



Curriculum Theologiae

The Challenges for Theological Studies in the Middle East

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Conference

Contextual theologies in a globalized world

Bonn - December 2nd and 3rd 2011

at the occasion of the 40th anniversary of the Institute of Missiology (MWI)

Paper

The challenges for theological studies in the Middle East

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1) Academic Context

In Lebanon there are four Catholic Faculties of Theology¹, one Greek Orthodox² and one Protestant (NEST)³. And one can add the Faculty of religious studies⁴ at Saint Joseph University. As academic theological institutions, they constitute the main center of theological studies in the Arab world⁵. Around 500 students study in these different institutions. The majority of them are in the undergraduate programs. Most of these Faculties offer Master degrees and few a doctorate program. Courses are offered in French or Arabic. Only courses at NEST are in English. Yet, the French programs have the connotation of being more scientific and having a higher academic level than the Arabic ones. They are reasons for this issue.

The majority of the students are Lebanese and religious (seminarians or monks). Yet an increasing presence of Lay people can be noticed with a significant number of Nuns too. The Faculties receive also students from Syria, Jordan, Palestine and Israel. Only, for the Masters or doctorate level, some few students from African or European countries join these Faculties.

Around 150 teachers work in these Institutions. Most of them work as free lecturer or for part time. Only around 20 teachers are totally dedicated to the Theological teaching and studies. Around 75% of the teachers hold a Phd. And more than 90% of them did their doctoral studies in Europe⁶.

¹ Pontifical Faculty of Theology at the Holy Spirit University – Kaslik (Lebanese Maronite order), Faculty of Theology of the Antonine University (Lebanese Antonine order), Faculty of Theology of La Sagesse University (Maronite diocese of Beirut), and Saint Paul Institute for Theology and Philosophy – Harissa (Paulistes Melkite Society).

² Saint John Damascene Institute - Balamand University.

³ NEST: Near-East School of Theology.

⁴ There is no curriculum of Theology, but the Faculty includes an ISSR (Religious sciences institute, with a Pastoral orientation), in addition to an Institute for Christian-Muslim studies and a department of Religious Studies.

⁵ In Palestine there is an Institute of science of religion in Bethlehem University (Palestine). In Egypt there are the Sakakini Catholic Institute for religious science (Cairo) and the seminary for catholic Coptic and many Institutes of Orthodox Coptic theology. There are also ecclesiastic schools for seminarians in Iraq and Syria.

⁶ By order of importance in number: Italy, France, Germany. Very few do their Phd in Canada or USA.

2) Theology in the Context of the globalized Middle-East

The problematic of this conference, contextual theologies in a globalized world, is challenging for the Theological studies in the Middle-East. On the one hand the challenge is about contextualization. In a document about the theological formation of priests, published by the Congregation for Catholic education, Theology is defined as being “not only the intelligence of the word of God but also the intelligence of the man to whom the word is addressed”⁷. In this sense, Theological studies are a kind of hermeneutic of the presence, since we cannot understand the person without understanding his historical and cultural contexts. Hence, in his apostolic exhortation, *A new Hope for Lebanon* (1997), the pope John-Paul II considered that contextualization and inculturation as fidelity towards the oriental patrimony should go together when theology is been developed and taught in the Middle-East⁸. Yet, in a conference on *Teaching Oriental theology*, sponsored by Missio and held in Lebanon in 2005⁹, I considered in my paper that the dominant practice is either to oppose oriental (Antiochean) to contextual (Arab) theologies or to marginalize both of them. To a very large extent, the curriculums of the different Faculties, especially in the undergraduate level, don’t reflect any contextual aspect of the theology, and include very limited oriental component. From my point of view this situation represents an important weakness that is affecting the church life and witness as well as the priests’ ministry in the Middle-East.

One can wonder if the fact that almost all the teachers and policy makers in theological studies are educated in the European countries can be the reason of this lack in contextualization of the theology in the Middle-East? Obviously we cannot expect from the European Faculties to teach about Arab or Middle-Eastern Theologies. It is the mission of the Faculties in the Middle-East to do it. Yet, it’s not the only problem. I tend to think that the formation in the west has a methodological lack and still teach a kind of “universal theology” that does not give to our teachers the methodological competences to think theologically their own context. Of course, I don’t want to generalize my judgment, but just to highlight on an issue that seems to me determinant in our reflection. The western teaching of theology is predominately systemic and “secularly oriented”. However the roots of Theology in the East are more narrative and symbolic and the present is grandly influenced by religiosity and religious pluralism.

Therefore, one of the main challenges for the Theological studies in the Middle-East is to develop a theology rooted in the Eastern tradition as well as answering the new cultural dimensions of the region: Arabity, Islam, over-religiosity and pluralism. We are not always helped by the catholic theological framework that tends sometimes to reverse the title of this conference, and instead of promoting “contextual theologies in the globalized world”, it defends a “global theology for all contexts.” And here I come to the second issue of the conference: Theology and Globalization.

In his lecture at the University of Regensburg, Pope Benedicts XVI affirmed that “Christianity, despite its origins and some significant developments in the East, finally took on its historically

⁷ Congregation for Catholic Education, « The Theological formation of the future priests », in: DC, 1698 (1976), n. 134.

⁸ Cf. John-Paul II, *A new hope for Lebanon*, n. 77, p. 122-125.

⁹ *Quo Vadis, Theologia Orientalis?* Proceedings of the Conference “Théologie orientale : contenu et importance”, Ain Traz, Avril 2005 (CEDRAC – textes et études sur l’Orient Chrétien, 6)

decisive character in Europe.” It is true that the Hellenic culture played a major role in forming the conceptual background for Christianity in its early age. Yet it wasn’t the only cultural space for the Christian presence, and others like the Aramaic / Syriac culture was as decisive as Hellenism in the East, and this cultural duality constituted one of the chances and challenges for the Church unity. Moreover, the pope did this statement while he was criticizing the “cultural pluralism” as a dangerous pretention for dehellenization of Christianity. In fact, I believe that the real issue here is not so much about the risk of dehellenization, but about the Eurocentric paradigm of the “Logos” itself, seen only in the perspective of rationality. In the East the Logos as rationality should be accompanied on the one hand by the wisdom that comes from experience and life and on the other by a dose of apophatism as a memory of the Mystery of God that is never dominated by our rationality.

Of course, blaming others is the easiest way to escape our own responsibilities. And I don’t think that theologians in the Middle-East can escape anymore their responsibility of helping the Church in getting answers and insights for the questions and the challenges that the Christians face there in their daily life. I do believe that we are at the beginning of a new phase of the theological studies in the Middle-East, where the tentative of developing local and contextual theology is offering very interesting and stimulating models.

3) Changes and Pioneer initiatives

Three examples can be given to demonstrate the emergence of this new phase for Theology in the Middle-East. All these examples are fundamentally centered in a sense that their main concern and area of research are related to the presence of the Church in the world.

The first aspect of this contextual theology is about the mission, understood as the meaning of the church life and witness. This presumption looks at the Church as it is the sign of the love of God for all Mankind, and that the historical circumstances of its existence should be interpreted in the framework of God will. The Council of the Catholic Patriarchs in the East published, between 1991 and 2000, six important pastoral letters, all related to this issue, from different perspectives. Father Rafiq Khoury, Palestinian theologian, published all these Letters with a theological commentary that clearly shows how these texts constitute a great resource for the development of a contextual and particular Ecclesiology and Missiology.

The second example and field of development of contextual theology in the Middle-East is related to the role of the Church in the public life and public sphere management, and focuses on Political Theology. In the last twenty years, an important literature was published and interesting studies were conducted producing an original and courageous approach of the relation between the Christian faith and the public issues. The “Kairos” document, published by number of Palestinian theologians, as a reflection and a theological response to the occupation and injustice that the Palestinians are facing, deserves attention in its form, as the result of a

collaborative study and its content, presenting a political interpretation of the Christian love¹⁰. There are in this domain many other good initiatives and publications¹¹.

The third and final example of the Middle-eastern contextual theology is related to the issue of Theology of pluralism and interfaith dialogue. Writings and theses of theologians like Yoakim Moubarac and Georges Khodr for example aren't known enough neither in the West nor in the East. Yet the last ten years, many young theologians started to work on this new heritage, and they are being able to present to the public the specificity of these thoughts and their relevance and importance for the life of the Church and its testimony in the region. One new experience was recently conducted by Adyan Foundation, with the support of the Institute of Missiology – Missio, and promoted a new methodology in research on pluralism, called “Theologies in dialogue”. A book entitled *Divine Hospitality: Christian and Muslim Theologies of the other in dialogue*¹², shows the interesting and original fruits of such a study, where Christian and Muslim theologians worked together on the same issue (Theology of the other) and brought answers from each one own tradition to the questions of the other. This interfaith collaboration in theological research and even in teaching seems to be able to open a way for a new methodology, discourse and even results in the Theology of pluralism and interfaith dialogue.

What helped in producing these new and promising models of real contextual theology in the Middle-East? Briefly I will say two major elements. First of all, I can say it comes from a better understanding from the local churches for the meaning of “catholicity”. In fact, catholicity becomes a driven force for contextual theologies when it is perceived not as a belonging to a universal identity represented by the same and unique religious discourse, but as a responsibility to enrich the universal Church of Christ by the experience of each local church and its theology developed in relation to the conditions of its life. It is a sign of the renewal of the Eastern Churches and at the same time a channel to foster this renewal. The second element is the increasing number of young theologians choosing local problematics or authors to work on as themes for their Phd or post-doctorate research. Some of them are also working on these Phd under the cotutelle system where they can have a local (Lebanese) director of the research with another European one and register their work in both a Lebanese and European Faculties.

This new work definitely needs maturation and this cannot happen without extending the debate around these topics of local and contextual theology to reach theologians from other context, and especially from the Western context. For some topics, I think we can already think about a dialogical relation between Western and Middle-eastern theologies. And this would surely be beneficial for both parties.

¹⁰ See: www.kairospalestine.ps

¹¹ Cf. Bibliography of Mouchir Basile Aoun and Fadi Daou.

¹² Fadi Daou and Nayla Tabbara, *Divine Hospitality: Christian and Muslim Theologies of the other in dialogue*, (Published until now into Arabic translated from French by Prof. Adel Theodor Houry), Adyan / St Paul Publications, 2011, Lebanon. (A French and German versions are expected to be published in the near future).