

SPIRITUALITY AND THEOLOGY **- the Place for Personal Faith Experience in Theological Education**

Balázs SIBA

ABSTRACT

There is a duality to theological education: on the one hand, some consider it to be a scholarly think tank which is supposed to be operating according to academic standards. Others, on the other hand, see it as a spiritual centre whose mission is to protect the faith. This dilemma is nothing new since, in the history of Christianity, universities have been playing a part in educating priests and pastors for more than 9 centuries. The discussion whether it is a place for academic work and/or spiritual formation has been going on from the very beginning, even at the foundation of these theological courses. The double need for a university (based on scholastic traditions) and a monastic-like seminary has now been complimented with the spiritual “revolution” of our age.

After analysing some theological concepts from a sociological, historical, and organisational point of view, I will briefly present a new curriculum of the Faculty of Theology at Károli Gáspár Reformed University which will focus on personal faith experience.

KEYWORDS: reformed theology, spirituality, theological education, university

A student of mine who intended to write his thesis about the topic of spirituality came up to me and asked indignantly: “Why is it that Reformed pastors go to the Jesuits in secret to learn spiritual leadership? Why isn’t there a Protestant institution dedicated to spirituality?” We may answer the question with a question: “Why do we need to engage with the topic of spirituality separately? Is it not what seminary is dedicated to teach anyhow?” In this paper, seeking answers to these questions, I will introduce a number of aspects of personal spiritual experience within theological education. [1]

There is a duality to theological education: on the one hand, some consider it to be a scholarly think tank which is supposed to be operating according to academic standards. Others, on the other hand, see it as a spiritual centre whose mission is to protect the faith. This dilemma is nothing new since, in the history of Christianity, universities have been playing a part in educating priests and pastors for more than 9 centuries. The discussion whether it is a place for academic work and/or spiritual formation has been going on from the very beginning, even at the foundation of these theological courses. [2] The double need for a university (based on scholastic traditions) and a monastic-like seminary has now been complimented with the spiritual “revolution” of our age. [3]

After analysing some theological concepts from a sociological, historical, and organisational point of view, I will briefly present a new curriculum of the Faculty of Theology at Károli Gáspár Reformed University which will focus on personal faith experience.

Cultural change as a challenge

Compared to the modern age, culture changes in the 21st century more quickly, in a more complex way, with a different attitude to spirituality. This challenges theological education as well.

The interpretation of the word “spirituality” has broadened and changed together with Christian religion, so today there is no monolithic definition to this term. [4] Christian spirituality is, in essence, the daily experience of God’s presence. If God speaks to the individual, it has an effect on him/her and his/her environment, not only on a cognitive but also on an emotional level. In order for an encounter with the Word of God to become an experience, and in order for individual and community experiences to transform into Reformed spirituality, sound Biblical knowledge and living faith are both indispensable. [5] Individual spiritual experience, as such, has always been an integral part of religion. While this personal encounter with the grace of God is the core, religious tradition is only the means by which these encounters can be shared and multiplied. [6] There is much fear even within the church regarding spirituality. This derives from at least two sources. One is that spirituality is, as it were, highly individual, personal, and this kind of excessive subjectivity has long been dreaded. The other extreme, regarding spirituality, is the spiritual openness and receptiveness which thoroughly permeates our age and society. And on a spiritual market where all is blurred it is difficult to find what is genuinely ours, and what will constitute the faith experience of our community. There is a concern that the world might mingle into our religious experiences. Besides the openness, however, there is also a growing need for spirituality both within and without church culture. These social trends will influence the lives of theology students as well. [7] There are indeed numerous worries and potential pitfalls, however, this should not mean that we can stop trying to find the right balance between individual, community and social spiritual needs and their manifestations. One of the missions of theological education is precisely this kind of mezzo level reflection, which may help the believer experience their relationship with God, and guides the Reformed believer amongst these social trends, in order that they “henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine” (Eph 4:14) One’s own experience has always had a place in theological education, and rightly so, as theology is bilingual. Dietrich Ritschl, Professor in Heidelberg claims that theology has two modes of language: one is ascriptive, the other is descriptive. [8]

The former is apt to tell stories of faith, the latter is doxological, apt to worship God. Ascriptive language is used whenever God speaks to me or I speak to God, in prayer, in singing, in silence. Descriptive language is used whenever I hear testimonies or read scriptures about religious experiences and encounters of others, and thus I gain perspective and patterns as for how to attain the right knowledge of God. While descriptive language is an all-important element of theological education, ascriptive language can by no means be omitted, either. During their student years, it is crucial that theologians do not solely take part in an academic workshop, but their faith will also grow.

There are many vocations, many professions, but it is probably pastors who most need to actually live what they preach. They are professional believers who draw on their own experience, too. He or she gives a testimony, and thereby helps others to be able to reflect upon their lives in light of the Bible and our creeds, and address God. But for this, personal experience is indispensable. Reformed Christians, we must rediscover the significance of a faith that is more struggle and commitment, inner drive and conviction than trying to find a balance between different views. This kind of rediscovery would enable us to gain equilibrium between emotions and thoughts, and it would result in a spirituality that is not afraid of sentiments. [9]

Historical Background

The place of personal piety in theological education has been debated ever since the foundation of the first universities, as the purpose of these institutions has always been manifold.

Since the 5-6 th centuries, there have been hundreds of episcopal and monastic schools throughout Europe. [10] Universities were beginning to be founded at the end of the 11th, beginning of the 12th century. By the 1300s, as many as 29 universities had been established in Europe. [11]

Jean Leclercq claims that, as a result of this, two separate models of doing theology has arisen: monastic and scholastic theology. [12] In his assessment, life communities have withdrawn to the cloisters and monasteries, therefore, pious literature in the monastic tradition has taken a completely different pathway, as scholastic theology in academic education. [13]



1. Figure [14]

At the very first university in Bologna (founded in 1088), law and medicine were taught independent of clerical or episcopal authority. This organisational principle has served as a model mostly for South-European universities, primarily for legal and medical studies. [15] The second university (Paris, 1150), in contrast, has grown out of an episcopal school into a vast educational institution. [16] Theology was an integral part of the University of Paris which was the forerunner of Sorbonne. The academic work of the university in Paris was organised around certain theological principles. [17] Monks and seminarists studied theology so that they would not rely solely on personal experience, but they would acquire structured, scholastic knowledge. Dominicans, Franciscans, Cistercians, Benedictines, Premonstratensians, and Augustinians all had congregations near the campus. A monk who studied at a university lived his community life in his congregation: morning prayers, meals and everything else that encompassed spirituality. Meanwhile, he would attend university in order to add knowledge to his faith. Reasoning did not appear despite of Christian spirituality, but as a result of it. [18] Universities could remain the house of scientific, intellectual work as long as, in the life of the monastic congregation, community and personal experience was kept in focus. The University of Paris served as an example for other universities North of the Alps, thus, faculties of theology were established in such a way that they were separate from Humanities. (E.g. In Vienna, Heidelberg, or Leiden.) [19]

The Reformation was the heyday of universities and so they had a great impact on the whole of Europe. [20] They also played a crucial part in spreading Reformation ideas, which is borne out by the fact that up until the Synod of Dordrecht in 1619, as many as 88 Reformers were professors at a university as well. [21] For Calvin and Luther, it was important to construct a scholastic system, out of which a Protestant Scholasticism was later developed. [22] Luther believed that no-one can be a theologian without Aristotle. On the other hand, he criticised a scholastic approach, since he considered theology to be more than intellectual endeavour: for him, it must be an existential discipline, too. [23] The Reformers saw the need for integrating personal piety with scholastic learning in classical university education. Luther emphasised that the subject of *theologia ascetica* should be created within practical theology in order to help students practice their faith. [24] He maintained that we can only become theologians through experience. He advocated a unity of the three practices of *oratio*, *meditatio*, and *tentatio*. The first is prayer in which we speak to God and God speaks to us. The second is scholarly reflection in which scholasticism plays a part. It is knowledge that can ripen the fruits of prayer. We may add that the third aspect, “putting to practice” is what can mature all these into a sweet fruit. Prayer, knowledge, and practice. He applied this threefold unity to the role of professors as well. Luther argued that some professors should live together with the students. [25] Calvin highlights their function likewise, since being a teacher and a spiritual leader go together, and a teacher is supposed to show good example. [26] Although the Reformation and later piety movements attempted to turn academic theological education into a place of spiritual growth for students, from the 17-18th century, spiritual experience could no longer incorporate itself into the academy. Graham Cheesman describes this process in the following manner:

“The term Theological Education harbours radical mis-conceptions because both the words, theology and education, have unhappily narrowed down their field of meaning in the 20th century. Theology has become for use group of scientific disciplines which can exist without the love and experience of God. Education is usually taken as synonymous with study and scholarship rather than a maturing of the person assisted by learning.” [27]

It needs to be pointed out, however, that the last century saw numerous theoretical as well as practical attempts to create a unity, and that ever since the 1960s, more and more campaigned for a *theologia ascetica* in theological education (e.g. Rudolf Bohren, Manfred Josuttis, and Jürgen Moltmann). [28] In Europe in Erlangen, Heidelberg, and Leipzig, several think tanks were formed to make spirituality a priority on its own right in theological education. [29]

A Concept for Organising Theological Training

How could spirituality as an organisational principle be integrated into the current theological education?

The training concept of Robert W. Pazmiño is relevant for a new curriculum, therefore, it is necessary to unpack some aspects of his views at this point.

Academic training may have more than one goal, but according to Pazmiño, educational institutions prioritise one of the following three focal points:

- The first is content focussed education which, above all, strives to transfer knowledge. Its goal is to impart maximal information to the student, in order that they become as knowledgeable in their expertise as possible.
- The second possible educational aim takes into account community needs, and demands. This kind of educational trend encourages social action among students, so that they would become responsible and active members of society, with the ability to transform their environment.

- The third possible focus prefers the personal needs of the individual: whatever is of interest, of concern, relevance, and importance for the student. In this case, education depends mostly on the capacity and motivation of the student. [30]

Pazmiño claims that all three focal points are important, but he suggests that church education be, first and foremost, God-centered. A God-centered educational focus will interpret all training areas with respect to a relationship with God. In other words, what this approach introduces to spirituality is not a new subdiscipline, but an integrating process in which theory and practice are being formed in unity. [31] In church education and training, these dimensions should emerge together, in harmony with the experience of a dialogue with God. One-sided tradition in and of itself can turn into empty religiosity, or humanism without spirituality. An unbalanced focus on “systematic doctrine”, which disregards the other two, can result in rigid compliance, and a legalistic version of the truth. A biased focus on spirituality, on the other hand, can lead to a mysticism out of touch with the world, even with the community of the church.

A curriculum to train spiritual helpers

In 2019, we at Károli Reformed University, Faculty of Theology intend to launch a new course for those who already have a BA in Theology. “Spirituality and Mission in the Church” is intended to be a 4-semester-long specialisation in which personal formation would be emphatic, while it would focus on how this individual experience can be translated into a Reformed, community experience in the process of learning together. Our idea is that a “spiritual helper” is supposed to offer a different kind of support than a counselor. Whereas in counseling, with the tools of psychology, the relationship between the counselee and the counselor is primary, in this new training approach we return to the conviction that the helper should understand her task, first and foremost, as supporting the relationship between the counselee and God. This is no spiritual mentoring, in the strict meaning of the word, since it does not necessitate a more advanced state of spirituality for the helper. Rather, it stresses the importance of eye level encouragement in a helping relationship.

The main modules will be the following:

Module	Subjects	Semester/credits			
		1	2	3	4
Module I: Foundational studies (30 credits)	Biblical and Theological Foundations (th.)	6 cr			
	Movements and Individuals I. (th.)	6 cr			
	Movements and Individuals II. (elm.)			6 cr	
	Texts I. (prac.)		6 cr		
	Texts II. (prac.)				6 cr
Module II: Personal Formation (44 credits)	Individual Process I. (prac..)	4 cr			
	Individual Process II. (prac..)		4 cr		
	Individual Process III. (prac..)			4 cr	
	Individual Process IV. (prac..)				4 cr
	Prayer (th.)	4 cr			
	Spiritual Temptation I. (th.)	6 cr			
	Spiritual Temptation II. (prac.)		6 cr		
	Spiritual Temptation III. (prac.)			6 cr	
	Spiritual Temptation IV. (prac.)				6 cr

Module III: Missional Approach and Practice (12 credits)	Mission and Spirituality (th.)	6 cr			
	Building Church and Community Life (th.)			6 cr	
Modul IV: Everyday Spirituality (24 credits)	Arts and Spirituality I. (th.)		6 cr		
	Arts and Spirituality II. (gyak.)				6 cr
	Work, Family, and Public Life I. (th.)		6 cr		
	Work, Family, and Public Life II. (th.)			6 cr	
	Thesis Consultation		2 cr		
	Thesis				8 cr
	Final Exams				0 cr
	Total (credit):	32	30	28	30

The chart reveals a strong focus on personal formation, while it is also important to understand how individual experience can be translated into a Reformed, community experience in the process of learning together. The aim of this specialisation course is that graduates would be able to integrate their knowledge of God into self-knowledge in reflection, while they are also able to help others in this, in line with the Holy Scripture and Reformed Tradition.

Looking ahead

We believe that constant renewal is necessary for the church. What is most needed here, is trust in God that God will bring into completion the required change in us (Phil 1,6) Even though learning the Christ in today's world entails the hardships, temptations, and failures of discipleship, we must know that a practice formed by God is not a vain undertaking. Standing before God first: that is the fruit. Learning theology: that is what can ripen the fruit. Taking it to the real world, and proclaiming the Gospel: that is what can make the fruit of our faith really sweet for others.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- [1] Dr. habil. Balázs Siba Balázs, Associate professor at the Department of Religion Education and Pastoral-psychology at Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Hungary. E-mail: siba.balazs@kre.hu; sibabalazs.com
- [2] MIHÁLYFI Ákos: *A papnevelés története és elmélete*, I. kötet. Budapest, Szent István társulat, 1896, 54.
- [3] HEELAS, P. - Woodhead, L.: *The Spiritual Revolution - Why Religion Is Giving Way to Spirituality*, Oxford, Blackwell Publishing, 2005.
- [4] PÁNGYÁNSZKY Ágnes: *Tanítás és tanulás felnőttkorban - Szemléletváltás a felnőttképzésben*, Budapest, Evangélikus Hittudományi Egyetem, 2015, 67.
- [5] RICE, H. L.: *Reformed Spirituality – An Introduction for Believers*, Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 1991, 58.
- [6] GERKIN, C. V.: *Prophetic Pastoral Practice - A Christian Vision of Life Together*, Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1991, 59.
- [7] GORDON, L.: *The New Spirituality: An Introduction to Progressive Belief in the Twenty-First Century*, New York, I.B. Tauris, 2007.; Woodhead, L.: *Spirituality and*

- Christianity: the unfolding of a tangled relationship*, in: G. Giordan, W. H. Swatos: *Religion, spirituality and everyday practice*, Springer, Dordrecht, 2011, 3-21.
- [8] RITSCHL, D.: *Zur Logik der Theologie - Kurze Darstellung der Zusammenhänge theologischer Grundgedanken*, München, Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1984, 181.
- [9] RICE, H. L.: *Reformed Spirituality*, 58.
- [10] MIHÁLYFI Á.: *A papnevelés története és elmélete*, 28-52.
- [11] GRENDLER, P. F.: *The Universities of the Renaissance and Reformation*, in: *Renaissance Quarterly*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, Vol. 57. No. 1., 2004, 1-42, 2.
- [12] LECLERCQ, Jean: *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God - A Study of Monastic Culture*, New York, Fordham University Press, 3rd ed, 1982, 192. lásd még: Hermisson, S.: *Spirituelle Kompetenz*, Göttingen, V&R unipress, 2016, 33.
- [13] WIKSTRÖM, O.: *A kápráztató sötétség – Szempontok a lelkivezetéshez*, Budapest, Luther Kiadó, 2013, 35.
- [14] GRENDLER, P. F.: *The Universities of the Renaissance and Reformation*, in: *Renaissance Quarterly*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, Vol. 57. No. 1., 2004, 1-42, 5.
- [15] RASHDALL, Hastings: *The Universities of Europe in the Middle Ages: Volume 1, Salerno, Bologna, Paris*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2010, 151.
- [16] MIHÁLYFI Á.: *A papnevelés története és elmélete*, 54.
- [17] HIGTON, M.: *A Theology of Higher Education*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2012, 41.
- [18] HIGTON, M.: *A Theology of Higher Education*, 13.
- [19] GRENDLER, P. F.: *The Universities of the Renaissance and Reformation*, 3-7.
- [20] GRENDLER, P. F.: *The Universities of the Renaissance and Reformation*, 1.
- [21] GRENDLER, P. F.: *The Universities of the Renaissance and Reformation*, 28.
- [22] SPIJKER, W. van't: *Early Reformation and Scholasticism*, in: *Dutch Review of Church History*, Vol. 81. No. 3, Leiden, Brill, 2001, 290-305.
- [23] SPIJKER, W. van't: *Early Reformation and Scholasticism*, 296.
- [24] ZIMMERLING, P.: *Plädoyer für eine neue Einheit von Theologie und Spiritualität*, Antrittsvorlesung an der Universität Leipzig vom 2.12.2005.; ZIMMERLING, P.: *Evangelische Spiritualität - Wurzeln und Zugänge*, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2003, 19.
- [25] GRENDLER, P. F.: *The Universities of the Renaissance and Reformation*, 10.
- [26] ZABILKA, I. L.: *Calvin's Contribution to Universal Education*, in: *The Asbury Theological Journal*, Vol. 44. No. 1. 1989, 77-96. 79.
- [27] CHEESMAN, G.: *Competing Paradigms in Theological Education Today*, In *ERT*, Vol.17, No.4, (1993), 484-499. 484-485
- [28] HOUSE, Paul R.: *Bonhoeffer's Seminary Vision: A Case for Costly Discipleship and Life Together*, Crossway Books, 2015.
- [29] ZIMMERLING, P.: *Plädoyer für eine neue Einheit von Theologie und Spiritualität*, Antrittsvorlesung an der Universität Leipzig vom 2.12.2005.
- [30] PAZMIÑO, W. R.: *Principles and Practices of Christian Education - An Evangelical Perspective*, Eugene, Oregon, Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2002, 22.
- [31] OTT, Bernhard: *Handbuch theologische Ausbildung: Grundlagen - Programmentwicklung - Leitungsfragen*, Schwarzenfeld, Neufeld, 2013, 179.