An Africanised theological education: a reflection from a novice lecturer

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Abstract

The transformation of theological education in the context of Africa has motivated this research. It discusses ways an Africanised theological education could help integrate knowledge with understanding and wisdom. The article stresses the need for theology students to be given more time for practical learning. It also stresses that epistemological diversity should be adopted so that nobody's knowledge acquisition preference is neglected. It also stresses the need for theological education to help students to be integrated into their cultural diversity. It finally stresses that students be exposed through teaching to their African predecessors for inspiration. It concludes that a meaningful Africanised theological education is possible if steps are taken to integrate the above-mentioned points it stressed into theological education in Africa.

1. Introduction

The transformation of theological education in the context of Africa has motivated this research. This article ponders on the need to transform the theological education system in a way that would equip students and graduates to be relevant change-agents in society. This reflection is motivated by the author's first-time experience as a lecturer of the module "Mission in Practice" at the University of Pretoria. From the beginning of lectures, after looking at the study guide, students expressed mixed emotions. Some were excited that they were going to put into practice a lot of their theoretical learning accumulated over at least three years. Others were disappointed by the few hours the module allocated for practical

work (8 hours of fieldwork and 18 hours of lectures on campus). Also, for practical work, only one context, the township of Mamelodi, was the place they were going to explore. From these emotional reactions came the need to reflect on practical learning as a way to transform theological education in Africa.

Another motivation came from the module's exam. Students had to submit a written assignment and sit in for an oral examination. In the latter, most black African students came to orally engage the examiners, whereas white and Indian students came with a script, read through it and engaged the examiners from it. The oral engagement seemed to be substantial as much as that of those who came with a script. This scenario challenged this article to reflect on epistemological diversity in academia.

Another motivation came from a reflection on the fact that this module was taught to two classes: English (mixed, but predominantly black) and Afrikaans (white only). Halfway through this module, some students from both classes wondered why they were separated.

A final motivation came from discussions with students during lecture times. It was noticeably clear that most of them did not know much about black African predecessors of the past centuries who are famous for their praxis rather than for their academic writing. This reality brought to the fore the issue of knowledge deficit that many Africans have about people from their context who walked before them the road they are on.

The above-mentioned motivations provided a platform to imagine a theological education that could be Africanised. A key question this article is grappling with is: how can theological education help integrate knowledge with understanding and wisdom? To answer well this question, it is important to reflect on the purpose of theological education.

2. Purpose of theological education

The ancient Roman world understood the purpose of education as a preparation for life. This is captured in this sentence: *non scholae, sed vitae studemus* (meaning that we should not study for the sake of studying, but

as a preparation to life).[1] Counts says that education is meant to "prepare individuals to live as members of society."[2] Additionally, it should "equip individuals with the skills necessary to participate in the social life of their community and to change the nature of the social order as needed or desired."[3] For Metz, the purpose of education is both to acquire "knowledge for its own sake and to devote energies toward promoting some concrete public good such as development, justice or autonomy."[4] Dowling and Seepe argue that education "must not pursue knowledge for its own sake, but for … the amelioration of the conditions of life and work of, the ordinary man and woman."[5]

Zeroing in on theological education, de Beer & van Niekerk argue that its purpose, especially at public institutions such as the University of Pretoria, should be "to serve the public good in the broadest possible sense."[6] As a discipline of knowledge that reflects on God who is meant to be good news to the world, theology is supposed to articulate a message of hope both in tangible and theoretical ways. Therefore, theological education should help someone understand the "hope to live in heaven and hope to live on earth."[7] It should help people to be grounded in their context so that along with other stakeholders, theology could competently participate in "addressing the everyday problems of people."[8] Womack, Duncan and Pillay argue that theological education should "be delivered as a public good, or as a commons."[9] Van Niekerk concurs with them when he adds that theological

1   De Give, *Grammaire latine* (De Boeck: Liege, 1961), 13.

2   George Sylvester Counts, *Dare the school build a new social order?* (SIU Press, 1978), 1.

3   Counts, *Dare the school build a new social order*, 1.

4   Thaddeus Metz, "A dilemma about the final ends of higher education – and a resolution", in *The Aims of Higher Education* (Pretoria: Council for Higher Education 2013), 23.

5   Dolina Dowling & Sipho Seepe, "Towards a responsive curriculum," in Piet Naudé and Nico Cloete (eds.), *A tale of three countries: social sciences curriculum transformations in Southern Africa* (Lansdowne: Juta and Co Pty Ltd, 2003), 41–53.

6   Stephanus De Beer & Attie S. Van Niekerk, "Transforming curricula into the next century: Doing theology collaboratively with local communities." *Verbum et Ecclesia* 38, no. 4 (2017): 216–217.

7   Katongole, *Born from lament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 2017), 11.

8   Katongole, *Born from lament*, 5.

9   Jonathan M. Womack, Graham Duncan, and Jerry Pillay. "The relevance and necessity of contextualising theological education and ministerial formation in South Africa." *Verbum et Ecclesia* 41, no. 1 (2020): 5.

education in Africa should not only equip students "to reflect on building up the church", but also to be participants in "improving the quality of life" in their context of life and mission.[10] The effectiveness of this direction is dependent upon the ability of higher institutions of learning to Africanise their curricula.

3. Africanisation

Letsekha sees "Africanisation as a renewed focus on Africa."[11] It aims to develop "Africans into assets for the building of their continent starting from local communities."[12] Africanisation in institutions of higher learning implies a contextualisation of the study materials so that the African realities and conditions can be prioritised. In reflecting on the need to Africanise theological education, Healey & Sybertz stressed that African students should be taught "to start from the reality of the African context and see how the gospel message can become a leaven to it."[13] In other words, African theology students should primarily be developed as "African Christian rather than Christian Africans."[14] Oduyoye unpacks the concept of African Christians in arguing that students should be trained "to take all of Africa's background into account. This education should also prepare students to deal with the gap between Christianity preached and Christianity lived."[15] The Africanisation of theological education will ultimately become a reality if black Africans themselves, from students to academics, learn to author their stories in contextual and meaningful ways. Kader Asmal, a former South African minister of education put it nicely in these allegoric words:

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10   Attie Van Niekerk, "A centre for community life in its fullness." *Verbum et Ecclesia* 36, no. 3 (2015): 6.

11   Tebello Letsekha, "Revisiting the debate on the Africanisation of higher education: an appeal for a conceptual shift." *The Independent Journal of Teaching and Learning* 8, no. 1 (2013): 7.

12   Kasebwe T. L. Kabongo, "Africanisation of theological education: An exploration of a hybrid epistemology." *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 76, no. 4 (2020): 1.

13   Joseph Healey and Donald Sybertz, *Towards an African Narrative Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1996), 19.

14   Healey & Sybertz, *Towards an African narrative theology*, 19

15   Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Hearing and Knowing: Theological Reflections on Christianity* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1986), 9.

> The lion, we have always hoped, will one day have its day … The
> lion will one day rise up and write the history of Africa. We know,
> very well, the kinds of histories that have been written by the hunter.
> Those books only serve the hunter's interests … We now want to
> hear the lion's story. We now want to hear the lion's roar.[16]

Es'kia Mphahlele concurs with Kader Asmal in stating that black Africans must "play a major role [in building their context], tapping the best minds amongst other population groups."[17] According to him, this process goes beyond simply filling our schools and colleges with a majority of blacks. It means revolutionizing the whole range of our curricula, "giving them a new direction, a humanist thrust distinct from the tyranny of didactic approaches that have choked up all the channels of education."[18]

For this revolution to happen, this article argues that learning from doing needs to be prioritised in theological education.

4.   Learning from doing

From the first lecture with students, there was a clear longing to learn from doing. It seems like action significantly improves someone's learning. A Chinese proverb says that "when I do, I understand."[19] This practical way of building knowledge capital could bring wisdom, which is needed in the development of agents of hope. It would also prepare students for a lived Christianity of proactive participation in the common good and real-life issues. Such a preparation seems to fit nowadays job market which prefers recruits with good experiential and theoretical knowledge.

4.1 Experience and competence

The South African job market seems to equate competence with experience. Students and new graduates face extreme difficulties engaging with the

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16   Mamphela Ramphele, *Dreams, betrayal and hop* (Penguin Random House South Africa, 2017), 47.

17   Es'kia Mphahlele, *Es'kia* (Kwela: Cape Town. 2002), 79.

18   Mphahlele, *Es'kia*, 79.

19   Kabongo, "Africanisation of theological education," 5.

labour market, with the major factor being their "lack of experience."[20] It is well-known that good experience provides "quality service delivery."[21] Universities classic emphasis on theoretical knowledge over practical knowledge is increasingly being challenged. However, some non-profit organisations are making efforts to marry experience to theory in their training of students. Three of them are alluded to below:

4.1.1 More than a teacher

"More Than a Teacher"[22] training academy's aim is to develop education students into fully professional, passionate and productive educators who achieve high-quality learning outcomes for learners. Participants are drawn largely from historically disadvantaged communities. All students are registered for a degree in education at a local long-distance learning university. To strengthen their professional readiness, students:

- Undertake 20 hours of classroom teaching each week and gain diverse learning experiences. They work as assistant teachers in a classroom under the mentorship of a qualified and experienced educator.
- Do extramural training and participation at school they are placed at.
- Do one month of service-learning at another school during the year in order to broaden their experiential knowledge.
- Lead a school-based project that responds to needs (teaching and learning, student experience, peer tutoring).
- Participate in personal development sessions by skilled facilitators.

Another organisation that prioritizes experiential learning is Alpha and omega.

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20 Businesstech, "These are your chances of getting a job after graduating in South Africa", 1.

21 Mark Granovetter, *Getting a job: A study of contacts and careers* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 3.

22 More Than a Teacher. [Online]. Available: http://www.kswr.org.za/ (2018). [Accessed: 21 October 2018].

4.1.2 Alpha and omega[23]

It was founded by Charles Pritchard, a Roman Catholic businessman. Its mission is connected to the great commission of making disciples of Jesus in the Roman Catholic doctrinal way. It consists of a teaching, prayer, counselling and healing ministry. It forms people into becoming the saints they were created to be. Charles Pritchard and his team believe that people learn more easily to follow Jesus by experientially learning to build an intimate relationship with him.

Another organisation that values experiential learning is InnerCHANGE.

4.1.3 InnerCHANGE

InnerCHANGE[24] is a missional order among people living with poverty. In South Africa, it has a team in the township of Soshanguve. It runs an apprenticeship in which ordinary neighbours are developed into community builders. This is an apprenticeship that is run yearly. It is geared more towards action than theory. Apprentices spend 24 hours a month doing a practical service project. They spend 4 hours a month in a classroom learning about InnerCHANGE's approach to ministry, and another 4 hours a month in a one to one mentoring session with an experienced InnerCHANGE staff. The reason behind this focus on action more than theory is because InnerCHANGE believes that the gospel is made real to people by its effects and actions of the people who profess it. Perkins stresses that "the love of God demonstrates its nature to us through the actions of its followers in society"[25]. He adds that "the first Christians learned of the love of God by seeing Jesus in action in their lives."[26]

4.1.4 Summary

The above-mentioned non-profit organisations are able to produce graduates who learn primarily from doing and secondarily through theory. In their

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23   *Alpha & Omega*. Apprenticeship of saints. [Online]. Available: www.alpha-omega.org. za [Accessed: 22 October 2018].

24   InnerCHANGE. [Online]. Available: www.innerchange.org [Accessed: 21 August 2018].

25   John M. Perkins, *Let justice roll down* (Baker Books, 2006), 85.

26   Perkins, *Let Justice roll down*, 85.

training of students and apprentices, the embracing of epistemological diversity is critical.

5. Embracing epistemological diversity

The author's assessment of students and his appreciation of the student understanding of the module both in writing and orally has challenged him to integrate a diversity of assessment and engagement with students in order to maximize their learning. The University of Pretoria promotes epistemological diversity. It understands it as "bringing marginalised groups, experiences, knowledge and worldview emanating from Africa … to the centre of the curriculum."[27] The good oral articulation of the module content reminded the author of his upbringing as a black African. The majority of black Africans live in contexts that are primarily oral in terms of how people build knowledge capital. They are raised in a world that is primarily understood "through proverbs, stories, and relationships."[28] A great deal of what black Africans understand can't be "put into words," however, they know "how to do" them.[29] They know things they can't say, feel things they can't name, and sometimes do things they can't explain; therefore, "proverbs and stories" are used as vehicles to communicate knowledge.[30] Chinua Achebe once said, "that proverbs are the palm oil with which words are eaten and the horse on which conversations rides."[31] Epistemological diversity must be integrated into the training of theology students so that they can each proudly embrace the unique ways they best accumulate knowledge. This integration would elevate to "equal status" different forms of knowledge acquisition.[32] It would also open

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27   University of Pretoria. "Unpublished policy document" (University of Pretoria, Pretoria. 2019), 1.

28   Chinua Achebe, *Things fall apart* (London: Heineman 1959, 5.

29   Achebe. *Things fall apart*, 5.

30   Ibid., 5.

31   Ibid., 6.

32   Hadebe. "Commodification, decolonisation and theological education in Africa: Renewed challenges for African theologians." *HTS Theological Studies* 73, no. 3 (2017): 7.

a respectful dialogue among diverse "epistemic traditions."[33] Diversity should be encouraged because the author believes that all human beings are a hybrid of different epistemologies: what an individual knows, comes from "diverse ways of knowing."[34] It is therefore critical for institutions of higher learning "to eradicate the painful exclusions and daily micro-aggression" of prioritising one way of knowing and suppressing the others.[35] Maximizing learning from a diversity of ways has the potential to improve the students understanding of their context. It would also improve their wisdom to know how to participate in the building of their societies.

6. Learning about Africa

In his interactions with students, the author was surprised to learn about how little the students knew about African theologians. This surprise echoed Maluleke's question: "Is it still possible to attain a diploma or a basic degree in theology within (South) Africa and to do so without ever having read any work by an African?"[36] This question could be broadened to more than reading but knowing in general. This article stresses that a good knowledge of fellow African theologians could be inspiring to students and improve their understanding of the context they live in. Ramphele states that "descendants of European settlers draw their strengths from their version of history. Alternative narratives should be available to young black people to enable them to reconnect with their roots and draw strength from the achievements of their ancestors."[37] Fellow Africans such as "Dona Beatriz Kimpa Vita, Simon Kimbangu, Engenas Lekganyane, Isaac Shembe and Glayton Modise [raised] a voice of contextual expressions of the church" in defiance to the western structures of their time.[38] Until

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33 Achille Mbembe. "Decolonising knowledge and the question of the archive. Lecture delivered at the Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research" (2015), 4.

34 Kabongo. "Africanisation of theological education", 3.

35 Womack et al, "The relevance and necessity of contextualising theological education", 5.

36 Tinyiko Sam Maluleke, "The Africanization of theological education: Does theological education equip you to help your sister?" in E.P. Antonio (ed.), *Inculturation and the postcolonial discourse in African theology* (Peter Lang, New York. 2006), 66.

37 Ramphele, *Dreams, betrayal and hope*, 52.

38 Kabongo. "From victimhood to hubs of (trans)formation and local agency: Re-imagining poor urban communities," 5.

today, they remain the sign of alternatives our time could be inspired by in an exploration of a meaningful role the church could play in society. They continue to remind African theologians not to "ignore the questions that are being asked on the ground.[39] Familiarity with African legacy could allow theology students to learn about something they can build off of. Ramphele stresses the importance for African students to know about their fellow predecessors in faith because "the continuity that history gives to a people is their most powerful weapon against attacks on their identity and self-confidence."[40] Cheikh Anta Diop also argues along the same line in stating that: "The most efficient cultural weapon with which a people can arm itself is the feeling of historical continuity."[41]

Such a feeling connected to good knowledge and praxis can help students to be connected to African values such as *Ubuntu*. The latter is a philosophy that "places communal interests above those of the individual, and where human existence is dependent upon interaction with others."[42] Ramphele states that in traditional African societies, Ubuntu shaped "the conduct of social relationships" and underpinned "the nurture and upbringing of young people to enable them to become proud members of their communities."[43]

Ramphele stresses that any form of "discrimination and oppression go against the very essence of humanity as a quality we owe each other."[44] They negate our connectedness as the core of our human nature. This is why some students discomfort of being separated along language line stood out as an important point to be highlighted in this article.

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39   Maluleke. "The Africanization of theological education", 67.

40   Ramphele, *Dreams, betrayal and hope*, 55–56.

41   Cheikh Anta Diop, *The African origin of civilization: Myth or reality* (Chicago Review Press, 1989), 317.

42   Thinandavha D. Mashau, and Mookgo S. Kgatle. "Prosperity gospel and the culture of greed in post-colonial Africa: Constructing an alternative African Christian Theology of Ubuntu." *Verbum et Ecclesia* 40, no. 1 (2019): 1.

43   Ramphele, *Dreams, betrayal and hope*, 107

44   Ibid., 109.

7. Bridge-building

South Africa is known as a rainbow nation because of its diversity. However, there is still a long way to true nation-building. Ramphele argues that all South Africans should have their primary identity as their citizenship to their nation. According to her, "we need to reconnect with our primary identity as citizens and to celebrate it."[45] She juxtaposes this statement against a general attachment to identities such as whites, blacks, Indians, coloured, Xhosa, Zulu, Venda, Afrikaans that she sees as secondary. She adds that our secondary identities would be under no threat in a society where unity in diversity is a lived reality. As a black African, the author argues that black Africans seem to draw their identity more from their clan than their country or continent of origin. Therefore, patriotism and pan-Africanism are still dreams that theological education can champion because the kingdom of God is diverse. Students come from different backgrounds and, currently, their interaction with peers of different backgrounds seems to be minimal to none. Institutions of higher learning should make conscious efforts to encourage and challenge students to interact with one another, especially people from different backgrounds.

In interacting with the four issues from this lecturing experience, the author is imagining students to become agents of a relevant and contextual ecclesiology in communities they will serve in post-university.

8. Ecclesiology

Niemandt defines ecclesiology as "a theological discipline that seeks to understand and define the church."[46] An Africanised theological education would be helpful if it prepares students to creatively help build "a community of witness, called into being and equipped by God, and sent into the world to testify and participate in Christ's work."[47] Niemandt postulates that "ecclesiology follows mission," meaning that followers of Jesus are called to be good news agents to the world and then gather people

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45   Ibid., 129.

46   Cornelius J.P. Niemandt, "Trends in missional ecclesiology." *HTS: Theological Studies* 68, no. 1 (2012): 1.

47   Niemandt, "Trends in missional ecclesiology", 1.

in relevant expressions that would grow and deepen the understanding of their purpose.[48] For this to happen, students need to be trained to be "rooted in a lived faith" and wrestle with what it means to connect theologizing with "serving God in everyday life."[49] Reality is so complex that theology is increasingly challenged to being a participant alongside other sciences in working for the common good.

Therefore, a transdisciplinary approach to education could help theology students to meaningfully participate in shaping the common good. Max-Neef argues that everyday reality teaches us how we "require access to new types of logic that allow for disciplinary cross-fertilization."[50] Klein understands trans-disciplinarity as "different academic disciplines working jointly with practitioners to solve a real-world problems."[51] Our current society issues require collaborative efforts between different sciences for sustainable solutions to be found. De Beer & van Niekerk argue that "theologians must learn" to work with others and make their contribution to the common good.[52] Theological education could encourage students to "collaboratively work with local and diverse communities" by dedicating many hours towards such experiences.[53] Such dedication could prepare students to get involved in issues that are meaningful to African people such as poverty, socio-politico-economic oppression, HIV/AIDS and malaria pandemic, Ebola and cholera epidemic, the ramifications of the coronavirus pandemic, vulnerable children, gender issues, combatting crime and corruption, the pollution of their environment, etc.

The need for theology to partner with other sciences is connected with the need to contextually diversify expressions of the church. In areas of poverty specifically, the church ability to gather people around a common interest

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48   Ibid., 3.

49   Ibid., 3.

50   Manfred A. Max-Neef, "Commentary foundations of transdisciplinarity". *Ecological Economics* 53 (2005): 7.

51   J. Thompson Klein, Walter Grossenbacher-Mansuy, Rudolf Häberli, Alain Bill, Roland W. Scholz, and Myrtha Welti, (eds.), *Transdisciplinarity: Joint problem solving among science, technology, and society: An effective way for managing complexity* (Springer Science & Business Media, 2001), 4.

52   De Beer and van Niekerk. "Transforming curricula into the next century",7.

53   Ibid., 7.

will be significant. Wagner points out "one church, which is growing rapidly by attracting a large number of unchurched people to Christ" because of its attention to their specific needs.[54] Mwambazambi stresses that "churches in Africa are in a unique position to give concrete social content to the dream of a new African society" filled with hope.[55]

It is ironic that African neighbourhoods where there is a local church at every street corner, are the ones where issues of poverty, crime, violence, child and women abuse seem to be the most prominent. Such a situation poses the question of the church ability to positively impact society. Kwakye postulates that the gospel is meant to infiltrate all corners of the world and serve as "a tool for both communal and individual prosperity."[56] Niemandt posits that the implications of the Africanisation of theology would be for it to consciously engage "with the realities of local contexts."[57] In a continent where violence, hunger and diseases are very prominent, theological studies should equip people to "bring joy and help people to flourish."[58]

9. Conclusion

This article reflected on some questions and observations the author's stumbled upon as a novice lecturer. These questions motivated a reflection on the purpose of theological education which is to be involved in real-life issues. Therefore, the Africanisation of theological education should prepare students to be proactive participants in the common good and become society builders. This article stressed that one of the ways they can learn to be such is through practical learning and be affirmed in their

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54   C. Peter Wagner, *Church growth & the whole gospel: A Biblical Mandate* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 1998), 39.

55   Kalemba Mwambazambi, "A missiological reflection on African ecclesiology." Verbum et Ecclesia 32, no. 1 (2011): 8.

56   Abraham Nana Opare Kwakye, "Encountering 'Prosperity' Gospel in nineteenth century Gold Coast: indigenous perceptions of Western missionary societies." *Pastures of plenty* (2015): 217–228.

57   Cornelius. J.P. Niemandt, "The prosperity gospel, the decolonisation of theology, and the abduction of missionary imagination." *Missionalia* 45, no. 3 (2017): 210.

58   Cornelius. J.P. Niemandt, "Rediscovering joy in costly and radical discipleship in mission." *HTS Theological Studies* 72, no. 4 (2016): 3.

preference of knowledge accumulation. Hence theological education needs to promote epistemological diversity. Students could be encouraged and inspired to become community builders through the inspiration of other Africans, among other sources, and become bridge builders by elevating their identity beyond their tribal or race line. Theological education can finally prepare them to catalyse contextual and meaningful ecclesiology that could help build communities.

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