

Electronic learning in Missiology (Elim) Programme

“What seems to be new often is a new format of the old.”

The Vatican as promotor of the Internet

In his encyclical letter *Miranda Prorsus* of 1957, Pope Pius XII already expressed his opinion concerning the new communication media: “The Church sees these media as ‘gifts of God’ which in accordance with his providential design, unite men in brotherhood and so help them to cooperate with His plan for salvation”ⁱ

The Vatican at the time adopted a fundamental but positive attitude towards the media.

A basic attitude which today still is the same concerning the Internet, a medium with many dangers, but according to Pope John Paul the Second, during World Communication Day 2001, offers inconceivable possibilities as well: “Consider, for instance,... the positive capacities of the internet to carry religious information and teaching beyond all barriers and frontiers. Such a wide audience would have been beyond the wildest imaginings of those who preached the Gospel before us.”ⁱⁱ

The Internet offers unique possibilities in connecting people of various different cultures, and to bring education across the borders. Electronic media have become a critical component in the present media ethos and are vitally at the service of intercultural dialogue between peoples worldwide. A virtual world community is indeed in formation in the present Information Age. Obviously, Christian theological education is called for to explore the potentials as well as scope of these ongoing interactions between cultures and religious traditions in the cyberworld.

Electronic Learning in Missiology

The Dharmaram College, Bangalore, represented by Dr. Anthony Kalliath, who also is present at this IAMS-congress, the Tangaza College, Nairobi, and the Nijmegen Institute for Missiology have taken the call of the Holy Father to heart. Jointly they have initiated a project for Electronic Learning in Missiology (Elim) – not as a replacement of ordinary contact education, but as a supplement to this.

The Electronic Learning in Missiology (Elim) programme is envisaged in the horizon of the intercultural and interreligious challenges, poised by the general media. In this context, intercontinental collaboration of theological faculties and institutes, through the present electronic media, becomes meaningful for wide and fast sharing of experiences and ideas in the field of Christian mission.

Out of this vision, the project Elim aims at:

- An exchange between teachers and students of Missiology in various continents;
- Making available and opening up of mutual sources of information;
- International cooperation between Missiological institutions.

One of the great advantages of education through the Internet is the possible intensifying of frequency and depth in cooperation between colleagues in the field, as well as exchange between students. International cooperation will no longer be dependant on exchange person to person only. In principal, an exchange by Electronic Learning could be realised on a daily basis.

Since 2002, Kenyan, Indian and Dutch theologians are uniting efforts in offering study programmes on Missiology in the Elim network. Two modules were created, that is to say “Mission: Between globalization and localization” and “Mission and Multiculturality”. The aim is to design a digital module on a yearly basis, in between 2004 and 2009. Upcoming themes

ⁱ Pontifical Council for Social Communications, The Church and Internet, Vatican, 2002, www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/pccs/documents/rc_pc_pccs_doc_20020228_church_internet_en.html

ⁱⁱ Johannes Paulus II, Preach from the housetops: The Gospel in the age of global communication, Vatican, 2001. www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/messages.communications/documents/hf_jp-11_mes_20010124_world-communications-day_en.html

have been scheduled – among others – around “mission history”, “mission planning” and “mission and ministry”. The whole Missiological curriculum will be available on the Internet as of the year 2010.

Organizing Electronic Learning

In the ideal situation, the course directors in various places plan to teach a course in a specific period. They will use Electronic Learning, and in addition to that they will have face-to-face communication with their students.

Emphasis will not be on supplying information, like in a lecture hearing, but on processing information. The teacher will not give a course of lectures, but will compile a digital module in which the student will be able to opt for his or her own way and pace in reading text, contribute in a digital discussion, and so on. The modules are structured according to student-oriented tasks. The didactical starting-point is the fact that students will learn to be working even more active with the material, for instance to search for information independently, completing tasks and exercises, or so-called ‘chatting’ within the ‘discussion board’.

Of course, the students will also be able to learn to work more autonomously during the classical hearings and work studies, but the main advantage of Electronic Learning is the international cooperation and teamwork during the group assignments and international contacts which are available. Furthermore, the student will be able to choose his own moment of focussed communication.

Another great advantage of Electronic Learning is the accessibility to sources of information and knowledge, and on-line texts. For several years already there is a growing spread of the “electronic book”, or E-book. Titles are on-line available, and there are programmes like Acrobat Reader, which make these e-texts readable. The text can easily be browsed through, just like the paper book, and titles will remain in principle always obtainable. The books of the Nijmegen Institute of Missiology hold besides a paper edition an E-book edition as well. All students have access to our digital publications. Today, a group of 30 students will not have to hurry to the library just before closing time, to get this one book they need so badly; it is just available on the Internet.

By the way, nobody is assuming that the E-book eventually will replace the ordinary paper edition, but scientific studies and magazines are getting more and more completely on-line. In the Netherlands, universities are collectively making arrangements with editors of scientific magazines, resulting in an affordable way for students to log into articles on the Internet for their studies.

The face to face encounter of teachers and students per location obviously remains necessary and needed, but through Electronic Learning, students in various places will be able to chat among themselves, they will be able to chat with their own professor, or with a professor at another university. The teachers can chat among themselves, and by doing so, together they create a web community. This web community is a closed network with only participating students interested in Missiology, who have been granted an entrance code by the course instructor. The modules will be credited by all the universities. This would also facilitate student exchange. Under strict conditions, students outside this Missiological web community can follow the course from a distance. For example, a student in Chicago is interested in what Missiology students are doing in Bangalore. You could refer him or her to the module on the Internet, give an entrance code and guide him or her through the module.

Of course the above mentioned would be the ideal situation; there have been some start up problems during the initial phase of the Elim programme, like the exact time of beginning the course, because of the differing timetables and schedules.

But the investments in time and effort are already showing to pay off in the synergistic teamwork between Bangalore, Nairobi and Nijmegen. In the “virtual classrooms” in the three continents Africa, Asia and Europe, students and teachers are discussing themes like mission and globalising. Spiritual and religious sources, like documents of the Vatican, the

World Council of Churches or scriptures of the Fathers of the Church, are being unlocked through the Web, and thus made available. The intercontinental cooperation between subject teachers, as well as the exchange between students is intensified, because there are no limitations in time and distance. The participants will experience this study exchange “*inter gentes*” like an outstanding way of North-South or South-South dialogue. The digitalizing of vocational training and education however brings along costly facilities as well, like computers and Internet connections.

The software that we use is named “Blackboard”, a special program designed for Electronic Learning. It enables instructors to add online learning materials, tests, class discussions and so on. In short, it is a sophisticated and easy-to-use software platform. The course instructors can take special classes, in order to get to know the Blackboard material, and learn how to work with it.

An important quality of Blackboard is that it is easy to handle, both for teachers and students alike, and it takes little study to use it with text files. If one is to use a webcam, video or audio files it gets a little harder, but even then it is a matter of time to get used to it.

The construction of the hardware, computers and providers however, and the necessary technical expertise and know-how that goes with it, does provide a problem. Using the Electronic Learning System assumes a fast and reliable access to the Internet. In the Elim project we are confronted with the fact that the infrastructure will not be always sufficient and it will take the necessary investments. By means of financial funding by subsidizers we hope to be able to further realizing these accommodations.

Information rich and poor

According to the Vatican, an important problem of the Internet is the digital divide, a “form of discrimination dividing the rich from the poor, both within and among nations on the basis of access or lack of access to the new information technology”ⁱⁱⁱ Dependent of the access to the new information technology, new groups arise of people ‘information rich and information poor’.

While the Internet of all places has the ability and the power to bring people together, the partition in the world social structure is spreading. By means of projects like Elim, the Dharmaram College, the Tangaza College and the Nijmegen Institute for Missiology are trying to make a stand against this digital partition, and to give room to an intercultural and interreligious dialogue.

Much value is given to the make-up, the very nature of the interactive mutual communication between teachers and students on a global scale. Electronic Learning offers the possibility of exchanging knowledge, visions and interpretations, on which occasion the personal context can be very decisive. For instance, the concept of “globalizing”: by Asiatic and African students, this term will be associated with “colonialism”, while Dutch students interpret the same more as “building a global village”...

Beliefs or convictions from different continents are getting into an academical debate, by means of the opportunities of modern communication. Such insight-enriching discussions contribute to a fruitful and mutually productive dialogue, consolidating the mutual solidarity of participants in the Elim project.

Within Missiology, the term “world” has in particular the meaning of advocating a world without partitioning walls. Electronic Learning can be a valuable contribution to this.

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ⁱⁱⁱ Pontifical Council for Social Communications, Ethics in Internet, Vatican, 2002, www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical-councils/pccs/documents/rc_pc_pccs_doc_20020228_ethics-internet_en.html