



# Teaching religion as change for social transformation in contemporary African and non-African universities: a South African manifesto

**Author:**Corneliu C. Simuț<sup>1</sup> **Affiliation:**

<sup>1</sup>Department of Historical and Systematic Theology, Faculty of Theology, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa

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**Corresponding author:**

Corneliu Simuț,  
corneliu.simut@gmail.com

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This article is a research report on the international colloquium entitled 'Re-Imagining Curricula for a Just University in a Vibrant Democracy', hosted by the University of Pretoria in 2017 to address a series of prospective changes in religious studies curricula in African and non-African universities. Anchored in the principles of the *Draft Framework Document*, a South African manifesto authored by a team of specialists from the University of Pretoria advocating educational reform in the field of religion, the colloquium debated the necessity of curricular change from the perspective of ecodomy, seen as a constructive attempt to modify university curricula to include relevant approaches to religion. Consequently, the discussions revolved around the idea of 'ecodomy' as a socially transformative step towards achieving community development in tertiary education religious institutions.

**Contribution:** This article, however, focused on the *Draft Framework Document* and its distinctive contribution to the pedagogy of theology and religious studies within the University of Pretoria.

**Keywords:** University; education; ecodomy; change; society; development; Africa; teaching.

## Introduction

The year 2017 was auspicious for the Faculty of Theology and Religion at the University of Pretoria. Still bearing its shorter, traditional name 'Faculty of Theology', this prestigious institution of theological higher education was at a crossroads half a decade ago. Having been put in the difficult position of justifying the relevance of religious education within a tertiary education setting, the then Faculty of Theology organised an international colloquium entitled 'Reimagining curricula for a just university in a vibrant democracy', which was held on 29 July 2017. It was not without reason that this conference was organised in 2017, because it celebrated not only the theological faculty's 100th anniversary but also half a millennium since the Protestant Reformation – both within the pressure to explain its very existence within the university's contemporary setting, an aspect which had often been underlined by the then dean of the Faculty of Theology, Professor Johan Buitendag.

The colloquium was attended by African and non-African scholars, although this particular aspect is irrelevant in light of the fact that all participants underlined the necessity of change as mandatory for tertiary education. With specific reference to religious education, it was clear for all those involved in the conference that change was no longer a mere concept but a reality which had to be pursued relentlessly, consistently and persistently. Change was the common denominator of the discussions within the spectrum of the faculty's research focus, which was the notion of 'ecodomy'. Defined as 'constructive process' by Geiko Müller-Fahrenholz almost three decades ago, ecodomy is permeated by the idea of change as necessary for any human progress (Müller-Fahrenholz 1995:109). For the 2017 Pretoria colloquium, however, discussions and the proposed solutions revolved around the idea of 'ecodomy', seen as mandatory for the development of religious education not only in Africa but across the globe as well because of its capacity for social transformation.

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## Thesis

The argument of this article is that the idea of 'ecodominical change' is not only a theoretical construct but also a real possibility if pursued within a certain set of directions which become a programmatic framework for its practical application in order to achieve social transformation. Faculties of theology throughout the world, as well as in Africa, tend to be organised based on traditional and confessional grounds, an aspect which can become problematic for contemporary perspectives on education. For instance, Protestant faculties of theology would normally hire Protestants, while Catholics and Orthodox sister institutions of religious education would follow the same pattern. Although this is not the case everywhere, it is perhaps safe to presume that there is a vast majority of such institutions of tertiary education which function within these traditional parameters.

The confessional reality of contemporary faculties of theology may result in a certain lack of sympathy and empathy for the problems of contemporary society; also, religious studies departments, which are conceived as more inclusivistic than traditional faculties of theology, may be equally ineffective because they do not address the problems of significant portions of society that focus on traditional religious convictions. If so, both faculties of theology and religious studies departments tend to be equally ineffective in addressing some of the most stringent concerns of today's society. Jerusha Tanner Lamptey, for instance, sees a 'standard typology' characterised by 'exclusivism, inclusivism, pluralism, and sometimes particularism' (Tanner Lamptey 2014:115) which fails to address the concerns of both traditional segments of society anchored in traditional capitalism (targeted by confessional faculties of theology) and its more liberal quarters focused on minority issues like feminist, sexual and environmental concerns (supposedly served by religious studies departments).

Thus, this article seeks to investigate if the notion of 'ecodominical change' can be applied to religious higher education in a way which offers a viable solution that has the potential to work efficiently across today's complex range of traditional and liberal philosophies of life in order to achieve social transformation. In other words, religion – as a constant feature of human existence in the world – must be studied in such a way that 'ecodominical change' produces long-lasting constructive results which not only improve human life in general but also provide existential meaning to individuals interested in any religious pursuit via concrete methods of social transformation.

## Methodology

The scientific method used in this article is qualitative analysis, which is used to investigate the proposals of the *Draft Framework Document* which laid the basis for the 2017 Pretoria colloquium (University of Pretoria, n.a. 29 July 2017). Given the fact that the colloquium focused on religious education from the perspective of the necessity of change, quantitative aspects like the number

of participants and their contexts become irrelevant. It must be highlighted, however, that all participants were higher education professionals, actively involved in tertiary education and research with considerable track records in the academy and consistent visibility across the spectrum of their religious studies field of expertise. One of the positive aspects of the 2017 Pretoria colloquium was the focus of all participants on what can be changed in religious higher education so that it becomes better, more efficient and more constructive, not only for certain societies but for human life in general.

For instance, all participants sought to live up to the idea of 'ecodominical change', in light of which religious education was earnestly investigated from a large range of African and non-African perspectives. The economic, cultural, social and geographical specifics of participants were blurred by the colloquium's focus on 'ecodominical change' as mandatory for religious education in the 21st century for the sake of human development, scientific progress and societal relevance, all concrete aspects of social transformation mediated by the transformation of religious education itself. The proposed solutions for the transformation of religious education through ecodominical change came from various geographical, social, economic and cultural contexts, but the way they were brought together by the notion of ecodominical change made all participants, African and non-African, hopeful for a better future for religious education in Africa and beyond.

Methodologically, no epistemological value is ascribed to the ideas expressed by the 2017 Pretoria colloquium participants as connected to their geographical, social, economic and cultural backgrounds. For the purposes of this article, their preoccupation with religious education as an instrument of ecodominical change for human progress and social transformation across the globe is the sole aspect which was analysed qualitatively in light of specific African concerns about tertiary education.

Ecodominical change in higher education, especially with reference to the study of religion, has potentially distinct ways in which social progress can be achieved both in Africa and around the globe. This was evident in what the participants at the 2017 colloquium expressed during their presentations as well as during their discussions with various education professionals and students. However, this article does not focus on the presentations and the discussions of the various scholars from African and non-African countries who attended the colloquium. They are important indeed, but for the purposes of this paper, another aspect is much more important – vital, even, for the issue of social transformation as ecodominical exercise through the teaching of theology and religion. Thus, what follows is a brief analysis of the *Draft Framework Document* (University of Pretoria, n.a. 29 July 2017) with specific emphasis on the idea of ecodominical change and how it can contribute to social transformation across human societies in African and non-African contexts in the academic field of religious studies.

## A South African manifesto

Sometime before the 2017 Pretoria colloquium, a team of officials from the University of Pretoria's top management authored and published the *Draft Framework Document*, a paper which presents a series of guidelines for the rethinking of the teaching curricula in theology and religion (University of Pretoria, n.a. 29 July 2017). This is indicative of the fact that the need for educational change had been felt at the University of Pretoria long before the actual 2017 colloquium took place. As it happens, by the time the colloquium brought together specialists in theology and religion from African and non-African contexts, predominantly Western scholars, the idea of change had been a matter of consideration – if not also of concern – for those in charge of educational matters at the University of Pretoria. At the same time, one may infer with a reasonable degree of confidence that the focus on educational change at the University of Pretoria was not exclusively the product of Pretoria academics; on the contrary, it seems that their connections with colleagues from the whole of South Africa, Africa as a whole and the rest of the world, for that matter, were the ingredients that ignited the spark of interest in educational change. It is thus logical to presume that when the 2017 colloquium took place and the matter of educational change was debated among religious scholars, what happened was that educational change turned into ecodominical change in the field of religious studies with a view to concrete social, transformative results.

The *Draft Framework Document* (University of Pretoria, n.a. 29 July 2017) does not claim exclusivity in anything, and even less so in pretending that it is the only official paper which brings to light problems and solutions for educational change in the field of religious sciences. The document is nothing but a proposal, hopefully one among many, which has a specific South African flavour in the sense that it is the result of South African concerns and realities. The main idea is that the religious studies curriculum must go through a radical process of change; in other words, teaching religion at the University of Pretoria – and, by extension, at South African universities and even throughout the whole Africa – must be undergo serious reconsideration. In the language of the document itself, this reconsideration translates as reimagination, with reference not only to higher education institutions but also to their social environment. The local context must never be excluded from the reality of university and educational change, because tertiary education institutions exist precisely to serve human contents: local, national, regional, continental and global. However, since educational change must be efficient primarily in the local context, the document identifies a series of problems like 'exclusion, marginalization, and social injustice' which, although not specific or restricted to South Africa alone, require special attention with a view to possible solutions. Postapartheid South Africa needs to find ways to deal with these issues, and ecodominical change can be effected if pursued through the mediation provided by relevant religious education within the tertiary education system (University of Pretoria, n.a. 29 July 2017).

The document also recognises that ecodominical change through religious education can be neither pursued nor implemented in the absence of 'dignity, equality, human rights, and freedom' (University of Pretoria, n.a. 29 July 2017). These fundamental human values are specific to religions across the whole spectrum of human spirituality, so it is not only natural but also logical that the active pursuit of religious education at the tertiary level should be encouraged and supported as assiduously as possible. In order for such support to be efficiently provided within a specific university setting, the document postulates the need for all the people involved in university life to be captivated by these core human values. Human dignity, equality, rights and freedom can be achieved and promoted within tertiary education institutions if both university management teams as well as the members of the teaching staff and students are not only convinced of this programme but also involved in the dissemination of religious values through ecodominical change mediated by a reimagined curriculum (University of Pretoria, n.a. 29 July 2017). Such efforts amount to a cultural vision which has considerable chances of success for as long as religious values are promoted based on 'critical inquiry, thinking, and democratic public engagement' (University of Pretoria, n.a. 29 July 2017), three academic aspects that may become vehicles of efficient and long-lasting ecodominical change that can produce the transformation of contemporary societies. In moving from these theoretical aspects to more practical means of curricular application, the document underlines the mandatory character of concrete actions guided by 'responsiveness to the social context, epistemological diversity, renewal of pedagogy and classroom practice' (University of Pretoria, n.a. 29 July 2017).

When put together, the *Draft Framework Document* and the papers presented at the 2017 Pretoria colloquium bring to light the stringent necessity of educational change. With respect to religious studies in tertiary education institutions, both types of contributions underline the fact that religious education is not only necessary but also beneficial to human development in human societies, regardless of whether one refers to African or non-African contexts. However, in order for religious studies to positively impact society, immediate and adequate measures must be taken so that educational change can be applied with concrete results for social progress. Thus, institutions of tertiary education must foster an 'institutional culture of openness and critical reflection' (University of Pretoria, n.a. 29 July 2017), so that the entire spectrum of religious spirituality and world religions may be comprehensively taken into account for university study and research. At the same time, the 'limitations, gaps, and shortcomings' (University of Pretoria, n.a. 29 July 2017) of the old curricula must not only be acknowledged but also avoided if ecodominical change through the study of religion is to be achieved and implemented in specific social contexts with a view to their transformation. University teaching and research can change for the better and can change human contexts ecodominically for as long as one admits the capacity of religion to provide good education, efficient pedagogy, interpretative significance and existential transformation in all human



contexts, African and non-African. Nevertheless, university professionals, students and the global public must learn how to be intellectually vigilant so that the spiritual values of religion should be disseminated as widely as possible in all human contexts through responsible ecodominical change.

## Discussion

It is clear that ecodominical change is no longer merely a fancy idea but rather a concept which has both the potential and the power to transform religious education across the world, Africa included. The theoretical and practical connotations of ecodominical change in the context of tertiary religious education must be aimed at the progress of human beings and the development of human societies irrespective of their geographical, social, economic and cultural backgrounds. James K. Mashabela, professor at the University of South Africa, speaks about 'community development' (Mashabela 2017:3–4) and this is exactly what ecodominical change seeks to produce in tertiary religious education. To give just one example, the issue of decolonisation has been intensely debated throughout the African continent and elsewhere in the world, but the reality behind the concept of decolonisation cannot be achieved properly and efficiently in the absence of solid tertiary education.

Mashabela is crystal clear in his assessment that the programme of decolonisation is not going to be successful if tertiary education fails (Mashabela 2017:3\_4); this is why institutions of religious higher education should pay heed at ecodominically changing their curricula so that human progress is not hindered and human significance is not cancelled. According to Mashabela, decolonisation is profoundly dependent on good, solid education, which includes religious instruction of all sorts. Ecodominical change becomes irrelevant if university education is not rebuilt again and again, on ever-new grounds which turn universities into venues of human progress. In Mashabela's mind, the purpose of education is to produce ecodominical change for the better, for a real, positive transformation in all the layers of human societies, especially in African societies (Mashabela 2017:3).

Such an academic endeavour is not beyond contemporary human possibilities; on the contrary, it can be accomplished as long as, according to Mashabela, universities are willing to reconstruct, re-examine, reinterpret and reconsider their curricula so that they address contemporary human concerns (Mashabela 2017:4). Education in general and university education in particular, religious studies included, should actively work for sustainable community development. In the African context, which is Mashabela's main concern, ecodominical change can be oriented towards community development if decolonisation focuses on African consciousness and a genuine Africanness – a purpose that cannot be achieved without tertiary education, a key component of which is religious instruction.

At this point, however, one must underline the universal character of religious education and its enormous potential

for ecodominical change and social transformation. If university education in general is perceived as not suitable for everybody, popular ideas about religious instruction include the conviction that religious education may be suited for everybody. This particular popular perception about religious education may help the entire spectrum of disciplines which are part of the university curriculum. How? By simply educating people that university education may be not only available but also suitable for everybody. Consequently, what John D. Hargreaves describes as the 'underprivileged African majority' (Hargreaves 1996) can be reached with tertiary education in the decades to come, and one of the ways in which university education can become available more rapidly to a large number of people is religious instruction.

If so, ecodominical change as instrument of religious higher education becomes a realistic prospect in light of curricula change across the institutions of higher education aiming at fostering human progress, scientific development and social transformation. Mashabela admits that the African continent has its problems, and decolonisation is a viable way to start solving those problems, provided curricula change in higher education becomes an educational reality. In this respect, religious instruction can be beneficial to African societies by making religious education available to as many people as possible, and in this respect, ecodominical change is a factor of crucial importance.

Ecodominical change is nothing but an attempt to make education more efficient by turning it into a reality which is available to ever-growing numbers of people for a transformative improvement of their life in society. Thus, ecodominical change takes the shape of David Ford's proposal to educate people about deficient forms of belief (Ford 2017:4), Joseph Mante's recommendation to fuse religious education with science education (Mante 2017:34) and Corneliu Simuț's suggestion that all forms of theology and religion, traditional and liberal, be included in university curricula so that students have access to as broad a knowledge base as possible (Simuț 2017:57). Nothing should be omitted from religious instruction, and ecodominical change must make sure that fosters the development of new, inclusivistic tertiary curricula which accommodate all aspects of learning. With reference to religion, controversial dogmatic issues, historically debated events, sensitive moral issues and virtually anything else which escapes current or past consensus should be included in university curricula, so that students have unmediated access to as much information as possible and as broad a spectrum of problems as possible. Ecodominical change, therefore, should never exclude relevant material; on the contrary, it should include all the aspects – controversial or not – which have the potential to enhance understanding, progress and awareness with a view to a real social transformation.

In university education, ecodominical change must be as inclusivistic as possible, not for the sake of including everybody but with the purpose of including as many people

as possible from as variegated backgrounds as possible. With respect to religious education, Gavin D'Costa speaks about 'secularized forms of theology' (D'Costa 2005:ix) which should never be excluded or detached from more traditional forms of theology; ecodominical change, therefore, will mandatorily include both in religious instruction for the sake of advancing knowledge, educating people and supporting progress if human societies are to be transformed in a genuine way.

Such an approach will include awareness of what happens in the world; for instance, Edward Shizha writes about the fact that decolonisation should 'reflect Africa's social and cultural realities' (Shizha 2012:171), and this will most likely happen if religious higher education is characterised by ecodominical change. Augusta Dimou notices that, in modern times, 'the state challenged the prerogative of the church over instruction' (Dimou 2009:17), which led to the exclusion of the church from the university. In contemporary times, however, the church – as well as other religious bodies – should be included in the university curricula for a more inclusive and encompassing perspective on the world. When that occurs, ecodominical change in higher education will have reached, if not its pinnacle, at least a significant milestone in transforming human societies. Within the African context, ecodominical change in tertiary religious studies should have a positive impact or, as Mashabela correctly puts it, university education must produce beneficial outcomes in all the layers of African societies (Mashabela 2017:3), a conclusion one might expect to be universally valid for any human society in the world.

## Conclusion

Universities must work to promote religion in all its complexity as a constructive aspect of human spirituality, despite claims like that of Donald Armstrong, who warns about the 'waning of Christianity in Europe and North America' (Armstrong 1999:95). Similar alarming signs may be attached to any world religion, but this is not a reason to fall prey to such pretensions. On the contrary, we must realise – alongside Lieven Boeve – that 'theology finds itself at the crossroads of academy, church, and society' (Boeve 2016:54), which creates a good environment for religion to flourish in any society, irrespective of its specific spiritual beliefs and practices. It is often the case that religion communicates fundamental realities of the human spirit in ways which are not accessible to other sciences, humanistic or not. For instance, Roger Haight explains that religion has the capacity to operate based on 'symbolic communication' (Haight 1999:209), beyond the symbolism of other sciences, for the edification of spiritual aspects that are not always or completely accessible to other sciences. In line with this argument, Erich Fromm reveals that religion expresses itself as human creativity precisely because the human being is the 'product of history' (Fromm 2013:24).

However, in so doing, human beings do not search for scientific proofs the way other sciences do. The sort of evidence religion needs lies in the realm of

human spirituality, as one learns from Franz Overbeck's experience as one of Friedrich Nietzsche's closest friends (Overbeck 2002 [1873]:76). Consequently, James W. McClendon confirms that this is one more reason to promote religion in tertiary education institutions, not only as a domain leading to a job or as a theoretical discipline but also – and more importantly – as a practical vocation open to and oriented towards ecodominical results in society (McClendon 2002:38). The specific nature of religion as practical vocation illuminates certain foundational aspects of human experience in ways resembling the transfiguration of Jesus Christ, an image Douglas Harink brings to the fore (Harink 2009:158). This specifically Christian metaphor of Christological illumination can be extended to all world religions, as religious spirituality across the whole range of human cultures aims at finding light of some sort for human problems irrespective of one's traditional or nontraditional convictions. This is why Oli-Pekka Vainio invites institutions of higher education to make sure there are no 'shifts' from 'liberalism to traditionalism' – and one can suppose that the other move from traditionalism to liberalism is also valid – when it comes to teaching religion in university settings (Vainio 2016 [2010]:1). For this to happen though, universities must not only be committed to accept and promote religion as vital for spiritual and professional formation but also be willing to make ecodominical changes in their curricula if they really aim at long-lasting social transformation.

Religious education as ecodominical change in higher education is a realistic prospect for as long as tertiary education institutions are willing not only to include religion in their curricula but also to use it constructively for the positive transformation of human societies in Africa and beyond the continent into our globalised world. The University of Pretoria's *Draft Framework Document* is proof of this realistic possibility, especially when coupled, improved and enhanced by specialist advice provided at the 2017 international colloquium via the input of scholars from other African and South African institutions of higher education like those in Accra, Bloemfontein and Stellenbosch. Regardless of whether ecodominical changes in higher education curricula lead to a religious education which seeks to result in social understanding, awareness, inclusivity, symbolism, help, decolonisation, openness, sensitivity, enlightenment and integrality (all vital aspects of social transformation) – or all the above, for that matter, a final word of wisdom from the University of South Africa seals the debate. Concretely, religious education as ecodominical change, or simply education as change in tertiary institutions, is a valid endeavour with prospectively beneficial outcomes only if the sole focus of such curricular transformation is community development. When pursued within these parameters, such educational contributions within tertiary institutions are likely to demonstrate their efficiency not only on the African continent but also across the globe, because concrete aspects of social transformation will follow closely.

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The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the author.

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