



Curriculum Theologiae

Internationality and Interculturality in Leuven

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Internationalität und Interkulturalität in Leuven
The International Programmes of the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies

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At the beginning of this presentation I would like to congratulate the Institut of Missiology for 40 years of excellent work. I would like to thank Dr. Klaus Krämer and Dr. Harald Suermann for the kind invitation to make an active contribution to this conference. In 1978 as a second year theology student I was one of 20 seminarians who participated in the first immersion trip to Nigeria organized by MISSIO and MWI Aachen with Pater Ludwig Bertsch SJ and the Philosophisch-Theologische Hochschule St. Georgen Frankfurt where I was studying at the time. This was my first contact with MISSIO and MWI. This study trip to Nigeria was an excellent learning experience for which I continue to be grateful since I learned so much there that was very helpful for me in my later ministry.

I was asked to speak about the international and intercultural experience in the university context in the international programmes in the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, Belgium.

Approximately at the same time when the Institute of Missiology was founded in Aachen the Catholic University of Louvain was split into a French-speaking university, the Université Catholique de Louvain, and a Dutch-speaking university, the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven. In the Dutch-speaking university the Faculty of Theology almost immediately took the decision to start with English-speaking programmes. These international programmes consist of Bachelor, Master and PhD programmes in Theology and Religious Studies recognized by the Belgian state and in STB, STL and STL programmes in Theology recognized by the Vatican in the context of *Sapientia Christiana*. These international, English-speaking programmes have since then existed side by side with the local, Dutch-speaking programmes. During the academic year 2011-2012 the international programmes welcome about 350 students from more than 60 countries and all the continents. They include lay people, sisters, seminarians and priests. In addition to a majority of Latin Rite Catholic students, there are also Greek Catholic, Syro-Malabar and Syro-Malankara students. Moreover the faculty welcomes Anglican, Greek, Romanian and Russian Orthodox, Ethiopian Orthodox students as well as students from various protestant traditions. About 150 of the 350 international students are in the doctoral programme. The students in the Dutch-speaking and English-speaking programmes obviously attend different courses, but are taught by the same professors. In this paper I will reflect on the international and intercultural experience of our English-speaking programmes in Theology and Religious Studies with a special focus on the

formation that we are trying to give to our students and the formations which we receive from them. On a personal note, I have been connected with Leuven since 1979 when I arrived there as a student in the English-speaking programmes. After obtaining my doctorate in theology in Leuven in 1986, I completed my training for the priesthood and worked as an assistant priest in the Diocese of Speyer, Germany. In 1990 I started teaching in Leuven and I am presently one of two members of the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies who studied in the international programmes.

1. Formation of the Students by the Faculty

The Faculty of Theology in Leuven has a longstanding tradition of theological teaching and research dating back to 1432. Recent historical research has demonstrated that Leuven theologians played an important role at the Second Vatican Council and helped shape its theology in significant ways (cf. the role of Cardinal Leo Jozef Suenens and the contributions of the *periti* Gustave Thils and Gérard Philipps). The theology faculty of Leuven continues to see its theology in line with Vatican II and as a whole has recently taken on a multi-year joint project of studying the council and its texts in preparation for the 50th anniversary of the conclusion of the council. This includes research projects, international symposia and a new Dutch translation of the conciliar texts.

By virtue of its geographic location at the crossroads between north and south, east and west Leuven is well-prepared to be a meeting place for different cultures. Leuven theology has for a long time been in fruitful dialogue with the Anglo-Saxon, the French and the German theological traditions. Being multilingual by necessity has prepared Leuven theologians well for a basic openness to welcome international students from the four corners of the earth. We are the first to admit that due to our programmes in English, there is something like an unconscious preferential option for the Anglo-Saxon tradition. But due to our active cooperation with our sister faculty at the Université Catholique de Louvain on all levels and with the Institut Catholique de Paris on the level of the doctoral programme where more than 20 doctoral students do a joint doctoral degree in Paris and Leuven with promoters from both faculties, as well as cooperations with colleagues in French-speaking Canada, there is a persistent influence of the French-speaking theological traditions on our work. There are also ongoing initiatives of research cooperation and staff exchanges with theological faculties in Germany and Austria with a renewed interest in intensifying these relations.

Since the 19th century one of the hallmarks of Leuven theology in the international Catholic world has been its resolute option for the historical-critical method. In the past 20 years there has been a gradual and organic shift from strict historical criticism to a hermeneutical approach inspired by Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur. Our faculty is now subscribing to a three-fold hermeneutical approach consisting of a historical-hermeneutical dimension (exegesis and church history), a systematic-hermeneutical dimension (dogmatic theology and fundamental moral theology) and a practical-hermeneutical dimension (practical theology, spirituality, liturgy and the applied parts of moral theology). Dialogue is an essential dimension of this hermeneutical theology.

In the Western world (with exception of Germany) there has been a tendency of transforming traditional faculties of theology into Faculties of religious studies (b.v. Nijmegen, Amsterdam) or integrating them into Faculties of cultural studies. This frequently happened due to a lack of interest in traditional theology and with the hope of attracting more students. The cultural trend of multi-cultural and multi-religious communities and the increased interest in world religions has not bypassed Leuven. But from the beginning we have avoided any tendencies or structural decisions that might play off theology and religious studies against each other. By putting the emphasis on interreligious dialogue in our study of world religions, we tried to keep theology and religious studies together. We also realized in the context of a faculty symposium at the request of Cardinal Godfried Danneels that there is a broad faculty consensus that a sustained tension between theology and religious studies is fruitful and necessary for a healthy exercise of the discipline.¹ The fact that we consider theology and religious studies to be twin sisters is expressed in the recent name change of our school to Faculty of Theology AND religious studies whereby “and” is not understood as cumulative, but as integrative. We are convinced that each theological sub-discipline should be practiced in a healthy tension between theology and religious studies, between an insider perspective and an outsider perspective, between faith and reason, between a mainly Christian/ecumenical approach and an interreligious approach.

Another important characteristic of our theology faculty is the fact that we are faculty of theology in a full university with more than 40,000 students including almost 6,000 international students and the fact that we are fully immersed and involved in the university sometimes even in joint research projects and in cooperation with other Faculties and Departments (with medicine, agriculture, art, psychology, economics, history, classics etc.). Most of us teach a required course of religion for students of one of the other Faculties. We are in the process of creating an institute for the study of religion and interreligious dialogue to facilitate cooperation of professors from all the theological sub-disciplines and from the other disciplines (philosophy, psychology, sociology, history) who are studying aspects of religion.

In Belgium, and Flanders in particular, theology still participates in the competitive calls for research grants on the level of the Research Foundation Flanders and the Research Council of our university. As a result in the past 15 years we have had a steadily growing number of externally funded research projects with research opportunities for doctoral and post-doctoral researchers. As a result at any one time about 50 full-time researchers (on the doctoral and post-doctoral levels) in addition to our regular staff of 23 full-time professors are financed by external research grants.

These are some of the parameters within which theological research and teaching is practiced in Leuven. There are currently 170 doctoral students in our Faculty. In recent years the average duration of the doctorates has been between four and a half and five years resulting in more than 30 doctorates completed each year in our faculty. All these elements illustrate our ambition of being a strongly research-oriented faculty. From the moment students arrive at our Faculty in Leuven, they are invited to participate in this research infrastructure. Much has changed in recent years to facilitate this participation for all the students, and international students in particular. Some of these measures were intended to overcome the individualism of doctoral formation

¹ These papers are published as Mathijs Lamberigts & Leo Kenis (eds.), *Quo vadis theologia? Theologie en religiewetenschap in Leuven*, Antwerpen: Halewijn, 2008.

exclusively by the relationship between a student and a promoter. We are now trying to practice the principle of learning community on three levels. On the first level, promoters are encouraged to form research groups with their post-doctoral and doctoral researchers and possibly one or two other professors. In the regular meetings of the research groups, all the members take responsibility for different aspects of the group, learn from one another by listening to and addressing critical questions to each other's research results and by coming to realize how their own research fits into larger research programme. On the second level all the researchers are part of a research unit organized on the level of the theological sub-disciplines. Here the doctoral researchers meet others who are part of other research groups in their own sub-discipline. They broaden their horizon in dialogue with them, and they benefit from their unique insights when they present their own research. On this level the doctoral students' research projects are evaluated and corrected by the professors of the research unit when they present their research plan at the beginning of their doctoral formation. After two years they are evaluated and a decision is taken whether they are allowed to continue with their studies. At the end of their doctoral formation, shortly before their public defence doctoral students present their research results to the members of the research unit and their results are discussed and evaluated. We also added a third level, the level of the entire faculty. Four to five times during the semester all the doctoral students of the Faculty are invited to a doctoral colloquium during which they are taught skills which are important for all independently of their specialization (e.g., publishing and conference participation) or they discuss with an invited international lecturer. In addition in our university the group of Humanities and Social Sciences to which our faculty belongs, organizes skills training on several levels in which our doctoral students are encouraged to participate (management skills for writing a doctoral dissertation; writing skills in academic English). We also actively participated in the first research day for the Humanities and Social Sciences in November 2010 in which one important part consisted in poster presentations by doctoral students.

Other measures lead to a greater integration of international students in the actual research staff of research projects as well as on the post-doctoral level. Here we are beneficiaries of the fact that the Research Foundation Flanders recently opened its doctoral and post-doctoral funding to students from all over the world (while it had been limited to citizens of EU countries before). While until a number of years ago the research staff of externally funded research projects and personal grants was reserved for Europeans, in recent years this group has speedily become more worldwide.

One of the greatest challenges in any doctoral programme is quality control. Many of the professors are convinced that every doctoral student, no matter what their background may be, should be evaluated in the same way and that the unequal levels of the pre-doctoral formation of the students should be overcome by offering additional learning opportunities to them. We can, however, not deny that we still hear some colleagues express their conviction that no matter how much students from particular countries try, they can never reach the level of European or North-American students. Part of this problem is due to the fact that in the Humanities objective standards of evaluation are next to impossible. Therefore there is the risk that prejudice and prejudgment might endanger the evaluation process which sometimes leads to undue disadvantages, but in some cases also to undue advantages for students who are perceived to have had a weaker academic background in the earlier phases of their studies in their home

countries. There is an urgent need for evaluation processes in which the direct contact with the examinees is avoided and the written exams are evaluated in a blind evaluation process.

If we ask what type of theology is being taught in Leuven, the answer has to be that there is a great variety depending on the sub-discipline and the individual professor. Due to the hermeneutical orientation of our theology, the students are not taught solutions for today's problems in a particular context, but are taught to theologize themselves, in order to be able to react theologically to completely new and unpredictable challenges. However, this effort only succeeds partially and in general the better students are able to learn this much better than the weaker students. We see the need of developing more concrete ways of teaching students this hermeneutical method. The most explicitly contextual theology is taught in parts of systematic theology, of theological ethics and of practical theology. The less explicitly contextual approaches are found in exegesis and church history. The Centre for Liberation Theologies headed by Prof. Jacques Haers is the most developed in the area of contextual theologies involving the home countries of students, but this does not mean that there are not also other colleagues who are open to and actively interested in such contextual research. Our Faculty also succeeds annually in attracting two to three scholarships from the Interuniversity Council for Development Cooperation which are reserved for candidates from so-called developing countries and which require doctoral candidates to select dissertation topics with contextual and developmental relevance. In cooperation with MISSIO Belgium and at the initiative of Msgr. Jan Dumon, Secretary General of the Pontifical Society of St. Peter the Apostle, our Faculty jointly organizes a biannual conference with our sister faculty of the Université Catholique de Louvain entitled *Omnes Gentes*. There is also one *Omnes Gentes* scholarship for a doctoral student from a country of the global south.

There are many students who come to Leuven with the intention of doing research on topics that are directly related to the needs of their own context. Many succeed in translating this into a doctoral project and find a promoter who is willing to supervise their research. There are, however, also professors who oppose such dissertation topics for the reason that we do not have the expertise needed to supervise such research. Sometimes students are advised to do the kind of research we are good at in our own Western tradition and to preserve their contextual interests for their later careers. There is, however, a growing number of doctoral students who work on contextual theological topics and for whom we invite competent co-promoters from other faculties of our own university or from universities around the globe. These doctoral candidates present their research at international conferences.

In addition to all this, in Leuven a vast amount of learning also happens outside the classroom and even outside the Faculty. One important point is that in Leuven international theology students are a large and very diverse group. Due to the fact that they are studying in a language which is not the language of the country they live in, and due to the fact that relatively few learn Dutch to a point where they can really be fluent, international students in Leuven tend to remain more among each other. This clearly harbours the dangerous potential of resulting in a ghetto, but it also has a number of very positive side effects in as much as it fosters friendships among international students from different parts of the world, and in some cases it has lead to

intercontinental professional cooperation even after people leave Leuven.² Even in the breaks of our theology classes, students from Africa, Asia, America and Europe compare their own contextually informed reactions to what they heard in class. The constant confrontation with cultural and religious diversity invites them to openness and flexibility. Our students live in regular student residences in the same hall way with students from Flanders and other parts of the world, with students from most any discipline in the university. Many priests live in Holy Spirit College or at the American College. Since last year we also have an international sisters' community with members from various countries in Africa and Asia. While these contexts offer immense opportunities, realistically we have to admit that many students who live in these communities are only interested in meeting fellow students from their own country or ethnic group and choose to live in a type of isolation from others around them. There is still much room for improvement. International students in Leuven have much to learn from one another and from their host country, as well as the church of their host country. They also have much to offer and to teach.

Many international students from different faculties meet in the University Parish International Community, the international student parish of our university. In as much as they opt to be active in this community, they can put into practice in a strongly multicultural context what they learned in the classroom. One priest who had been very active in the student parish for several years said in the farewell liturgy after his defence that he had studied in two faculties, the faculty of theology and the "faculty" of the student parish, and that he had learned equally much in either "faculty". Since a number of years our university requires each faculty to have a think tank for "Diversity and equal opportunity". This think tank consists of members from all the groups within the Faculty. In our Faculty this group has been very active and has done excellent work. One of its initiatives last year was to require each research unit to invite an internationally renowned colleague who would add to the diversity of our work. This group among others raises the awareness of the Faculty on global issues, fosters the meeting of people from different cultures and religious traditions, teaches inclusivity (including the use of inclusive language in research) and teaches students and faculty the need to call into question the patriarchal cultures of their home country).

I will stop here with describing the sphere, and the opportunities our faculty tries to provide for international students to be formed. In this process, however, we have seen ourselves also being formed by the students. It is to this aspect that I now turn.

2. Formation of the Faculty by the Students

The presence of so many students from all over the world has also been immensely enriching for our Faculty. It has been a gradual learning process that made it possible for us to allow their presence to enrich us, and it would certainly be justified to say that we still have a lot to learn. In what follows I will try to bring together the ways in which the international students have formed us as a faculty, but I will also allude to some missed opportunities.

² See, for instance, the series *Christian Living Today* published in Kuching, Malaysia by two alumni of our Faculty, one from Malaysia and the other from Uganda.

Among the missed opportunities is certainly the fact that despite the presence of international students from non-Western countries for over 40 years, our full-time teaching staff is still almost exclusively Western. Recently we have started to counteract this to some degree, but including visiting fellows and post-docs from non-Western countries in our part-time teaching staff. Another missed opportunity is the fact that our theology is still in many ways and in many areas Eurocentric, white male theology, and in the core subjects it seems that our interlocutors are in many cases exclusively white males also. The place in the faculty where this is certainly not the case is the Centre for Liberation Theologies which is organized as a close cooperation of professors and students. The regular lectures and courses related to this centre are examples of a more inclusive approach.

In recent years, however, we have seen a great number of developments in addition to the work of the Centre for Liberation Theologies which already have a positive effect on the members of the Faculty. Learning from our students often happens unconsciously and unintentionally, sometimes even indirectly and despite the fact that we may not be open enough to fully benefit from the opportunities. This happens mainly as a result of the questions the students raise in our classes and by way of the topics they propose for their research.

The presence of international students in our Faculty has revitalized the spirituality and the liturgy. Our Faculty liturgies for the Feast of St. Thomas express in prayer and song the many languages and cultural expressions of our students. In the areas of daily Eucharist and initiatives to share in the area of spirituality our international students take up responsibility.

One of the most formative dimensions of the presence of international students is the continued contacts and cooperation after the graduates are back in their home countries. This has resulted in a rich multiplicity of initiatives and formal or less formal agreements of cooperation. Leuven professors regularly visit their graduates in their home countries and lecture or teach courses in seminaries in the global south at the invitation of Leuven alumni. Our affiliation with Marymatha Major Seminary in Trichur, Kerala, India is the most developed and structurally rooted cooperation of this type. In the context of this cooperation every year one Leuven professor spends 3-4 four weeks in Trichur teaching courses and participating in the examinations and giving a keynote at an annual conference. But there are also intense contacts with many other schools and faculties around the world. We have an ongoing cooperation with Dharmaram College, Bangalore, India (e.g., the “Mysticism Without Bounds” conference in January 2011 with a delegation of 15 people from our Faculty, and the “Revisiting Vatican II: 50 Years of Renewal” conference in January 2013). We also have formal cooperation agreements with the Faculty of Theology, Kinshasa, DR Kongo. Here also members of our Faculty regularly teach courses and students from Kinshasa come to study in our Faculty. There is also an informal cooperation with the “Institute for the Formation and Religious Studies” in Quezon City, Philippines, and with St. Vincent's School of Theology, Philippines. This has also resulted in support for scientific journals in some of those schools by professors from Leuven being membership of international editorial boards (e.g., *Asian Horizons in Theology*, *Hapag: Journal of Interdisciplinary Theological Research*). There is also a very active alumni organization of graduates of our Faculty in India with annual academic meetings and the participation of one Leuven professor.

Structural channels along which our international students teach us are also their cooperation in research groups, their regular visits and guest lectures in Leuven. In addition we make ample use of the opportunity to allow our graduates to return to Leuven a few years after the completion of their doctorates for research leaves of one semester or three month. This opportunity is also open for those who are not Leuven graduates. Moreover we see more and more that our graduates and other colleagues from the global south are invited to Leuven as readers of doctoral dissertations and as speakers at international conferences in Leuven, often combined with a short research leave and guest lectures or participation in existing research groups. It is certainly also thanks to the presence of so many international scholars in Leuven that our on ranking of scientific journals, the “Louvain Index of Theology and Religious Studies for Journals and Series” (LITAERS) contains many journals from non-Western countries and is in this way rather unique in its kind.

It is important to note that I have deliberately limited myself here to the channels through which international students have helped form our Faculty. I have not dared to address the more interesting, but immensely more difficult question how international students have influenced our way of doing theology as well as the content of our theology. This question may have to be left to research of a later period when people can benefit from a clearer vision due to the distance of time. We can at least say that the presence of international researchers has co-determined the research agenda of our Faculty with a strong focus on hunger in the world, environmental issues and on issues of inclusivity (including Muslim-Christian relations in Nigeria and Dalit exclusion in India), issues of globalization and “in- or acculturation” to name but a few.

As has been emphasized, many of these initiatives are still in the beginning stages, and they are not all equally effective. But they are a new beginning which we hope will in time lead to a deeper change of mentality and practical changes for the better in doing theology.

Before concluding I will focus on some perspectives for the future, reflecting on opportunities and challenges which I see coming up at the horizon.

1. There is the need for ongoing training of new doctors in post-doctoral research positions for non-Western countries in order to train a new generation of researchers. All too often we see that the doctorate is the endpoint of a young scholar's publishing career after their return into their home country. We need more initiatives which will enable young scholars to continue researching and publishing under the often difficult circumstances of their new responsibilities. so that their doctorates can truly be the beginning of their scientific careers.
2. We need to develop joint research projects with international scholars in the global south. Here we can report some initial initiatives, e.g., research on anti-corruption teaching in Catholic schools in the Philippines, on research on trauma and resiliency, and research on the Catholic identity of schools and universities, expanding a project which has been developed in Leuven for Catholic schools in Belgium, Australia, in the UK, and a pilot study in the Philippines.
3. We finally need to explore the possibilities of the digital revolution for our cooperation. We are suggesting, for instance, the development of electronic theology libraries, the teaching of joint courses and joint conferences via weblinks, as well as an increase of invitations of

correctors of dissertations and speakers at conferences (if necessary the via online communication).

Conclusion

The Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies at Katholieke Universiteit Leuven is by far the most international Faculty of our university. The international programmes have become so important for the Faculty that without them the Faculty could hardly exist anymore. For about two generations our Faculty has been shaped by the presence of large numbers of international students from many parts of the world and by the ongoing contacts which have resulted from their presence. The process of transformation from a Western Eurocentric Faculty of Theology to a truly international and intercultural Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies has been slow and challenging, but it has been steady and progressive. Both the international students and the Faculty have benefitted immensely from the international programmes. Without doubt there is more learning and more benefits to come for both sides as we move into the future.