

“CONTEXTUALISING AND EXCELLENCY  
CHALLENGES FOR THEOLOGICAL FORMATION IN TODAY’S INDIA”

Bangalore, September 20-22, 2013

III. Excellence in and Relevance of Theological Formation

Response Paper by Reimund Bieringer, Leuven

Please allow me to begin this response paper by thanking the organizers of this conference, The Institute of Missiology, MISSIO, Aachen, Germany and the Institute of Dialogue with Cultures and Religions, Chennai, India, for the honour of inviting me to participate and prepare a response paper. I very much regret the fact that due to circumstances beyond my control, the serious illness of a close family member, it was not possible for me to travel to Bangalore at this time. I hope that my paper can in whatever small way contribute to the success of this important conference.

Recently I received papers by Fr. Prasad Pinto and Fr. Jacob Parappally to review for my response paper. I highly appreciate their contributions. In my response I would like to begin by giving a synthesis of my own reading of their papers and then in a second step I would like to raise some critical issues.

In his paper entitled “How Excellence and Relevance in Contextual Theological Formation Impacts the Church and Society: A Pastoral Approach”, Fr. Prasad Pinto begins with a brief historical sketch of contextual theology and its achievements so far. This is followed by a brief general description of the attempts at contextualization and inculturation followed by “Some Specific Contributions”. The impact of contextual theology is charted in a list of seven examples and a list of eight challenges. In his historical overview, Fr. Pinto takes as his starting point the historical link between Christianity and the colonising powers as well as the rise of Indian nationalism and the movement for self-determination which form the context of the beginnings of Indian theology. As Fr. Pinto points out, these beginnings “were mostly confined to Brahminic upper caste traditions” (p. 1). He then points to the Second Vatican Council as “a push to the process of all round inculturation” and to the support of inculturation by the FABC. He chronicles the interventions that brought the efforts toward inculturation to a halt. Fr. Pinto then describes the ideal of contextual theological formation as follows:

“the Indian Church would have leaders, animators and pastors empowered to grasp the living realities, capable of reading the signs of the time, interpret and discern them in a life giving way in order to evolve grassroots programmes in furthering the realization of the Kingdom of God, which is nothing but a human situation, where there is freedom, fellowship, harmony and justice for all” (p. 2).

He is, however, quick to admit that the “actual situation today ... is far from satisfying” (p. 2). Fr. Pinto then gives a brief general overview of the attempts at contextualization and inculturation of the Church in India, emphasizing mostly the role of the National Biblical, Catechetical and Liturgical Centre (NBCLC), Bangalore. When focusing on the specific contributions, he lists the work of theological centres and associations, the seminars organized by the NBCLC, the

seminars of the CBCI commission for seminaries and the work of the Indian Theological Association.

The second part of Fr. Pinto's paper deals with the impact of contextualized theology. The first point he mentions is a fundamental change in ecclesiology. The church is no longer seen as an end in itself, but as the people of God with the mission to realize the Kingdom of God in human societies (see p. 4). This necessitated the centres of theological formation to be located in the actual contexts where people live and experience injustice and mass media to be used by the Church to disseminate "life-giving values" (p. 5). Concrete results are the church's opposition against the caste system, the church's support for "grassroots liberative movements" (p. 4), a closer cooperation in the *National Alliance of People's Movements* and the establishment of "Legal Aid Cells to empower the poor in obtaining justice" (p. 5).

Fr. Pinto concludes his paper by listing what he himself calls eight "challenges" for contextual theologies, even though he not only lists challenges, but also opportunities (esp. no. 4 "Many students are showing openness to the living reality"). The legacy to Western influence and control results in the danger that contextual theologizing remains "a classroom exercise" (p. 5) and "does not allow them to be creatively free" (p. 6). The implication is that the "speed of contextual theologizing is very slow" (p. 6). Another challenge originates in the experience that "the modern India is rapidly changing" (p. 6). The challenge is being met by "a search for a deeper identity in the Indian Church" (p. 6). Fr. Pinto also mentions the inner division of contextual theology into "intellectuals and ordinary people" (p. 6) which is tied to "two types of worship" (p. 6). Describing contextual theology as "pluralistic", Fr. Pinto distinguishes "three types of groups" (p. 6), one authentically accepting change, another rejecting change and a third only accepting change superficially. He also calls for a closer cooperation between different centres of theological formation. Finally while acknowledging the impact contextual theology has already had on society, Fr. Pinto concludes, "Yet a vast civic space still seeks to be filled by Christian transformative involvement".

While reading and analyzing Fr. Pinto's paper one cannot help but realizing the enormous struggle that contextual theologizing has undergone in its attempt to take root in India, but also how much still remains to be done. It is clear that the pace of contextual theology has been slowed down considerably in the past 15-20 years, but it is already encouraging that it has not disappeared completely. It would be highly interesting to have more detailed information about the conditions of possibility and the contexts of its survival as well as the internal Indian opposition it faces. It will also be extremely interesting to see how the pontificate of Pope Francis will impact the development of contextual theologizing in India.

The paper by Fr. Jacob Parappally is entitled "The Impact of Contextual Theological Formation on the Academic World and Other Religions". This paper consists of two parts which attempt to chart the impact of the academic world and other religions on theological formation and then vice versa the impact of contextual theological formation on the academic world and other religions. In his introduction Fr. Parappally also briefly presents the difference between the colonial period and the Vatican II era. The theological formation associated with the colonial period had hardly any impact on the academic world and other religions. Fr. Parappally describes it as follows:

“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” (p. 1).

As opposed to this Fr. Parappally emphasizes that after Vatican II the “new paradigm of theologizing is *experience-based, praxis-based and dialogical*” (p. 1).

In his first subsection Fr. Parappally frames the impact of the academic world and other religions on contextual theological formation. He takes as his starting point the shared conviction that “no relevant theology can be taught without dialoguing with the plurality of religions and socio-cultural, economic and political reality of the context” (p. 2). Fr. Parappally seems to focus here more on what theology needs to be like in order to be useful for contextual theological formation than on the impact of the academic world and other religions on contextual theological formation. Theology needs to be dialogical, towards other religions as well as towards “the natural, human and social sciences” (p. 2).

Fr. Parappally suggests that there is less evidence or significance of an impact of contextual theological formation on the academic world. This is largely due to the fact that in India “theological formation in general is seen as a training for forming priests or pastors” (p. 3). Moreover the perspective of “secular academicians” (p. 3) is marred by prejudice “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” (p. 3). According to Fr. Parappally such prejudice “has been overcome to a great extent through inter-disciplinary seminars, conferences, symposia and other means of interaction initiated by departments of Christian studies and theological faculties and Contextual theological institutes” (p. 3).

The paper by Fr. Parappally concludes with a reflection on the need of interdisciplinarity in the perspective of contextual theologizing: “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” (p. 4). Moreover contextual theologizing is also enriched by the complementarity of Western-Christian with Indian-Hindu world-views. “Contextual theological studies can promote an *inclusive pluralism* that recognizes the plurality of approaches to Truth and their essential inter-relationships” (p. 4). Both interdisciplinarity and “inclusive pluralism” can only develop their full potential through “serious dialogue” (p. 4).

In Fr. Parappally’s paper we see clear parallels with Fr. Pinto’s position, but less or no emphasis on the opposition with which contextual theologizing met, esp. from Western circles in the church. According to Fr. Parappally the ultimate goal is “to become catalysts for transforming society into the Kingdom of God’s dream” (p. 2). Fr. Pinto also sees the goal as “furthering the realization of the Kingdom of God” (p. 2).

In both papers we meet the *apriori* that theological formation is good (or excellent), if it is relevant, and in order to be relevant it needs to be contextual. I would like to challenge them on these points. I do not disagree with this *apriori* but things seem to be more complex than that. Can we really reduce the issue of excellence to relevance, contextualization and impact?

Admittedly for a long time and in some places still today, the absence of relevance, contextualization and impact has been seen as an *apriori* quality label, if you permit me to use a certain amount of cynicism. It is clear that both papers consciously or unconsciously react against that kind of ideology. Yet on the other hand, it seems somewhat problematic to assume that as soon as relevance, contextualization and impact are present, quality is guaranteed. This also runs the risk of becoming an ideology.

I would like to suggest that excellence in contextual theology also depends on more specific criteria. We subdivide the criteria into the technical and the philosophical ones. The technical criteria include the use of sources, tools and methodology. The philosophical criteria embrace the use of logic, critical attitude, hermeneutical approach, memory and imagination. Excellence in contextual theology is also measured by the correct use of primary and secondary sources. Here it is above all a question of the reliability of the sources, their authors and their critical editions. Excellence in contextual theology also depends on the use of the adequate tools and the suitable methodology.

The quality of theology also depends on the logic that is used, i.e., on coherence and strength of the arguments, on the plausibility of the line of reasoning, on the argumentative power. In addition the quality of the theology also depends on the critical attitude. In an academic context, critical attitude mainly refers to the awareness and the conscious choice of a specific position, of a proper methodology, of specific tools and sources. A critical approach is fully conscious of the fact that there are several options to choose from and decides after a process of discernment and distinction which option to choose. A critical approach also knows how a specific contextual theology fits in the larger context of the history of theology. Finally a critical approach evaluates the different options and keeps what is good. Excellence in contextual theology is also measured by its hermeneutical openness. Contextual theology can by definition not just repeat or imitate a theology of the past. Rather it sees itself as having to write a new chapter in a chain novel of which the tradition has written the previous chapters. As such theology is firmly rooted in the tradition of the Christian churches and has to rely on a strong and vivid memory. At the same time theology, and contextual theology in particular, also has to rely on imagination in order to move forward into the future.

Let me conclude by once more thanking Fr. Pinto and Fr. Parappally for their stimulating papers and the organizers for their kind invitation. The papers provide a vision of the Kingdom of God for contextual theology which is essential for the transformation of society. I hope that the technical and philosophical criteria which I suggested will not be allowed to detract from this core business of contextual theology, but will assist contextual theology to achieve its goals in a more efficient and more excellent way and for the well-being of all.

Thank you for your kind attention.