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CO-OPERATION IN THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION

Isaac Zokoue

*The International Council of Accrediting Agencies (ICAA) links together evangelical theological education world-wide. This includes the major regional associations for theological schools from Africa (ACTEA), Asia (ATA), the Caribbean (CABC), Europe (EEAA), North America (AABC), Latin America, and the South Pacific. In 1981 the ICAA decided to develop a Manifesto for the renewal of evangelical theological education. After widespread consultations and many revisions, a **Manifesto on the Renewal of Evangelical Theological Education** was adopted in 1983. Included in the Manifesto of twelve articles is the following statement on co-operation in theological education, Article 12.*

Our programmes of theological education must pursue contact and collaboration among themselves for mutual support, encouragement, edification and cross-fertilisation. We are at fault that so often in evangelical theological education we attend merely to our own assignments under God. Others in the same calling need us, and we need them. The biblical notion of mutuality needs to be much more visibly expressed and pragmatically pursued among our theological programmes. Too long we have acquiesced in an isolation of effort that denies the larger body of Christ, thus failing both ourselves and Christ's body. The times in which we serve, no less than biblical expectations, demand of each of us active ongoing initiatives in co-operation. This we must accomplish, by God's grace.

Isaac Zokoue completed secondary education in Central Africa Republic. Thereafter, he obtained a Master's degree from the evangelical French seminary, Vaux-sur-Seine. He has also earned two doctorates in systematic theology, one from the seminary at Montpellier, France, and a second from the University of Strasburg. Dr. Zokoue was deeply involved from the very beginning in the Bangui Evangelical School of Theology (BEST) and became the first President of the seminary's governing board. In 1987 he became the President of BEST. In addition to his services at BEST, Dr. Zokoue has served with the Association of Evangelicals on the national and continental levels and on a world-wide level with the WEF, Lausanne Committee and other organisations.

Based on article 12 of the Manifesto, approved by the international consultation on evangelical theological education, is the following paper which was read by Dr. Isaac Zokoue at a colloquium on evangelical leadership development in Africa, held in London, England.

INTRODUCTION

The fact that we have become conscious of the necessity of co-operation in theological education, as witnessed by this statement, is itself a sign of spiritual progress. Indeed the lack of co-operation noted in the manifesto is a problem of a spiritual nature more than it is a structural one. It is true that in order to co-operate one begins by establishing a structure and a framework within which this co-operation can be exercised. It is thus obvious that the lack of structure, or simply the absence of channels of communication between the efforts in question produces *de facto* a lack of co-operation. But before coming to the practical problems of this co-operation, I am interested in the reasons behind this lack of co-operation. It is there that I discern some situations for which we have to repent. In the Christian life, a new start is possible only if one acknowledges his sins, confesses them and abandons them. What are these situations?

REASONS FOR LACK OF CO-OPERATION

Competitive Spirit

Among our institutions there is a *competitive spirit*. Each school believes that it is the best and thus is not prepared to receive or learn from others. A feeling of self-sufficiency then develops. This problem manifests itself in the school's program, for the resource needs of finances and personnel are the same everywhere. But each school institutes a programme which is supposed to justify its existence, that is, a programme adapted to the needs to which the school wishes to respond. That is normal.

But the error comes when one acts as if he is capable, with this programme, to meet every need. This, of course, is impossible. One must recognise one's own limits and, at the same time, acknowledge and encourage what others are doing to fill those gaps in one's own programme. Donors have a role to play in changing this mentality, for it is in order to convince these donors to give that each school does all it can to demonstrate that it is the best and that its function is unique. Our brochures testify to this fact. The donors themselves must recognise the absolute necessity of co-operation among our institutions and must not seek to help them on a competitive basis.

Critical Spirit

Close to the competitive spirit is a *critical spirit*. If someone believes that he is the best, he is prone to point out the faults of others: "That school does not have a good programme, good professors, etc." Criticism is permissible, provided it is justified and especially, provided it is constructive. But often we are simply critical. Our sole purpose is to show that we are doing better than others, and since this is the case, the others need not exist at all. Such attitudes have often led to scattering our efforts, with each one creating or developing his own work, instead of helping to unite our efforts. Division thus triumphs over co-operation. Among evangelicals, it is not unusual that doctrinal problems are at the root of this scattering of effort. But several cases have shown that the doctrinal problems have been somewhat forced, and that people were using them simply as a pretext for separating from others.

Denominationalism

Denominationalism has been another important factor behind the lack of co-operation. The dominant situation is that each denomination protects what it has acquired. Denominationalism can exist on the national, regional, continental or international level of the church federations and associations. These church groupings are in fact groupings of denominations at the heart of which the principles of co-operation have been adopted. But strangely enough, these so-called interdenominational works have the least external support and the most difficulty in surviving because the tendency toward isolation and selfishness remains strong. On the other hand, interdenominational co-operation is often limited to the level of church leaders and does not really touch the specialised agencies which remain the denominations' special domain and the source of their pride, not to mention their arrogance.

The *Manifesto* explains this lack of co-operation in terms of such evils as withdrawal, isolation, and ignorance of the true nature of the Body of Christ. In reality, these factors result from the attitudes that we attempted to describe above. If such ignorance exists, that is, not having an adequate vision of the Body of Christ, it is culpable ignorance, for the New Testament is filled with teaching on that subject. It may perhaps be necessary at this juncture to express a regret that evangelicals have let the ecumenical movement have a monopoly on the teaching concerning the unity of Christians. For if one notes a certain myopia on the part of those who have the responsibility to train workers assigned to the building up of the Body of Christ, it is because, in the background, a unified vision of the people of God is missing.

Spiritual Deficiency

I fear falling into casuistry by making this list of the reasons for our failure in co-operation. But I wish by means of these few points to show that the lack of co-operation is a spiritual deficiency, because some fundamentally reprehensible attitudes exist. We cannot then, speak of co-operation as if it were sufficient simply to establish a framework for co-operation and then all will work out fine. It is necessary to begin with a change of attitude, not only in the institutions in question, but also in the churches responsible for these works, indeed even in the donors. The initiative must come from the institutions; they are the ones who will progressively establish the landmarks of this co-operation and help churches accept it. But obviously an institution cannot thrust itself into a programme of co-operation if the ecclesiastical structure on which it depends does not promote or facilitate such an initiative. A strategy of co-operation among donors, and particularly donor organisations, ought to be put into operation in order to support the co-operative effort among theological schools. A change must thus be envisioned at the donor level also.

AREAS OF CO-OPERATION

In recommending co-operation among theological schools, the *Manifesto* proposes several ways and means for attaining this objective: contact, mutual support, encouragement, edification, reciprocal stimulation, and initiative in the co-operation. This set of actions has been presented as our duty to one another. A duty is the opposite of what is optional. The whole question is to determine whether we consider co-operation a duty with all its attendant constraints, or whether we want to consider it a choice. Our approach to this problem, according to the document, must be pragmatic. This signifies that one must not be satisfied with making speeches about co-operation or with simply exhibiting all possible good intentions, but one must rather undertake actions that make co-operation a reality. Thus co-operation appears in the *Manifesto* as a homework assignment that is overdue. There is, therefore, a certain urgency about this subject. But one must "make haste slowly", taking into account some lessons from the past.

There is sometimes a great gulf between intention and reality. For this reason we need to be realistic. It seems to me that there are three fundamental points to consider: 1) the arena of co-operation; 2) the ways and means of co-operation; 3) the geographic limits of co-operation.

Arena of Co-operation

The life of an institution has several facets, but the arena for co-

operation on which we wish to concentrate here is the educational programme. In this regard, some of the realities are as follows:

a) Each school has its own program of classical subject which can be grouped under such titles as Practical Theology (Homiletics, Pastoral Theology etc.), Church History (from the first to twentieth century), Systematic Theology (a vast domain), Old Testament (elementary Hebrew; Old Testament Introduction, including Archaeology; Biblical Theology of the Old Testament; Old Testament exegesis; etc.), New Testament (similar to that of Old Testament, with Greek replacing Hebrew), and, more and more frequently, Missiology (also a group of subjects including History of Missions, Cultural Anthropology, etc.). Obviously we have not here cited all the courses. These are, however, typical subjects found in most schools. But each school also introduces into this curriculum some subjects dictated by the realities of its particular region. Thus, for example, Traditional African Religions, Islam in Africa, History of Missions in Africa, and so forth, take on more importance in the African context than is the case on the other continents. The difference between schools can also be located in terms of the school's purpose: training of pastors, evangelists, missionaries, teachers, etc. How is it possible to envision co-operation with regard to the different ranges of these programs?

Among the schools that could be aimed at might be:

- **enrichment of one's own program.**

Through the exchange of documents, one is able to discover possible deficiencies in one's own program. A school can settle down into a routine and not seek to innovate, to adapt itself to changes in society and in the church. For example, several schools have not yet seen the need to have any instruction (even cursory) on communications.

- **improvement of teaching.**

Through exchanges of professors or students, one can measure the quality of teaching taking place at the school. It is good to seek to know, by means of an openness to others, whether the level of instruction given in the school allows students to continue their studies in another school at the same or a superior level. Teaching methods can also be a source of mutual inspiration (some professors follow a textbook, others develop their own courses).

- **broadening of horizons.**

At the higher academic levels (masters and doctorate), circulating

theses and dissertations, as well as their publications, can be a source of reciprocal stimulation. If groups of scholars are located in these schools, they will be able to benefit mutually from the results of each other's research. It is often the professors of theology who contribute the most to the advancement of theological reflection.

Let us stop at these three points without claiming to have said all that is essential. This much, however, is sufficient to demonstrate the importance of co-operation at the level of the academic program. The school that cuts itself off from others deprives itself of the many benefits of fraternal co-operation.

b) Another reality about the educational programme is that each school teaches in a language that is not universal. Even though English is widespread, the evangelical world includes groups who are unable to use this language. This fact makes the exchanges we have just mentioned difficult. The only solution is to have resource to interpreters as well as translations. But let us be aware of this: at the international level, true co-operation among our schools is possible only if the linguistic majority takes into consideration the reality of the situation and the existence of linguistic minorities. It is well known that those who speak English do not make the effort to learn other languages. Because of this fact, the minority groups have always been forced to communicate in English or to manage to produce articles in English. Their demand is rather dissuasive and does not encourage co-operation. An understanding must be reached in this area, so that each can communicate in whatever language he chooses.

Ways and Means of Co-operation

The ways and means of co-operation among theological schools remain to be discovered. There are two possibilities:

a) It would be wrong to believe that co-operation of a certain active form does not exist among several of our schools, even if it takes place without being co-ordinated. Indeed, experience shows that the creation of a committee or an organisation is not always the best way to begin a work, especially if that work calls for volunteers. A fair number of inoperative organisations and committees exist. Taking into account the fact that a multitude of such groups already exist in our midst, it would make sense not to create a new one. Existing channels of communication can be used. At the continental level there are organisations linking theological institutions. Universal platforms also exist at the intercontinental level. It is therefore possible to ask these organisations, each at its own level, to encourage co-operation among our schools. Exchanges of documents and notices of job openings and positions sought can pass through these organisations.

b) A second possibility would be to create a group that would be responsible for promoting co-operation. Experience has also shown that if a decision is made without delegating someone to carry it out, that decision is useless. There is thus an advantage to be gained in giving the responsibility to designated persons. But taking into account the very nature of this undertaking, namely, co-operation – which is a matter of free and personal commitment to working with others, it does not seem to me advisable to create a committee with this goal. It is possible to consider such a committee as responding to the need for co-ordination. Yet once again I do not think it necessary to have a group of co-ordinators in this domain. One is quickly in danger putting people under pressure and pushing them into actions that are not freely decided upon. The sought-after stimulation can be transformed into mental pressure.

We retain therefore the idea of *not* creating a special structure for promoting co-operation among our schools. The *Manifesto*, as a document, is itself a group product. This means that the group which produced the *Manifesto* can make sure that each of its twelve points moves into the phase of application. Other arguments that I have not mentioned here could militate in favour of the creation of such a group. In this case, a trial period would be advisable.

Geographic Limits of Co-operation

The geographic limits of co-operation among our schools ought to be defined. Do we wish to speak of co-operation among countries using the same language, among countries of the South or of the North only, among regional organisations or among continental organisations? Without further ado, let us say that the co-operation we extol ought to be multi-directional: North-North, South-South, North-South. Each direction has its own advantages. The directions North-North and South-South have the advantage that the co-operation will be richer because there will be many things to share. It is also to be noted that the North-North exchanges have often been easier. The South-South exchanges are more difficult and thus merit particular attention and support. The direction North-South or South-North will have the advantage of establishing co-operation on the foundation of an encounter between western and non-western cultures. Openness along this axis has already often been the case from the South to the North, but not yet, or else timidly, from the North to the South, a direction which ought to be encouraged. The evangelical world is seeking more and more to tighten its bonds, and co-operation at the theological level ought to be a cohesive factor in this search.

There should be no limits to co-operation among theological schools. If one recognises that theology has more often divided than united evangelicals, one will be prepared to encourage every initiative in this area. Schools, more so

than churches, are in the best position to give direction to this co-operation. Where this co-operation is in danger of running into difficulties is the doctrinal positions of the participants. Co-operation on the programme level is not going to come about in isolation from an understanding of the diverse doctrinal positions at the heart of the evangelical world. One can imagine that each group would be open only to those with whom they have doctrinal affinities. This kind of co-operation is inevitable, but the co-operation that we seek must not be discriminatory. Its objective is to reinforce theological education among evangelicals of each continent and hence of the whole world. This is a new concept.

I have taken the liberty to speak of co-operation among our schools in a broader framework, but everything that I have said is also true for Africa taken in isolation. Intra-African co-operation exists, but it very much needs to be strengthened. We must welcome and encourage all possibilities of co-operation in the African evangelical world. As the *Manifesto* says, "This we must accomplish, by God's grace."