

Chapter 5.16

Distance Education from Religions of the World

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INTRODUCTION

Internationally, *religious institutions* are developing distance learning for a variety of reasons and purposes. The religious applications of distance learning comprise three main areas: extending the reach of *theological education* (primarily for the training of clergy), expanding opportunities for higher education from religious-sponsored universities and colleges, and facilitating other lifelong learning opportunities for members of the laity. Although Amos noted in 1999 that “little has been written and published on distance education in North American theological education” (p. 126), that is still the case today. Despite an expanding usage of distance learning by religious institutions, there has been little published on any of these international efforts. Accordingly, this chapter is a synthesis of original research, the authors having contacted leaders and academics from international institutions affiliated with

major world religions to discover more about their various applications of distance learning.

BACKGROUND

Training Clergy

Certainly a shared problem, every major world religion has congregations and adherents in distant or rural areas where they cannot send fully trained graduates from their theological schools as *clergy* or religious leaders. In order to compensate for this problem, *seminaries*, or schools of theology, have made efforts to train religious leaders using distance education (Reissner, 1999; Patterson, 1996). Those efforts have now expanded beyond the target users of religious leaders for *theological education* to the entire *laity* (Cannell, 1999), and the source beyond schools of theology to also include religious-affiliated colleges and universi-

ties. For example, even Buddhist organizations in various parts of the world (e.g., Sri Lanka, Thailand) are offering *correspondence education* courses for lay members to become better educated in and integrated into their faith.

Higher Education and Piety

Beyond strictly theological education, one of the most fascinating trends throughout the decades has been the shifting emphasis of people of faith from receiving strictly theological education to receiving higher education and university degrees. Prior to the 1960s, and at various other periods in history, scholars noted that certain religious leaders had an almost anti-education philosophy and believed that all forms of critical learning based on reason (and not faith) threatened *piety*. (Stewart, personal communication, February 9, 2004; Wriedt, 2004). This attitude of skepticism towards the value of higher education is still seen today among some religious bodies (e.g., Jehovah's Witnesses, the Amish, Mennonites, and the Hutterite Brethren).

Dr. James Stewart, the associate dean in the School of Distributed Learning at Bethany College, has noticed, however, that "most churches are beginning to see secular education integrated with religious values as being just as important in parishioners' preparation for their 'life ministry' as the spiritual training. Prior to the 1960s...it would have been rare to see a minister with a bachelor's degree, but now all church members are encouraged to pursue college education and even advanced degrees" (Rogers & Howell, 2004). Numerous examples of the emphasis on higher education abound, including the fact that many church organizations now have departments of *collegiate ministries*. Mottos like that of Andrews University (Seventh-Day Adventist), "Educar es Redimir" (to Educate is to Redeem), indicate their view of the tie between education and spiritual progress. The current leader of the fastest-growing

Christian church (Gopez-Sindac & Jolly, 2004), The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, said in a recent worldwide address to the youth of the church, "You need all the education you can get. Sacrifice a car; sacrifice anything that is needed...you belong to a church that teaches the importance of education" (Hinckley, 2001, p. 4). Accordingly, this same church also instituted a program called the Perpetual Education Fund, by which people around the world in poverty-stricken circumstances can acquire educational loans, then receive better employment, repay their loan, and ideally be in a better position to lead the church in their local areas. For a variety of reasons, there is an increasing educational need coming from members of many faiths, and one of the many ways most religious-affiliated colleges and universities are trying to meet that need is through distance learning.

Church and State

The line between church/religion and state is still indistinguishable in some parts of the world, as it was in the Western world during earlier eras. It could then be said that almost any educational effort within countries of this type is, in essence, the product of a religious institution. This is the case with a majority of the Islamic countries, and when we speak of educational efforts from these countries, each of the 58-member nations of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) has different and changing levels of acceptance of distance education. For instance, in many of the Arabo-Islamic countries (e.g., Lebanon), ministries of education do not officially recognize degrees earned through distance education (Nasser & Abouchedid, 2000). However, it is important to note that Islamic organizations from both Arabic and non-Arabic countries are still very interested in using distance learning to accomplish goals such as those that "safeguard the Islamic identity of Muslims in non-Islamic

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