

CONTEXTUALIZATION AND EXCELLENCE IN THEOLOGICAL FORMATION IN INDIA/ASIA TODAY

Excellence in and Relevance of Theological Formation

The Impact of Contextual Theological Formation on the Academic World and Other Religions

-Jacob Parappally, MSFS

The theological education in India/Asia that is offered by the Catholic Church is primarily meant for and oriented towards the training of priests or pastors for the pastoral care of the faithful in the Church and for participating effectively in the mission of the Church to all people. Since Vatican II the theological faculties are thrown open to men and women of religious congregations and laity for their theological formation. Catholic theological education is guided by the norms and directives of the Department of Catholic Education of Vatican which demands that certain number of essential subjects should be taught in the seminaries and faculties either as requirement for priestly ordination or for a theological degree or for both. However, it does not prevent a theological faculty or seminary from teaching relevant and contextual subjects besides the prescribed ones or developing and creating new methods of teaching theology or doing theology. Its directives are based on the documents of Vatican II, especially the document on Priestly Formation. Besides the Vatican II Council documents every bishops' conference provides guidelines for theological formation to make theological education relevant to the mission of the Church.

Theological education inherited from the colonial period confined itself to the class rooms of the centres of theological training and it dealt with abstract concepts developed from an alien philosophy and a Western cultural context. A theological reflection alienated from the process of Divine revelation taking place in the struggles and sufferings of the people was found to be irrelevant to the Indian/Asian context of deep religiosity, pervasive poverty and discrimination based on caste, class and gender. It is no wonder that such theological formation had hardly any impact on the academic world and other religions. However, the academic world in general and some members of other religions admire the character formation, discipline, long and rigorous training and the dedication of those in theological formation for committed service. Therefore, not the academic content of theological formation that has an impact on the academic world or other religions but the method employed and the outcome of such formation that has some impact on others.

The new paradigm of theologizing after Vatican II with an emphasis on dialoguing with the context of one's life and mission found it imperative to have a scientific analysis of the socio-economic and the socio-cultural context and a reverential approach to the revelation of God in other religions for developing a meaningful theology. This new paradigm of theologizing is *experience-based*, *praxis-oriented* and *dialogical*.¹ Therefore, the contextual theological formation is influenced by the findings of secular

¹ K. Kunnumpuram, "Theology in India at Cross-roads," *Theologizing in India*, M. Amalados, T.K. John, G. Gispert Sauch, eds. (Bangalore: TPI Publ., 1981), p. 5.

disciplines on social, economic, cultural and political realities and a respectful and unbiased study of other religions where one can find God's presence and action beyond the boundaries of the faith-tradition of the Church .

1. The Impact of the Academic World and Other Religion on Theological Formation

At the outset it must be admitted that the impact of the academic world and other religions on theological formation is more evident and significant than vice-versa. This is happening in the contextual theological centres and in the theological faculties which are giving certain importance to the challenges of the context. It is a felt-need by all formators whether they are professors of theology or not that no relevant theology can be taught without dialoguing with the plurality of religions and socio-cultural, economic and political reality of the context. In the context of a plurality of religions it is thought to be imperative that the students become competent to dialogue with the members of other religions. The Vatican II Council says: "Let them also be introduced to a knowledge of other religions which are more widespread in individual regions, so that they may acknowledge more correctly what truth and goodness these religions, in God's providence, possess, and so that they may learn to refute their errors and be able to communicate the full light of truth to those who do not have it."² Further, all theological studies, having their source in revelation, need to address the human problems of the day in the light of revelation and must seek find solutions to them. So theological education is not something for securing some information or some abstract thinking insulated from the realities of life but intended to help the students to become catalysts for transforming society into the Kingdom of God's dream. The Vatican II Council affirms that, "they [students] should learn to seek the solutions to human problems under the light of revelation, to apply the eternal truths of revelation to the changeable conditions of human affairs and to communicate them in a way suited to men of our day." So the theological study and research cannot be but be contextual and inter-disciplinary.

The orientations of the Vatican II Council were further systematically explained and the norms of theological education were clearly enunciated in the Apostolic Constitution *Sapientia Christiana* of Pope John Paul II. It articulates the goal of Catholic theological education as: 1. [T]hrough scientific research to cultivate and promote their own disciplines, and especially to deepen knowledge of Christian revelation and of matters connected with it, to enunciate systematically the truths contained therein, to consider in the light of revelation the most recent progress of the sciences, and to present them to the people of the present day in a manner adapted to various cultures;...³ Both the decrees of Vatican II and the document *Sapientia Christiana* emphasize the need to make Catholic theological education relevant to the context of life, while being faithful to the teaching of the church.

Theologizing in the context, thus, needs to be done also in dialogue with the natural, human and social sciences which have made tremendous progress in recent years giving us new insights into the understanding of the world, humans and socio-political structures and systems. Dialogue with various scientific disciplines is imperative for understanding and responding to God's work for humans and for understanding the

² Ibid.

³ *Sapientia Christiana* of Pope John Paul II, Part I, Article, 3.

forces that obstruct God's plan for humans and their world. Vatican II acknowledges the contribution of sciences in understanding humans when it states, "Thanks to the experience of past ages, the progress of the sciences, and the treasures hidden in the various forms of human culture, the nature of man himself is more clearly revealed and new roads to truth are opened. These benefits profit the Church too"⁴ Theologizing in dialogue with religions, secular movements and various sciences makes theology relevant to the context in which we live. It can challenge individuals to a deeper Christian commitment to transform the society in which they live and it can challenge theology itself to become more catholic.

2. The Impact of Contextual Theological Formation on Academic World and Other Religions

For a large number of Christians engaged in academic world with their specific competence in the secular disciplines theological formation in general is seen as a training for forming priests or pastors. In the special situation of India/Asia where theological formation, though offered to all, is taken mainly by those who are going to enter into the ministry of priesthood and some religious men and women who are assigned to the work of formation in religious institutes. This pragmatic approach to theology cannot make much impact on academic world as a discipline. Some impact of contextual theological formation on the wider academic world can be seen in the Universities which have a Department of Christianity or at least a Chair of Christianity and in those Centres of Contextual Theological Formation.

It is through dialogue between theologians and secular academicians as well as through serious researches done on socio-cultural, economic and political issues from the perspective of Christian faith. Such dialogues take place only on the level of exchanging ideas and perceptions but also as dialogue of action concerning issues of concrete life situation which affects especially the vulnerable sections of the society, namely, dalits, tribals, women, children as well as on issues like violence, corruption, economic exploitation etc. Such dialogues help in removing certain prejudices of those in the academic world because they are not familiar with the content of theological formation or burdened with certain information they had about theology as a narrow, fundamentalist, exclusive, sectarian other-worldly and unrealistic religious speculation.

Since theology basically deals with the meaning of human life and destiny from the perspective of God-experience in and through Jesus Christ there are many possibilities to enter into dialogue with all disciplines and ideologies that are genuinely concerned about humans and their destiny even when they may not recognize the value of the faith-perspective of those engaged in theological reflection. The prejudice against Christian theology in general has been overcome to a great extent through interdisciplinary seminars, conferences, symposia and other means of interaction initiated by departments of Christian studies and theological faculties and Contextual theological institutes. Through such dialogues the Contextual theological studies and research have been recognized as an integrated approach to the understanding and promotion of the

⁴ *Gaudium et spes*, No.44.

unfolding of humans as humans and the preservation and development of Nature. The specialized research and studies in other branches of knowledge are limited by their very subject-matter and tend to be fragmentary without any possibility of entering into the other dimensions of material or human reality. However, they too can benefit from the insights of theology to see the inter-connectedness not only of their particular field of knowledge with other different fields of knowledge but also the inter-connectedness of everything and everyone. Such an insight itself is theological and therefore, comprehensive.

Any discipline that is not open to inter-disciplinary enrichment through a culture of dialogue would be condemned to irrelevance or it would make only a minimal contribution to the advancement of knowledge. By creatively engaging in dialogue with secular disciplines the contextual theological formation can contribute much to make theologizing a meaningful and enriching exercise integrating academic excellence with actual life-situation of the people various strata of the society, especially the marginalized and be a catalyst of transformation. It is being done with much success in a few universities and Institutes of theology. Contextual theology has made traditional theology incarnate in the context of the life-struggles of the people as well as made it inter-disciplinary in its method of theologizing. From the perspective of faith, every scientific discipline is a systematic reflection and articulation, committed to praxis to enhance the quality of life by re-reading of the scripture of Nature which is the 'vestige of the Trinity' according to St. Augustine. Both the advancement of knowledge in empirical and social sciences in general and socio-cultural, political and economic issues, thus, become also the locus of theological reflection.

A theologian, especially in India, is blessed with the experience of two world-views, Indian and Western. If the Indian world-view is largely influenced by the Hindu religious tradition the Western world-view is predominantly Christian. But in order to evolve a relevant contextual catholic theology it is imperative that theologizing takes into account both these world-views which are complementary in understanding and experiencing the entire reality of God, human and the world. Without the Indian insight into the radical relationship of everything expressed through the advaitic intuition and through the emphasis on the epistemological principle of identity, theology can become exclusivistic, triumphalistic and sectarian. Without the Western emphasis on the principle of contradiction theologizing in the Indian context can get mired in confusion without proper and clear distinctions in understanding reality. Contextual theological studies can promote an *inclusive pluralism* that recognizes the plurality of approaches to Truth and their essential inter-relationships. So what is needed is not a mere tolerance and co-existence among various religions, cultures and academic disciplines but a co-insistence and concord. When all academic disciplines can discover in their own way this truth and if the contextual theological studies with a commitment to academic excellence and with its specific genius can show and promote their inter-relatedness through serious dialogue they all can contribute positively to the integral transformation of humans and their world.

-Tejas Vidya Peetha,
Institute of Mission-oriented & Contextual Theology
Kumbalgodu. P.O. Bangalore- 560074.
Parappally@gmail.com