

THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION AND HUMAN RIGHTS

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AN URGENT CHALLENGE

Asia

An internationally known theological college in Taiwan finds itself at the center of the current struggle for human rights, as staff and graduates seek to guide their churches' response to an increasingly oppressive government that does not represent the majority population.

In South Korea professors and students of several seminaries have been arrested for participating in public demonstrations calling for democratization. One major institution was recently closed by security forces after students denounced the massacre of 189 people in the Kwangju uprising last May. Another theological school is made up of teachers and students who have been expelled from all accredited institutions.

In the Philippines theological educators have had to work quietly among marginalized people in order to avoid confrontation with the long-lasting rule of martial law.

Africa

In South Africa the major cluster of Black theological schools, Federal Theological Seminary, has recently moved into its new campus near Pietermaritzburg after wandering for five years from one borrowed home to another. In 1975 the government expropriated the former campus near the Fort Hare University at Alice following incidents involving prophetic statements and actions against apartheid. Even the new buildings, which cost over \$5 million, could be lost, for the government refuses to give final legal assurances concerning the land.

Latin America

A former director of a theological institute in Uruguay tells of years of imprisonment and torture.

A professor of the famous Instituto Superior Evangelico de Estudios Teologicos in Argentina "disappeared" years ago, and repeated international inquiries have brought no response from the authorities.

The Baptist Seminary in Nicaragua found itself increasingly caught up in the struggle against the uncompromising Somosa dictatorship and is now fully involved in the struggle to build a new, just society. (cp. pp. 13-16)

Last February the Latin American Commission on Theological Education, meeting at Cali, Colombia, published a statement which affirms that "One of the fundamental foci of the ministry which we are called to carry out is the whole area of human rights." (cp. pp. 11-12)

Europe

Theological educators from all over Europe who gathered at Herrnhut in East Germany last October declared that "theological education must include education for peace-making and social responsibility. It should help people

to grow in knowledge of and commitment to human rights, disarmament, and strategies for building trust between individuals, and nations." In view of the ultimate threat to human life posed by the confrontation of the superpowers, the churches and theologians in this sharply divided region have, since the Final Settlement of Helsinki in 1975, given special attention to peace education and human rights, and the Conference of European Churches has recently opened an office to pursue these concerns.

North America

Recognizing that their nation is directly and indirectly involved in the spreading violence, terrible dislocation, and massive poverty among the peoples of the world, a group of U.S. theologians and church leaders has issued a paper on "Theological Education and Liberation Theology," in which they challenge the life-style and socio-economic structures of their own people, and call for repentance and a radical critique of theological education. They invite their colleagues to lead the churches toward biblical liberation in solidarity with the poor and oppressed. (cp. pp. 17-20)

THE SCOPE AND COMPLEXITY OF THE STRUGGLE

Since 10 December 1948, when the U.N. General Assembly adopted and proclaimed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, enormous efforts have gone into the broadening struggle for human rights. The concept itself has been refined and extended to include not only legal procedures and civil rights but also the economic, social, and political systems that shape individual and corporate life, the cultural identity and dignity of peoples, and the basic physical needs of human existence. A 1978 U.N. publication, *Human Rights: A Compilation of International Instruments*, contains 50 major declarations, covenants, conventions and protocols which focus on such specific concerns as war crimes and crimes against humanity; torture and other inhuman treatment; racial discrimination and Apartheid; the rights of women, children and the disabled; the status of refugees and migrants; slavery and labor practices; and the eradication of hunger and malnutrition. (cp. bibliography in this newsletter, pp. 29-31)

Likewise the churches of all traditions have become increasingly aware and active in this wide range of concerns for the rights of all people so that they may enjoy the fullness of life that God wills for the whole human family. The involvement of Christian churches, groups, movements, and individuals in the struggle for human rights is most evident in the work of the World Council of Churches, whose programs reach into the entire range of concerns mentioned above.

It is now evident that in the last five years millions of Cambodians have died not only because of starvation, a repressive regime, and civil war; they are victims of geopolitics. Racism in Southern Africa is maintained and supported not only by the Afrikaaners and their Dutch Reformed Church; Europeans and North Americans, many of them "good Christians", continue to provide the capital, technology, and markets that underwrite the Apartheid system. Repression and violence in Central and South America -- there were 9,000 political deaths in tiny El Salvador in 1980 -- is not just the responsibility of local oligarchies and dictators; they are sustained and supplied by international political and economic interests and condoned by churches that refuse to become involved in politics and say they oppose violence.

In the name of "national security" the superpowers are spending millions per day on armaments, depriving their own poor of adequate schools, hospitals

and adequate housing; they are building up a destructive force that already measures 1¼ million times greater than that which decimated the city of Hiroshima in 1945. Our theological institutions, called to prepare the churches for ministry in this world today, face the unavoidable task of unraveling and exposing the powers of evil that enslave and destroy, and of unveiling and appropriating God's power to heal and save human life in all dimensions and in every local context.

THEOLOGICAL ROOTS AND ECUMENICAL CONCERNS

The Preamble of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which is of course non-sectarian, affirms that "Recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world." Christian theologians have, especially during the past decade, carried out serious research into their own diverse heritage to rediscover and articulate the theological roots for human rights and social justice. They declare that although the Bible does not address directly and extensively the specific human rights issues of today, these issues are clearly related to the fundamental tenets of the Christian faith.

In 1970 the General Assembly of the Lutheran World Federation launched an extensive study together with its member churches leading to an international consultation on human rights in 1976. The report of that consultation, "Theological Perspectives on Human Rights," sums up the Lutheran position, which is grounded in the doctrines of creation and redemption -- the law of God in worldly societies and the grace of God in the Christian community -- both of which affirm the transcendental ground and inalienable right to freedom, equality, and participation in public affairs.

The World Alliance of Reformed Churches, which had been concerned with human rights for many years, initiated a study process with its member churches at the meeting of its General Council in 1970. This process culminated in an international consultation in 1976 and a report on "Theological Bases of Human Rights". While affirming the creation of men and women in the image of God, Reformed teaching emphasizes God's sovereign claim upon human beings and His redemptive action in history. It focuses on the destructive power of evil -- which corrupts the image of God and violates human rights -- and on the liberating power of Jesus Christ.

Roman Catholic teaching on human rights emerges within the social doctrine of the modern papacy since the late nineteenth century. In 1963 John XXIII's *Pacem in Terris* gave a complete list of human rights grounded in the theological affirmation of the dignity of every person under God. Through the creation of men and women in the image of God, each person transcends the natural order and is open to God. Through the incarnation God identifies Himself with the whole human community, and all human beings enjoy the rights of justice and equality.

The Faith and Order Commission of the National Council of Churches, U.S.A. has made an attempt to bring together these three traditions in a 1980 paper, "Toward an Ecumenical Theology for Human Rights," which identifies three important areas of consensus. The three traditions affirm the holistic character of human rights which brings together the western liberal tradition of civil and political rights and the socialist tradition of economic, social, and cultural rights. They all find the theological basis for the essential dignity of every person in the relationship to God through His work of creation and redemption. All recognize the necessity of just social structures and genuine community for the realization of human dignity and rights.

These are only samples of the many consultations and documents that have dealt with human rights from the perspective of every major theological tradition. A more complete survey would have to include the uncounted local, regional, and international organizations that seek to expound and defend the rights of all people to a fully human existence -- in every place, under all kinds of circumstances, whatever their particular identity may be. Moreover, the churches and their institutions are beginning to deal more seriously with the critical issues now facing the world community, i.e. hunger, peace, energy, ecology, science and technology, and population, which are integrally related to the question of human rights.

THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION AND HUMAN RIGHTS

It may be admitted that theological institutions have been slow to recognize the importance of human rights in their curricula, but it is now clear that the concern for human rights is central to theological education, just as it is central to the faith, life and mission of the church. Faced with the widespread, growing, and in many cases indescribable violations of human rights, no theological school can fail to engage in this universal struggle -- in terms of theological research, curriculum content, institutional goals and life-style, community ethos, prophetic stance, and practical involvement -- and remain true to its vocation.

Of particular concern must be the way in which theological institutions naturally tend to reflect and support their constituencies, which in many places are the dominant and privileged sectors of society. Theological students and teachers must do socio-theological analysis of their local and global contexts, examine carefully the imperatives of the Gospel, and take concrete steps to break out of this bondage or they will in the long run be accomplices of the very forces of oppression and exploitation that they condemn.

Insofar as they are engaged in the task of preparing men and women to minister to the poor and the powerful, theological schools need to develop a pedagogy of human transformation that will not only theorize about human rights but engender the necessary commitments, understanding, and skills to promote holistic human development and to combat the root causes, structures, and specific manifestations of oppression. This may well involve serious questioning of existing patterns of curriculum design and classroom instruction. In some places it has already led to radical experimentation and basic institutional change.

What is at stake is not only theological education, but theology itself. For too long theological students have invested their formative years and theological teachers their specialized talents in the tedious labor of accumulating information and constructing an apparatus which few can relate effectively to the concrete struggles of people. The newer theologies of the Third World, of women, and of marginalized peoples have shown us how the most respected theologies and theological schools have ignored and supported discrimination and oppression, and they have shown us a more dynamic way of doing theology on the basis or in the midst of their struggles for liberation.

Ministerial formation, which ultimately must engage the whole people of God, becomes urgent and exciting when it is set squarely in the struggle for human rights in the deepest and widest sense of that concept. However limited and difficult may be their particular situation, those who enter the struggle for justice, peace, and a new humanity can identify themselves with partners of every creed and color, class and nation, religion and ideology and with the coming of God's rule on earth as it is in heaven.

PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS FOR THEOLOGICAL INSTITUTIONS

One simple but important suggestion is to encourage each theological school to carry out regular studies and discussions on human rights, making use of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other national and international documents, together with biblical and theological resources, and analyses of what is actually happening in their local and global contexts. It might be interesting to ask how many theological institutions have actually done this, either in an ethics course or in a wider, interdisciplinary and holistic way. How many made a special study of the Rights of the Child in 1979? How many will take up the Rights of the Disabled in 1981?

Another approach would be to set up a human rights forum (cp. pp. 8-10), through which students and faculty could report and debate current local, national, and international incidents and issues on human rights. In many parts of the world it would seem to be helpful and necessary to become involved in investigation and advocacy for those whose rights are being violated (cp. *How to File Complaints of Human Rights Violations: A Practical Guide to Intergovernmental Procedures*, by G. da Fonseca, Geneva: W.C.C.) and also to trace the roots and analyze the structures that cause or permit these abuses. Some theological schools will have to begin by examining the rights of women, minorities, the disabled, or others within their own institutional life.

Some institutions have developed specific courses and study materials that deal directly with the rights of their people and equip them with the knowledge and skills they need to claim and defend those rights. Cook Christian Training School, for example, which has provided ministerial training for 127 Indian tribes in the U.S. and Canada, now offers workshops, courses, visual aids, and instructional guides on Treaty Rights, Tribal Sovereignty, and how to deal with the U.S. government. This is not a deviation from their theological task but a more basic response to the needs of their constituency, for whom the land and tribal identity are not simply economic and cultural but religious matters. As Cook School now works with extension networks all across the continent, it is equipping the local leadership in their struggle to recover their heritage and their rights. (cp. pp. 20-23)

Recently a group of outstanding theological educators and church leaders from the Caribbean region met with the theological institutions of Atlanta, Georgia to discuss the "internationalization of theological education." The Caribbean speakers expressed the need for their North American partners to support their peoples' rightful claims to political, economic, and cultural autonomy, because of the overbearing influence and interference of the northern power. The Atlanta schools expressed the need for their professors and students to experience neo-colonialism, exploitation, and extreme poverty from a Third World perspective in order to carry out their prophetic and theological tasks in their own context. This is only one example of many new initiatives in partnership among theological schools in different parts of the world, particularly between the First and Third World countries, which are basically concerned with human rights and global solidarity.

There must be hundreds of ways for theological institutions, individually and in partnership, to focus on human rights and to intensify their theological, ministerial, and missiological efforts. Whatever else may be their purpose, they are called, in the words of Russell Chandran, "to help congregations to become aware of the global struggle for full humanity and to participate in that struggle."