

## THE CONSULTATION PROCESS BETWEEN EUROPEAN THEOLOGICAL FACULTIES (THE GRAZ PROCESS)<sup>1</sup>

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During the late 1990s several European churches asked the Conference of European Churches (CEC) to undertake a study process on the recognition of theological diplomas between different churches on this continent in order to facilitate an interchange of ministers between the respective churches. Theologians who received their theological diploma in a specific country could not be employed easily in another country, even by the churches of the same confessional family. This situation became more acute because in some countries there were more graduated theologians as the respective church could employ, while churches of the same confessional family in other countries were lacking candidates for their pastoral work. On the other side, in the same period of time, almost all theological institutions of higher education were under the pressure of the so-called Bologna process, promoted mainly by the ministries of education in European countries. Facing this challenge, the theological faculties were themselves very interested in working together with similar institutions across Europe. These were the two major reasons which lead to the initiation of the so-called Graz process.

The Graz process<sup>2</sup> is mainly based on two consultations organised by the CEC in cooperation with the Catholic Theological Faculty of Karl Franzens University of Graz, Austria. The first of these consultations took place from 4-7 July 2002 in Graz and consisted first of all in a stock-taking of the situation of the different theological faculties in Europe. Some of them are only church related, others are related only to the respective state universities and finally there are also some theological faculties which are related to both the church and the state universities.<sup>3</sup> The consultation considered further the possibility of an exchange of credit points as well as of joint research programmes. The statement adopted at this consultation emphasised that “the response from theological faculties and educational institutions of the European Christian churches, who came to Graz from almost everywhere in Europe in their ecclesiastical and confessional diversity”, was substantial and satisfying. Among the consultation’s recommendations was “that Europe-wide consultations should be convened regularly on issues of theology and theological education, every two to three years”. All the papers from this consultation, as well as a detailed report on the conference programme, have been published in English<sup>4</sup> and German. This publication has been widely distributed throughout Europe.

The echo of the first Graz consultation motivated the organisers to plan a second one which took place from 6-9 July 2006, again in Graz. The total number of 75 representatives of faculties of different theological traditions, as well as representatives of churches and ecumenical organisations came from 23

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<sup>1</sup> Part of this paper was originally presented to the the consultation: The Future of Ecumenical Theological Education in Eastern and Central Europe. Sambata de Sus, Romania, 24-28 September 2008, see: Full Report of the International Seminary for young lecturers and professors of theology, Sambata de Sus, Romania, 24-28 September 2008, Ed. by Viorel Ionita and Dietrich Werner, 103-110.

<sup>2</sup> See: [www.cec-kek.org/content/future\\_teo.shtml](http://www.cec-kek.org/content/future_teo.shtml).

<sup>3</sup> See also: <http://cid.ceceurope.org/index.php?id=810> and [http://cid.ceceurope.org/fileadmin/filer/cid/Education\\_and\\_Formation/StatementfromGraz\\_print.pdf](http://cid.ceceurope.org/fileadmin/filer/cid/Education_and_Formation/StatementfromGraz_print.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> *The Future of Theology in Europe. Report on the Consultation of the Theological Faculties in Europe*, Graz, Austria, 4-7 July 2002, edited by Prof. Dr. Viorel Ionita, Prof. Dr. Gerhard Larcher and Prof. Dr. Grigorios Larentzakis, Geneva, 2003, 112.

countries in all. The main theme of the second consultation of theological faculties was: "The Challenges of Theology in a Pluralistic Europe". The aims of the consultation were to consider:

1. the Bologna Process as an ecumenical challenge to new forms of cooperation; mutual recognition of academic achievement;
2. the significance of the confessional dimension in theological education for the ordained ministry;
3. points of orientation for cooperation between churches and faculties of theology;
4. links with various networks, such as the European Society for Theology, the European Society for Catholic Theology, Theological and Religious Education in Multicultural Europe (TRES), the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe (Leuvenberg Church Fellowship), conferences of Catholic and Protestant faculties, Nordic Conference of Faculties etc.;
5. the founding of an ecumenical Conference of Theological Education, Faculties and Colleges in Europe.

One of the key note speakers at the second Graz consultation was Mr. Ján Figel, EU Commissioner for Education, Training, Culture, and Multilingualism, who spoke on "*The Challenges for Higher Education from the European Union Perspective and the EU responses*". In his presentation, the EU Commissioner was very happy that issues like higher education and especially the Bologna Process were among the main topics of this consultation. The speaker also stated that the numbers of theological students attending lectures in most countries had been decreasing for years. The solution to these problems, according to Ján Figel, lies in a thorough reform of courses of study and their content. Theology has always been a part of the European universities. Change is part of the university since the very first ones were founded. The motto *ecclesia semper reformanda* is also valid in theology.

A central point in the EU Commissioner's presentation was inevitably the question of the study of theology within the context of the Bologna Process. Here the speaker showed that the key words for Bologna curriculum reform are employability, interdisciplinarity and networking among institutions. The speaker was persuaded that courses of study in theology and religious education can greatly benefit from curriculum reforms with these concepts in mind. As in every other area of study, young people cannot be persuaded to choose theology simply by changes in course structures. The things that count are content, employability and personal development. In conclusion, Ján Figel encouraged all to make the goal of a Europe-wide space for higher education their own, so as to make it more attractive for students, teachers and scholars from Europe and from other parts of the world.

The second key speaker was Professor Georg Winckler, Rector of the University of Vienna and President of the European University Association. Prof. Winckler spoke first about the modern growth theory which also characterises the growth of European universities. Then he critically compared growth in European universities with North American universities on one hand, and with universities in China on the other. While the universities in the United States are elitist at the top and democratic at the ground level, the European universities are neither. To meet the challenge of a Europe of Knowledge, European universities need to grow especially in respect of the following three points:

1. liberate themselves from the shadow of government bureaucracy and become truly autonomous institutions, accountable only to the wider public;
2. liberate themselves from narrow national systems and work towards recognition of academic achievement in other countries, and also for mobility of students and teaching staff across national boundaries and between fields of study;
3. work for a better fundraising strategy, which should allow at least 2% of gross national product (GDP) to be available for education.

Prof. Winckler's presentation clearly established the context for the future study of theology in European universities.

The main theme of the consultation was elaborated in three papers, given by three church leaders representing the Protestant, Catholic and Orthodox traditions respectively. The first speaker was Bishop Wolfgang Huber, Council President of the Evangelical Church in Germany, who spoke on *The Challenges of Theology in a Pluralistic Europe from an Ecumenical Perspective*, in his case from a Protestant viewpoint. The former professor of theology emphasised that Christian theology is always confronted with two challenges: it is asked what contribution it makes to the life of the church. And it must also ask itself, what its relationship to the world of scholarship is. In both of these aspects we are currently in the midst of thoroughgoing change. In a way, it is the first time since the Middle Ages that Europe is being consciously experienced as the space in which such change is taking place. To the question, "What are the challenges for theology in a pluralistic Europe?", Bishop Huber offered four responses: 1) the self-understanding of Protestant theology; 2) the current challenges to higher education policy in Europe from a German viewpoint; 3) the possibilities and opportunities for ecumenical cooperation in the area of theology and especially theological education; 4) the current ecumenical situation and the challenges that go with it. In conclusion, Bishop Huber's wish for the Second Consultation of Theological Faculties in Europe was that it might contribute to more exchanges and ecumenical agreements. To become aware of others in their ways of worshipping and being religious not only contributes to our knowledge but also helps us see where we stand ourselves. This is just the way we can succeed in overcoming false barriers between us and others, and to strengthen our common witness to the Christian faith.

The second main speaker was Archbishop Alois Kochgasser from Salzburg, who spoke on Christian Theology's Encounter with Recent Challenges in a Pluralistic Europe – the Mission and Ecumenical Orientation of Faculties of Theology, from a Catholic viewpoint. The Archbishop discussed the following points: 1) a fruitful initiative; 2) awakening and crisis in the ecumenical movement; 3) provocative "signs of the times"; 4) how ecumenism serves Europe; 5) the challenge to Christian theology; 6) ecumenical responsibility in the study of theology; 7) "doing the truth in love together" (Ephesians 4:15-16). He closed with the observation that, knowing that there is no alternative to ecumenism and that it has been irreversible since its beginnings in the last century.

The third paper was written by Metropolitan Daniel Cibotea of Moldova and Bucovina, Romania, nowadays the Patriarch of the Romanian Orthodox Church. This Orthodox contribution discussed the following points:

1. the confessional pluralism of Christian theological faculties faced with a wider pluralism; the religious, cultural and philosophical pluralism of today's Europe; the need for ecumenical cooperation among Christians and for co-existing socially with different kinds of religions and philosophies;
2. the pluralism of relationships which a faculty of theology has, and its efforts to promote its own identity within the academic context; new opportunities and challenges in its inner organising and activities,
3. the main challenges for European theology today: nihilistic secularisation, middle-class individualism, religious attacks by sects and the globalisation of the market for profit.

In this respect true theology must defend the traditional values of Christ's gospel, which "is the same yesterday and today and for ever" (Hebrews 13:8). It is a theology which is critical of the self-satisfaction and ineffectiveness in mission of church institutions, and also critical of itself, that is, of theological faculties' failure to fulfil their role in being the churches' conscience reflecting on its mission. Each of these three main papers was followed by an intensive discussion, raising the issues of the relationship between the study of theology and the church governing bodies, or how the Bologna process can be carried out by the various faculties of theology in Europe; the attitude of today's theology towards ecumenism was also discussed.

On Friday afternoon, continuing on Saturday, July 8, three sub-themes were discussed. The first of these was "Core Values for Theological Faculties in Europe Responding to the Evolving Needs of Churches and Society", with papers presented by Prof. Vladimir Fedorov (Russia), from an Orthodox viewpoint; Prof. Antonio Autiero (Italy/Germany), from a Catholic viewpoint, and the Rev. Dr. Angela Shier-Jones (England), from a Methodist viewpoint. After a few questions for clarification in the plenary session, this theme was discussed in three working groups. The working groups reported, among other things, that it is important to study the question of relationship among church, theology and values. It was recognised that these three aspects belong together and must be treated as such. However, many of those in the discussion groups had trouble with the concept "values" that it is not without ambiguity and may have different meanings in different contexts. Nevertheless there was agreement that such a concept must exist.

There was also a great concern for promoting academic compatibility and mobility within Europe. Questions of compatibility include, among other things, the differing standards for biblical languages. On issues of mobility, again the motivation is uppermost to give students the enormous advantage offered, for example, by an Erasmus programme (without problems over the granting of credits, since these should be settled by an agreement before the student's stay abroad). Another central point was setting up a coordinating office through which to share the results and emphases of research with the European faculties. There was unanimity that this is needed in order to carry out the Graz Process in a meaningful way.

It was also important to make clear once again that an area of "religious studies" should be promoted, even though it would not take the place of classical theology. Instead, the focus would be interdisciplinary, so that, for example, students of law or medicine could have access to this area of study. Also very important was the impulse that economics should not determine whether or not a course of study is offered. Areas of study such as theology or the humanities are an investment in the future, and should not be tied to short-term accounting; this was clearly the opinion of the participants in the discussion.

The second sub-theme was: "Challenges of the Bologna Process for the Theological Faculties and Churches in Europe". In the plenary session, the way this process is put into practice in various contexts was described by Prof. Ivan Dimitrov (Bulgaria), Prof. Vidar L. Haanes (Norway); Prof. Wolfgang Weirer (Graz) and Dr. Bogdan Popescu (representing the European region of the World Student Christian Federation). With regard to this sub-theme, the working groups reported, among other things, that questions of mobility require transparency and uniformity, so that, for example, a person doing research for a dissertation will not be significantly hindered by additional examinations.

For master's degree programmes there are already good possibilities for mobility and granting of credit. It was also suggested that faculties have special tutors to look after the needs of foreign students. These tutors should have had an ecumenical education and have studied abroad themselves, in order to be really competent in their role. Other points were that plenty of preparatory work can be done via the Internet, and that faculties can establish their own emphases which the tutors coordinate and make available to other faculties through a central coordination office.

A point which emerged as central is that a university lives by the interaction between teaching and research. Care should be taken not to have, from time to time, research professorships to bring in money and teaching professorships dedicated purely to teaching. Another important proposal was that of "ecumenical chairs", not for professors concentrating on ecumenism as a subject, but to be occupied by professors from other confessions, which could raise the level of programmes considerably. Here faculties should benefit from the possibilities for mobility of the teaching staff offered by the Bologna Process. It would also be desirable that, just as each faculty has its emphasis which is communicated through the central coordinating office, individual professors might also do so. A "pool of experts" could thus be set up and coordinated. Finally, the enormous competence in the field of religion possessed by those who study

theology and its importance for interreligious dialogue was stressed. However, care should be taken not to let theology slide into religious studies.

The third sub-theme was "Building a Network of Faculties of Theology and Churches in Europe". Speaking to this concern, Prof. Grigorios Larentzakis described the so-called Graz Process, which is the initiative to create a platform for cooperation among all the faculties of theology throughout Europe. Then, the following networks for cooperation among various faculties of theology were introduced: the European Society for Theology (by Prof. Susanne Heine); the European Society for Catholic Theology (by Prof. Albert Franz); the European Forum of Orthodox Schools of Theology (by Prof. Grigorios Papatomas); the work of the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe with regard to theological education (by Prof. Michael Beintker); Theological and Religious Education in Multicultural Europe (TRES) (by Prof. Erik Eynikel), and the World Conference of Associations of Theological Institutions (WOCATI) (by Prof. Petros Vassiliadis).

The presentations on these networks, as well as the discussion which followed, showed that these networks do not compete with one another, but rather complement one another very well. Finally it was proposed that Graz be the location of a coordinating office for the network connecting all the faculties of theology in Europe. At the conclusion of the Second Consultation of Faculties of Theology, a Final Statement<sup>5</sup> was adopted, which emphasised among other things the role of theology as the bridge between society, the academic world and the church. The statement said further: "Theology not only serves the churches and Christian communities, it also makes a vital contribution in the social and political arena, helping people to understand human nature and all of creation."

This Consultation "engendered a justifiable pride and confidence in theology as an academic discipline. There are, however, still questions that can provoke intense discussion amongst us: the relationship between church and faculty, questions about what to teach and how to teach, for example, the importance of research, interdisciplinary studies, theology versus religious studies, and how the faculties and the church understand and respond to modernity or postmodernity." Finally, this Final Statement pointed out that progress still has to be made "to further the vision, aims, and objectives that have emerged out of the two consultations." In this regard, it was proposed "that a permanent body be established called the Conference of Theological Education Faculties and Colleges in Europe, based at Graz."

The two Graz consultations offered a good platform for exchange and cooperation between all theological faculties from all over Europe regardless their confessional profile. In Europe there are a considerable number of networks between theological faculties mainly on a confessional or regional level. The Graz process is the only network of all theological faculties from all Europe in a genuine ecumenical perspective. In the light of the second consultation in Graz the plans were discussed to establish a permanent office for the continuation of this consultation process. This office should coordinate regular consultations at the European level on specific matters. In this respect the theological faculties in Europe could better link to each other and respond together to the new challenges they have to face more and more in the secularised Europe.

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<sup>5</sup> See: [http://cid.ceceurope.org/fileadmin/filer/cid/Education\\_and\\_Formation/TheologicalFacultiesstatementGraz2.pdf](http://cid.ceceurope.org/fileadmin/filer/cid/Education_and_Formation/TheologicalFacultiesstatementGraz2.pdf). See also the German version: [www.ccc-kek.org/pdf/TheoFakultaltenEuropa.pdf](http://www.ccc-kek.org/pdf/TheoFakultaltenEuropa.pdf).

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First published 2010 by Regnum Books International

Regnum is an imprint of the Oxford Centre for Mission Studies  
St. Philip and St. James Church  
Woodstock Road  
Oxford OX2 6HR, UK  
[www.ocms.ac.uk/regnum](http://www.ocms.ac.uk/regnum)

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Court Road, London W1P 9HE.*

**British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data**

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-870345-80-4

Typeset by South View Lodge Publishing Services  
Printed and bound in Great Britain  
for Regnum Books International  
by Cromwell Press Group

Cover design by Emily McGinley

Handbook of

# THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION IN WORLD CHRISTIANITY

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edited by Dietrich Werner, David Esterline, Namsoon Kang and Joshva Raja