



# World Council of Churches

Ecumenical theological education (ETE)



NORWEGIAN  
SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY

## The future of theology in the changing landscapes of universities in Europe and beyond

Joint conference of CEC/CiD Commission, WCC/ETE (Ecumenical theological education), MF Norwegian School of Theology and members of the Graz process.

Dates: early June 2012

### Background:

Historically, Europe has fostered theology as a scholarly enterprise within the context of university studies, mostly supported by the government. This has been important for the role of religion in society, and for the recognition and transparency of religious positions. The situation was one in which societies were more monocultural than what is presently the case, and where the Christian church has an unchallenged hegemony. However, in recent years, due to the increasing religious pluralism, the conditions for theology's position in the university context seem to be changing. The need for a new type of politics of religion which takes this pluralist position into account calls for a reconsideration of on what terms theology should be part of the University. At the same time there is a new discourse on how the missionary challenges of secularized Europe are to be properly reflected and related to by theology and theological education in this context. Both the missionary challenges as frequently described by the CEC study program on common mission in secularized Europe as well as present challenges and dynamics on the political and demographic level, several of which have deep implications for the future of Christian theology and theological education on this continent, need to be addressed adequately.

In what ways then, can the advantages of having a university-based study of religion and theology be combined with the need for addressing and relating to pluralist conditions as well as to the missionary challenges on the European continent? Is the traditionally strong position of theology as religion's reflective and self-critical mode to be left behind, giving way to a more privatized approach to religion which does not live up to the standards established throughout the centuries? Theological research and education during the last couple of years have undergone subtle *changes related to the political conditions and university related structural environments for theological education* and ministerial formation- The plausibility and legitimacy of 'theology' (as a confession bound distinct academic discipline) in a secular university context is questioned in many places. In several contexts there is a trend to move away from theological faculties and to give priority to departments of religious studies in state-funded universities. Reports from Great Britain, Scandinavia and Germany indicate a

decline in research projects and teaching positions in theology proper and a shift towards projects and positions in the field of religious studies.<sup>1</sup> Very similar changes and trends are reported from a number of African as well as - to a minor extend – from Asian countries and certainly from the US context. The Third Consultation of Theological Faculties in Europe which met in Graz, Austria July 2010 therefore made a strong plea to recognize the validity and importance of theology within the European university context and stated:

*“The move to Religious Studies is in part a response to a decrease in student numbers, in part a reflection of an interest in the religious pluralism of Europe. However, the inevitable result is a decrease in the number of faculty in traditional theological disciplines. We recognize that Theology and Religious Studies can be complementary disciplines in a faculty.”*

The final statement of this Graz consultation emphasized the *“urgent need to make the case for the importance of theology in the context of universities in Europe. The case for theology taking its place amongst the humanities (and indeed the sciences) needs to be made by University teachers, church leaders and Christians with influence on the authorities. Reasons for the ongoing significance of theology include the rich history of theology in the Universities from their birth, the growing importance of religion in European and world politics, and the postmodern critique of any claim to an ultimately non-confessional worldview”*<sup>2</sup>

Referring to the same trend towards Departments of Religious Studies in global Scale the Global Study Report on Theological Education from ETE from 2010 had stated before:

*“In several cases Theological Faculties which were closely related to churches and serve both ministerial formation programs as well as general religious education programs were being transformed into mere Departments of Religious Studies which are integrated into larger Faculties of Humanities (for example in UNISA, South Africa). While also new opportunities can be implied within these new scenarios (more openness and potential for interdisciplinary research and academic recognition, more financial stability, overcoming of one-sided dependency from one major denominational tradition) this also poses some questions: How is the inner coherence and church-related responsibility of theological education exercised if the structural framework does not any longer allow staff to emphasize*

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<sup>1</sup> “Several of the theological faculties in Scandinavia have gone through external evaluations and benchmarking processes and some have merged with other faculties and institutes. The threats are not so much on quality as of economy, resources and critical size. There is a great need for research and education in religion and society, but this – on the other hand – is a threat to research and education in theology proper. There is a growing interest in the study of Religion in general, but no parallel interest in the study of Theology. In most of the Scandinavian faculties, positions in classical theology are replaced by positions in religious studies. It is difficult to fund theological projects, while in all the Scandinavian countries there are research programs in Religion and Society, funded by research councils.”(Vidar L. Haanes: Academic Theology in Scandinavia: Research – Education – Formation, p. 2. Contribution to the Third Consultation of Theological Faculties in Europe, Graz, Austria, 7-10 July 2010, <http://www.uni-graz.at/grazerprozess/tagung2010/pdf/Haanes%20Graz%202010.pdf>). In a similar way Peter Stilwell from Portugal describes the situation of theological education in Latin Countries in Europe: “How can we justify the existence of Theology in a university setting? We are under fire from those who think the study of religion should be handed over to Cultural Anthropology, Sociology, Psychology, History, Philosophy and possibly even Literature, supposedly neutral in their methodologies and with identifiable epistemologies. Only these are considered to raise the study of religion above ‘mere catechetics.’”(Some Notes on the situation of Theological Education in Latin Countries”, p.2)

<sup>2</sup> Third Consultation of Theological Faculties in Europe, Graz, Austria, 7-10 July 2010: “Jeopardised or in demand? Academic Theology in Europe between Education, Science and Research”, see: [http://www.uni-graz.at/grazerprozess/tagung2010/Final\\_Statement\\_2010\\_en.pdf](http://www.uni-graz.at/grazerprozess/tagung2010/Final_Statement_2010_en.pdf)

*ministerial formation? How are churches enabled to continue to formulate their own priorities and directives for theological education if they are structurally no longer related to the institutional framework of theological education in their countries?”<sup>3</sup>*

In a similar direction also the concluding report of the session of Edinburgh 2010 conference observed:

*“There is a move from denominational seminaries to studying in university faculties of religion. This means that many of the theological seminaries are at risk of closure or the dimension of ministerial formation has been weakened. This also risks a disconnect from the international communions of various Christian traditions. Also inter-denominational theological seminaries have been closed or are threatened in some contexts. While the insights of “secular” education are of their own value to the theological enterprise and theological education should not be isolated from other realms of human knowledge, emphasis should be given to the need to bring theological perspectives to bear on the task of defining the distinctive goals and character of theological education. Increasing tendencies of universities to integrate on theological education under Philosophy and Religion departments put pressure on churches to look for their denominational oriented training centers. In some cases denominational houses of studies within university contexts have proved a good alternative and complement. Ecumenical institutions find it hard to survive both due to the monitory expectations of the universities and also due to the increasing secularization of theological education in university contexts. While working under a lot of academic and financial pressure ecumenical theological colleges need to deliver the ministerial training expectations of the churches without losing their contextual emphasis. In this sense such ecumenical institutions of theological education need to be encouraged worldwide”<sup>4</sup>*As indicated in the above quote, it is neither sufficient nor desirable to replace the theological education with one of religious studies. However, there may still be the need for a closer cooperation between the two subjects, in order to increase and safeguard the quality of education and research, and to secure a vital and publicly responsible discourse on religion.

## **Goals**

Due to encounters within the Graz process of European theological faculties which was facilitated by CEC and its CiD Commission and also accompanied by ETE Programme of WCC plans have emerged to call together a major international consultation under the title: **"The future of theology in the changing landscapes of universities in Europe and beyond"** in MF Norwegian School of Theology, Oslo in May or early June 2012.

This would be primarily a European consultation of academic theologians, church representatives and interested experts, but enlarged by a selected number of international theological experts, university teachers and leading staff from regional associations of theological schools which can give some valid contribution on the global issues related to the

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<sup>3</sup> *Global Study Report on Theological Education*, Section 12) Changing context for theological education in the 21st century p. 56

<sup>4</sup> *Edinburgh 2010 and the future of theological education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century*. Report of parallel session on theological education – Edinburgh 2010, p. 5

status and future of Christian theology and theological education in both state-related public universities as well as private and church-related universities in today's world.

It will belong to the objectives of this conference:

- 1) To analyze recent trends in the field of academic theology and theological education with regard to the status and academic context in which Christian theology continues to exist within university contexts both in Europe and beyond
- 2) To reflect on root causes, advantages and disadvantages which can be identified in current changes and new trends which can be observed in university policies and higher education trends in the field of humanities in general
- 3) To reflect on the self-understanding of theology as an academic discipline in the context of the general development within theory of science
- 4) To reflect on the confessional and ecumenical character of Christian theology, the missionary dimension of theological education as well as the relation of theology to non-Christian theologies in an academic context
- 5) To reflect on the churches' position and assessment of the new situation and to articulate a common assessment or shared principles in trying to assess the current situation and recommendations for the future
- 6) To bring together new models of cooperation, dialogue and synergies between theological faculties of different contexts within the shrinking space of World Christianity in North and South, East and West.

The conference will be enriched by presentations from a joint research project on "The politics of theology: Theology as subject in the university in late modern pluralist societies" which currently is undertaken by Prof. Jan-Olav Henriksen and Prof. Harald Hegstad from MF Norwegian School of Theology. It will be further enriched by results of a research project on the role of theology in public universities from South Africa, University of the Free State, Bloemfontein (*Acta Theologica, Supplementum* 14, 2011).

### **Next Steps**

- a) It will be clarified whether this or an emended project outline can be supported by the related partners for this project (by names: Rector, Prof. Vidar L. Haanes, Oslo, Dr. Kaisamari Hintikka, CEC, Dr. Dietrich Werner, WCC)
- b) It will be clarified whether the Norwegian government and/or churches can provide some funds to carry costs for accommodation.
- c) European institutions will be expected to pay their own travel for their representatives.
- d) ETE will intend to cover part of the travel costs for international participants from the global South
- e) External funds should be applied for in addition in case we do not get a budget together and to fund a subsequent publication.
- f) An invitation process should be started by October 2011 once clarification on the basic concept has been reached.
- g) The GS of WCC will be asked to explore in what ways he can use his relations both with Norwegian churches and the Norwegian government to get this supported.
- h) A selected number of representatives would also be invited from related networks (WOCATI, Graz process, Societas Oecumenica, WGT and others)

Dietrich Werner, WCC/ETE

Vidar L. Haanes, MF Norwegian School of Theology