

THE ROLE OF THE RELIGIOUS UNIVERSITY: A PROTESTANT PERSPECTIVE FROM GERMANY

FRIEDRICH SCHWEITZER

As will become clear in the following, German Protestantism's unique perspective on the religious university cannot be understood without taking into consideration its historical background. For this reason, I will begin with a brief survey of this background. The theoretical perspectives offered in the second part of this chapter should be understood in the context of this description.

For reasons that will also become clear below, I will not use the term "religious university." Instead, I will speak of religious or church sponsorship – concepts that are more applicable to the German situation. Moreover, I will not limit my comments to the traditional university but will include other institutions of higher education as well. This broadening of scope again reflects the situation in Germany where the university's special status has been legally weakened so that universities and other institutions of higher education are now considered parts of the same educational system.¹

Historical Background

For most of its history, German Protestantism has had no interest in having its own religious institutions of higher education. Since the university has played a major role for Protestantism – ever since its inception in sixteenth

¹ The present chapter due to its circumscribed length is more of an essay than an academic analysis in the classical sense. Consequently, I have only provided references to those publications that I refer to directly. For an overview and additional references, see Gerhard Ruhbach, "Hochschulen, kirchliche," in *Theologische Realenzyklopädie*. Vol. XV (Berlin/New York: De Gruyter, 1986), 423–435.

century Wittenberg – this may be surprising. Indeed, Martin Luther was a university professor himself. However, because the primary task devolving upon these institutions was training pastors with a clear Protestant identity and this was taken care of by the state universities of the Protestant territories in their theological faculties, there was no need to create separate institutions. Indeed, this tradition has continued to this very day and is now, under pluralist presuppositions, based on clear legal guarantees.² So, for the most part there was no need for a Protestant university in Germany. This, as opposed to the situation, for example, in the United States where Protestants have played a major role in maintaining religious colleges and universities of their own for, among other reasons, the fact that the state was not able or willing to provide for theological education. At least until the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries, the German universities provided faculties of theology that were fully in line with the Protestant church's need and expectations for pastoral training.

There is a distinct difference between Protestantism and Catholicism in this respect in that Catholics have always maintained faculties of theology and universities that were independent from the state. This difference is no coincidence; it is rooted in the Catholics' different theological perspectives on education and on the academy. Roman Catholics have tended to adopt a comprehensive understanding of all academic work from a theological point of view, not only for theology but also for other fields including science. Protestants, following the Lutheran teaching of the two kingdoms, distinguish between the realm of faith and the realm of worldly reason. As long as the state-sponsored university allowed faculties of theology to function as part of its structure, there simply seemed to be no need for church-sponsored universities or even for church-sponsored faculties of theology.

However, for a number of different reasons, during the twentieth century, German Protestantism has taken a much more active and visible

2 Martin Heckel, *Die theologischen Fakultäten im weltlichen Verfassungsstaat* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1986); cf. Friedrich Schweitzer and Christoph Schwöbel, eds., *Aufgaben, Gestalt und Zukunft Theologischer Fakultäten (Veröffentlichungen der Wissenschaftlichen Gesellschaft für Theologie, Vol. 31)*, (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2007) for the contemporary discussion of these questions in Germany.

role within higher education. At first, this new attitude arose as a response to the ongoing cultural and political changes that had been affecting the university, including its theology faculty, since the Enlightenment. Under the pressures of what many perceived to be the secularization of the state university as a whole, and the growing influence of – what many considered to be – undue liberalism within the theological faculties of the universities themselves, the first Protestant *Kirchliche Hochschule* (church-sponsored university) was founded in Bethel, Germany in 1905.³ In this case, the Protestant church was motivated by religious or theological reasons to finally establish a church-sponsored institution of higher education focused on the training of ministers. Later in the twentieth century, during National Socialism's ascendancy, the political situation gave such institutions a new importance and meaning. The more the ideological influence of National Socialism transformed the universities in Germany, the less there was a place for a politically independent theology in these universities. Consequently, the need for maintaining religiously sponsored universities became quite obvious.⁴ During the period of state socialism in East Germany – the communist GDR – this development continued apace as church-sponsored institutions of higher education were the only places where theology could be taught in ways that were acceptable to the church.⁵

The developments mentioned in the last paragraph that gave church-sponsored institutions of higher education a new meaning and importance, still applied primarily to the creation of institutions devoted to training pastors and teaching theology, so the number of newly founded institutions remained small. Only in the 1960s and 1970s, when the state decided to raise the status of what used to be merely professional schools to that of

3 Frank-Michael Kuhlemann, *Die Kirchliche Hochschule Bethel. Grundzüge ihrer Entwicklung 1905–2005* (Bielefeld: Bethel-Verlag, 2005).

4 Cf. Hartmut Aschermann and Wolfgang Schneider, *Studium im Auftrag der Kirche. Die Anfänge der Kirchlichen Hochschule Wuppertal 1935 bis 1945* (Cologne: Rheinland-Verlag, 1985).

5 Cf., for example, Werner Vogler, ed., *Vier Jahrzehnte kirchlich-theologische Ausbildung in Leipzig. Das Theologische Seminar/Die Kirchliche Hochschule Leipzig* (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1993); *Vom Menschen: Die letzte Ringvorlesung der Kirchlichen Hochschule Naumburg, mit einem Rückblick auf ihre Geschichte 1949–1993* (Naumburg: Naumburger Verlagsanstalt, 1993).

schools of higher education, giving them a rank similar to the university, did the picture change more dramatically. The church had long been active in maintaining such professional schools, for example, in the fields of education, social work, and health care. When such schools became an official part of the German system of higher education, Protestantism was more or less suddenly forced to address its having become a major sponsor of institutions somewhat like religious universities.⁶ At present, the Protestant church in Germany sponsors eleven professional schools (*Fachhochschulen*) that have higher education status.

Today, the Protestant church considers its role as a sponsor of such institutions of higher education as part of its educational responsibility, not only in terms of the needs of the church itself but also in terms of its contribution to the good of society as a whole.⁷ I will address the possible reasons for this self-perception in the next section; but, before doing so, I want to summarize what we have learned from this historical survey of German Protestantism. On the one hand, the church has specific educational needs, which can be fulfilled by institutions of higher education that are not sponsored by the church. On the other hand, if such state-sponsored universities are unwilling or are unable to educate in a manner that is also acceptable to the church, the church clearly needs to sponsor higher education. Furthermore, the fact that such higher education is sponsored by the church does not imply that such institutions serve only the needs of

6 For legal aspects, see Manfred Baldus, "Kirchliche Hochschulen" in *Handbuch des Staatskirchenrechts der Bundesrepublik Deutschland*. Vol. 2, eds., Joseph Listl and Dietrich Pirson (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1995), 601–637; Ernst-Lüder Solte, "Kirchliche Fachhochschulen im staatlichen Recht" in *Bürgerliche Freiheit und Christliche Verantwortung. Festschrift für Christoph Link zum siebzigsten Geburtstag*, eds., Heinrich de Wall and Michael Germann (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), 465–481.

7 Dieter Aschenbrenner, ed., *Die Kirche und ihre Hochschulen. Standortbestimmung, Struktur- und Autonomiefragen, neue Aufgaben* (Hannover: Evangelische Akademie Loccum, 1994); Kirchenamt der Evangelischen Kirche in Deutschland, ed., *Entwicklung und Perspektiven der evangelischen Fachhochschulen in Deutschland. Bestandsaufnahme zur Lage der evangelischen Fachhochschulen* (Hannover: Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland, 1997); Peter Meis, "Zur Aufgabe der Theologie für die Profilbildung kirchlicher Fachhochschulen," *Pastoraltheologie* 93 (2004): 200–213.

the church; rather, these institutions can and – according to the church's own beliefs – should also work for the common good. As opposed to the traditional higher education system in Germany, which was characterized by a state monopoly on universities, the current situation is greatly changed. To some degree, something like an open market in the field of higher education has now evolved, with potentially competitive players or sponsors. This situation opens up new possibilities for religious sponsors but it also creates new challenges for them. One of these challenges concerns the need to explain why religious sponsors ought to maintain their own institutions of higher education.

Theoretical Perspectives: Reasons for Religiously Sponsored Institutions of Higher Education

In this section, I want to introduce a number of different rationales for religiously sponsored institutions of higher education. Again, I will draw on my specific German Protestant background.

Universities are part of the general educational system; however, their academic nature and purpose make them special and guarantee them certain unique rights. These mainly concern their freedom to teach and research (in Germany guaranteed by the Constitution or Basic Law, Article Five) – a freedom, which most analysts agree, is not crucial to nor foundational for other parts of the educational system. Nevertheless, many of the rationales applied to church-sponsored higher education apply as well to other educational institutions maintained by the church. For this reason, I will draw upon some recent research on the Protestant church in Germany that focuses on Protestant schools in general (both primary and secondary schools).⁸ Although I have not arranged the following rationales in any particular logical sequence, I will begin with the theological considerations.

From a theological perspective, the Christian faith addresses all aspects of life, including education. Intergenerational relationships are of prime

8 Kirchenamt der Evangelischen Kirche in Deutschland, ed., *Schulen in evangelischer Trägerschaft. Selbstverständnis, Leistungsfähigkeit und Perspektiven* (Hannover: Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland, 2008).

importance to this faith, as evidenced by the biblical record – beginning with the first book of the Bible where God makes a promise to Abraham and his offspring (Gen. 12ff.) and continuing in the Gospels, which make reference to children and mention the special obligations due them (Mk 9:36ff.). Following biblical precedence, Christian ethics as the expression of this faith must include the field of education as one of its core topics. Accordingly, education must be based on Christian norms and values. Contemporary Christian theology and ethics do not necessitate a narrow – fundamentalist – definition of education. A Christian approach to education should be open to all kinds of academic knowledge and it should be prepared to dialogue with other understandings of education, whether they adopt the perspective of philosophy or the perspectives of other religions or worldviews. It is important to realize that Christianity's interest in education cannot be limited to religious education. Its focus on the entire human being requires it to address the general tasks of education as well. This is why church sponsorship of educational institutions makes sense theologically and why it can even be considered indispensable. Such involvement also makes sense from a more practical perspective. While theology can treat education in the abstract, its theoretical pronouncements will be much more plausible if there also are practical examples that the church can point out to demonstrate its interest in education. Church-sponsored educational institutions can play an important role in showing how the Christian faith should influence education through its specific understanding of the human being as God's creature and of reality on the whole as God's creation. From this perspective, religious sponsorship in higher education becomes an expression of religious freedom.

Given this theological background, the church will expect church-sponsored educational institutions to provide a special brand of education that reflects the Christian faith. This is in line with the conviction that Christianity possesses an understanding of the true nature and destiny of human life and that this understanding can be translated into educational approaches, without – to repeat – becoming the sole determining factor in education. This rationale for church-sponsored educational institutions addresses Christian believers. It presupposes Christian faith and then draws upon this faith's educational philosophy to justify such institutions.

In pluralist societies, however, this kind of internal rationale will be insufficient to justify the existence of church-sponsored educational institutions, especially if they demand financial support by the state (like in Germany) or at least certain tax exemptions. This is why we have to ask whether such institutions provide educational benefits that make sense to the general public that is not affiliated with the church. Several positive responses can be given to this question. First, recent evaluations in the context of PISA (the Programme for International Student Assessment) have shown that student achievements in Protestant schools in Germany equal and, in certain respects, even exceed those at state-sponsored schools.⁹ Second, the very existence of church-sponsored schools contributes to the existence of a pluralist and competitive educational system – a contemporary desideratum. As long as such a system or its members do not get swept up by unhealthy social, cultural, or ethnic selectivity, this plurality and competition can be of educational value. Third, Protestant schools are expected to produce elite citizens – not in terms of careerism or individual economic success, but in terms of virtues and values, including solidarity, responsibility, justice, and caring.

Further arguments for church-sponsored schools come from the realms of law and politics. German law has provided the right to maintain schools without state sponsorship for a long time. Until the 1970s, the respective clause did not include the universities. Until then, the state had not been willing to give up its monopoly on the universities. The fact that the law has now changed in this respect as well may be considered an expression of the notion that in a free society the state should not be depended on exclusively. Church-sponsored educational institutions – from nursery school to university – can be deemed the fruits of a strong civil society. Within the context of this way of thinking, democracy itself is strengthened when it takes root in everyday life by taking part in the institutions of civil society or by creating and maintaining such institutions, as in the case of

9 Claudia Standfest, Olaf Köller, and Annette Scheunpflug, *leben – lernen – glauben. Zur Qualität evangelischer Schulen. Eine empirische Untersuchung über die Leistungsfähigkeit von Schulen in evangelischer Trägerschaft* (Münster: Waxmann, 2005).

church-sponsored higher education. Church-sponsored schools contribute to democracy by preventing a state monopoly on education; this argument is especially telling in a country like Germany where approximately 95 percent of the primary and secondary school students still attend state schools.

The rationales mentioned so far apply to all educational institutions maintained by the church. Consequently, we might ask whether the university should be considered a special case because of its unique role in conducting scientific research and in teaching from a scientific perspective. It is certainly true that freedom of research and teaching must play a different role in higher education than in other fields of education. This freedom is one of the defining characteristics of higher education, notwithstanding its particular sponsor. However, this does not imply that only the state or other nonreligious bodies should sponsor higher education. This would only be true if the nonreligious ethos of rationality were to be considered neutral, while all religious ethos were to be deemed inherently biased and prone to distortion. Yet matters have never been so clear cut. Clearly the deciding point is whether a particular ethos guarantees academic freedom. As history has taught us, this guarantee can be jeopardized by any sponsor, be it the state that can fall prey to political ideologies like, for example, National Socialism, or be it a church that does not want to see its faith questioned by science. Academic freedom cannot be guaranteed either by the abstract appeal to state neutrality or by dependence on religious principles. It must come from the practice of higher education itself.

Conclusion

While religious sponsorship in higher education has not played a major role in German Protestant history, there are good reasons why its role should be reconsidered as we look toward the future. These reasons apply both to theological education and to other areas of interest to the church. I will summarize them briefly.

- (1) Theology now has a well-established place in German state-sponsored universities. Yet as history has shown, there is no

guarantee that this will always be so. Consequently it is a good idea for at least some church-sponsored institutions of higher education to teach theology.

- (2) The church constantly needs people who are motivated to work in church-sponsored institutions of education, social work, and health care. State-sponsored universities often fail to offer an education that promotes the development of such values. Church-sponsored higher education is the most suitable place for such an education to take place.
- (3) Our contemporary understanding of democracy and freedom of education applies these concepts to all educational levels. The traditional idea of a state monopoly on higher education clearly conflicts with this understanding, so religious sponsorship of universities can be understood as actively furthering the ends of democracy.
- (4) With the end of the state monopoly on higher education, this field has become subject to what are essentially market influences. While financial interests should not be deemed illegitimate in higher education and while commercial sponsors of universities should not be automatically disqualified, it makes sense for society to grant non-commercial sponsors, like religious bodies, a special role in this market.
- (5) By sponsoring institutions of higher education the church gains a unique opportunity to contribute to the common good. Training young people to become an elite – in terms of their sense of commitment, responsibility, solidarity, and caring – makes an extremely valuable contribution to society as a whole.