

Title - Should a Theological or Bible College be Affiliated to a Secular University?

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I. Introduction

The answer to this question can either be no or yes, depending upon the context of the theological college, the conscience of the theological college and the commitment of the theological college. No, in the sense that theological colleges are given no chance to be affiliated to secular universities. In this case, the problem is not necessarily the theological colleges but the secular universities. The typical example in this case is India; whereby, although some theological colleges are ready to enter affiliation-dialogue with secular universities, government universities have closed their doors for such a dialogue. In this case theological colleges are prevented from operating with secular universities either as a wing/department or a separate department but with its accreditation attached to them. So, here the context does not allow affiliation to take place.

Other theological colleges the case might be different. Unlike the above scenario whereby the doors are closed for dialogue, here the doors might be wide opened. But some theological colleges because of their own Christian convictions, they opt not to be affiliated to the secular university. Gnanakan being one of the proponents of this idea. He strongly opposed this idea of being affiliated to the secular university because “we need to aim for spiritual standards which might not be accredit able by secular standards.”¹

Still other Theological colleges feel obligated to take the challenge not necessarily because of the privileges and advantages that secular university offers to the affiliated theological colleges but fundamentally because of responsibility and mission that Christians have to the world. Even the authors of The Idea of a Christian University, who have spent most of the time critiquing John Henry Newman’s The Idea of a University, agree that “the proper study of theology cannot be done in isolation from engagement with world religions”² 191 They continue to advocate that “total isolation from non-believers is not only impossible; it is also undesirable.”³ And it is to this group of theological colleges that I belong. However, before we venture into the stand of this group, let us listen to the concerns of the other groups.

II. The Context of the College,

In the area of the first group, whereby the secular universities have closed the doors for dialogue of affiliation, we can not force matters. In His own and best time God will open chances for such a dialogue in India. This is our prayer. According to Steve Mackie, this

¹Ken Gnanakan “Accreditation and Renewal” in Evangelical Review of Theology vol 19 No3, July 1995, p.280.

² Jeff Astley, Leslie Francis, John Sullivan and Andrew Walker eds, The Idea of a Christian University, Bucks: Paternoster Press, 2004, p.191.

³ Ibid, p.266.

is the only reason that should cause the theological colleges not to be affiliated to the secular universities. “Only in those cases where public institutions can not or will not provide for the study of Christian theology, should the church establish parallel facilities in their own institutions whereby theology can be studied at the same level and with the same degree of rigour as in the university course”⁴ As far as Theological Education is concerned, to Mackie, this is the only genuine reason for the theological college not to be associated or affiliated to the secular university. This is fair enough.

III. The Conscience of the College

As some theological colleges are missing that opportunity of interacting with the secular university because the University has not yet opened its doors such a dialogue as an example above, other theological colleges, with all chances of forming a new relationship with the academia, decline the offer because of their Christian conscience. Here are six the reasons for not taking up the opportunity to work with academia as quoted by Dr Cheesman⁵ are as follows:

A. Professional Elite:

Only a few at the top of the church are trained. Yet, we are all priests. (I Pet.2:9) “It has been said for example, that the standard type of seminary training tends to create a professional elite separated from the ordinary membership of the church.”⁶

As for this charge, it is true in one sense. In the other sense it is debatable because leadership development is needed anyway if we are to promote effectiveness in the ministry. Like any other profession, this profession also needs effectiveness even more because it deals with God’s people and issues. Only that sometimes, there is a sense of pride in some leaders when they get that type of training; that attitude of looking down upon others. If this is the concern, it can be and has been checked from to after time. This has to be discouraged by all cost and means if anything we are called to humble ministry. As Jesus was humble (Phil 2:5), we also need humble servants of God.

B. Compromise:

Two types of education crashing. As university is concerned with academic knowledge about God, college is concerned with relational knowledge and knowing God. One uses reason to determine God’s will and the other uses faith to determine God’s will. In order to strike the balance between the two types of education, compromise is needed. While the college strives to emphasize personal and spiritual development, emphasis of secular university is on reason. Reason has been on centre-stage as the arbiter of what is true. Lesslie Newbigin, in *Foolishness to the Greeks*, gives a penetrating analysis of the changes that have taken place in the Western world as a result of this paradigm shift in the area of establishing what is true.⁷ As that happens, one party always suffers and in

⁴ Steven G. Mackie, *Patterns of Ministry: Theological Education in a Changing World*, London: C. Tinling & Co. Ltd, 1969, p.145.

⁵Graham Cheesman, “The Relationship Between the Colleges and the Universities-An Examination of Choices and Reasons”, *Class Notes*, 2005, pp.228-231

⁶British Working Group, “Ministerial Formation” July, 1980, p.12.

⁷Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, London: SPCK, 1986.

most cases it is the college. Why is that so? Jeff says it's because university is financially adequate.⁸

This might be true in one context, but in another context it might not be absolutely true. As we shall see later on, this is not absolutely true with us in Malawi. Although I know "that there will be never an exact fit between the two forms of education"⁹, things have changed and are continuing to change not only in Malawi but also in other places.

C. Non-Christians should not make judgements about Christian service;

What to teach and what not to teach, who goes in the service and who does not go in the service, who to recruit to teach and who not to, which books to use and which not to use, etc. all this is determined by non-Christians. This was highly advocated by Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones an influential member of evangelical community who opposed the use of university examinations in training for Christian Service.¹⁰

As we will see in our case, this problem have been accommodated in one way or the other in our college. We have other courses that students take which have nothing to do with university diploma. However, that fact cannot be ruled out. We do have cases whereby non-Christians do make judgements about Christians in other areas of life. Here it's a matter of choice. Similarly, in university-college relationship it's sometimes a matter of choice.

D. Transfer of University attitudes:

Critical attitudes of the university which lead to comparative, judgmental and competitive attitudes among students are transferred to the colleges.

This problem is there and is there to stay. The solution of this problem is in the hands of the colleges. Since most of the time of the students is spent in the colleges, colleges themselves can check this problem. I do agree with DA Carson who advocate that "if they are to survive as Christians ... and to engage meaningfully with their peers, Christian students must be helped to bring all the powers of a renewed Christian mind to bear on their university experience: to recognize idolatry and false worship and to challenge it in the name of the one true God, as Paul did in the once great 'university' city of Athens (Acts 17)."¹¹

E. Content of teaching if we teach through University is historically and not practically determined.

Content is determined by the structure of the university and not by what is needed out there for ministry. Jeff continues to add that "[t]he subject has been fully 'intellectualized' in terms of non-Christian tradition(liberal secularism) and its relation to Christian form of life and praxis have successfully prised apart."¹² Yet, "[t]his is no intellectualistic religion, but a religion directed to the end of converting men and women to God and nurturing them in a redeemed community."¹³

⁸ Jeff Astley, Leslie Francis, John Sullivan and Andrew Walker eds *The Idea of a Christian University*, Bucks: Paternoster Press, 2004, p.189

⁹ Graham Cheesman, *Classroom Notes*, 2005, pp.228-229.

¹⁰ Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Training for the Ministry Today*, London Theological Seminary, 1983, p. 9.

¹¹ D. A. Carson, editor, *Worship: Adoration and Action*, (Wheaton, IL: World Evangelical Fellowship) 2000, c1993, p.4.

¹² Jeff Astley, p. 189.

¹³ Philip Duce and Daniel Strange, *Keeping Your Balance*, Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 2001, pp. 76-77.

This is quite true. But as we will see the college programmes will neutralise this problem in one way or the other.

F. How it affects the students:

What motivates the students to go for University rather than college? It is status rather than a call.

If it is a status rather than a call that the students apply for a college, then by the end of three years at the college, he/she will have been influenced for the good of the ministry. You can not go through a theological college for three years and remain as you were. It's impossible! After graduation wherever he/she is to be working the influence of reaching out will be there. And this is our goal: to witness to the world.

G. Academic Qualifications more important Spiritual Qualifications

Jeff has added another point. "We have the anomalous and anachronistic situation where theology is on offer in our university to be taught by anyone, and learnt by everyone, but apparently only practised in the churches."¹⁴

Let this be like that. As Christians we need not to get worried about this for God is in control. He has been using pagans to bring His purpose at home. Cyrus is the typical example.

H. A Gulf Between a College and the Church

"Worse still is the ease with which there can develop a gulf between the kind of theology and the church, a form of isolation no less real than that of seminary."¹⁵

The fact that the college is affiliated by both bodies: spiritual-oriented and secular-oriented is sufficient evidence that there is balance in the system. If the college was not spiritual, ACTEA could have hesitated to grant us the membership. We have seen other colleges being denied that status. So, for us the church can not accuse us of imposing a different theology. Moreover, you can never enter this type of relationship without approval of the Church.

IV. The Commitment of the College

While other theological colleges, with all chances of forming a new relationship with the academia, decline the offer because of their Christian conscience, still others are making use of the opportunity to advance their Christian commitment. Some of three reasons for this group suggested by Dr Cheesman¹⁶ are as follows:

A. It avoids obscurantism:

The spirit of unconnectedness or unwillingness to discuss with anyone (I am right I don't need any other advice) is avoided when the college is in relationship with the university. It is this spirit that caused evangelicalism to be ineffective before Enlightenment. Commenting to the character of a college, Mackie asserts that a theological school, like other educational institutions, must be characterised by integrity, openness to the truth and academic rigour—whatever educational requirements it may demand or provide. It should therefore be prepared to enter into a critical relationship

¹⁴ Jeff, p. 189

¹⁵ Reginard Stackhouse, "The Place of Theological College in the University", Theological Education Winter 1977 13(2) p.103.

¹⁶Graham Cheesman, Classroom Notes, pp.231-233.

with the surrounding system, whether by relationship to a university or by other means.”¹⁷

B. It makes mission possible:

How can you speak of Jesus Christ to the society, university inclusive, if you don't understand their thoughts? If you understand university, you can witness to it better.

C. Churches and colleges have a claim on society:

We have the right to be served by the university. “Christians pay taxes and so their children are entitled to grants or loans while studying. Churches contribute to society, so should be able to assess the benefits of a university.”¹⁸

V. My Context

In my case, the relationship between our theological college and the secular university is both healthy and balanced in a way. Zambezi College of Ministry (ZACOM), which is a theological training wing/arm of Zambezi Evangelical Church, was started in 1997. In 2003, the college was affiliated to Accrediting Council for Theological Education in Africa (ACTEA) as a Correspondent member. Just like Belfast Bible College (BBC), ZACOM entered into a new relationship with academia “in that of sharing a jointly-taught and examined [diploma] with a university or a group of colleges relating together to that university”¹⁹ in 2004. In our case, Roman Catholics, Presbyterians, Anglicans, and Baptists formed a theological faculty which is led by an official of the university under the department of Theology and Religious Studies. Rev Dr Klaus Fiedler, a Baptist minister and a lecturer in the department of Theology and Religious Studies of the University of Malawi, is the official of the university that leads this faculty. In fact, it has a theological committee, known as Board for Theological Studies (BTS) that meets mostly twice or thrice if need arises a year. While all lecturers of the courses are the members of the Board, the Chairman and Treasurer of the committee rotate from one theological college to another after two years. But Rev Dr Klaus Fiedler, an official from the university, is constantly the Secretary of the Board.

In the area of what to teach, the student is expected to do 15 courses in 3 years. 8 courses come from Church History, Theology, New Testament and Old Testament. When it comes to the text books, you will be surprised to see that it is the so called evangelical books that we are being used. Take for instance Theology the course that I normally teach. Four main text books have been recommended. And these are Wayne Gruden, Systematic Theology; Bruce Milne, Know the Truth; Millard Erickson, Christian Theology; and John Macquarrie, Principles of Christian Theology. Most questions come from Erickson. The other 7 courses are electives which can be chosen from the following. NT Greek, Hebrew, Islam, Missiology, ATR, Dissertation, Pastoral Counselling, Philosophy of Religions, Education Psychology etc Here, too, you will discover that the very books used in “purer” theological colleges are the ones being used in these courses.

¹⁷Steven Mackie, p.159.

¹⁸Graham Cheesman Class Notes p. 233.

¹⁹Ibid, p.222.

When it comes to academic requirements for students, to me they are fair because they apply to everyone. Students must have passed O Level with 3 credits including English. We are responsible for recruiting students ourselves though with an eye on both the academic and spiritual qualifications which is fair and good. Those students we feel have qualified for Christian service but not for this university diploma are also recruited to take up college courses which have nothing to do with university. At the end of the day, nobody is left outside. So, some of the concerns/charges mentioned are being taken care of. Because of the way we handle the students, non-university students don't feel intimidated in any way. To the contrary, we have seen some of these students striving to get into the programme in one way or the other.

As for teachers, those from reputable colleges are expected to teach university courses. Also, they have to have at least the first Degree. Because of the nature of our college, the question of dictation of who to take and who not to take by the university is out because we recruit teachers for both programmes: university and college. Again here the above concerns are ironed out. Those who fail to make it to teach the university courses, if they qualify for ministerial vocation, we recruit them so that nobody is left out. What else can I say?

We have deliberately put courses like Apologetics, Cults etc in order to train our students how to defend our faith before and after graduation. So, at the end of the day you will see that all the concerns are gradually addressed to in one way or the other. More importantly, you will find that our commitment to Christianity is firmly anchored. That is why I say joining academia is more of a responsibility for Christians than a privilege.

Honestly, I didn't understand Mackie when he asserts that "[r]elationship between theological schools and universities should be established or strengthened where they already exist, and every use should be made of the educational resources which universities provide," until ZACOM joined hands with academia. Then he continued, "Theological studies at universities should, however, be supplemented by additional training for those students preparing for Christian ministry."²⁰ This is exactly that we are doing. 15 courses for 3 years are not enough for a Bible student. Since I know "that there will never be no exact fit between the two forms of education,"²¹ namely: theology and university, at ZACOM, we also teach additional courses which are geared towards training for Ministry. "Such religious particularities as the practice of evangelism, prayer and worship [which] would not fit in the secular university mould"²² are incorporated in our system because we also know that "the academic study of these subjects alone would never be enough for the Bible colleges."²³ We give additional courses not only because university courses are never enough for the theological college but also because we want the students, the teachers and the church to know that the task of theological education is not in the hands of the university. So, Lesslie Newbigin is right when he advocates that "the task of theological education cannot simply be handed over to the universities. It is

²⁰ Ibid, p.158.

²¹ Ibid, 228-229.

²² Ibid, p.229.

²³ Ibid, p.229.

the task of the church and the church must take the responsibility. But, provided the proper independence is maintained on both sides, the opportunity to do theology in the university setting is something which must be welcome.”²⁴ These additional courses do not only show the ownership of the task of theological education but also show the identity of theological education when it sinks deep in the soil of its church’s faith, tradition, and life as Reginald correctly puts it:

[There] is the need for theological college to have its roots sunk deep in the soil of its church’s faith, tradition, and life. From that soil it can draw what it needs to provide students the priestly formation without which they can not be adequately prepared for the ministry. Equally from that soil it can also draw what it needs to fulfil its place in the university. That place is not a triumph list pretension to be the queen of sciences, but a biblical vocation to be their servant.²⁵

Is it not for this biblical vocation to be their servant that we, as Christians, are called for? As H Richard Niebuhr set forth in a profound essay on this subject, theology’s calling in the university includes pointing the university beyond itself to the truth that is higher than both the institution and the society which has spawned it.²⁶

Christianity, unlike other religions, is characterized by freedom. Reginald advocates that:

The value of that freedom lies not in the opportunity it gives the theological scholar to do his own thing. It lies in the way such freedom enables the theological college to propound a theology that not only enjoys freedom but proclaims it. The gospel that emanates from a denominationally circumscribed college may say much about a Christ who liberates but its very character will deny that liberation. If the college needs the church, it needs equally the university.²⁷

John Henry Newman’s claim in The Idea of a University that theology must be part of the university or it cannot rightly claim to be universal in its quest for knowledge.²⁸ Newman continues to advocate that university is the university because theology is included in its studies. Thus Newman asks if it [university] is “logically consistent in a seat of learning to call itself a university and to exclude Theology from a number of its studies.”²⁹ So, let us make use of it then.

It might be seen as if in our case it has been ease. Let me assure you that it has never been as ease as we might think. It was a battle, but worthy fighting. Some of the reasons for break-through are relational. You know theology is all about relationship. ‘Shouting at people from a distance’ does not help at all. It just plants seeds of mistrust and creates unnecessary tension. What I am advocating is that when you relate well with people you later on enjoy the fruits of their favour. This does not mean that you become a puppet of

²⁴ L. Newbigin “Theological Education in a World Perspective”, Churchman, 94:3, p.115

²⁵ Reginald Stackhouse, “The Place of Theological College in the University”, Theological Education Winter 1977 13(2) p.104.)

²⁶H Richard Niebuhr, “Theology in the University”, Radical Monotheism & Western Culture, Supplementary Essays I, New York: Harper & Row, 1960, p. 3.

²⁷Reginald Stackhouse, p.105.

²⁸John Henry Newman, p.33

²⁹ Ibid, pp33-34

the people, but a friend. Jesus Christ was a friend of all, publicans and sinners alike, Paul became all things to all people. Why not us!

VI. Assessment

Far from defending ourselves and far from “the peril implicit in the desire ‘to be like unto the nations round about’”³⁰, working with the academia has proved to be a success in a number of ways. And even without mentioning the advantages that are incurred when joining academia which are secondary, the relationship has helped our theological college in a number of ways:

A. Responsibility rather than privilege:

To us taking up the challenge is not a privilege but a responsibility. As Christians we have a responsibility to do to the world, university inclusive. That is witnessing. As you are on earth God can use anything, anyone and any circumstance to reach out people in anyway. He is the Lord of history. So, any opportunity given is used wisely as a responsibility and not as a privilege.

B. Exposure:

Both the theological teacher and students have been and are being exposed to university lifestyle in a number of ways hence chances to witness are wide. This exposure will go a long way assisting us in many ways.

C. Methodology:

Since teaching is dynamic, the relationship has helped teachers to know more methods of teaching Theology even from social sciences. Social sciences, for example, teach that after every 20 minutes in class if students are not activated in one way or the other, the memory span is constant.³¹ This helps a theological teacher to have more activities in his/her lesson so that the memory span is activated.

D. Relationship:

As we meet faculty members from other theological colleges, we have seen that we have created a good working relationship not only with the university but also with other theological colleges. Theology is all about relationships. Dr Chesman is right when he asserts that “Christian service is not shouting at people from a distance, but is done best in relationship with those to whom you minister, and by people who have a foot in both camps.”³²

E. Influence:

Because of the relationship with academia, our circle of influence has also enlarged in one way or the other. The influence the college has now for Jesus Christ is far greater than before not only to the church but also to the society as a whole.

Mackie has articulated 4 areas as to which theological education has to be engaged with:

Theology should be studied and Theological Education given in continuous dialogue with the contemporary world in such areas as:

³⁰ Paul Bowers, p. 31.

³¹ John Biggs, Teaching for Quality Learning at University, 1999, pp.100-101

³²Graham Cheesman, Class Notes, p. 229.

1. the understanding and communication of the faith in response to new insights about the World (particularly in the development of the natural sciences)
2. the response to the contemporary discussions about man and his problems (in philosophy, psychology, art and literature etc.)
3. the understanding of social change
4. dialogue with men of other faiths

The teachers must themselves be involved in this dialogue so as to be able to equip students to judge the given situation and relate the Gospel to it, in an age when the given situation is constantly changing.³³

If Mackie is right, of which he is, then it is through this partnership with academia that all this can become a reality. With the same message that Jesus is Lord, we can use different ways to communicate this in the changing world.

VII. Conclusion

All this helps us to bridge the gap that is there between the word and the world. Just as God bridged the gap that was there between God and man through His Son, so is theology. Theology has to bridge the gap that is there between the Word and the world. There are so many ways of doing this, and having affiliation with a secular university is one of them. Remember, it is not by might or power but by the Spirit of God (Zec. 4:6). So, let us make use of each and every opportunity if it is to our advantage to bridge this gap.

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³³Steven Mackie, p.156

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