

Theological Education and Human Development: Historical Foundations and Contemporary Implications

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Abstract	Original Research Article
<p>This paper examines the historical and contemporary significance of theological education in shaping human development. It argues that theological education, beyond imparting knowledge, forms character, nurtures values, and orients individuals toward moral and spiritual responsibility. Historically, in the formation of American society, the clergy, printers, and teachers played decisive roles in transmitting theological and cultural values that fostered civic responsibility, social cohesion, and intellectual growth. Theological education is thus described as the “education of education,” providing the ethical and spiritual foundations upon which broader learning and social progress rest. In contemporary contexts, especially in Africa and the global South, theological education continues to address pressing social challenges such as poverty, corruption, interreligious tensions, and nation-building. Drawing on Amartya Sen’s Development as Freedom, the paper highlights how theological education expands human capabilities by fostering justice, freedom, and communal flourishing. Despite challenges posed by secularization, declining reading cultures, and tensions between academic and ecclesial commitments, theological education remains indispensable. It provides moral grounding, equips leaders, and promotes holistic human flourishing in relationship with God, society, and creation.</p> <p>Keywords: Historical, Contemporary, significance of theological education, ethical and spiritual foundations and Theological and Cultural Values.</p> <p>Citation: Atanda, P. (2025). Theological education and human development: Historical foundations and contemporary implications. <i>GAS Journal of Religious Studies (GASJRS)</i>, 2(2). [9-11]</p>	

INTRODUCTION

Human development, in its most comprehensive sense, encompasses the growth, transformation, and flourishing of individuals and societies. It is not merely about economic advancement or technological innovation but about the holistic development of human capacities, values, and relationships. Central to this process is education, which shapes the intellectual, moral, and social fabric of communities. Theological education, as a particular branch of education, addresses human development in light of divine purpose, moral responsibility, and communal life. It does not merely impart knowledge but seeks to form character, nurture values, and orient human beings toward their Creator and their neighbors.

The thesis of this paper is that theological education has historically shaped human development and continues to provide moral, spiritual, and intellectual grounding for contemporary societies. By examining historical foundations, especially in the formation of American society, and by engaging contemporary debates in theology, education, and development studies, this paper argues

that theological education is indispensable for the flourishing of humanity.

HISTORICAL FOUNDATIONS OF EDUCATION AND HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

The study of American society offers a compelling illustration of how education drives development. Bernard Bailyn’s classic work *Education in the Forming of American Society* identifies three major groups that played decisive roles in shaping education: the clergy, the printers, and the teachers (Bailyn 23). Each of these groups not only transmitted knowledge but also fostered values, created social cohesion, and advanced cultural development.

Merle Curti, reflecting on this educational legacy, observed that “anyone concerned with the development of contemporary education or with any other aspect of American history should read and take to heart the analysis of, criticisms, and suggestions in education in the forming of American Society” (qtd. in Bailyn 5). This underscores the idea that education, in its broadest sense, is



not peripheral but foundational to societal progress. Theological education, in particular, has consistently demonstrated its power to shape not only religious institutions but also the broader trajectory of human development.

THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION AS THE “EDUCATION OF EDUCATION”

Theological education may be described as the “education of education” because it informs and shapes the very values and frameworks that undergird other disciplines. It situates human learning within the broader context of divine purpose. J. Donald Butler, in *Idealism in Education*, argues that education must be pupil-centered, formative, and socially oriented, with the dual objectives of developing both the individual and the community (Butler 41–62). Theological education embodies this vision by shaping the inner life of individuals and preparing them for service within society.

Furthermore, theological education cultivates moral reasoning and spiritual discernment. Unlike purely technical or professional training, it asks ultimate questions about meaning, justice, and the common good. It therefore provides a moral compass that informs economic, political, and cultural life. This formative function highlights why theological education is not merely one field among many but foundational to the very idea of holistic human development.

THE CLERGY AS AGENTS OF HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

In early American society, the clergy stood as the primary educators. Their sermons, catechisms, and theological writings not only instructed congregations in faith but also shaped social norms, civic responsibilities, and ethical practices. Bailyn emphasizes that “the clergy were the main agents in transmission, and how they fulfilled this role affected the character of the existing culture” (23). Theological education, therefore, was not limited to seminaries but was lived out in the pulpit, in pastoral care, and in community leadership.

The clergy’s role as moral and intellectual leaders underscores how theological education directly contributes to human development. By providing ethical guidance, teaching literacy through Bible reading, and fostering community solidarity, the clergy advanced social cohesion and civic responsibility. Even today, theological education equips clergy and laity alike to engage in issues of justice, reconciliation, and nation-building. As David Bosch notes in *Transforming Mission*, theological education enables the church to engage the world critically and constructively, participating in God’s mission of transforming societies (Bosch 389).

THE ROLE OF PRINTING AND PUBLICATIONS

The invention of the printing press democratized access to education, and theological publications were among the earliest and most influential works circulated. Bailyn highlights the central role of printers and publishers in shaping American society, noting that printed works allowed learning to spread beyond classrooms

and churches (97). Theological education benefited enormously from this development, as catechisms, sermons, and theological treatises became widely available.

In the modern era, theological education continues to leverage publishing and digital platforms. Online theological resources, digital libraries, and Christian publishing houses expand access to education globally. As Thomas Groome argues, Christian religious education thrives when it engages people in sharing stories, reading texts, and reflecting on them communally (Groome 104). In this way, the medium of printing and publishing extends the formative power of theological education to broad audiences.

TEACHERS AND FORMAL INSTITUTIONS OF LEARNING

Teachers, as Bailyn notes, formed the third major group shaping early American education. They did not only teach reading, writing, and arithmetic but also cultivated civic virtues and entrepreneurial skills that enabled ordered and progressive societies (112). Their work paralleled the role of theological educators, who likewise sought to form both intellectual and moral capacities in students.

Seminaries, universities, and schools of theology represent formalized efforts to integrate intellectual rigor with spiritual formation. David Kelsey, in *Between Athens and Berlin*, highlights the tension in theological education between academic scholarship and ecclesial formation but insists that both are necessary for a complete educational vision (Kelsey 87). Teachers in theological institutions embody this dual role, equipping students for both personal growth and social contribution.

THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION AND CONTEMPORARY HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

In contemporary contexts, especially in Africa and the global South, theological education plays a vital role in addressing pressing social issues. Theological institutions have become centers for leadership formation, peace-building, and community development. Stephen Bevans, in *Models of Contextual Theology*, emphasizes that theology must always be contextual, engaging the lived realities of people and addressing their particular needs (Bevans 55). Theological education in Africa, for instance, must grapple with issues of poverty, corruption, interreligious relations, and nation-building.

Amartya Sen’s *Development as Freedom* provides a useful framework for connecting theological education with broader notions of human development. Sen argues that development must be understood as expanding human freedoms and capabilities rather than merely increasing economic output (Sen 36). Theological education resonates with this approach, as it seeks to liberate individuals from ignorance, injustice, and oppression while equipping them to live meaningfully in community.

CHALLENGES FACING THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION TODAY

Despite its historic and ongoing significance, theological education faces serious challenges. Declining interest in reading,

particularly in cultures that prioritize oral traditions or digital media, threatens the depth of theological engagement. Furthermore, increasing secularization has marginalized theological education in many societies, reducing its perceived relevance. In Nigeria, for example, many students read primarily for examinations rather than for personal intellectual or spiritual growth.

Another challenge lies in the tension between secular and theological forms of education. As Kelsey argues, theological education must continually negotiate its identity between academic standards and ecclesial commitments (Kelsey 112). Theological educators must therefore reimagine curricula and pedagogical methods that remain faithful to Christian traditions while engaging contemporary cultural and intellectual contexts.

CONCLUSION

Education lies at the heart of human development, and theological education occupies a central place within this process. Historically, through the leadership of the clergy, the dissemination of printed works, and the instruction of teachers, theological education shaped the formation of American society. Today, theological education continues to contribute to human development by equipping leaders, fostering moral values, and promoting social transformation.

As this paper has argued, theological education is more than one branch of education; it is foundational to the very concept of human development because it orients individuals and societies toward ultimate meaning and moral responsibility. Renewed emphasis on theological education is therefore critical for addressing the challenges of the modern world and for fostering a society where human beings can flourish fully—in relationship with God, with one another, and with creation.

RECOMMENDATION

Theological Education and human Development are like

inseparable twins. This is because; one will definitely lead to the other. Theological Education is to lead to the development of Humanity in true sense of it. It is on this note, that the paper strongly recommends that Theological Education should be taught and offered at all levels of education.

It should also be taught as a compulsory course or subject. This is because for humanity to rightly govern and pilot the affairs of the society, it ought to have been rightly standing with correct Theological perspective. If the Theological education is faultily taught and learnt, then is the tendency that every other thing will be wrong. But if the Theology is rightly taught and learnt the tendency is for all to be well in a given society.

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