



From the Editor

Soundings amid the Avalanche: Prospects for Anglican Theological Education

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ABSTRACT

Recent events in the USA and the UK reveal how theological education is changing, reflecting wider issues in global higher education as well as local and ecclesial concerns. Those responsible for seminary leadership and governance might pay closer attention to those wider developments, and not neglect wider benefits to the Church of theological discourse generated in these institutions beyond vocational training.

KEYWORDS: Anglicanism, theological education, Church of England, Episcopal Church, Sir Michael Barber, Lord Stephen Green, Martyn Percy, Katharine Jefferts Schori

Introduction

To say that there is a crisis in theological education is a bit like observing that there is trouble in the Middle East; but even crises have histories, and a statement of obvious or perennial truth can be worth nuancing. Across the diversity of the Anglican Communion, there may even be distinctive or overlapping crises; and for this discussion, developments on both sides of the Atlantic are presently worth attending to.

Seminaries and theological colleges in the Western world in particular are currently being pulled in somewhat different directions by concurrent tides of ecclesial and educational change. Together these may create both

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the appearance and substance of chaos, but they also offer important opportunities.

The issues involved may ultimately be of importance across the Communion; despite a focus here in the US and UK, seminaries in Africa, Asia and Latin America are linked with these via important networks, including the fact that leading educators in the developing world – such as bishops, college principals, and others who train the trainers – often spend formative time at these institutions in the West. Changes in the UK and the USA will therefore have effects across the complex ecosystem of theological education in the Anglican Communion.

A Tale of Two Seminaries

In the past year, two of the historic seminaries of the US Episcopal Church or TEC – the General Theological Seminary in New York, one of the oldest free-standing seminaries in the Communion, and the Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge, Massachusetts – have been embroiled in grave internal conflicts. In both cases, deans appointed from outside the academy on the basis of proven leadership in other ecclesial spheres found themselves in lasting and damaging conflict with the faculty.²

Both institutions had experienced significant financial difficulties, had sold large amounts of property, and had been actively considering how to make further changes. Both had appointed deans whose previous experience led trustees (who are responsible for such appointments in the TEC institutions) to seek candidates whose qualities as leaders and fundraisers were more emphatic than their academic qualifications; indeed this is a normal if not universal pattern in the TEC seminaries, as in some others.

In both cases, significant steps were also being made to restructure the curriculum. At GTS, the third year of the standard master's degree program was being rethought as a 'wisdom' year, based on internships and reflection on ministerial practice;³ at EDS, more students now undertake 'distributive learning', including online

2. Sharon Otterman, 'Seminary Bringing Back 7 Professors it Dismissed', *The New York Times*, 8 November 2014, p. A19; Sarah Pulliam Bailey, 'Controversial Episcopal Seminary Dean Katherine Hancock Ragsdale to Step Down', *The Washington Post*, 6 January 2015, http://www.washingtonpost.com/national/religion/controversial-episcopal-seminary-dean-katherine-hancock-ragsdale-to-step-down/2015/01/06/f7d13d5c-95ee-11e4-8385-866293322c2f_story.html (accessed 10 January 2015).

3. 'The Way of Wisdom – Diving into the Deep End', <http://news.gts.edu/2014/04/diving-into-the-deep-end/> (accessed 8 January 2015).

teaching and short residential programs, than the former norm of full-time residential study.⁴

Both sets of innovations reflect something more, and more problematic, than the mere exercise of progressive educational imagination. Both arose also as responses to the financial difficulties connected with operating in traditional modes as full-time residential programs, while facing declining enrolments. Both institutions were trying to find ways not only of serving a changing Church, but simply of surviving.

Despite the professed agreement within these seminaries about new strategic directions for their educational programs, both experienced a clash of expectations about governance and leadership which cannot be separated completely from previous structures and cultures. Despite progressive or even radical theological orientation, both institutions have found it profoundly difficult to create a sustainable alignment of strategy, pedagogy and theology.

Common Awards and Managing Talent

In the UK, the Church of England has recently decided to place its system of vocational theological education – far more dependent on ecclesial funding, and otherwise subject to central control, than the seminaries of TEC – under a ‘Common Awards’ scheme that will have most students, regardless of physical location, studying for degrees of the University of Durham. Colleges at Oxford and Cambridge will, however, continue to have access to those universities’ degrees.⁵

The report that led to this move, and related commentary on it, emphasize the value of university accreditation, and the partnership between Church and that public academy. These arguments or observations are familiar and important, having played their part in much earlier developments for many Anglicans in places as disparate as Australia and New Zealand, Hong Kong and Ghana.

At least as evident in the Church of England’s move, however, is a desire for consistency and control; the strategy reflects the far more centralized polity of that Church, and hence a different implied ecclesiology as well as a particular approach to educational quality control. Given that the Church has over recent decades fostered an

4. ‘Distributive Learning’, <http://www.eds.edu/distributivelearningoption> (accessed 8 January 2015).

5. Mike Higon, ‘Theological Education between the University and the Church: Durham University and the Common Awards in Theology, Ministry and Mission’, *Journal of Adult Theological Education* 10.1 (2013), pp. 25–37.

increasingly varied range of theological courses, from the traditional university courses through smaller theological colleges to local training schemes, it seems that this is a response to a diversity of programs and results that had begun to cause concern.

It is less easy to see how university accreditation in itself provides the benefits usually associated with such an alliance, such as the community of learners gathered around fields of knowledge, as one proponent of the scheme expresses hopefully.⁶

If such community does emerge through 'Common Awards' it seems likely to be virtual. The regulatory emphasis is not the only place where Common Awards reflect tendencies in higher education more broadly, beyond its stated aims. For instance, although each of the colleges involved continues to teach its programs locally, the website for the new arrangement implies the use of shared resources via 'digital technology', without specifying much about how.⁷ The separation of pedagogical and accreditation elements also hints at a realignment of the different functions traditionally joined in one system or institution, which in some instances may find themselves increasingly 'unbundled', as one policy paper has put it.⁸

Late last year the Church of England separately released a proposal for how the Church will 'manage talent'.⁹ The Green Report, *Talent Management for Future Leaders and Leadership Development for Bishops and Deans: A New Approach*, focuses not on theological education in general, but on training for those who are expected to hold senior positions, such as bishops and deans. Despite affirming that 'the programme will incorporate ecclesiology' and 'draw on deep theological expertise', the Report quickly says that it 'should not be run primarily by ... theological colleges', which have apparently 'failed to provide sufficient challenge for a senior Church cohort'. The envisaged provider seems likely to be one of the leading business schools.¹⁰

6. See Highton, 'Theological Education between the University and the Church', p. 29.

7. See <http://www.cavle.org/schools/LifeLearningCloud> (accessed 16 January 2015).

8. Michael Barber, Katelyn Donnelly and Saad Rizvi, *An Avalanche Is Coming: Higher Education and the Revolution Ahead* (London: Institute for Public Policy Research, 2013).

9. Report of the Lord Stephen Green Steering Group, *Talent Management for Future Leaders and Leadership Development for Bishops and Deans: A New Approach* (The Church of England, 2014).

10. Green, *Talent Management*, pp. 10–11.

One of those whose participation in these MBA style programs would be mandated, Dean Martyn Percy of Christ Church, Cathedral of the Diocese of Oxford, observes that the proposal has:

no point of origination in theological or spiritual wisdom. Instead, on offer is a dish of basic contemporary approaches to executive management, with a little theological garnish. A total absence of ecclesiology flows from this.¹¹

This move also has its hint of ‘unbundling’, particularly in the removal of leadership training functions from theological colleges. So on the one hand the English developments suggest a centralization of policy and control; on the other they suggest a redistribution, in ways not so far entirely clear, of education and training across a changed educational economy. The Church of England’s colleges, however, may be seen as ‘net losers’, in the sense that each initiative takes away something that has usually been seen as within their mission and purpose. While these particular elements of ‘unbundling’ may not seem crucial to a vocational training mission, Percy’s point about the lack of a broader theological vision in the Green Report cannot be dismissed; if leaders are not trained in centers where theological learning and research are generated, something critical is lost.

Secularism, Higher Education, and Theologia

The somewhat distinctive developments on both sides of the Atlantic reflect some similar developments affecting Church and higher education, and hence theological education particularly.

One of the tidal pulls that affects all institutions of theological education, particularly in the West, is the progress of secularization. Most obviously, the demand for and value attributed to theological education is waning in many places, and the resources necessary to sustain free-standing and small institutions that perform it in particular are becoming rapidly scarcer.

The traditionally mixed character of theological colleges, as places of pure learning as well as of vocational training, is being further altered at least in balance or emphasis. Church funding or sponsoring bodies at various levels are asking more pointed questions about the cost of seminary education, whether that cost is actually being borne by institutions (as primarily in the UK) or by the individuals whom

11. ‘Are These the Leaders We Really Want?’ *Church Times*, 12 December 2014; <http://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2014/12-december/comment/opinion/are-these-the-leaders-that-we-really-want> (accessed 16 January 2015).

they will ultimately employ (as it largely is in the USA and elsewhere). Both questions reflect a wider tendency in higher education to value employability more than abstract forms of knowledge or pursuit of truth and wisdom.

If it reflects present trends, this increased scrutiny and reflection also involves some familiar issues, now arguably framed in distinctive ways. The relationship between the specifically vocational or skills-based aspect of theological education on the one hand and more expansive notions of learning and exploration of truth on the other, have been themes in a long-standing 'crisis of theological education'.

The 'crisis' began to be described in the 1980s. Edward Farley's *Theologia* proposed and lamented a narrative of decline from an integrated emphasis on 'sapiential and personal knowledge' in theological education to a distinct set of disciplines focused on vocational training.¹² David Kelsey's *Between Athens and Berlin* explored similar questions but suggested less tendentiously that two similar poles or models could both be excellent, if incapable of synthesis.¹³

Further contributions to these discussions have variously sought to expand the paradigm beyond two poles, and to foreground additional possibilities such as the contributions of feminist and of global perspectives.¹⁴ Most of these, however, share with the Farley and Kelsey paradigms the assumed context of a stable institution, whose life and work could perhaps be changed with enough theological and political will, but without radical disruption to their basic structures. Tellingly, US conversations ostensibly about 'globalization' in theological education could thus focus more on how institutions in the US might themselves look more diverse than on real shifts in global practice and power in education.¹⁵

What many of those institutions now face, however, is not only a question of just how to live and work, but whether they can do so at all. Feminist and global perspectives may become as much a niche in a diverse educational market, offered more fully in some settings than

12. Edward Farley, *Theologia: The Fragmentation and Unity of Theological Education* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), p. xi.

13. David H. Kelsey, *Between Athens and Berlin: The Theological Education Debate* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1993).

14. Rebecca S. Chopp, *Saving Work: Feminist Practices of Theological Education* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995).

15. Alice F. Evans, Robert A. Evans and David A. Roozen (eds.), *The Globalization of Theological Education* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993).

others according to preference, than the general ethical and political challenge they ought to be.

Traditional structures of teaching and learning, and of employment of academics, have allowed for research as well as classroom teaching, and a variety of forms of engagement with Church life. Whether these activities have had an appropriate accountability to ecclesial and other communities is another question. In any case, seminaries that are strapped for cash will, like universities attempting to please their funding agencies, find less and less time for exploration of truth and virtue. They will attend at best to the usefulness that truth and virtue may seem to have for leadership, ministry and mission.

The Education Revolution

Challenges to the viability of seminaries and their programs are not merely the result of decline in religious commitment. Smaller liberal arts colleges in the USA share at least some of the difficulties of the seminaries. As the cost of higher education in whatever field seems to rise inexorably, any small institution without strong resources, including high demand by potential students, finds itself vulnerable. While some of the issues differ, the traditionally high value placed on the humanities in the USA is also softening, in a way that leads to some comparable issues for these two types of institution; many seminary-based scholars in theological disciplines would recognize their colleagues in the liberal arts colleges as undergoing similar trials.

The crisis for the humanities may be even more stark in the large research universities that have been the normal home of the liberal arts in the UK and Europe, where the dominance of science-derived models for research performance is now overwhelming. In both the smaller and larger secular institutions, students are increasingly attracted to undergraduate courses directly labeled in terms that suggest business or professions, and hence employment. Only the most prestigious institutions, with the highest demand based on reputation, seem at least partly immune to these pressures.

So the global ferment in higher education is the second set of forces within whose influence theological education finds itself, without the same level of awareness, for good or ill. Much commentary on seminary education takes place, however, in a vacuum, ecclesially focused but not cognizant of all the parallels and connections with developments affecting all colleges and universities.

One convenient analysis of these wider trends comes in the form of the 2013 report *An Avalanche Is Coming*, produced by leading figures

from the global education business Pearson. Granted a self-serving element, Sir Michael Barber and colleagues point to at least some of the key issues and prospects.

The authors of *An Avalanche* pose three key problems for universities:

- How can universities and new providers ensure education for employability?
- How can the link between cost and quality be broken?
- How does the entire learning ecosystem need to change to support alternative providers and the future of work?¹⁶

Each of these also has its manifestation in seminary education. Students and churches alike are more and more concerned that the preparation given in seminary actually provide the skills or other qualities that make graduates suitable for employment. This has become a more acute concern as churches seek not merely functional leadership for maintaining structures and programs, but confront the question of survival. Some are also clearly wondering whether classical seminary education would be relevant, even if it and they were not otherwise under threat. Congregations are, for example, less likely to view the minister as a fount of authoritative knowledge, whose biblical and theological literacy in the pulpit could make up for other deficits.

The second issue, of cost, arises quickly out of those of relevance and employability. Costs in higher education have generally been outpacing inflation, even while employers of all types wonder about the value of their newly hired graduates' degrees. Where the Church itself bears the cost of theological education to a significant extent, the simultaneity of the diminishing resources of the institution and the rising costs of education create an acute pinch point. How this plays out depends on the specifics, and around the Anglican Communion this can vary widely. In the USA and Australia most dioceses make only small contributions to seminaries and students and their supporters bear the brunt, but in the Church of England funding depends on the center.

While bishops and others in leadership are prominent in asking these pointed questions about expense, in many parts of the world students and their supporters actually bear the major cost of their education. Thus, where debt funds the seminary experience or loss of

16. Barber *et al.*, *An Avalanche Is Coming*, p. 6.

income accompanies it, prospective security of employment is a fundamental condition for encouraging the risks involved in embarking on it.

In TEC then, the increasingly common 'seminary is too expensive' claim actually hints not so much at a lack of central resources to support seminaries (which is not new, since the seminaries have been self-supporting as well as self-governing), but at the declining number of local congregations who will be able to employ clergy and thus allow them to repay debts. In remarks given to the Executive Council of TEC last year, the presiding bishop commented favorably on the rise of local non-accredited training programs, and went so far as to say that:

The average Episcopal congregation, with 60 to 70 members attending weekly worship, cannot afford the traditional model of full-stipend paid leadership, a building, and a sufficient program to support its members in their daily baptismal ministry. Nor can seminary graduates with educational debt afford to work in most of them.¹⁷

These comments certainly evoke a different theological education 'ecosystem', as the *Avalanche* report puts it, but attend to one emerging element without considering the whole. That 'average' parish, one among the 'most' referred to, may be an even more typical entity in the future; but most Episcopalians may actually continue to be connected with the 'unusual' parish that has viable programs and employs multiple staff.

The third of the *Avalanche* points, of a changing ecosystem, is where those involved in Church and seminary leadership and governance need to pay closest attention to wider developments. Some of the changes to the theological ecosystem are reflected in the new programs developed at GTS and EDS, as well as potentially in Common Awards. In particular, the possibility of delivering some aspects of education remotely is part of most of these schemes. Barber and colleagues have something more radical in mind, however, than just the growing importance of distance learning; writing just as the 'Massive Open Online Courses' or MOOCs like Coursera were first attracting significant attention, *Avalanche* points to how the accessibility of knowledge, whether delivered in classrooms or over Internet connections, seems to have transcended the institutions who have tended to claim it as their

17. Katherine Jefferts Schori, 'Executive Council Opening Remarks', <http://www.episcopalchurch.org/notice/episcopal-church-executive-council-opening-remarks-presiding-bishop> (accessed 11 January 2015).

primary offering. Students no longer need seminaries, whether they are physical or virtual, to acquire theological knowledge itself; it is freely available. Distance education is therefore not itself the point. What seminary programs retain in an 'unbundled' future is personal and spiritual formation; and as in higher education generally, full-time and residential programs will retain their primacy because of the power of community itself as a means of personal transformation, providing access both to peer-learning and to expert figures in ways that can complement or catalyze learning where a screen and Skype cannot.

The traditional seminary does then arguably have a future, as the Common Awards scheme recognizes or at least allows. This seems less clear to TEC leadership. Theorist of disruptive innovation Clayton Christensen, whose work is drawn on appreciatively by Barber *et al.*, has suggested that as many as half of presently existing universities might fail under the weight of coming changes.¹⁸ While this may be regarded as alarmist, it implies half will not fail. Discourse about institutions of theological learning is far less nuanced if and when it implies residential seminaries have no future; what seems far more likely is that some of them do, and others do not, and that a variety of other opportunities for teaching and learning will emerge alongside them.

Conclusions

Since the crisis continues, no conclusion is really possible; what remains is to suggest some of the most pressing areas for attention and reflection.

The ecosystem of theological education is certainly changing; but as always there is continuity as well as discontinuity with the previous paradigm. One aspect of change that seems clear is that, as in higher education more generally, an increasingly differentiated range of options for vocational training will be available; indeed it already is. This much is reflected on one side of the Atlantic in innovation as well as institutional crisis, and on the other side by centralized efforts to find or create consistency where it has become lacking.

Seminaries and churches need to face more directly the power of the student as consumer. As Barber *et al.* put it, in the changed and changing ecosystem the student consumer is king.¹⁹ Existing

18. See Clayton M. Christensen and Henry J. Eyring, *The Innovative University: Changing the DNA of Higher Education from the Inside Out* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011).

19. Barber *et al.*, *An Avalanche Is Coming*, p. 10.

theological institutions are already acknowledging the need to embrace a diversity of approaches and offerings, whose viability will only be confirmed by sustainable demand. While bishops may correspondingly use their own influence and resources differently in seeking to direct students within the system, the students themselves are the ultimate arbiters of whether a particular approach to education justifies the expense they must bear. Church authorities may find this hard to accept; where they can offer support themselves, they can perhaps stave off this shift of power, but it may ultimately prove irreversible.

While at least some of the newer programs discussed may be intended to address a call for integration or wisdom, there is a potentially devastating loss if the scholarship that has characterized institutions supporting tenured faculty gives way to systems based solely on vocational teaching, which are likely to base their activities on adjunct teachers and the part-time contributions of practitioners. I have suggested this trend will not sweep all other models away, in either the UK or the USA, but it seems inevitable that fewer institutions will have the means to function as centers that manifest the traditional nexus between research and teaching. Those learning communities which remain genuine embodiments of what the university as well as the seminary are intended to be and not merely vocational teaching centers or users of university compliance regimes will have an even more important mission for their own Churches, and for the Anglican Communion.