach the ongoing realities of a continent on the move. Yet there is a global uncertainty that characterizes the complexity of political and economic activities in the world today. Africa, for sure, is not an exception. Beyond this uncertainty, there are undoubtedly the preliminary possibilities of social transformation. Religious trends along with economic and political trends are the main parts of this change.

The atrociousness of the problems in Africa has been brought to the attention of various theorists. They point out the ambiguity of a continent that still struggles to define its identities and, at the same time, needs to relate to modern representations. That is why the constant configurations in contemporary Africa are to be taken as permanent reframing of tradition and modernity along the cline of inventions and imaginations.

The social transformation in the twentieth century can be framed in a philosophical way as an attempt to posit one's identity by way of a set of habits and practices labeled as African. The quest for identity is reflected in the crucial dichotomy that exists between assimilation and rejection. Within the continent, two major directions were taken. The first one claimed the "African-ness" as found in or possibly reshaped by myths and other traditional narratives. The substratum of this line of thinking was the illusionary reconstruction of an "authentic" Africa. Along the same lines, a second move was made. It found the genuine way to build up auto-determination in ideologies such as Marxism and panaficanism.

To follow the thread of the development of the states in post-colonial Africa, one must recall the conditions of pre-colonial states. This allows us to focus on the path to modern states and underline the appropriation that has been made. Three trajectories can be traced in the process of formation of postcolonial states. While states power has passed through different actors they correspond to three periods of time. The first period begins from the African territories conquest and ends in the 1930s. Its characteristics are administrative authoritarianism and decentralized despotism.[13] The second phase goes from the 1940s until the exciting promises of de-colonialization. Here appeared the "modernizing bureaucrats" who try to construct African future in terms universalistic context and its modern institutionalization. Power remains still centralized and interventionist. In the late 1950s, the third period represents a moment of decentralization with African leaders coming into responsibility.

a.   Jesuits and the work of Solidarity

Let me start with two quotations:

"Full human liberation, for the poor and for us all, lies in the development of communities of solidarity at the grass-roots and non-governmental as well as the political level, where we can all work together towards total human development." Society of Jesus: General Congregation 34, Decree 2, §59.

"…Our responsibility as an international apostolic body is to work with others at the regional and the global level for a more just international order." Society of Jesus: General Congregation 34, Decree 2, §72.

While the work for solidarity is not exclusive to the ministry of the Society of Jesus in our time, perhaps one should go back to the era of our Jesuit founding fathers. Right at the beginning of his religious experience, Ignatius made it clear that living close to the poor, remaining poor, and preaching to the poor as Christ did, should be the standard for the preferential option. Even in their Constitutions, it is noticeably stated that Jesuits are to look for ways and modalities to "serve the poor, help the sick, visit prisoners." Today this configuration of the work of Jesuits in the past may seem very obsolete since we are in a different context, our world has changed quite significantly since 1540, and the global environment is becoming more and more challenging. This is what makes the work of solidarity urgent and undoubtedly precious.

b.   The Theological Imagination and the Cultural Creativity

"Globalization has hastened the spread of a dominant culture which has brought to many people wide access to information and knowledge, an enhanced sense of the individual and freedom to choose, and openness to new ideas and values across the world. At the same

time, this dominant culture has been marked by subjectivism, moral relativism, hedonism, and practical materialism leading to an 'erroneous or superficial vision of God and man' […] In all our ministries, we are called to a more serious engagement with this reality and to broaden the spaces of a continuing dialogue and reflection on the relationship between faith and reason, culture and morality, and faith and society […]".Society of Jesus: General Congregation 35, Decree 3, §20.

"An Ignatian work can be said to be Jesuit when it has a clear and definitive relationship with the Society of Jesus and when its mission accords with that of the Society by a commitment to a faith that does justice through interreligious dialogue and creative engagement with culture." Society of Jesus: General Congregation 35, Decree 6, §10.

In terms of theological imagination in the African cultural context, the challenges of coherence and appropriateness will concerned predominantly the articulation of a language that speaks to African people and affirms the faithfulness to the living tradition of the Church. One level of analysis and imagination is the re-visitation of some classical themes in providing epistemological elements to discern afresh the articulation of culture and the interpretation of dogmas. Another level is the understanding of African culture that does not stick to the pre-colonial or colonial Africa. Now that African societies are on the move, that essential categories of Christian faith have been or are being appropriated, the hermeneutical reflections in this post-colonial time brings at the surface structuring factors of the continent. One can detect two paths that mark the lines for a hermeneutics of the self. The first path entails self-examination of African philosophical and theological discourse. The second path is a deconstructive critique of stereotypes usually displayed by some Africanists who view Africans of African culture as a monolithic pattern. In this pattern, particular attention has been brought on the everyday culture and human condition. Here the point is to consider

theological imagination in connection with the historicity of language, and to conceive theology as an autobiographical reflection.

c.   Teaching theology and producing culture

"L'existence chrétienne ne peut se comprendre que dans une tension entre une référence à la singularité d'une histoire et la référence à l'actualité de la vie dans l'Esprit. D'un côté elle s'enracine dans une histoire concrète et effective, elle est renvoyée à un personnage singulier ; mais d'un autre côté ce rapport l'expulse de tout passéisme, puisqu'elle lit sa propre élection dans cette histoire […] Ainsi la fidélité à Jésus implique de vivre selon son Esprit qui est l'Espirt du ressuscité, non point de se fixer sur un point du passé, dépassé, mais d'être fidèle au mouvement de dépassement qui anime ce « point » lui-même." P. Valadier, La condition chrétienne. Du monde sans en être, Paris, Seuil, 2003, p. 129.

The contemporary conflict of interpretations of theology and its object, on one side, and that of culture, on the other, does affect the teaching of theology. The pluralistic context of our time makes it clear that it is now necessary to take into account the limit situation wherein the public validity of theology is challenged, and the relativity of culture is promoted. Yet, as a matter of fact, theology still remains determined by the flourishing cultural trends. That is why dialogue must be kept with cultures to verify the meaningfulness of the theological truth.

In the post-colonial culture of Africa, one needs to raise the questions of 1) the function of a university in connection with the contemporary expectations; 2) the appropriate articulation of a faith discourse and the cultural expressions of the time. I have put side by side these two aspects of learning and knowing without emphasizing upon the dynamics of theology sui generis or upon the exposition of cultures since the African continent is made of a mosaic of cultures. If a school must seek to examine its formative and humanistic horizons,

9

it has to go further and through constant self-examination. Theology and culture must then be viewed as entertaining a permanent dialogue for the search of meanings and values.

Notes

[1] J. C. HAUGHEY, *Where Is Knowing Going? The Horizons of the Knowing Subject*, Washington, D.C., Georgetown University Press, 2009.

[2] GC 35, § 20.

[3] M. J. BUCKLEY, « Christian Humanism and Human Misery: A challenge to the Jesuit University », in F. M. LAZARUS, ed., *Faith, Discovery, Service. Perspectives on Jesuit Education*, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, Marquette University Press, 1992, 77-105, at 83-84.

[4] *Constitutions* IV, 11, § 440.

[5] *Constitutions* IV, 12, §§447-448.

[6] J. H. NEWMAN, *The Idea of a University*, D. M. O'CONNELL, ed., Chicago, Loyola University Press, 1927, 3.

[7] *Ibidem*, 473.

[8] See M. P. GALLAGHER, « University and Culture: Towards a Retrieval of Humanism », *Gregorianum* 85/1 (2004), 149-171, at 151-152.

[9] JOHN PAUL II, « Ex corde Ecclesiae. The Apostolic Constitution on Catholic Universitie*s* », *Origins* 20 (4 October 1990), § 17.

[10] K. TANNER, *Theories of Culture. A New Agenda for Theology*, Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1997, 63.

[11] Quoted by M. P. GALLAGHER, « University and Culture », 160.

[12] *Ibidem*, 168.

[13] M. MAMDANI, *Citizen and Subject. Contemporary African and the Legacy of Late Colonialism*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1996.