

Liberative Solidarity: Contemporary Perspectives on Mission by K. C. Abraham

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Chapter 9: Praxis and Mission - Implications for Theological Education

Theological education in India and in other countries of Asia is part of the missionary heritage. Missionaries started institutions -- Bible Schools, Colleges and others -- to train young people to spread the Gospel. William Carey started a liberal arts and science college for both "Christian and Heathen" students rather than strictly theological seminary for missionary students native or East Indian. But the college was considered a "Handmaid of Evangelisation". Carey predicted that the college would provide an Indian Christian Teacher preacher -- "full instructions in the doctrine he was to compact, and the doctrine he was to teach and acquire a complete knowledge both of the sacred scriptures (Christian or otherwise), and of those philosophical and mythological dogmas which formed the soul of the Buddhist and Hindu systems." Both apologetic and missionary motifs were present, even from the beginning. The instruction followed a western model of education. Mission was understood as evangelism or proclamation. As we realise notable changes have taken place in our understanding of mission as well as in the education philosophy. Mission is now understood in a holistic sense. It is participation in the transforming and liberative work of God in God's creation. If we accept that perspective then the fundamental question is how can theological education help the church's participation in God's mission? To answer this we need to consider some other developments one, paradigm shift in theological thinking and two, a new understanding of the nature of pedagogy itself. Both may be briefly mentioned.

Two developments

1. Theology, it is affirmed, is contextual. Theological reflection is a response in faith to the realities of people, especially people struggles for freedom, for justice, for wholeness and well-being. A theology that does not relate itself to these contextual realities becomes abstract and irrelevant. The church, of course, is committed to remain faithful to the essence of given faith traditions, but theological reflection is a task in which the church is called upon to give an account of this commitment in relation to many challenges, questions and aspirations of people at a particular time and age. This task cannot be done by reiterating some universal and abstract principles or credal formulae. They are important. They represent the articulation of faith by people in a particular context. We need to start from "below", from the experience of people. From the perspective of the day to day struggles of the people for justice, for

freedom and love, we interpret the meaning of tradition. This paradigm shift in theological reflection has given rise to different theologies: people's theology, Dalit theology, black theology and feminist theology. They all take the experience of suffering of a particular group of people as their vantage point of theological task.

2. In our understanding of pedagogy also there is a marked shift. Education was thought to be a process of merely disseminating some valuable information by experts to the empty and receptive minds of the learners. You hear the amusing characterisation that education is inculcation of the incomprehensible by the incompetent to the indifferent. From this "banking concept" (Paulo Friere) of education we are now committed to a pedagogy whereby the teacher and the taught together enter into a process of gaining a new awareness of the condition of oppression around them and that awareness leads them to a commitment for change. The emphasis on context as well as liberation is common to theology and education. Liberation is a theological motif and provides the goal for theological education.

Some Important Concerns

a. Emphasis on Perspectival Change

Perspective is the way we look at things. We have indeed indicated the change of perspective in theology, mission and education. It can be summed up as liberative and ecumenical. Both these presuppose an intense awareness of the context in which theological education should be done. In fact it is the pre-requisite for a meaningful theological education.

Our context is pluralistic. There are trends and issues that are common to the Indian context. The elite domination, continuing misery of the poor, rise of religious fundamentalism, impact of new economic policies, ecological crisis, and so on. But there are problems that are specific to each region. To assume that the context of the North-East and Kerala are the same is erroneous. In our analysis of the context, we need to pay more serious attention to these regional variations. There ought to be a cross fertilisation of the regional insights. The Board of Theological Education, senate of Serampore college, has undertaken the task of publishing a bibliography of original Christian writings in regional language. This will be a first step towards better communication between regions. The time has come for us to encourage the study of languages of regions other than one's own for research. Many of us do not pay any attention to what is in our regional languages. We are eager to study materials written in the European contexts. Perspectival changes should be reflected in our methodology. It is not enough to add a new course or branch of study to the existing curricula. When we are confronted with new challenges, we try to domesticate them by the practice of offering courses. Women's concerns or contextual approach should inform the way we teach theology or biblical studies. In the same way we cannot assume a mission perspective in theological education if we merely include a course or branch of study in missiology. The transforming and liberative thrust of our education needs careful attention.

b) Praxis and Mission

Missional thrust is transformative. With a critical awareness of the oppressive structures in their situation, learners should be moved for action to transform them.

This is praxis. The question should be raised: How this change-oriented and committed form of learning can happen in our theological studies, if we take missional thrust seriously? We needed to reflect on theological praxis as methodology for our education.

Here liberation theologians have something valuable to offer us. They make a distinction between theory and practice on the one hand, and praxis on the other. The traditional pattern of theologising as in many other disciplines has been, first to enunciate a theory (as in biblical or systematic theology) and then apply it (practical theology, ethics, and so on). The assumption hidden in this procedure is that pure and true thought about reality can occur only when it is removed from act and practice follow theory: doing is an extension of knowing.

Praxis-thinking challenge this assumption of western Christianity, which is the hidden assumption of much of our education system. It insists that thinking that occurs apart from critical involvement ends up in constructions of theories about existence that keep us from the real world. "Praxis is thought emerging in deed and deed evoking thought." To quote from a document:

Thinking is not now considered prior or superior to action; rather, it takes place in action. The Christian religion was founded not on a work, but on the word made Flesh. Faith is no longer simply "applied" or completed in action, but for its very understanding (and this is theology) faith demands that it be discovered in action. It is necessary to relate Christian theory and historical practice, faith and praxis. Some theologians are talking of a theology defined as critical reflection historical praxis. Practice refers to any action that applies a particular theory Praxis is practice associated with a total dynamic of historical vision and social transformation. Through praxis, people enter into their historical destiny. Since praxis, changes the world as well as the actors, it becomes the starting point for a clearer vision of God in history.

(Sergio Torres and John Eagleson, eds. *Theology in the Americas*, New York: Orbis, 1982, p.435.)

This is praxis-theology. I can see someone raising an objection to this. It may appear that in our churches there is no lack of emphasis on experience or practice. Perhaps what we need is a criterion for judging which experience is authentic, and for this we need theory. The argument is valid. By praxis, we do not mean rejection of theory. On the contrary, we need rigorous theoretical reflection but it should emerge from the practice that is oriented to transformation. Otherwise, it will be an artificial construct which lends itself to domination of alien thought patterns.

Praxis is critical reflection on historical as well as contemporary experience. Theological praxis as distinct from theory alone should take seriously all experience in our church and our culture, critically examine them and reinterpret them if necessary. There are liberative humanistic vision and values in the tribal Dalit culture which have become long forgotten. Or we are ashamed of them because of the influence of western rationality and Christianity that came to us through Western oriented doctrines on or life-style and thinking. We need bold and imaginative recovery of these elements for praxis theology that is methodology we need to develop.

The Biblical interpretations should also be shaped by praxis and contextual realities. We need Biblical research into the literary genre of the text and its immediate context. But we need better understanding of the text in terms its praxis for the people in that context. How has the text helped enhanced their vision of God's transforming act? Then there is a horizon meaning to which the text points. Can we arrive at a fusion between that horizon and the horizon of meaning for our liberative praxis? That is the crucial question.

(c) Formation

Theological education is also designed for ministerial formation. Piety and learning are two goals of Serampore College education. Piety is to be understood as a process whereby we internalise the faith -- its vision and values -- which will decisively shape our life-style. Discipline, prayer, worship and contemplation are all part of this. Many aspects of this need to be considered.

I suspect that many of our student's piety before they come to theological studies is shaped by individualistic and other-worldly concerns. When they are exposed to newer challenge in the theological college they tend to react differently. Some even develop a form of double existence -- one good for seminary answer sheets and assignments and the other for pastoral ministry. They do not internalise the newly found enlargement of their faith. They still want to be babes in faith. A conscious attempt is to be made about developing a piety that is responsive to God's liberating and transferring act in our midst.

(d) Commitment

The cornerstone of theological education and the methodology outlined earlier is the commitment of teachers and students to the Gospel. The Gospel in the ultimate sense is a mystery and we cannot exhaust it by our response and interpretation. We commit to this ever deepening mystery in faith. But our response, however imperfect, should have a concrete shape. All along I have maintained that liberative praxis, a justice-oriented action is that concrete form in our situation. We are called to commit to this form of witness with an openness to the newer challenges of the mystery of God's grace.

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