(23)Theological Education in the Middle East

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Introduction

Theological education has its roots in the Levant, where it experienced centuries of activity in different languages, cultures and sociopolitical realities. The wide array of questions and issues that Christian thinkers have addressed and confronted in this region of the planet are recorded not only in the living witness of millions of Christian believers but also in an immeasurable library of biblical, liturgical, historical, and dogmatic manuscripts, which have had an influence in these lands and abroad and have inspired thousands of modern studies in different theological disciplines (Kattan, 27-70).

History gives witness for theological education not only in the favorable conditions granted by different Christian governments, but also in non-Christian states. The Middle Eastern communities gave birth to outstanding theologians such as St. Athanasius the Great, St. Ephrem, St. John of Damascus, and St. Gregory of Narek, who left their legacy for the universal church (Elias, 33-49).

In modern times the Arabic language has brought Middle Eastern Christians together and allowed them to work in an area of great importance. They have the responsibility of bearing witness to their faith and proclaiming it in a large world of more than 221 million Arabic-speakers (according to Lewis), among which it is estimated that only 14 million are Christians without considering the diasporas (Calculated according to the data available in Roberson and the CIA World Factbook).

When it comes to talking about the Middle East churches there are two possible approaches: to study them according to the countries where their presence is more perceivable, i.e., Egypt for the Coptics, Lebanon for the Maronites and Syria for the Greek and Syrian Orthodox; or according to the four great families of churches, which are The Oriental Orthodox Churches, The Eastern Orthodox Churches, The Catholic Churches and The Evangelical Churches. In this chapter the latter classification has been adopted as it appears in the official website of the MECC (Middle East Council of Churches). Those institutions that do not belong to an MECC denomination have been included in their closest church family.

Historical Developments and Achievements

The Oriental Orthodox Churches

The Oriental Orthodox Church family comprises basically three denominations: The Coptic Orthodox Church, which counts for the highest number of church members residing in the Middle East, the Armenian Apostolic Church (Catholicosate of Cilicia) and the Syrian Orthodox Church of Antioch and all the East. The countries where theological educational centers function for these churches are: Egypt, Lebanon and Syria.

In Egypt we can find several faculties and seminaries of theology, which belong to the Coptic Church. The most important center is called the Coptic Theological Seminary in Cairo, within the area of the St. Mark Cathedral. This main theological seminary has branches in Alexandria, Tanta, Shebeen, Port Said, Mahala, Luxor and the Muharak Monastery. It has also branches outside Egypt, i.e., in the United States, Australia

(www.coptictheology.com), England and Germany. Some of the branches have courses for undergraduates (B.Th.) besides the courses for postgraduates. In addition to the theological Seminaries, there is also the Higher Institute for Pastoral Care and Education and the Higher Institute for Coptic Studies, in Cairo. His Holiness Pope Shenouda III is the highest head for the theological seminaries including all its branches and religious institutes. Master and Doctoral Degrees are granted by the Church, without the state's acknowledgment, after presenting a research thesis.

The Armenian Church has a theological seminary in Bikfaya (Lebanon). It was founded in 1930 by Patriarche Sahak Khabaian as an extension of the one already existing in Cilicia. During its almost 80 years of existence the clergy of the church have received theological education at a high level by a distinguished faculty. The seminar grants the B.Th. degree. Special interest is given to Classic and Modern Armenian Language as well as History of Armenian Literature.

The Syrian Orthodox Church has its theological institution in Maarrat Sidnaya (Syria) under the name of "Saint Ephrem Faculty of Theology" (www.syrianchurch.org). This school was founded by Patriarch Ignatios Ephrem I in Lebanon in 1939. The school knew several locations in Iraq (Mousel), Lebanon (Zahle and Atchaneh) and Syria (Damascus) until it was finally established in Maarrat Sidnaya since 1996. The faculty grants the B.Th. degree and it is known for its teaching of classic Syriac and Syriac Literature. It is worth mentioning that the Saint Ephrem faculty is the only theological institution of university level in Syria, even though the state does not give any official acknowledgment to its degrees.

The Eastern Orthodox Churches

The Eastern Orthodox Churches are four, including the Church of Cyprus, which does not belong to the Arabic speaking world: The Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Alexandria and All Africa, The Greek Orthodox Church of Antioch and All the East, The Greek Orthodox Church of Jerusalem and The Greek Orthodox Church of Cyprus.

The Churches of Alexandria, Jerusalem and Cyprus entrust the education of their clergy and theologians to the theological faculties of Athens and Thessaloniki in Greece. The Patriarchate of Alexandria (www.greekorthodox-alexandria.org) has a dominant number of priests and bishops, who speak Greek, besides the important number of Greek missionaries in the Sub-Saharan Africa. It is worth mentioning that the Patriarchate is about to open the Patriarchal Library of Alexandria that will give access to thousands of ancient manuscripts kept by the Patriarchate throughout the centuries. In Alexandria there is also the School "Athanasius the Great" which gives some courses of theology within a multidisciplinary program for the preparation of missionaries.

The Orthodox Church of Antioch has its center of theological studies at the St John of Damascus Institute of Theology, one of the founding faculties of the University of Balamand and a daughter institution of Our Lady's Monastery of Balamand in Lebanon. The seeds of the institute started with the clerical school at the Monastery founded in 1832. Patriarch Malatius II Dumani gave special interest to the school at the turn of the nineteenth century. In 1962 the standards of education were improved to the level of the Lebanese Baccalaureate II. In 1970 the Institute was founded by the Holy Synod of Antioch with an undergraduate program and with the official recognition of the Lebanese Ministry of Education as an Institution of Higher Learning. Today the institute grants a B.Th. and a B.A. in Religious studies as well as an M.Th. in different fields of specialization (www.balamand.edu.lb/theology). Regarding distance learning, the institute offers online courses on theology and biblical studies in Arabic and Spanish. The University of Balamand has also an Institute of History, Archeology and Near Eastern Heritage and a Center for Christian-Muslim Studies, both of which focus their research on the Church of Antioch.

The Catholic Churches

The family of Catholic Churches embraces a wide array of Middle Eastern traditions: The Maronite Church of Antioch, the Greek Catholic Melchite Church of Antioch, Alexandria and Jerusalem, the Armenian Catholic Church of Cilicia, the Syrian Catholic Church of Antioch, the Coptic Catholic Church of Alexandria, the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem and the Chaldean Catholic Church of Babylon.

The centers of catholic theological education in the region are located mainly in Lebanon, then in Egypt, Iraq and Palestine as well. Lebanon has its “pontifical” Faculty of Theology, at the Université de Saint Esprit Kaslik (www.usek.edu.lb). The faculty is a fruit of the service for theological education provided by the LMO (Lebanese Maronite Order) since 1695. Since 1962 the school became officially a Faculty of theology acknowledged by the Lebanese state. In 1974, the Lebanese Assembly of Catholic Patriarchs and Bishops adopted it as an official faculty for the Catholic Church in Lebanon, and in 1993 the Congregation of Catholic Education at the Vatican appointed it as a Pontifical Faculty of Theology *in perpetuum*. The faculty at Kaslik gives the degrees of B.Th., M.Th., and Ph.D. in different fields of specialization. The USEK has also an Institute for Liturgical Studies and an Institute for History that are closely related to the service of the Maronite Church and the Oriental Churches.

The Melchite Church of Antioch has in Harisa the Saint Paul Institute of Philosophy and Theology, which was founded in 1936 by the Society of Pauline Fathers. For a period of 12 years the institute moved to Jerusalem and came back to Lebanon in 1967. Students are granted two degrees: A License in Philosophy and a License in Theology. Courses are given both in Arabic and French.

The Society of Jesus plays a key role for the development of theological studies among the Catholic Churches of Lebanon. Starting with the seminary in Ghazir (1846), Jesuits founded the University of Saint Joseph (www.usj.edu.lb) in Beirut in 1875, in which a Faculty of Theology has functioned since 1881. This faculty has changed its name several times since then and now finds its continuity in four different institutions: The Faculty of Religious Sciences, the Higher Institute for Religious Sciences, the Institute for Islamo-Christian Studies, and the Center for Arab Christian Documentation and Research. Courses are given in French. These institutions grant the B.Th., M.Th. and Ph.D. degrees in different fields of specialization.

In 1990 the Antonine Order crowned its commitment for education with the foundation of the UPA (L'Université de Peres Antonines; www.upa.edu.lb) in which the Faculty of Biblical, Ecumenical and Religious Studies together with the Faculty of Theology and Pastoral Studies functions. Both faculties provide the following degree programs: Diploma of Theology; License in Theology and M.Th. Courses are specially oriented to laypeople and monastic orders and aim at providing theological education for catechists and pastoral agents. Courses are given in Arabic.

The Sagesse University (www.uls.edu.lb) in Beirut has a Faculty of Canon Law. This faculty is affiliated with the Pontifical Lateran University in Rome, and is the unique Catholic Canon Law Faculty in Lebanon and neighboring countries. It delivers a canonical formation destined to clergy as well as to non-religious students, in view of a juridical and jurisdictional mission within the Church. Since its foundation in 1875, the Sagesse Superior Institute for law has been faithful to the mission of the Catholic Church. The modern Faculty was founded at the end of the last century and offers a Bachelor Degree in Canon Law. The Sagesse University has also a Faculty of Ecclesiastical Science that confers degrees as follows: Diploma in Theology, B.Th., M.Th.

In Egypt there are two important institutions for the Catholic Family: The Faculty of Human and Theological Sciences (El-Maady, Cairo), and the Faculty of Religious Sciences (Sakakeny – Cairo). The Faculty at El-Maady has its beginnings as early as 1879 as a seminary for the Coptic Catholic Church. It moved from Cairo to Tanta, and then it was permanently installed in El-Maady in 1953. In 1990 the faculty was integrated into the Urbaniana University in Rome and became the “pontifical” university for the Catholics in Egypt. The Faculty

functions especially as a seminary for the catholic vocations and grants the degrees of B.Th. and License. Courses are given in Arabic. The Faculty at Sakakeny is a modern institution founded in 1978 and belongs to the Egyptian Assembly of Catholic Patriarchs and Bishops. The faculty aim is mainly the theological education of laypeople, nuns and married priests, who belong to the different Catholic denominations in Egypt and the region, particularly Catholic Christians from Sudan. Courses are given in Arabic and students are granted either a Diploma in Religious Studies, a License in Theology, or a Diploma in monastic formation.

The Bethlehem University is a Catholic institution of higher learning providing religious education both in the Palestinian West Bank and in the Kingdom of Jordan. The university was founded in 1973 within the Lasallian tradition that can trace its roots back to 1893 with the foundation of several Lasallian schools in the region. Despite being closed twelve times by Israeli military imposed orders, the longest of which was for three years from October 1987 until October 1990, classes have continually been held on- and off-campus. The Department of Religious Studies was founded in 1998 within the Faculty of Arts at Bethlehem University primarily to prepare qualified catechists and to also offer quality Christian religious education to all students of the University. The department offers a degree program of B.A. in Religious Studies (<http://religiousstudies.bethlehem.edu/>).

In 1991 the Synod of the Chaldean Church founded the Babel Faculty of Theology in Baghdad. The Faculty is open to all Churches in Iraq. Courses are given in Arabic and a degree of B.Th. is granted. Cooperation agreements with USEK Lebanon are available.

Evangelical Churches

The Evangelical Churches of the Middle East are organized in several national synods and unions. The MECC member churches are: The Evangelical Synod of the Nile, the Union of the Armenian Evangelical Churches in the Near East, the National Evangelical Synod of Syria and Lebanon, the National Evangelical Union of Lebanon, the Episcopal Church in Jerusalem and the Middle East, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan, the National Evangelical Church in Kuwait, the Synod of the Evangelical Church in Iran, the Evangelical Church in Sudan, the Episcopal Church in Sudan, the Presbyterian Church in Sudan, the Protestant Church in Algeria, and the reformed Church of France in Tunis.

In Egypt the evangelical Churches have two outstanding centers of theological education, one in Cairo and another in Alexandria. The Evangelical Theological Seminary Cairo (ETSC, www.etsc.org) began as a theological school in 1863 and moved between Asiout and Cairo. In 1927 the current central building was inaugurated under the administration of the Evangelical Synod of the Nile to which a library (1967) and a building for student lodging (1994) were added. Degrees are granted on the levels of: B.Th., Diploma in theological sciences and B.A. in Christian Education. Courses are given in Arabic for pastor candidates and laypeople who are engaged in education in the Church. The faculty in Alexandria is a branch institution from the faculty in Cairo. It was founded in 1986 by the initiative of the Evangelical Synod of the Delta. A B.Th. degree is granted and courses are given in Arabic mostly by faculty members coming from Cairo.

The key center of Evangelical Theology in Lebanon is the NEST Near East School of Theology (NEST, www.theonest.edu.lb). NEST was founded as a result of a merger of the School of Religion in Athens (the inheritor of all the 19th-century Armenian Evangelical Seminaries in Asia Minor) and the Beirut School for Religious Workers (the inheritor of Abeih Seminary). These two merged in 1932 to form NEST as an interdenominational protestant theological seminary serving the Evangelical churches of the Middle East and Africa. Since 1966 the Lebanese Ministry of Education officially recognized the Near East School of Theology as an Institution of Higher Learning. NEST serves and is managed by the Presbyterian, Congregational, Anglican and Lutheran Churches of the Near East. The following degree programs are granted: a Diploma in theological Studies; B.Th., B.A. in Christian Education, M.Div., M.A. in Christian Education and S.T.M. (Master of Sacred

Theology). The Language of instruction is English. Besides ETSC and NEST, which represent MECC member churches, there are several institutions for theological education which belong to other evangelical denominations. One of them is the Arab Baptist Theological Seminary in Mansourieh (Lebanon). This seminary started its journey in 1960 aiming to equip Christian leaders in Lebanon and the Arab world through theological capacity building. Besides Lebanon, students come from Jordan, Egypt, Morocco, Syria and Iraq. The Seminary is under the legal ownership of the Lebanese Baptist Society. Since 1960, ABTS has made a significant contribution: 200 graduates and over 400 alumni from various Evangelical backgrounds are serving all across the Arab world and beyond: Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Sudan, Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan, Syria, Palestine, Iraq and Arab ministries in the West. The degrees granted by the seminary are: B.Th., Diploma in Theology and M.Div. Other Evangelical institutions in Lebanon are the Eastern Mediterranean Nazarene Bible College, the Christian Alliance Institute for Theology (CAIT), the Mediterranean Bible College (Church of God), and the Baptist Seminary in Ain Najm, which also grant several degrees of theological education.

The Jordan Evangelical Theological Seminary (JETS, www.jets.edu) is the only institute of theological Higher Education in the Kingdom of Jordan. It was officially founded in 1995 in Amman and has a non-denominational affiliation. Students come from all over the Middle East. The programs are not accredited by the Jordanian Government, but by three international accrediting agencies: The Middle East Association for Theological Education (MEATE), the European Evangelical Accrediting Association (EEAA), and the Asia Theological Association (ATA). The seminary offers the following degree programs: Certificate in Biblical Studies, Diploma in Biblical Studies, B.Th. in Biblical Studies, M.A. in Biblical Studies and M.Div. The Seminary has a statement of faith that claims to represent the common faith of the Arab Evangelical Churches and its key goal consists in equipping Arab leaders for the Arab world.

Furthermore, In Jordan the Program for Theological Education by Extension (www.ptee.org) functions, offering online courses for the following degrees: Certificate of Theology, Diploma of Theology and Bachelor of Theology. This interdenominational institution has study centers in six Arabic countries as well as in Sweden and the USA.

In Palestine functions the Bethlehem Bible College, an interdenominational theological institution founded in 1979 (www.bethbc.com). The College offers a B.A. program in Biblical studies and Christian education. It is accredited by the Palestinian Ministry for Higher Education and the Middle East Association of Theological Education as a four-year college.

Modern Challenges and Trends

After the Second World War and the foundation of the Ecumenical Movement in 1948, interaction between the different faculties in the region was generated. As a result of these meetings ATENE (Association of Theological Education in the Near East) was founded in 1967. This institution evolved into ATIME (Association of Theological Institutes in the Middle East) after 1974, when the MECC was founded. ATIME continues working on different levels of studentship, faculty and administration in order to strengthen ecumenical relationships among the member institutions and to foster the spirit of cooperation and dialogue. The association also has the target of watching over the academic level of its institutions and the publication of reading material in Arabic. ATIME is a member of WOCATI (World Conference Association of Theological Institutions).

The contribution of several European and American faculties has been decisive in granting graduate education to local students who became the resource persons for theological education in the Middle East. Starting with the regional seminars founded in Rome for Eastern Catholics, following with the theological faculties in France, Belgium, Germany, Britain, Holland, and the U.S.A., both Roman Catholic and Protestant ones,

There has been a large number of priests, pastors and lay people who have attended these institutions to continue their studies and return with a specialization in some field of theology.

This phenomenon has often formed generations of theologians and clerics engaged in raising questions and issues outside the context where they practice their teachings. Often modern biblical criticism and even modern systematic theology as well as modern historiography have been misunderstood or given as unrealistic thoughts for the average Middle-Eastern Christian.

Therefore, more than ever theologians in the Middle East are called to contextualize their teachings, since they live in a region where heavy socio-political conflicts are strongly linked to religion and theological thinking. There is a need for a theology committed to the local people, a theology conceived in these lands and for the people living in these lands. Coexistence with Muslims and Jews and ecumenical dialogue with the countless Christian denominations is one of the biggest challenges for every Arab-speaking theologian (see Sabra, 70-75; Abou Mrad, 257-258).

Some practical and concrete aspects to be considered for future joint work planning in the Middle East are the following:

- To ensure coordination of theological publications. This would involve the creation of research units for the different fields of theology. There is a need for theology books in Arabic such as: modern biblical commentaries, studies on compared systematic theology, interdenominational history works and essays on pastoral theology based on the reality of Christianity in this part of the world.
- The Middle East needs a network of libraries to facilitate research work. Each faculty of theology and university has an important but limited number of theological writings. Linking them will multiply the chances of reaching the required work by researchers, instructors and students from across the region. Investments for new library material are restricted and there is no institution that can offer a more or less comprehensive collection of theological treatises. Furthermore, there is a wide array of languages used by the Arabic-speaking Christians, which makes it even more difficult to deduce a regional common identity from the available theological references. For a long time the writings in Arabic have been considered limited in number and quality, thus each library has chosen the enhancement of their collections with publications in English and French. Besides, theological libraries in the Middle East have in many cases a relevant number of books in German and Italian. Furthermore, each denomination enriches their libraries with books in their traditional languages: Armenian, Coptic, Greek, Russian and Syriac.
- There is no doubt that the future of theology in Arabic depends on research work. The big challenge for the 21st century Arabic speaking theologians is the production of serious research with international standards. The Arabic-speaking churches need to read their own history critically. They need to understand their archaeological sites and to study their manuscripts. Modern Arabic speaking theologians are expected to produce theological and pastoral treatises for a high educated Arab reader, with a sharp critical mind. Therefore, it is necessary to promote ecumenical theological research cells. Moreover, a database is needed with indexes and digital texts of modern theological writings in Arabic, especially articles in books and magazines, which are mostly hard to find.
- To promote the expansion of Christian theological training centers in many Arabic-speaking countries that still lack them. New centers of theological education in the Gulf are needed, as much as distance learning programs through internet, especially for those countries where physical presence is very difficult.

Conclusions

The 20th century was the century for the emergence of modern high theological institutions in the Middle East. The political changes in the region and the fruitful activity of Western missions have challenged “local” churches to move towards the development of their educational centers. Almost every denomination opened their theological centers with undergraduate programs, developing later on into graduate and postgraduate programs, particularly in the nineties. Among the Middle Eastern countries, Lebanon has played a decisive role in the development of theological education for all denominations.

Regarding contents, contextualization is the biggest challenge of the 21st century. There is a big demand for a theology that responds to the parish requests and to the daily fortunes and misfortunes of every Christian family and society. It is the responsibility of local theologians, and therefore of local theological institutions to develop a creative theology that would be able to answer to the challenges and the trends of today.

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- The CIA World Factbook* at: www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/index.html.
- The Middle East Council of Churches (MECC)* at: www.mec-churches.org.

Selected Websites of Theological Institution in the Middle East¹

Egypt

St Athanasius the Great School, Alexandria: www.greekorthodox-alexandria.org
 The Evangelical Theological Seminary Cairo (ETSC), Cairo: www.etsc.org

Jordan

The Jordan Evangelical Theological Seminary (JETS), Amman: www.jets.edu
 The Program for Theological Education by Extension (PTEE), Amman: www.ptee.org

Lebanon

Sagesse University (ULS), Beirut: www.uls.edu.lb
 Saint Joseph University (USJ), Beirut: www.usj.edu.lb
 The Near East School of Theology (NEST), Beirut: www.theonest.edu.lb

¹ Universities are mentioned when several faculties, institutes and/or centers with theological education programs are active at the same university.

University of Balamand (UOB), Balamand:

www.balamand.edu.lb

University of the Antonine Fathers (UPA), Baabda:

www.upa.edu.lb

University of the Holy Spirit Kaslik (USEK), Kaslik:

www.usek.edu.lb

Palestine

The Bethlehem University, Bethlehem:

religiousstudies.bethlehem.edu

The Bethlehem Bible College:

www.bethbc.com

Syria

Saint Ephrem Faculty of Theology, Maarat Sidnaya:

www.syrianchurch.org