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ECODOMY AS EDUCATION IN TERTIARY INSTITUTIONS.
TEACHING THEOLOGY AND RELIGION IN A GLOBALIZED WORLD:
WESTERN PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract: This paper investigates whether and how teaching theology and religion in institutions of higher learning can contribute positively to the development of human society. The positive character of such development is described by means of the idea of ecomomy, defined as constructive process. The inquiry assesses the constructive role theology and religion can have if taught in higher education institutions in an open and critical way. As such, the relationship between theology (including the idea of religion in general) and a wide spectrum of aspects (such as pluralism, hermeneutics, globalization, public engagement, oppression) are debated with the sole purpose of identifying ecomomic, constructive ways in which theology and religion can contribute to the development of society. The article focuses on specifically Western contributions to educational reform with the sole purpose of identifying viable arguments in favor of tertiary theological and religious education (which can be seen as valid and functional throughout the world in contemporary societies and have the potential to be applied in non-Western contexts). The actual investigation of these Western models is preceded by a concise description of the premise and method used for the current research. The study concludes with a critical assessment conducted from a predominantly Western angle. This focuses on the practical application of theology and religion in various local contexts based on the implementation of renewed university curricula aimed at the ecomomic development of society in general.

Key words: education, ecomomy, university, theology, religion, constructive, Africa.

1. Introduction

The Western educational perspectives researched in this work emerged within a 2017 colloquium organized by the Faculty of Theology at the University of Pretoria. Back then, the faculty had just decided to follow a long-term strategy based on openness to everybody and everything, namely to people of all backgrounds, faiths, convictions, and religions. This article is an attempt to see how teaching theology and religion can be conceived as being implemented realistically in the global world in connection with the faculty's fundamental research theme identified as "ecodomy". It should be stressed here that, for the purposes of this study, the concept of ecodomy was used in accordance with the definition provided by Geiko Müller-Fahrenholz in the mid-1990s which focuses on the spirit of community building (Müller-Fahrenholz 1995, 109). Conceived as including "any constructive process", the idea of ecodomy as education based on teaching theology and religion in a university setting was the underlying theme which pervaded the colloquium as a red thread clearly visible through the presentations of all participants in the colloquium, Western and African. In this paper though only the contributions of Western scholars will be taken into account as educational patterns to see whether they applicability resides not only in Western contexts but also perhaps across the African continent.

In light of this proposition, the thesis of the article is the presupposition that these Western educational perspectives can have a positive common denominator which enables them to disseminate religious and theological education throughout the world in a ecodomic, constructive way not only in the traditional West but also potentially in non-Western contexts. The demonstration will follow the notion of education as ecodomy (with reference to religion and theology) in tertiary institutions with the purpose of contributing to the actual development of societies in the West as well as elsewhere in the world.

It should be highlighted here that while the colloquium was interested in discussing what happens in public universities everywhere in general educational terms, the papers and the subsequent discussions did end up focusing on teaching theology at faculties of theology in public universities throughout the world. More specifically, theology – as well as the general subject of religion – was taken into account as part of the larger field of humanities from the standpoint of its past and present ecodomic contribution (but also of its prospective future results) not only to the tertiary education system but also the whole of society in general across the globe.

2. Premise

Thus, this article is an attempt to investigate if the idea of ecodomy is theoretically feasible in connecting the idea of education in public universities with the particular endeavour to teach theology – which is traditionally confessional and hence positively or negatively divisive – in such a way that, within the context of public universities, students and professors are provided with a constructive working environment as well as an open-to-all approach to personal and communitarian development. While such an investigation may appear to have a rather natural answer in the Western world, it may not be the same with the general situation on the African continent – hence the colloquium’s preoccupation not only to investigate if education can be carried forward in terms of ecodomy but also if the very idea of ecodomy as education can at least be conceived in a theoretical way as making sense for the future. Why?

Because the question of whether or not education can be seen as ecodomy or if ecodomy can be achieved by education is not without relevance in today’s world. Conflicting ideologies roam free not only in Africa where the colonial past with its respective philosophy is still visible throughout the whole of Africa at least by means of its practical consequences resulting in the poverty of most black Africans. The Western world as well is caught up in this ideological conflict between opposing ideologies such as the exclusivism of traditional capitalism and the more recent inclusivistic philosophies focusing on minority groups of all sorts (feminist, sexual or else). In other words, to quote Jerusha Tanner Lamprey, in dealing with theology and religion one can usually identify a “standard typology” which deals with “exclusivism, inclusivism, pluralism, and sometimes particularism” (Tanner Lamprey 2014, 115), and this appears to be the standard virtually everywhere in the world.

In order to see if and how these philosophies can or should be dealt with in contemporary times throughout the global academic spectrum, the Pretoria colloquium included a rather wide range of Western and African participants. While African contributions came from sub-Saharan Africa and South Africa, Western insights were provided by scholars from Europe and the United States of America. Firmly anchored in the belief that theology and religion is not only a perennial reality of the world across the globe, contributors were keen to demonstrate that teaching theology in a public university can indeed provide a constructive way forward for religious education in the 21st century in terms described by this article as ecodomic. A common denominator of all contributions was the staunch conviction that there is no true, genuine education without the earnest study of theology and religion which can and should be done ecodomically or constructively across the spectrum of institutions of tertiary education throughout the world.

3. Method

Methodologically, this study is based on qualitative research which is an indication that the only aspect of interest for the research itself is the totality of ideas expressed throughout the colloquium. Quantitative aspects such as the number of participants and the various percentages represented by their ideas as originating in different geographical, social, economic, and cultural contexts are irrelevant for the purposes of this study. The places of origin of each of the colloquium participants are going to be taken into account exclusively for their informative value, with the sole intention of raising awareness of how various ideas may or may not circulate in different geographical, social, economic, and cultural backgrounds.

For instance, it is considered important that a certain idea which was proposed by an American can be not only accepted but also implemented in a different geographical, social, economic, and cultural environment. Likewise, it is equally important to establish whether or not an idea expressed by an African can be of both theoretical and practical value in a contexts of different geographical, social, economic, and cultural characteristics. To be sure, none of the ideas displayed throughout the colloquium will be considered based on where their promotor comes from - thus, the Americanness, Africanness, and/or Europeanness of the ideas debated during the colloquium will not be considered as possessing any epistemological value whatsoever. Moreover, for the sole purposes of this study, only the Western contributions will be subject to critical analysis in hope of discovering principles which demonstrate the ongoing validity of theological and religious education in contemporary societies across the globe.

What matters to this study is the quality of ideas, their theoretical worth, as well as their practical feasibility and especially whether or not ideas originating in a certain different African and Western contexts may or may not have any bearing upon a different context. To be sure, in this paper, only Western contributions will be subject to investigation. In other words, the purpose of the study is to see if ideas collected from all over the world by Western scholars are indeed capable of possessing a common feature which can establish that education may work as ecodomy across the world in various geographical, social, economic, and cultural contexts, such as the Europe and the United States of America (but also have the potential to work throughout the whole of the African continent).

4. Theology and Pluralism

The honorary guest speaker at the banquet which followed the Pretoria colloquium was David F. Ford, Regius Professor of Divinity (Emeritus) at the University of Cambridge, England, United Kingdom. Ford began his discourse by emphasizing the fact that the field of theology is under the pressure of responsibility which needs to be correlated not only with the realm of tertiary education or the university, but also with the whole world – including the African continent. As such, the responsibility of theology – and, by extension, that of religion – is to make sure it produces “life at its fullness” (Ford 2017, 6), an expression which was the unofficial motto of the Faculty of Theology at the University of Pretoria. Ford warns that the world is full of various types of faith which fall under the careful watch of theology whose responsibility is to educate people in this respect. Men and women across the globe understand faith in ways which Ford describes as “ignorant”, “foolish”, and even “dangerous”, so the responsibility of theology is to provide people with a proper education so that these approaches to faith are corrected (Ford 2017, 4).

It is Ford’s conviction that theological and religious education in the university is capable of providing people with a suitable understanding of faith which allows them to enjoy a better life; hence, his belief in the capacity of theological and religious education to improve human life. Ford emphasizes that the duty of theology in a public university is to search for “wise, more intelligent, and more responsible faith and belief, and wise, more intelligent, and more responsible understanding of faith and belief, all for the sake of the flourishing of a healthily plural world” (Ford 2017, 4). In other words, there is no genuine religious pluralism without a proper theological and religious education in public universities. Reversely, if a certain society seeks to enjoy true religious pluralism, then it should focus on building a solid system of public universities where theology and religion are taught responsibly. Such pluralist societies do not just create themselves; the key ingredient which makes a certain society pluralist appears to be theology – in fact, responsible teaching of theology and religion in public universities.

As far as Ford is concerned, the role of theology in educating societies towards genuine pluralism is immense since the very foundation of pluralism rests on how theology is taught in public universities. Nevertheless, the reverse is also true; in Ford’s words, “pluralist societies are ... stakeholders in the future of theology” (Ford, 2011: 148) which indicates that the presence of theology and religion in public universities can really survive only in pluralist societies. If this is true, a genuinely pluralist society will strive to keep theology and religion as part of its public university system not because people may or may not be interested in these fields but because theology and religion are vital in keeping the pluralist essence of that society. By extension, in Ford’s view, theology and

religion are instrumental in preserving democracy in any society. This means that theology and religion can work ecodomically for the improvement of society not only in education and learning, but also in politics and economy for the wellbeing of as many members of that society as possible.

5. Theology and Hermeneutics

If theology and religion in general may indeed be useful for the flourishing of democratic societies, what can be said of the Christian religion? Should public universities seek to focus on religion in general or a religion in particular? Since the Western world appears to be facing a certain “waning of Christianity in Europe and North America” - if one is to believe the phrase coined by Donald Armstrong (Armstrong 1999, 95) - is it still feasible to finance the study of theology, and especially of Christian theology, in public universities? A possible answer is provided by Marcel Barnard, professor at the Protestant Theological University of Amsterdam in the Netherlands, who describes a global picture of what theology is or can be. For instance, since Christianity is a global phenomenon and not only a feature of European life, Barnard chooses to no longer insist on philosophical and economical considerations but rather to focus on the geographical impact of the Christian religion.

Concretely, he points out that the continent of Africa has over 800 million people who belong to the Christian religion in all its confessional traditions. This already significant number is very likely to increase, Barnard opines, and if he is right then it is possible that the number of African Christians should rise to over one billion by the year 2050 in the geographical area lying south of Sahara (Barnard 2017, 5). The Christian religion, however, is on the rise not only in sub-Saharan Africa, but also in South America and Eastern Asia, so if Ford is right in postulating that the study of religion - Christianity included - is a vital ingredient in ecodomically creating a democratic society, then the very same ecodomic benefits of theological and religious study are more than merely obvious should one consider the geographic expansion of Christianity in the global South according to Barnard's example. Nevertheless, when it comes to the actual study of theology, Barnard insists that it must be based on a certain type of hermeneutics which is characterized by freedom, criticism, and commitment. The study of theology must be performed as objectively as possible and it must always include “traditions, convictions, beliefs, and practices” (Barnard 2017, 5).

Thus, according to Barnard, each religion, Christianity included, must be treated the very same way, so that all communities - and, by extension, all societies - reap the same benefits of a critical and honest study of theology and religion. Only this particular sort of committed and objective

hermeneutics will eventually contribute to the ecodomic development of human life across the globe (Barnard 2017, 6). Commitment and objectivity, however, cannot be achieved without earnest critical assessments; this is why Barnard warns that “students and scholars are invited to introduce their beliefs and practices and discuss them critically with others” (Barnard 2017, 8). Thus, according to Barnard, no aspect of religion – theoretical or practical – should escape the vigilance of informed criticism if society is to genuinely reap the ecodomic benefits of the academic study of theology and religion in public universities throughout the world.

6. Theology and Globalization

It must be pointed out here that in order for the entire world to benefit from the academic study of theology and religion, the very idea of theology and religion should never be restricted to Christianity alone. Theology and religion – and especially the academic study of theology and religion in public universities based on earnest, critical, and committed hermeneutics – have the capacity to enact social transformation in potentially any human society; it is important therefore that the very definition of theology or religion be explained from the very start if it can have results which can be described as beneficial or ecodomic. This particular idea was advanced by Ruud Ganzevoort, professor at the Free University of Amsterdam in the Netherlands, who discussed the study of theology and religion within the complex reality of globalization. Thus, Ganzevoort is convinced that contemporary times provide the perfect example of a world which is inter-connected like never before in its history to the point that various societies are linked to one another via the internet and media irrespective of their past, economic development, religious affiliation or anything else which may otherwise be a motive for division. In such a globalized world, Ganzevoort believes, restricting the study of theology and religion to the Western world and Christianity is not only impossible but also detrimental, or anti-ecodomic. Theology should be equated to religious studies, so that the academic study of religion in public universities includes not only Christianity but also every religion still extant in the world (Ganzevoort 2017, 22-23).

It is crucial for public universities to include the study of theology and religion(s) in their academic curricula because theology and religion contribute to a better understanding not only of the human being, but also of human existence in the world in an ecodomic, constructive, positive way. In doing so, however, the study of theology and religion must never remain restricted to the academic realm; on the contrary, theology and religion must become actively and ecodomically present in society. In Ganzevoort, therefore, theology and religion must attempt to deal with as

many social problems as possible and they must do so without fear of nefarious consequences. Faith seeking understanding, Ganzevoort believes, is the very slogan which should animate the academic study of theology and religion in public universities; thus, the task of theology is to explain the infinitely complex psychology of the human being in the contemporary globalized world – and this is exactly what ecodomy is all about (Ganzevoort 2017, 24). In this particular world, when the academic study of theology and religion meets the extraordinary progress of science, the positive transformation of society is not only possible, but also mandatory; thus in the 21st century, to quote Lieven Boeve, “theology finds itself at the crossroads of academy, church, and society” (Boeve 2016, 54).

For this positive transformation to become actual, however, the world must find a common language and Ganzevoort is convinced that this common language is provided by the critical study of theology and religion in public universities; theology as common language is perhaps the quintessence of ecodomy. When theology becomes the ecodomic common language of the world, humanity can really address difficult issues like gender inequality, poverty eradication, climate change, injustice, and war. Also, when theology turns into a language spoken by as many human beings as possible across the wide and complex range of world religions, Ganzevoort explains that theology is no longer “the prerogative of the church”; it is the property of the whole world which can and should use it in ecodomically dealing with still ardent global issues like human sexuality, public life, active politics, feminist ideologies, and black marginalization (Ganzevoort 2017, 25).

7. Theology and Engagement

The academic study of theology and religion in public universities across the globe in order for the whole world to acquire a common language in dealing with social problems may appear if not utopian, then at least extremely difficult to achieve. Christian Danz, professor at the University of Vienna in Austria, demonstrates that it is not exactly that hard to do so. First and foremost, public universities need to understand that theology and religion can indeed be engaged in dealing with the most essential problems of human societies across the globe. Second, the very same institutions of higher education need to comprehend that theology and religion do not refer exclusively to “everyday religion”, namely the actual practice of various religions, but also to what is nowadays described as “public theology”, or the academic attempt of public universities to provide solutions to as many social problems as possible based on the academic study of theology and religion (Danz 2017, 16).

Thus, the idea of “public theology” encapsulates the very substance of ecodomy because theology can help society solve its public problems. Danz argues that theology and religion are not just scientific subjects of more or less interest to be included in tertiary education curricula throughout the world. Theology and religion are much more than this; in fact, they are ecodomic instruments which can provide significant support in helping human beings realize what societies are made of and why they face specific problems. According to Danz, theology and religion are crucially important to any society because they deal with interpretation. Theology and religion can ecodomically provide the necessary means whereby human beings are capable not only of interpreting themselves and their problems but also of providing possible solutions to those problems. If theology and religion are hermeneutic instruments to decipher human problems and ecodomically offer ways to solve them, how can or should theology and religion be studied in public universities? Danz has the solution: theology and religion should always be studied in conjunction with secular philosophy, religious philosophy, and social ethics (Danz 2017, 16).

Theology and religion communicate certain information but they do so in dealing with what Danz calls “symbols”. These symbols, which include ideas like God, Christ, and Spirit, must be interpreted for each society and once the interpretation is provided, these symbols become useful in providing ecodomic solutions to social problems. Roger Haight notices that this mechanism is in fact “symbolic communication” (Haight 1999, 209), and it is precisely this sort of idea which Danz uses to exemplify how the academic study of theology and religion can ecodomically work in solving social problems. Theology and religion offer explanations about human development, Danz writes, and in doing so they not only inform society on the fabric of its problems, but also provide ecodomic solutions to these problems by assisting societies in reaching individual and communitarian self-understanding. It is important, however, to realize that the role of theology and religion in providing ecodomic solutions to social problems is not passive. On the contrary, it is active because the academic study of theology and religion in public universities has a trinitarian/triple dimension. Thus, the scientific study of theology and religion deals with the ecodomic identification, engagement, and resolution of such social challenges in all social contexts (Danz 2017, 17).

8. Theology and Oppression

While theology and religion have the potential to be ecodomic and constructive in all social contexts, in order for them to genuinely work ecodomically in all social contexts they need to be adapted to each social context. An excellent example of how theology and religion should be

applied to particular social contexts is provided by Patrick Hornbeck, who teaches at Fordham University in New York, United States of America. Hornbeck uses the notion of “proyecto social”, an idea he borrowed from Ignacio Ellacuría who first used it in connection to the university. By extension, however – and this is exactly what Hornbeck is doing – the “social project” can be applied not only to the university per se, but also to how theology and religion should work in a certain social context, especially in those dominated by oppression of some sort. Thus, according to Hornbeck, the ecodomic effects of theology and religion being within the particular context of the university, simply because universities do have a powerful and visible impact in society through their graduates (Hornbeck 2017, 27).

In conjunction with Alain Touraine’s conviction that “the university reproduces society, it produces for society, and it serves to transform society”, Hornbeck uses Ellacuría’s thought to insist that all universities – public and private, secular and confessional – not only have to potential to work ecodominically in the world, but also have the duty to do so in each and every social context. For instance, all universities where theology and religion is present in the curricula, should find a way to help people whose lives are afflicted by perennial social problems such as poverty (Hornbeck 2017, 28). In fact, according to Hornbeck, universities should target such problematic contexts because they can deal with poverty by means of theology and religion. Whenever they do so, universities work ecodominically for the social transformation of society. In order to do so, however, universities must become aware of the ecodomic potential of theology and religion which in turn should be translated into various social programs aiming at social improvement in particular social contexts, especially in those where poverty is pandemic. Hornbeck, however, is aware that this cannot work unless societies develop a vision in this respect, namely that public universities are not only the “common property of us all” but also instruments which can ecodominically promote “the public good” and “the actualization of human potential” (Hornbeck 2017, 29).

In other words, universities have an immense potential to improve the quality of human life and the very fabric of human society if theology and religion are taught seriously, earnestly, and ecodominically for the sake of each human being in all such institutions of higher learning. This is an indication that teaching theology and religion in tertiary education systems is not only a theoretical endeavour but also a practical mission. Consequently, universities must find ways to practically apply all sorts of social measures with the specific intent to eradicate vicious ideologies like “racism, slavery, and segregation”. When this happens in any particular social context or hopefully around the world, Hornbeck is convinced that teaching theology and religion in tertiary education institutions has

achieved its ecodomic purpose of actively and effectively resisting oppression of all sorts (Hornbeck 2017, 28).

9. Conclusion

The purpose of this article was to find if there is a common characteristic for all Western perspectives on university education as ecodomy, and all seem to have focused on the fact that teaching theology and religion in tertiary schools may have both theoretical and practical outcomes in the actual development of society.

If universities should focus on the local problems of each society for increased chances of success, it means that teaching theology and religion in higher education with the specific purpose of achieving ecodomic, constructive results should be done by contextualization. As such, Bruce J. Nichols expresses his conviction that it is only through contextualization that theology and religion can truly be ecodomically effectively when they critically assess the contexts in which they are applied practically. Thus, theology makes critical evaluations through education and interpretation but in order for this process to be ecodomically successful, universities across the world and those within the African continent must work unceasingly based on the conviction – competently expounded by Wolfram Weiße – that proper education never excludes religiosity (Weiße 2008, 349).

In this case, teaching theology and religion in universities should always be considered a mandatory educational endeavour throughout the world because even if our world is globalized, problems are always contextual. Nevertheless, globalization is made of a conglomerate of individual contexts, so contemporary education must always be contextual despite as well as because of contextualization. This is why Joseph E. Bush appears to be correct in his assessment that globalization is nothing but “shared praxis in society” which leads to the conclusion that a contextualized approach to teaching theology and religion in universities cannot and should not be avoided in the 21st century (Bush, 2016: 114). If this is true and if teaching theology and religion in universities is aimed at solving local problems first, then any contextualized theology turns into what Ivor Davidson identifies as “practical, public, contextual, conversation or transformational theology” (Davidson 2015, 73).

When this happens, teaching theology and religion in institutions of higher learning will be ecodomic and constructive in the most genuine of senses because, as George M. Newlands prophetically predicts, “God has consequences for all human life” (Newlands 2006, 186). Translated pedagogically, Newlands’ prophecy indicates that theology and religion have consequences for all human life and it is the duty of the university system to make sure that these effects are socially ecodomic in all

respects, irrespective of people's traditional or non-traditional convictions. This certifies that teaching theology and religion in universities is not only recommendable, but also mandatory because of their ecodomic potential if human societies across the globe are truly interested in solid progress and constant development.

Acknowledgment

On July 29, 2017, the Faculty of Theology – now the Faculty of Theology and Religion – within the University of Pretoria in South Africa held a colloquium on “Re-Imagining Curricula for a Just University in a Vibrant Democracy – Carrying the Conversation Forward”. The colloquium occurred in a rather special context because the Faculty of Theology celebrated not only its centennial anniversary but also 500 years since the Protestant Reformation. This double celebration was appropriated as a milestone opportunity to reconsider its academic and spiritual mission as an African institution of higher education in a globalized world where the problems of a certain society tend to become issues of more or less serious concern for societies around the world. Within the same year, an article was published based on the colloquium papers: “Teaching Theology at African Public Universities as Decolonization through Education and Contextualization”. Authored by Johan Buitendag and Corneliu C. Simuț, the article appeared in HTS Theologiese Studies/Theological Studies [73(1): 1-8] and focuses on how teaching theology in African institutions of higher learning can advance the local issue of decolonization.

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