"HOW DO YOU DO THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION IN A RELIGIOUSLY DIVERSE WORLD?" ELLIOTT #2048

Today, 18 Apr 86, a colleague asked me to pop off on this, as he's soon to read a paper on it in a national gathering. "Pop off" is my verb for what I think he wants: my angles, at the moment.

1. What "world"? Each human being lives in a psychosocial world of hisr own construction. (This is the 1st time I've ever contracted "his/her" into "hisr," and I think it stinks. I despair of trying to desexize the English language and am tempted to return to "he/his/him" generic.) Further, this private, intra-skinbag world is religiously polymorphous: nobody, at least in the dream (day-or-night) state, is either theist or atheist: awe-reverence moves in the inner life plasmically, quantumly, as plastically as the clay moved in the Potter's hand (Gn. 2.7a; cf.1.26fa). These nights, Loree and I in our evening devotions have been reading, studying, discussing the dream/world dimensions of Daniel, a theological-education work in which the Jewish God and the world-God (of "Babylon," the anti-world of the Jewish world) are identified: Daniel has been given the power to reveal the identity of his-and-Nebruchanezzer's God!

2. Theological education, now, must deal with these convergent factors: (1) The compaction of consciousness both psychospiritually and geographically; (2) The consequent surfeit of world-views ("paradigms"), with predictable chaos, confusion, and homeostatic hunger for simplicity (both intellectual and moral), peace (spiritual quiet), and healing of all the diseases caused by the temporary triumph of chaos over order, license over responsibility, and anomie over freedom; (3) The rising longing for transcendence, for a "More Than" that is "Beyond" our petty strivings and sufferings (else how could Macmillan hope to sell enough of THE ENCYCLOPEDIA OF RELIGION at $1,100 per?); and (4) The abiding (from the 1960s) suspicion-unto-despair of all human institutions, the alternatives being (a) the monadic self ("personal religion"), (b) attempts at ideal social constructs ("communes," we called them in the 1960s and early 1970s), (c) peoplehood (eg, Jewishness, negritude--in general, ethnism), (c) the local savior (eg, the Rev. Jim Jones of People's Temple), (d) ecstatic out-tripping (eg, sex, drugs, religio-emotional highs), and (e) intense attention to some apocalyptic vision. I call these factors "convergent" in two senses: they converge on "religion" in that they represent traditional-essential forms of religious experiencing, and they converge (at the other of the ellipse's foci) on "the way it is," ie, "the spirit of the times" in the eye of the tube and the eyes of our most competent culture-interpreters ("theologians of culture," in my trade's jargon).

3. Theological education must also deal now with such divergent factors as (1) culture-sanctioned egocentricity (eg, "self-fulfilment," "identity," "integration," "self-esteem"--contrary to religion's call to conversion, to recentering, to self-abandonment, to holy community), (2) culture-sanctioned scientistic secularism (the "religion" of the public schools and therefore also of the tube, flicks, and pop writing), (3) anticommitment (in spite of the '85 Gallup Poll claiming that 95% of teens believe in God or a universal spirit, 39% pray frequently, and 69% believe in angels), and (4) deepening amnesia about the West's spiritual heritage (with consequent vulnerability to passing "spiritual" fads and quasireligious movements, and consequent also the weakening of the sanctional underpinnings of the West's ethics and morals, which are basic to the West's political, economic, and social institutions).

4. Professional religious education (ie, training to become a profes-

over

sional in religion) is only one species in the genus "theological education," other species being home, primary & secondary education, college & university, and continuing education for clergy & laity. I fear that the thinksheet-title's question reveals the traditional myopia of "seminaries," whose work still tends to be something (unlike early Christianity, Ac.26.26) "done in a corner." Provincial (denominational) seminaries, especially those uninvolved with any college or university, may almost be said to contradict our question: do they really live in "a religiously diverse world"? Or are they training religious professionals to serve in mission-compound-like enclaves of particularistic piety? Even more ominous, such schools tend to be ethnic & classistic lock-ins with a small scattering of students "not like us"--repeating the uniculturalism of their founding congregations, of which they are the academic extensions. So I'm suggesting that our question calls into question the structure and style of most of our institutions doing "theological (ie, professional religious) education": you should do this theological education in a religiously diverse world, not in a religiously monochrome setting. Two types of exception to the traditional academically isolated and and denominationally integrated seminary are (1) the divinity school that is thoroughly integrated into its university (eg, the U. of Chicago Divinity School, training religious leaders for both ecclesial and academic institutions) and (2) the independent seminary that is ecumenical both denominationally and culturally (eg, N.Y. Theological Seminary). The training of religious professionals has been tried in some other, and natural, loci (eg, the congregation, "the street," some forms of the old "urban training centers"); but there will be more of this if theological education takes more seriously that this is indeed "a religiously diverse world."

5. Theological education should be done with one eye on the devotional (action in the heart, spirituality, the practice of the Presence) and the other on the contextual (action in "the world" of multiple concentric contexts, each with its own tangential academic correlates--eg, the disciplines of psychology, sociology, science, history, philosophy, philosophy of religion, "history of religion," the religions and quasi-religions). Roots (devotion through one's given heritage) and sky (openness to other heritages in our pluralistic culture and world and to the "more truth" that sometimes makes some "ancient good uncouth"). "Theological education in a religiously diverse world" demands the cultivation of this roots/sky, orthodox-open spirit, a hybrid of the traditional and the modernist. It is a mind, a mindedness; but it is more profoundly a spirit, a set of the soul. And, for its cultivation, one needs a tutor, a mentor, a guide, one primary model with whom one has at least one two-hour session each week. We have not been training such polymaths, generalists------so we do not have the biblical pattern of theological training, viz, 1:1 with one's own "rabbi." Instead, we've trained specialists who fragment theological education--and the students!--into their cubbyholes ("disciplines"), where the games played are almost exclusively of the mind, to the neglect of the heart and of life/ministry integration. To get to the theological education we now need, we must have an earlier intervention: we must begin training a new (old! biblical!) type of theological educator (and not just a hyped up "student advisor").

6. The curriculum should follow the contours of the individual student's aptitudes/attitudes/needs/motivations/devotion. What is this person's primary way of being religious? (See my #545, 8 ways in 8 diagrams with 4 factors: God, self, nature, others.) The mentor will help the student to more sophistication about the needs/wants tension, with an eye to increasing motivation (and therefore quality of effort) in course work, which will be mainly with others than the mentor.