

The Future has Arrived: Changing Theological Education in a Changed World

Session 2

The Future has arrived. I know that statement doesn't make much sense; the future is always arriving, isn't it? It is never truly accurate to talk about the future as if it has finally happened—it is something that is always happening. The future arrives each day, just as the sun's rising in the morning follows its setting in the evening. This moment in time in the church and theological education, however, it doesn't seem to be happening that way. It is as if the future has moved faster than the present and the sun has risen in the east before it has set in the west. Theological schools in North America are at an unprecedented time in their history—a future has arrived and they are struggling to catch up with it.

So many factors that influence North American theological education have been changing at the same time, and ATS schools are being affected by both the scope and pace of change, especially the changes in North American religion. In this presentation, I want to talk about some of these changes and why they demand that North American theological schools change. Religion is awash with fundamental change, and it remains to be seen how faithfully theological schools will change.

Maybe a better way to understand the moment that schools are facing is to use biblical images. Jesus was born in the “fullness of time.” The conditions may not have been ideal for the Savior of the world to have been born, but the God of ages past and years to come saw fullness, and determined that it was the right time to demonstrate God's remarkable love. The Bible has one word for the kind of time that passes, like the hours of the day, and another term for the kind of time that marks special opportunity. The changes in religion and higher education seem to be far greater than the kind of changes that come and go with the passing of years. They are better understood as constituting a special time—a unique historical moment when the opportunities outweigh the threats. It is never clear, in the middle of the day, which kind of time it is. Maybe the future has not arrived, but I am quite convinced that this is a special time, in the way the New Testament teaches us to understand *kairos*.

The changed and changing world of North American religion

North American religion has been and continues to change in many ways.

Denominations

Denominations have changed and are changing. The reunion of two US. Presbyterian church bodies that formed the Presbyterian Church (USA) is twenty-five years old, and in little more than two decades, membership is down by one-third. The Assemblies of God, on the other hand, has grown each of the past nineteen years, and now equals the PC(USA) in size. The Unitarian Universalist Association has charted membership gains during the past two decades, while the US membership of the Church of the Nazarene¹ has been relatively flat. Membership in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America has declined gradually for many of the years following

the merger that formed it,ⁱⁱ and membership in the massive Southern Baptist Conventionⁱⁱⁱ plateaued during this past decade and registered slight declines in the most recent years. The United Church of Canada has lost almost half of its membership since its mid-twentieth century peak. Even stable numbers mask considerable internal change. For example, while Roman Catholics have constituted about 25 percent of the American population across these two decades, almost 25 percent of adults who grew up Roman Catholic no longer consider themselves to be Catholic. (No Protestant denomination has as high a retention rate as the Roman Catholics.) Some denominations are stronger, most are weaker, and while each has a loyal constituency, it does not appear that denominations will be the structural center of North American Christianity in the future as they have been in the past.

Christian identities

As denominations have weakened, the Christian identities that denominations cultivated have lessened. People seem less aware of what it means to be a Baptist or a Methodist or a Lutheran. Presbyterians and Methodists move easily from a congregation of one denomination to a congregation of the other, as if Arminian and Calvinist positions are best resolved on the basis of which congregation has the better youth ministry program. The Pew US Religious Landscape researchers conclude that “44 percent of adults have either switched religious affiliation, moved from being unaffiliated with any religion to being affiliated with a particular faith, or dropped any connection to a specific religious tradition altogether.”^{iv} This denomination switching has resulted in an altered sense of Christian identity and religious practices. At my United Methodist congregation in Pittsburgh, I have seen people cross themselves at the communion rail and occasionally genuflect as they enter the pew. I’m no expert on Methodist piety, but I don’t think these practices are taught on confirmation retreats. Patterns of piety and religious practice have theological homes that shape a way of being Christian, but as practices are separated from those homes and blended with other practices, the theological coherence of any particular Christian identity is strained.

Religious participation

Religious participation in North America has changed. The percentage of residents of Quebec who attend church regularly has moved from higher than the Canadian average in the 1950s to lower than the national average now. The numbers are stunning—from over 80 percent frequent attendees in the 1950s to far less than 20 percent in the past decade.^v People are attending church differently. Reginald Bibby’s data on Canadian church attendance suggest that regular attendees are attending less regularly, and Mark Chaves’s data on attendance in the United States indicate that an ever increasing percentage of attendees are going to larger membership congregations.^{vi} The fastest growing religious preference for adults in the United States is “no religious preference.” Pew Forum’s recent study of “millennials” indicates that these young adults are not only less likely to be religiously affiliated than any other age cohort in the United States, they are less religiously active than their parents or grandparents were at the same age.^{vii} Folks in North America are still going to church—the United States and Canada have the highest estimated percentage of church attenders of any western democracy—but they are going to church differently than they used to.

Christianity as a world religion

Christianity as a world religion has been changing. More than 20 percent of all Christians now live in Sub-Saharan Africa; Christianity in that region grew an amazing seventy-fold during the twentieth century, to almost 500 million adherents.^{viii} Because Christianity embeds itself in the culture in which it is located, Christian practices are reinvented and beliefs take on differing hues as Christianity finds new cultural homes. The center of gravity of worldwide Christianity has moved. This will no doubt be the century of the first non-European pope and the one in which North American Christianity will be more influenced by Christianity in other parts of the world than worldwide Christianity will be influenced by North America. The growing influence of the global South is already affecting the Anglican Communion and US-based church bodies that have significant membership outside the United States. These influences will only grow as the century matures.

Religious pluralism

North America is increasingly experiencing the influence, interaction, and presence of the religions of the world. ATS worked on the idea of globalization in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In addition to noting the economic and political issues of a globalized world, the project encouraged theological schools to pay more attention to the world as a whole, to worldwide Christianity, and to the presence of the world's other religions. The processes of globalization have brought multiple religions into proximity with one another, and religious proximity can be stormy. Religion has been the basis for prejudice and violence, and in a globalized world, religious tensions threaten not only peace but also the fundamental opportunity for human flourishing. The presence of the world's religions in North America is still limited (about 6 percent of the US population identifies with a religion other than Christianity), but in cultures that value individual expression and do not legally privilege any one religion, the presence of the world's religions takes on an importance disproportionate to its percentage.

The changed and changing world of theological education

I have focused on the changes in religion because, in many ways, the church could exist without seminaries if it chose to do so, but the seminaries cannot exist without the church. It would be unwise, I think, for the church not to have schools for the training of its pastors and others, but it could be done. The seminary, however, has no reason to exist if no congregation will have its graduates as pastors and leaders. So, the seminary has a special reason to look at what is going on in the church and sort through what that means for the way it does its work, and what work it does.

This catalog of changes in North American Christianity is more illustrative than exhaustive, but each of these factors has an impact on theological education. The change in denominational strength and capacity has a direct effect on the majority of ATS schools that were founded by denominations to serve particular needs and structures. What is the mission of the denominational seminary related to a denomination that is losing members and institutional capacity? As the particular Christian identity of believers lessens, what is the role of the seminary to clarify what it means to be Christian? Changing patterns of church attendance affect leadership needs in parishes and congregations. They contribute to the increase in bi-vocational and alternatively credentialed clergy, as some congregations become smaller, and to the increase

of lay professional staff members, as other congregations grow larger. What do these changes mean for degree programs and educational practices? The shifting center of gravity in global Christianity invites North American theological schools both to consider their contribution to a wider world and to embrace the intellectual contributions that the world brings to them. Changed religious preferences call theological schools to reassess their work. How do Christians relate to the growing multi-faith character of North America, and what is their role when an increasing percentage of the population has no religious preference?

The schools have been changing, of course. Theological education practices are more diverse than they were twenty years ago: far more extension programs, a growing number of online courses (which did not exist at all twenty years ago), and a far wider array of degree programs. New degree programs and delivery patterns are institutional responses to changed religious realities and altered patterns of church-related work. The student bodies of ATS schools are changing. Just over 13 percent of all students in 1990 were persons of color, and this past fall more than 34 percent of total enrollment were persons of African, Asian, Latin American descent, or international students. The percentage of women students has grown from 29 percent to 35 percent, and the combined effect of these two changes is telling: women and students of color account for all the growth in enrollment since 1990. The faculty has changed as well. The percentage of women faculty members has grown from 15 percent in 1990 to 24 percent, and the percentage of faculty of color has increased from 8 percent to 15 percent. Changes in the composition of the faculties and student bodies reflect the changing composition of the population and the shifting roles of women in religious leadership.

While this is a great deal of change, much more will be needed. The religious world around North American schools has been changing faster and perhaps more pervasively than the schools have. Schools have adapted practices and modified structures, but ultimately, realities beyond the schools will require even more fundamental shifts in institutional form and educational character.

What other changes are needed? Here is a short list, one that I have advocated for North American schools.

1. The first broad response is to do better what theological schools have already been doing well. The changes that are needed are in addition to what schools have been doing well, not a replacement for what they have been doing. The pattern of theological education developed during the twentieth century in North America—which has no doubt influenced many of your schools through denominational, mission agencies, and education of many national leaders in those schools—has demonstrated enduring value. Christian pastors need to know more, not less, be more conversant with their culture, not less, work more creatively, not less. In order to meet the needs in the future, schools need to identify what they do best and learn to do it better. That is the first and most important place to start.

In addition to doing better what the schools have already been doing, North American schools need to give attention to some areas in the curriculum and patterns of educational practice.

2. While much of the curriculum should remain as it is, at least two areas related to the religious realities in North America need attention. The first is the growing number of persons affiliated

with religions other than Christianity, and the second is the ever growing number of persons who have no Christian faith. Pastors need more wisdom about Christian ministry in an increasingly multifaith context. Christian pastors have the job of standing in a pulpit and telling people that Christianity has a vision of the world that is worth their devotion and commitment, and is the source of their salvation. How do pastors make this authentic and compelling claim in ways that do not alienate the people who hear their sermons from their neighbors of other faiths? How do pastors advocate the claims of the Christian faith without fueling religious hatred or violence? How do we educate pastors for the real world in which Christians marry outside their faith, and one of your graduates has to think with them about how to raise their children, care for their sick, and honor their dead? Pastors are evangelists for the Christian gospel. They need to relate the Christian faith to people who have little religious interest and no religious commitment.

3. North American schools have begun to diversify educational practice, but they will need to continue to increase the ways in which they seek to educate pastors, other church leaders, and lay persons. Diversity of educational practices in the future will be as crucial as uniformity of educational practice was in the past. Diversity of practice, however, is only valuable if it both serves the multiple needs of a changed religious reality *and* reflects passionate and thoughtful educational practice with intellectual substance. Theological education must have more diverse models, but these models will have limited value if they do not reflect the equivalent of a gold standard for each.

Conclusion

I don't know how much Christianity has changed in Africa, but I know that it is changing a great deal in North America. On both continents, change in religious understanding and practices means that changes are necessary in the way that Christian pastors are educated and prepared for service. The changes may be different in North America from those in Africa, but on both continents we need the capacity to change, to reflect old commitments in new educational forms, and to be faithful to the future by not being bound to the past.

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ⁱ www.nazarene.org/files/docs/StatisticsAnnual.pdf.

ⁱⁱ www.elca.org/Who-We-Are/Our-Three-Expressions/Churchwide-Organization/Research-and-Evaluation.

ⁱⁱⁱ www.lifeway.com/lwc/files/lwcF_corp_news_ACP2009_GeneralData.pdf.

^{iv} <http://religions.pewforum.org/reports>

^v www.cbc.ca/news/background/catholicism/churchattendance.html.

^{vi} www.canadianchristianity.com/nationalupdates/071206state.html. See also

http://hrr.hartsem.edu/cong/research_ncs.html.

^{vii} pewforum.org/Age/Religion-Among-the-Millennials.aspx.

^{viii} pewforum.org/executive-summary-islam-and-christianity-in-sub-saharan-africa.aspx.