

THE CONTEXT OF THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION AND MINISTERIAL FORMATION IN SRI LANKA: SOME CHALLENGES

The Theological College of Lanka, Sri Lanka, is a theological institution initiated by the Methodist, Anglican, Baptist and Presbyterian Churches in Sri Lanka to train ministerial candidates in an ecumenical venture. I lived in this context of theological education and ministerial formation for the last seventeen years. I have seen and experienced challenges that emerged at various levels concerning theological education in Sri Lanka and I am going to highlight some of them.

From its inception the Theological College of Lanka maintained a vision of theological education which can be characterized as 'contextual and ecumenical'. The Rev. Basil Jackson, the founder principal (Methodist), the first faculty of the College and others who founded the College in 1963 were responding to a particular situation; important in the political and cultural history of the country at that time. The Theological College of Lanka founder's model of theological education is to train students joining the College from traditional Christian families. In a closer look, one could say that the primary inspirations for the College founders were the church union movement that was initiated in Sri Lanka and the ethnic tensions that prevailed between Sinhala and Tamil ethnic groups. These issues were the basis of ecumenical, bilingual and vernacular theological education at the College.

THE CULTURAL CONTEXT OF SRI LANKAN THEOLOGY

To recover the relevance of the Christian message to Sri Lankan Christians, the churches in Sri Lanka have to fight a battle against the Western form of Christianity which is widely prevalent. Fortunately the revival of Christian theology and the rediscovery of the idea and reality of the Church in relation to the world and society are helping the churches to recapture the wholeness of the Gospel message. However there is constant suspicion among some Christians and new converts that the Christian faith is being betrayed and delivered into the hands of other religions.

The idea of understanding Christ in the Sri Lankan cultural context should be seen as God's self-revelation, self-communication and self-donation which took place originally in a concrete religious, political, social, economic and cultural context. The cultural context is not secondary; we - as well as Jesus - are born in a socio-cultural context and, as sociologists have amply demonstrated, we are shaped by our own social and cultural context. The context, however, is not an immutable matrix; we can also transform our context and are called to engage in the process of its transformation through revolutionary action.

The human context - social scientists say - is the context which consciously or unconsciously one chooses to live in, which gives meaning and structure to his/her world.¹ The structure of the human body has not changed significantly for the last several thousands of years and it will remain the same for another thousand generations to come, unless it is genetically manipulated to create a being that perhaps will no longer be human. Superficial characteristics such as skin colour, hair, etc., may vary. However, they argue, human words, actions, postures, gestures, tones of voice and many more are the characteristics that constitute the human historical, social and cultural context². According to them, the "context, by design, carries very little weight."³ Yet they argue that contexting is an inter-related process between past experiences and present situations.⁴ This forces every theologian to comprehend the human contexts, to grapple, struggle and develop new meaning for the theological venture. Tissa Balasuriya presents this as a "basic community factor"⁵, which engages us in the struggle for justice and freedom as a theological community. Balasuriya challenges the traditional Christian theologians to look at humanity within a wider framework:

¹ Hall, Edward T. *Beyond Culture*. New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1976, p 88

² *Ibid.* p 42

³ *Ibid.* p 89

⁴ *Ibid.* p 95

⁵ Balasuriya, Tissa. "Divergence: An Asian Perspective" in Abraham, K. C. *Third World Theologies: Commonalities and Divergences*. New York: Orbis Books, 1990, p 118

Theology has to be developed in a more practical, committed and contemplative manner in order to lead to radical changes in people's lives, interrelations of faiths and ideologies, and the sharing of the world's wealth among all.⁶

In this multi-cultural and multi-religious situation, a theologian needs a sensible approach for a meaningful theologising process that perhaps would create a meaningful partnership among Churches and the Theological Institutions.

STUDENT ISSUES: CHANGING CULTURAL CONTEXT OF THE CHURCHES

It is not possible to explore the implications of all of these in depth but let me pick up four features of our changing context:

1. The College was welcoming passionate students who are mostly first generation of converts as ministerial candidates from different churches. On the outset they are committed to Christ and creative in the way in which they wish to serve him. However, on a closer encounter, many lack basic knowledge and spiritual formation and we are forced look at this issue and be much more intentional about this than in previous generations. The College's attempt to channel their passion into a systematic study of theology and Biblical analysis is found to be a difficult exercise as from which they are far disinterested.
2. A weakness of the theological education, particular in Sri Lanka, is that we still live and function within the cosy paradigm of Christendom, or rather, to be more precise, within a cosy evangelical subculture. Theological education, evangelisation and social participation all exist to serve the churches and relate well to the huge network of followers. It has tended to live in a somewhat restrained world. Theological institutions must ask the question about the social context and seek to find to what extent we are in touch with it. Formulators of modern theological thoughts and those involved in imparting theological knowledge need to be training leaders who can serve effectively in emerging churches in different social matrices, where religious fundamentalism is a very present reality.
3. Theological students in Sri Lanka come from varied cultural, racial, social and denominational backgrounds. Students from traditional Christian families and non-traditional Christian families represent different places on the ideological scale. In this context, imparting theological knowledge requires more than just supplementing a lack of knowledge in certain areas. This is rather a frustrating issue for students from non-Christian backgrounds as they do not see that the study of theology needs basic intellectual understanding and theoretical skills. Students opting to join evangelical Bible colleges rather than a theological college probably reflect the larger changing cultural context of the churches in Sri Lanka.
4. In addition, ministerial candidates coming from non-traditional Christian family backgrounds create challenges in teaching because they are in need of basic formation in the Christian faith. Students from newly created Christian families join to study theology with little experience in the life of a congregation and without knowing Christian traditions in the country. In a traditional Christian context the congregation is seen as the place instituting the basic faith in an individual. When a candidate offers for ministerial training, both the Church and the College assume that theology students were essentially formed in the practices of the Christian life in local congregations. It is anticipated that they come to the College having been shaped by Sunday Schools, youth fellowships and continuing Christian traditions of faith. A theological college is responsible for spiritual formation as well as academic preparation. However, the present reality alters the existing scenario and raises questions for the Churches to analyse the required theological training in the present context. This new reality also fundamentally changes the nature of what can be taken for granted in the classroom and raises critical questions about what is required for faithful teaching and learning.

For example, the subject 'Christians and People of Other Faiths' is taught as part of the undergraduate programme in Sri Lanka. Different approaches to religions by the churches are presented to the students as 'exclusive view', 'inclusive view' and 'pluralistic view'. This does not create any serious faith concerns

⁶ *Ibid.* p 116

to the students coming from the traditional Christian backgrounds. They look at 'other faiths' as the 'other' without confusing 'Christian faith' with 'other faiths'. This is not the issue when students come from the non-Christian backgrounds. They say that they have made a decision not to be part of a particular 'faith' or 'belief' but to be part of 'Christian faith'. Students told me that this subject has raised serious issues about the decision that they have made at some point in their life. Once a student expressed his opinion in this way: "This is mixing other religious beliefs into Christianity. This is confusing to me and others; it's an antichristian attempt."

From the time of my theological education in the 1980s several changes have occurred in student and faculty constituencies. This calls for a new approach about the use of faculty as the College tries to respond to the needs of the Church. One way of describing the location of the ecumenical College is to interpret it as existing within the changing context that so characterizes contemporary culture. Theological education is shaped especially by the restructuring of local congregations. Any inquiry into the nature of theological education must take into account this larger context; the growing demand for free forms of worship, praise and worship and deviation from traditionally accepted worship patterns. The expectation is that faculties will be encouraged to move toward more direct analysis and respond to the changing institutional contexts of their teaching and learning.

CONVERSATION, COLLABORATION AND MUTUALITY

The questions we face need evidence of sustained collaborative efforts on fundamental educational questions. In order to address the issues that have been named, it is essential that theological teachers develop a deeper sense of collaboration. This conversation is important because the Churches often accuse theological institutions of elitism and they say that the kind of training obtained in the theological college is unsuitable to the Christian ministry and not helpful for spiritual nurturing. Some even complain that our undergraduates cannot preach a good sermon, are not involved in evangelistic work, nor even say a prayer that is relevant to the situations they face. The churches also seem to say that they are not fully equipped to deal with crisis situations like sickness, mental break-down, family quarrels and so on. On the other hand, the faculty responsible for our theological institutions say that they are disappointed with the lack of commitment of the part of the church leadership for theological education. There is no interaction between the church leadership and theological institutions regarding the formation of curricula and teaching methods.

The Christian churches in Sri Lanka followed the practice of ministerial training, historically based on individual philosophers and Gnostics who opened schools in major cities and drew students to their lectures⁷. If we look at these initiations the most important theologians emerged from the local churches. The pastoral community, not the academy, was where the theologians could be found. In the main, theological formulation was done by the pastoral community and then given back to the seminaries, which trained the future pastors. The Greek catechetical schools solely focused on training leaders for the early church. These schools demonstrated the best of classical culture that could find a future within the church. When the Christian Church was persecuted by the Roman World, catechetical schools functioned to train leaders for the Church and helped the apologists to defend their faith. Historically, the need for ministerial training was recognised by the Church during the course of the second century. The growing awareness within the Church as a unique organisation, viewed in debate with non-Jews and Jews on the one hand, and heretical schools on the other, unquestionably called for strategic and intense preparation on the part of those who would undertake church leadership.⁸ But it's not where we find ourselves today. The theological institutions began to develop on their own and theological education became a standalone component of the church. Professors became prominent theologians in their own right, no longer operating under the influence of the church. Consequently much of theological formulation became focused towards institutional concerns, rather than directly concerned with the needs of the local church.

I am not suggesting there are no theologians in the theological college who are driven by ecclesial concerns. Yet the dissonance persists. Too often the theology of the academy is seen as irrelevant to the life of the church. The problem with many theological institutions is simply that the brilliant men teaching future ministers have themselves not ministered, and in many cases, not even served in a ministry, in a

⁷ Bruce L Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language*, Texas: Word Publishing, 1995, p81.

⁸ Harold H. Rowdon, *Theological Education in Historical Perspective*, Vox Evangelica 7 1971, p75

local church for years. A well-known Sri Lankan theologian, the Jesuit Aloysius Pieris, points out this in a very eloquent way:

Learn, first, the folk language. Assist at the rites and rituals of the... people; hear their songs; vibrate with their rhythms; keep step with their dance; taste their poems; reach them through their legends. You will find that the language they speak puts them in touch with the basic truths that every religion grapples with, but each in a different way; the meaning and destiny of human existence...⁹

I want to avoid the extreme of total subjection of ecclesial concerns to theology and the total independence of all concerns of the Church. I propose to put them as equals and interdependent, ancillary to each other, supporting and illuminating and enriching each other. I feel that the human experience gives the theologian not only the context for theologising, but also the raw material to elaborate the theological answer to the human question. Also the nature of the question determines the best method to find the appropriate answer. Hence the need of a partnership between theology and the ecclesial concerns are important in order to listen and understand "the signs of the times" (Mat.16: 3).

My proposed theological procedure, in symbiosis with the procedures of the ecclesial concerns, can be properly called "an incarnational theology." In the process of the Incarnation, the Divine Logos, while remaining what he was, was made what he was not. This retention of the divine mode of being while assuming the mode of being of a servant is expressed most eloquently by Cyril of Alexandria in his *Third Letter to Nestoria* (AD 430):

Taking flesh of the Holy Virgin, and making it his own from the womb, he underwent a birth like ours, and came forth a man from a woman, not throwing off what he was, but even though he became [man] by the assumption of flesh and blood, yet still remaining what he was, that is, God in nature and truth. We do not say that the flesh was changed into the nature of the Godhead, nor that the ineffable nature of the Word of God was transformed into the nature of the flesh.¹⁰

One has to address these different perceptions of the problem. How do we integrate church concerns with theological education? Theological training is for the church ministry.

KNOWLEDGE EXPLOSION AND CULTURE

Our task, therefore, is complex. I would point out that part of the reason the local church often doesn't have a great deal of patience for "local church academics" is precisely because "academics" are often not relevant to the life of the church. I am not suggesting that we simply encourage pastors to do academic theology. What I'm suggesting is that we resurrect a robust ecclesial theology that is not driven by academic, institutional, guild specific concerns, but rather is driven by ecclesial concerns.

From my Methodist background, the Wesleyan movement offered discipleship as a model for higher and theological education. John Wesley's understanding of the perfect human being came from the idea of a perfect God creating perfect creation. However, John Wesley would say that the disobedience of man brought a disorder in his body and reason. John Wesley would emphasise that the disobedient state of man has brought sickness and diseases in humanity in return which has created the necessity of medicine and physicians. So he argued that the disorders of the rational nature have shown the necessity of education¹¹.

All knowledge available to us should not only to expand our mind and add more information; but help us to discern the purpose of God for all God's people and creation. Discernment is the result of a nature conscience that is being sensitised by God's word and our faith in Christ. A student should not be divorced from the Bible and theology when it comes to the practical skills required to manage, counsel or communicate. The contemporary church has too long not thought biblically enough in these areas but adopted secular wisdom and baptised them by sprinkling a few Bible verses around rather than

⁹ Pieris, Aloysius. *An Asian Theology of Liberation*. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark Limited, 1988, p 70

¹⁰ Hardy, Edward R. (ed.): *Christology of the Later Fathers*. London: SCM Press, 1954, p.350. Quoted in J. L. Lane, "Incarnation and Solidarity", mimeographed, 1996, p.10-11

¹¹ *The Works of John Wesley*, 3rd Edition Vol. VII, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978, p87.

immersing herself in Scriptural wisdom. The classroom is not the place where lecturers lecture and students listen for an hour or more a week, or whatever, where one doesn't need to think but information is provided from the lecturer's perspective. The practical training placements should raise questions about ministerial situations that set the agenda that are then discussed/analysed elsewhere in the curriculum. Integration does not just happen automatically; it needs to be intentional.

A few would disagree with such aspirations and, indeed, some would plead that that is what we are already doing. But the evidence is that many have not truly understood the more radical changes that are required if we are going to be relevant to the churches that need a meaningful agenda. a theological institution is needed, if all of us are convinced the basic idea that the existence of the College is for the churches in Sri Lanka; flexible strategizing; theological grounding; outcomes assessment; spiritual formation in nurturing educational communities; holistic curricularising of spiritual, practical and academic aims; orientation to servant leadership; creativity in teaching; a Christian world view; a lifelong developmental focus and a cooperative spirit are some of the basic elements we need to focus intentionally and importantly.

- Rev. Dr. Albert W. Jebanesan, Methodist Church Sri Lanka

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Hall, Edward T. *Beyond Culture*. New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1976.

Balasuriya, Tissa. "Divergence: An Asian Perspective" in Abraham, K. C. *Third World Theologies: Commonalities and Divergences*. New York: Orbis Books, 1990.

Shelley, Bruce L., *Church History in Plain Language*, Texas: Word Publishing, 1995.

Rowdon, Harold H., *Theological Education in Historical Perspective*, Vox Evangelica, 7, 1971.

Pieris, Aloysius. *An Asian Theology of Liberation*. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark Limited, 1988.

Hardy, Edward R. (ed.): *Christology of the Later Fathers*. London: SCM Press, 1954, p.350 Quoted in J. L. Lane, "Incarnation and Solidarity", mimeographed, 1996.

Wesley, John, *The Works of John Wesley*, 3rd Edition, Vol. VII, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978.