

Review

Challenges to Accessing Higher Theological Education in Ghana: Choosing Between Accreditation and Mission

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Abstract

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Evangelical theological education in Ghana over the years had operated alongside programme and content standards of similar institutions worldwide. Students of these schools have come from diverse educational background and of varying levels of practical experience and intellectual abilities. Though the terminal points of many of such evangelical theological institutions were certificate, diploma and degree, many of their students have progressed with their studies to Master's and Doctoral level studies both in their home countries and abroad. The institutional authority status had been enjoyed by higher evangelical theological institutions in Ghana Long before the establishment of the National Accreditation Board (NAB) to regulate tertiary institutional operations. The law that established this regulatory body among other things was to ensure conformity to entry grade requirements and programmes supervision through affiliation with older national universities. Since many of these Evangelical Colleges came under the NAB and the mentoring of public universities, their academic programmes contents, standards, and the attitudinal, moral, spiritual and intellectual requirements for pursuing evangelical theological education

theology is a special study that requires special attitude, mindset, and discipline to do (Njoroge and Benaars, 2009). This study cannot be placed at equal level of reading Law, Economics, Business Administration, Medicine or any of the like. Thus, applying similar or demanding standardized academic qualification for studying theology will be tantamount to 'getting it wrong'. A deliberate study of the background of those who seek for such a study will prove the view of this paper to be true. This is not to suggest that theological studies is for unintelligent minds; rather, the mind required for theological study and its content is not that of the mathematical or empirical type, but that which is enduring, humble, contemplative, reflective, religious, spiritual, godly and that which is of faith seeking understanding for service.

Those who seek to read theology in Africa at all levels outside a typical university setting are mostly people who do not have the minimum entry grades or passes to enter the structured university system. Sometimes, a few academically qualified ones in other fields of study branch into higher theological study. If not the other majority group of individuals who actually enroll in the theological studies in Africa are artisans, ordinary middle class youths and old adults, who hold certificate of lower school grades but could read and write well (Bening, 1990).

Often times too, most of such candidates are sitters of ordinary, advance, or West Africa Senior Secondary Examination who did not pass their Mathematics or English or both. Yet, many of such individuals have in the recent past studied theology to the Bachelor's, Master's and PhD levels and are serving in many capacities in the church and society (I know this as a matter of fact). The hard fact is that any attempt to structure theological education along the lines of what obtains in liberal religious departments of National Universities in order to fulfill accreditation and mentoring institutional requirements is getting the whole thing wrong. 'If we choose the ways and standards of men, whose interest would we be serving as sacred institutions...?'

I. Accreditation of Theological Education in Ghana - Re-considering the Purpose

Higher theological education in Ghana, predated Ghana's National Accreditation Board which was established in the 1990's to regulate all tertiary education in Ghana under the Ministry of Education (Kemdirim and Oduyoye, 1998). Before the law on accreditation, what the existing theological Institutions did was to enter into full or partial affiliation with the religious departments of national universities to award external certificates to students who were deemed qualified and desired to obtain such degrees (National Accreditation and Qualifications Authority Bill). That institutional arrangement did not in

any way face out the award of internal tertiary theological certificates awarded by those theological institutions - they were awarded along side.

What only prevented students in such tertiary theological programmes from vocational, technical and other background from sitting for such external degrees were the required minimum entry qualifications set by the mentoring University (NAB Letter of 10/9/14, Ref. NAB/A/19/). Yet, when it comes to intellectual, ability critical thinking, competence and academic performance, many of those who did not meet the standards set by the mentoring Universities did equally better (This fact was obtained from interactions and interviews with the Deans of Ghana Christian University College, Accra; Dominion University College, Accra; Assemblies of God Theological Seminary, Salpond, Central Region, Ghana etc.).

In view of that, several Universities, Seminaries, and Analogous theological institutions in Europe and America accepted their internal certificates and transcripts as proofs of academic eligibility into higher degree studies. Even in Ghana, some have gained entry into higher accredited studies with internally awarded certificates on the basis of the strengths and credibility of their previous programmes of study (This fact was obtained from interactions and interviews with the Deans of Ghana Christian University College, Accra; Dominion University College, Accra; Assemblies of God Theological Seminary, Salpond, Central Region, Ghana etc.).

The situation nowadays is that as the National Accreditation Board has intensified conformity to the law and many of the accredited theological schools are being compelled to turn away applicants who by accreditation standards do not qualify to enter into any higher theological studies programme. Hardly does a day pass by without an advert of such institutions on the various accredited theological programmes they have on offer (*Daily Graphic*, Thursday, February 5, 2015; *Ghanaian Times*, Wednesday, December 17, 2014; *Daily Graphic*, Wednesday, December 10, 2014; *Daily Graphic*, Wednesday, October 15, 2014; *Daily Graphic*, Monday, September 18, 2014).

These adverts advertently or inadvertently serve as deterrent to many willing, potential, intelligent and capable individuals who feel called into ministry and direly needed theological education.

Consequently, almost all theological departments or schools are in dire need of students to fill their lecture halls and to keep them in business - especially many of such schools and institutions run by the Pentecostal and Charismatic denominations. But for these more organized theological colleges like that of the Assemblies of God, Trinity Theological Seminary and the like receive more applicants than they can admit.

These challenges actually call for a re-examination of the decision to seek accreditation for theological education since it looks as if it is not serving its purpose.

If not, the churches and affected theological institutions need to re-engage the internal Accreditation Board in order to develop a special accreditation system for theological education in Ghana. This is because, we may have accredited studies and programmes, but there cannot be ‘unaccredited knowledge’ or ‘content of knowledge or experience’ much as there can be illiterates but there cannot be people with absolute ‘tabula rasa’ any where humanity is found.

I. Facing the timeless Questions

May be the fundamental question we need to ask, or what needs to be ascertained in admitting applicants into various programmes of study are ‘ability’ and ‘determination’. Focusing on entry qualifications alone maybe erroneous, just as non-entry qualifications alone maybe misleading; in all of this, the underlying fact should be ability to learn, cope, adjust and give a credible account of what is learnt. This quality of ‘ability’ is what individuals from even technical and vocational background have been able to exploit in order to end up as lawyers, doctors, socialist, business consultants etc.

It is in view of these universal facts that the questions below ought to be carefully and thoughtfully contemplated in respect of the subject matter at stake.

- a. Do we have highly respected scholars and authorities in our educational systems who progressed in their studies to earn recognized terminal degrees without required university entry passes in their time because other alternative learning systems accepted them?
- b. Are accreditation schemes and policies the only ways of truly guaranteeing quality, standard, and conventional knowledge?
- c. Do fictitious degrees and institutions abound even in the most advanced societies regardless of all the checks and balances?
- d. Should the church, or its theological colleges and seminaries prevent willing, determined, and capable applicants from pursuing theological education on the grounds of lack of academic entry requirements?
- e. Must there be limit on the level of theological education that individuals without required passes set by national bodies should acquire even if all evidence show that the person in question is capable of learning beyond set limits?
- f. What happens to those who are steadily progressing in their theological education yet without the set entry passes for progressing even to terminal degrees?
- g. What do we think is actually informing the diversification of theological course contents and names of degrees in most parts of Europe and America, and parts of Africa? Could it be due to the need of ensuring that persons with the ability to learn to higher levels are fairly giving the opportunity?

h. Is it actually possible for people without required entry qualifications to study theology at the university level once they progress from the basics? This is not to suggest that one needs a university degree to be a minister of the gospel.

- i. Is it true that with God all things are possible?
- j. Aren’t our minds programmed for different conceptual appreciations and cognitive strengths? (Kundu and Tutoo, 1988)

II. Facings the timeless Facts

a. It is a fact that particularly in Africa, our educational systems tend to condemn many potential and scholarly materials and brilliant persons to the street and low status careers on account of structured schemes of ‘intellectual assessment’.

b. The fact is that higher theological education is not just about obtaining a required grade in Mathematics and English and the rest. What it requires are ability, maturity, critical and critical thinking. This has proven to be true and continues to be the case in several theological institutions where people without the set entry passes into tertiary programmes have been admitted under certain circumstances.

c. It is a fact that what the mind can muster and know is not influenced sometimes by any previous knowledge in anything. This confirms the fact that man is indeed fearfully and wonderfully made (Psalm 139:14).

d. It is a fact that, to be illiterate does not necessarily mean that one is a ‘*tabula rasa*’.

e. It is a fact that formal, or structured, or accredited education is aborting great minds, intellectuals, and cognitive abilities.

f. It is a fact that, after all, the materials of study that great minds and students used for their intellectual achievements were created and owned by the so called illiterates, unschooled and unlearned.

Accreditation and Affiliation to Liberal Faculties and Evangelical Theological Education in Ghana – A Case in point

The Accreditation of Evangelical Theological Institutions in Ghana, and their affiliation to liberal religious studies departments of national universities in particular as required by the National Accreditation in Ghana (Njoroge and G. A. Benaars, 1988), have had mixed impacts on many Evangelical Theological Schools.

i. Image enhancement

With accreditation and affiliation, many evangelical theological institutions in Ghana are winning public

confidence and recognition as institutions where one can apply to, and earn certificates awarded by some of the big national universities in Ghana.

ii. Programmes diversification

Once they get their theological programmes accredited, many evangelical and Pentecostal theological institutions add University College to their names. And by operating as university colleges, they add other programmes in science, business, and social studies etc.

iii. Subjecting the Evangelical curriculum to liberal intimidation

As the few theological schools in Ghana succeed in affiliating with liberal religious studies departments of mentoring institutions - a collaboration required by the accreditation law, the evangelical theological curriculum becomes challenged. A case in point is the affiliation of the Maranatha University College, then known as Maranatha Bible College to the University Cape Coast Bagulo Bening (1990).

In the process of affiliation, some established courses of study which have been taught for over thirty years were merged, or removed, or renamed to suit liberal theological sentiments. Total credit hours of study at the diploma level were heavily slashed down, and some progressive courses of study were taken out of the Diploma and Bachelor's curriculum [purported] to be taught at the Master's level (I know this as a matter of fact).

Course contents were also reduced, and all of a sudden, the college was faced with the requirement of external moderation of questions before examinations are administered.¹⁴ Meanwhile, without these affiliation requirements, the Maranatha Bible College had produced great theological scholars and teachers who proceeded to learn in renowned seminaries and universities in America and Europe.

Sometimes, experts by virtue of the power vested in them by the laws on accreditation and affiliation, who have no idea of some of the courses and their contents change the direction and expectation of examination questions just to satisfy their academic outlook because they are professors and PhD holders. What they often display is the 'ignorance of the learned'.

iv. Changing the skin of the Chameleon

Evangelical Theological curriculum in Ghana has over the years sought to respond to challenging and emerging trends in African Christianity, discipleship, and ministry formation in a very special way. Thus, subjecting these

hallmarks to requirements by accreditation and affiliation programmes auditors seem to be changing the direction, vision and theological education philosophy of these schools. This situation has even compelled Mensa Anamua Otabil, the founder and chancellor of Central University College, Ghana, to run two other theological schools, namely, *Living Word School of Ministry* and *Daniel's Institute* because the theology school of his university has failed to advance his Pentecostal /Charismatic theological training agenda (National Accreditation and Qualifications Authority Bill, Act, 2014). Only God knows what could change the skin of the Chameleon and how the Chameleon would look like when that truly occurs.

v. Killing a loved one softly

The evangelical theological heritage is being softly killed on the altar of accreditation and affiliation. The accreditation and affiliation systems in Ghana do not seem to appreciate the vision and mission of our evangelical theological schools. They impose on us but would not want us to impose on them. They threaten to withdraw their accreditation and then go public with it when theological schools deliberately resist or genuinely fail to implement their demands.

The numbers that used to subscribe to our theological programmes are seriously dwindling due to accreditation requirements. Affiliation and accreditation charges do not take into consideration the small numbers in our theological schools. All they know is law, procedure, financial obligations for accreditation charges and affiliation services – you wonder whether some of the theological colleges need these good but needless standards in view of our track records.

Our own internal controls and supervision may be enough. If stakeholders do not sit up, evangelical scholarship, mission, and institution would be swallowed up by liberal arts education and their profit making drives, innovations, and market driven academic programmes sooner than later. 'Let what belongs to Caesar be Caesar's and what belongs to the Lord be the Lord' (Matt. 22:21).

CONCLUSION

But for the Law on Accreditation, one cannot imagine what the Ghanaian tertiary education landscape would look like. No wonder, Ghana's higher educational system is still respected and highly recognized across the world. In a society like Ghana where organizations and individuals are quick to duplicate innovations, the rush to turn every little structure into a university college without taken into account the short and long term requirements is effectively being checked by the National Accreditation

Board.

The Board is also fostering institutional collaborations through requirement of affiliation to sovereign and older universities. This is building confidence in scholars and aiding cross pollination of ideas, standards, and best practices obtained in world class academia. However, the Accreditation Board must take another look at the philosophy, mission and vision of theological schools in order to engage them on their own terms.

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