

Theological Education: Treasure in Earthen Vessels

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Introduction:

Serampore College was established by William Carey in 1818. Bishop's College was founded by the first Bishop of Calcutta in 1820. Last year Bishop's College celebrated its one hundred and seventy-fifth anniversary. Many other Theological Seminaries in India have been promoting theological education actively and vigorously. Indian Christian Theology has been in the making for about two hundred years. Pioneer theologians like Krishna Mohun Banerjea advocated Vedic theology, Nehemiah Goreh was engaged in the 'rational' refutation of Hinduism and Brahmabandhab Upadhyaya (Bhavani Charan Banerji) reconceived Christian Theology within the *advaitic* philosophical framework. A.P. Nirmal has been the crusader for Dalit Theology in our own time. There is a rediscovery of the *Lokayata* School of Hinduism. Theological education in India is being redefined or reconceived in the context of our rich and pluralistic religio-cultural milieu and our particular socio-economic-political reality. As we are about to end the second millennium and on the threshold of the third, it is an opportune moment to examine and evaluate this rich treasure which we have built up in the last two hundred years.

Theological Education as a liberating force

It is a treasure in the sense that theological education has been and can be nurtured and nourished to serve the objective

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of liberation. This is being increasingly realised in Black, Dalit, Eco, Women(Feminist), People's(Minjung) and Tribal theologies. Liberation theology of Latin America was categorical and unequivocal about it. They were the early ones to realise that Liberation theology is the liberation of theology discovering the prejudices and presuppositions of all theologies and developing a contextual methodology. *Praxis* became important and necessary for doing Christian theology. The context began to include the *whole* of life and *all* of life. Thus it became inclusive and open. It is made of flesh and blood, heat and dust of reality. Indeed theological education is a treasure contained in earthen vessels. It is earthen in the sense that it is made *by* and *for* human beings who are limited and finite, sinner and sinned against. In this sense theological education becomes tentative and provisional. It is a venture and an adventure. There are risks and opportunities of such an enterprise. It has no once-and-for-all character about it. From this perspective we have to constantly examine and scrutinise our theological education. Has it become irrelevant and meaningless — is it life-affirming and life-giving? Is it liberating?

From this life and liberty perspective it is wrong to think of theological education in terms of doctrines and theories although the latter are important and necessary. We have to understand theological education as a *human happening* with continuities and discontinuities, identifiable by certain fundamental beliefs, ways of work, perspectives and feelings. It is a social exercise with temporal and spatial dimensions. It is open to various modes of study and interpretations. It is for this reason hermeneutics have become important and the principle of suspicion has been introduced. As we begin to question and challenge pre-given formulae and pre-determined doctrines, it is high time to question our own *bona-fide*. As a community of scholars how much or to what extent we are part of the natural community characterised by in-born or built-in prejudices or biases. As scholars are we 'objective', accurate and fair without losing our inter-subjectivity and concomitant sentiments or emotions? How much are we authentically committed to theological education? Do we guard against the very ailments we condemn in our theological

education? Or to put it simply *WHO WILL LIBERATE THE LIBERATORS??* Are we ourselves saved from casteism, regionalism and a desire to monopolise theological education? Are we saved from corruption which is affecting our socio-economic-political reality? A recent survey suggested that India is one of the most corrupt countries in the world. What about us as theological educators? Why are we in this 'business'? To make money? To gain power? We are all caught in this human predicament. We cannot escape it. Reinhold Niebuhr reminded us about this in terms of "moral man(human) and immoral society." Obviously, we cannot eliminate this dilemma completely within time and history. But surely we must be conscious about these natural inclinations or temptations. If not, our theological enterprise loses its credibility — its *raison d'être*. We are not in the 'business' of reducing theology to sociology. Our responsibility is to equip the people with theological-theoretical tools and skills, to discern, understand, assess and seek to change those sociological conditions or conditionings which are sinful, unjust or oppressive in character and content. Theological education is not an attempt to help people to reconcile, cope with, adjust, adapt or adopt to the ways of the world. Indeed we have to take seriously the Biblical caution or warnings (Romans 12:2; John 17:14-16; 3:3; II Cor. 5:17). As theological teachers we have to maintain this tension or 'tautness'. As responsible people engaged in theological education we must be "against the world for the world" simultaneously or concurrently.¹ This is difficult but not impossible. We have to go back to the Kairos Document, The Hartford Appeal and The Chicago Declaration and be clear about our theological affirmations. We ought to be involved in the liberating task cognitively and affectively without promising utopias, knowing fully well the radical contradictions of our time. We must cultivate a "shared cognitive orientation," "a pattern of meanings and values" that will help all of us, the teacher and the student, to overcome or transcend our finite and fallen conditions. This is our liberation.

Our self-understanding as *theological* teachers becomes important. We cannot separate the subjective consciousness and conduct from the objective reality we seek to promote and

vigorously uphold. Such a dichotomy or dualism is the bane of our theological education in India. Even the C.P.I.(M) Politburo in its recent meeting decided to weed out criminals and anti-social elements from the Party and purge it of its corrupt and opportunistic elements. Can we make such a confession ourselves engaged in theological education in India? *Simul justus et peccator* principle of Martin Luther is not a justification to indulge in our own kind of corruption, turning theological education into a self-seeking, power-mongering and money-making venture. We certainly recognise the naturalness of the theological community — the qualities and patterns of life that are definitely continuous with other communities like the family, the nation or even the trade unions. In this sense and from this perspective theological education is political in character and the theological community is a political community in itself.

This is a dimension of our theological education which we do not just tolerate but affirm its necessity and usefulness. The issue of power and authority becomes important in theological education. We need to question the Charter or the Constitution that governs our theological education in India. We have to question our power-structure. Is it authentically democratic, transparent, and accountable to our constituency? We need to develop appropriate political forms in our theological education that would be congenial for promoting life and liberty. At this point we need to look at the actual working of theological institutions in our country. How much or to what extent they are engaged in imparting theological education and to what extent they have become centres of power-mongering? The challenge before us is how to be political without being unduly politicised as theological institutions. We have to develop patterns of relations and action through which theological education is properly determined and social power is exercised. As a human community our theological institutions must determine policy and it must have the necessary social power to act in the light of its decisions. No one should be permitted to exercise power without formal authorization. We ought to guard against unilateral and arbitrary exercise of power which is extra constitutional in

character. This has happened and is happening in our theological education and institutions. We need greater alertness, efficiency and effectiveness, expertise and experience in the political administration of theological education in India. There are no short-cuts or bypass in theological education. It has already suffered in the hands of the uninitiated, inexperienced and 'half-baked' teachers and administrators. We must encourage devolution, decentralisation and diversification of the decision-making processes in theological education. That will be conducive towards liberation of our education system itself. No one individual should arrogate to herself/himself absolute power. T.N. Seshan is the best example of this issue with all his merits and achievements. Ernest Troeltsch had sought for a "sociological standpoint" for the life of the churches about one hundred years ago.² I am sure we can go back to it in for the sake of theological education and its functioning. Later Max Weber pleaded for "routinization of charisma."³ We cannot leave the working (functioning) in the hands of few individuals who may be very vocal and charismatic. We need to work out carefully the institutional form or the organizational structure for theological education to flourish and progress. But the political processes should not become so corrupt that it jeopardises the fruition of theological education. As we affirm theological education as a liberating force we realise that politics(power-making and power-giving) is inevitable. But we need to exercise caution. We need to discern and discriminate between "good politics" and "bad politics". This is a challenging, risk-taking responsibility in and for theological education.

Theological Education as an Empowering Force

For too long our theological education has been domesticating and slavish. It has produced over the years imitators and not initiators with imagination and innovation. It has produced 'pujaris' and not prophets with the capacity to not only foretell but to tell forth or forth tell (nabii) the plights and predicament of the present. Theological education is political in the sense that it empowers or gives power or equips the candidates with

the ability to think for themselves. It must make them independent and self-reliant in thinking and action. From this point of view 'politics' is the enemy of the politics of empowerment.

This empowerment will very much depend on our language, our interpretation and our communication. Indeed the theological community is a community of language and of hermeneutics. There is a crisis of language and interpretation in theological education. Liberalisation in economics has come to mean privatisation or libertarianism and not being liberal and open. It has come to mean old-time rugged, unmitigated individualism and not qualified socialism. Similarly in theology there is a semantic confusion and reductionism. Our language and interpretation has reduced religion to a sentimental, 'spiritual', and asocial exercise. Consequently theology has become individualistic and other-wordly. It has more a psychological value rather than an ethical-liberational-empowering thrust. This has even adversely affected the Bible translations in our time. To the extent a translation and the consequent interpretation is open and inclusive, theological education is liberating and empowering. But to the extent the Bible translation and the concomitant interpretation is exclusive and archaic, theological education remains and renders the recipients slavish, domesticating and dependent. For centuries we have affirmed the life and character of the Church as "One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic." Today we have to reconceive or redefine the Church as "Many, Just, Contextual and People-oriented."⁴ We have to empower people in this way. Thus the theological community maintains its social identity and inner unity through the internalization of meanings represented objectively-subjectively(contextually) in certain documents (creeds, partistic literature etc.), symbols (cross and the lotus etc.) and rites and rituals. It is for us to make them liberating, empowering and thereby meaningful. As a community of language and interpretation this becomes our primary or fundamental responsibility. The theological community is one of the "generalized others" or "reference groups" to which we belong. Our language from the Bible, in the liturgy, in hymns and the people's experience must

condition the meanings and values sustained and promoted in theological education. This language must have continuity as well as discontinuity with other language groups like the sociological or the language of the Hindu or Muslim community. This is done not with the objective of dividing or separating but to affirm our identity as a theological community. As we seek for convergence or consensus, we cannot or should not *reduce* or *confuse* the Bible with the Gita or the Koran. Integrity and intellect demand this. Our identity as a community of theological language is not at the cost of, or to the exclusion of other identities. The Bible cannot be eliminated from our language in theological education but it has to be used critically and creatively to make it meaningful and relevant for our context. This is exactly what the early Church did for their context. This requires coding and decoding, reading and rereading the Bible as Ched Meyers and Feminist scholars have done in recent time.⁵ James Gustafson rightly writes,

The existence of the Bible as an objective linguistic expression of the meanings of the Church, and the continuous communication within the Church through this language, have made possible the social continuity and unity of the Christian community.⁶

If we are engaged in the task of empowering the poor and the powerless we have to develop a theological language that has a sound basis and certain critical criteria. Otherwise our language becomes wishy-washy, naive and simplistic. This in turn demands certain hermeneutical principles that are conducive towards empowerment. The basic principles which we affirm categorically in theological education are freedom, justice, love and human responsibility. These are derived from the character or nature of God. Therefore for us God *per se* is not important but quality of God as testified to in various scriptures and in secular writings. Theological education must be liberating and empowering because we believe that God is continuously and persistently liberating and empowering in spite of or may be because of the slavish and domesticating nature of the human. It is for this reason that in hermeneutics we have to take cognizance of the triadic relationship among what is interpreted, an interpreter and the persons to whom

one is interpreting. Our business is to interpret the Bible, the Church fathers and mothers, certain periods in history, other religions in the light of recent scholarship. The interpreter must be a person of principles and commitment. He or she cannot plead ignorance or pretend to be neutral. We must learn to be objective with a sense of commitment, we are not teaching natural sciences but a social science.

Increasingly there is a realization in theological education that much damage has been done through fragmented, separate interpretations in each branch of theological study. Therefore to undo this damage there is a beginning of a wholistic integrated interpretation. Increasingly we are becoming interdependent and interactive without losing the integrity of each discipline in theological education.

In the process of theological interpretation we are beginning to challenge and question the traditional understanding of theology itself and concomitantly the role and nature of the Bible, Creeds, the Church, the liturgies and such others. In the process we are learning to defreeze or decode and thereby de-absolutise the predetermined concepts or ideas based on assumptions long outdated. From this perspective we have to use different language rather than orthodoxy, heterodoxy and heresy. This is not a state of *anomie* (normlessness) but consequences of latitudinarianism or modernism. This is not only for pedagogical advantage but for fundamental methodological shift. This reinterpretation calls for a deeper search and a wider horizon of meaning. Traditional orthodoxy restricts the scope and character of theological conversation or dialogue and makes it esoteric and elitist. Much of the interpretation that we have inherited in India is missionary-colonial in character and very much anti-nature, anti-women, anti-non-white and very often anti-poor or anti-justice. Today with a new self-consciousness we are able to reinterpret from the perspective of the poor, the women, the tribals and the *dalits*. In India even till recently we were preoccupied with the Brahminic-Sanskritic, non-dalit, non-tribal philosophical framework for our theological education. Indeed this will create some problems and difficulties, some confusion and a lack of clarity or consistency. But we are not

new to these problems. In and through such interpretations we are in a position to equip and empower the *dalits*, the tribals and the women. In the process theologians will evolve a new identity and community based on continuity-discontinuity.

Theological Education as a Unifying Force

Unity in theological education is derived from or determined by its component parts or constituent elements. It is not a barren, mathematical, undifferentiated unity. This unity presupposes diversity and differences. This unity emerges from the inherited denominational, inter-denominational and ecumenical theologies. At one time the ecumenical was identified with the ecclesiastical. Today we have discovered the intrinsic relation among the *oikoumene*, *oikos* and *oikonomos*. We are truly concerned about and aware of the whole inhabited earth. Liberation must lead to reconciliation and unity. Theological education has an integrative function. For a long period of time religions have been disintegrative — Christianity against all other religions, Hinduism against Islam, Protestantism against Roman Catholicism, denomination against denomination. We have lived with this history for a long time and we are victims and not beneficiaries of such a history. It is for us to amend our ways of divisions, repent for not living what we have been teaching in theological education and reconstruct that history in the direction of an ecumenical unity in the fullest sense of the word. Religions of the world have promoted civilizations and cultures, high ideas and ideals. It has been a unifying force in the history of humanity. But it is also true that religions have instigated and encouraged war and violence, fanaticism and fundamentalism, resulting in debility and death. There is a new awareness of this human failure and a new reckoning with reality — socio-economic discriminations and divisions, political powerlessness and religio-cultural arrogance and monopoly. Ideologically we are divided. Rev. Wayland, an American Baptist had declared in 1955,

What nation will be second in the new order of things, is yet to be decided; but the providence of God has already announced, that if true to ourselves, we shall be inevitably first.⁷

Such a triumphalist spirit is still kept alive through the Right-wing groups in the States, Europe and England. People like Ronald Reagan, Margaret Thatcher and Helmut Kohl came to represent such a spirit, suffering from colonial captivity. Today colonialism is more subtle and deadly. Colonialism is not conducive towards the goal of empowerment. It is an attempt to render the poor nations of the world utterly powerless and dependent. Theological education in India cannot and must not have a class, caste or an ideological character as the God whom we affirm is an impartial God. In a country like India our only option is for the poor and the *dalits*, for the tribals and the women — those who have been alienated and marginalised for centuries very often in the name of religion. We cannot suffer from historical amnesia or myopia. In this sense the theological community is a community of memory and understanding.

In theological education we do not worship the past and indulge in idolatry of the past. But we must review and reckon with the past so that our present is properly comprehended and the future is changed. For this reason we look very critically at the Bible, the history of Christianity, the history of other religions and the history of our societies. From this historical study we are able to articulate or formulate our theology. Out of this common memory, a common life comes into being. In this sense theological education can be integrative. Today the Bible, Jesus the Christ, the Church which are part of our memory, are being questioned and challenged. But precisely these provide the inner unity and continuity for theological education. Without these, theological education will become meaningless and irrelevant. Old paradigms and metaphors have served us well. Now it is for us to evolve new paradigms and metaphors so that the past becomes alive and we can anticipate the future meaningfully. We must experience a new reformation - post - Martin Luther, post-modernism.

As a community of memory in India, it is important and necessary for us in theological education to remember and relive our past of Asia, Africa and Latin America. As Third world countries we have to be proud of our double heritage — our religio-cultural past which has to be reinterpreted and used and our colonial-missionary heritage which has to be questioned and prophetically used. We cannot discard them *in toto* or *en masse*. That will give us continuity and unity. The new theology will be born on the anvil of this critical and creative approximation if not appropriation of our double heritage. The traditional doctrines like that of the Trinity and the Eucharist must be redefined and reconceived and then used for our purpose of liberation, empowerment and unification. Similarly, our Church history will give us continuity and unity but in a new or novel way. We will talk about the history of Christianity which is both secular and 'sacred'. History is not chronology but re-creating the story of the life and thought of the community in such a way that it fosters an understanding of its inner life or dynamics. We can project ourselves into that history. The history is inwardly appropriated as in the recent bicentennial celebration of the coming of William Carey. Similarly when we recall and review the one hundred and seventy-five years of the history of Bishop's College.⁸ Those are not past events but living people who contributed enormously to the building up of Indian Christian theology. We cannot forget not because of what they did in the past, but what contributions they can make in the present in the formulation of our own theology. Their methodological importance has to be emphasised in theological education.

Theological community is a historical community with its own identity and centre in Jesus the Christ. We cannot overlook the continuing significance of his life and work for our theological ventures and adventures. The lived experiences of the past that were important enough to be remembered and expressed in a theological language has definitive and decisive significance today. We do not need to indulge in Christomonism or Jesulogy for this theological exercise. The present memory of Jesus as a person is not the admiration of an antique.

Theological education is an attempt to recover, reinterpret and relive in the present his meaningfulness. Jesus the Christ continues to provide a centre for theological thinking and social consensus. We should not think of Jesus in isolation but in interaction with figures and thought-forms available in India. In our unifying efforts in theological education we should be prepared to cross boundaries and overcome barriers which have been traditionally considered insuperable. Continuity, identity and unity in theological education are maintained both by remembering and reliving of the past and by the present power and significance of meanings from the past. The past and present flow into each other. The present with the deep consciousness of plurality of reality, both divine and human, can illumine the past. It is for us to seek for normative unity between the past and present. In this sense there is continuity in unity. Firstly, it is not unity for its own sake and secondly, it is a unity that presupposes many parts or constituent elements which are not opposed to each other. It is for this reason we are discovering greater convergence and consensus than oppositions or contradictions. The apparent dualisms of the past are rediscovered as dialectics or synthesis of today in theological education. We have to learn through unlearning. But certain fundamental differences or divisions will persist because of the differing perceptions of reality, both human and divine. This is our challenge or struggle in our pursuit for liberation, empowerment and unity. As I have stated before,

His (Vivekananda) basic criterion of religion is public morality. Thus the unity he sought was not a naive, cynical, passive, indifferent longing for harmony. It is a pursuit of harmony in the midst of suffering and death, discrimination and debility, injustice and oppression... It is not a unity of good and bad, justice and injustice, the oppressed and the oppressor.⁹

There can be unity of liberation, empowerment and integration. There can be no unity between liberation and domestication, between seeking power for oneself and attempting to empower others. From this perspective theological community is a community of belief and action.

We have covenanted to be together based on a common allegiance and aiming for a common goal. In this sense it is a self-conscious and an intentional community. It is marked by discipline and dedication. Its common core is the Bible, Jesus the Christ and the Church but their understanding varies and they have to be dynamically related to the lived context. Historical Creeds and Confessions are questioned and there is an attempt to formulate new creeds and confessions. But we must remember that belief implies more than intellectual assent. It implies trust, faith, commitment, loyalty and obedience in and to the object of belief. That must make the difference. It must become a community of action for liberation, empowerment and unity. Thus theological education is a process of integration of the cognitive, affective and the behavioural — unity of *gnana*, *bhakti* and *karma*. It is for this reason we talk about *doing* theology. It must be *praxis* or action-oriented. Action is a function of commitment and confirmation of belief. We are informed and impelled by an active, dynamic God whose 'isness' is recognised in his or her dynamic action in history (creating, liberating and re-creating).

Very often action liberates and empowers and in that sense it is unifying. But it is also true that much action domesticates and renders people powerless today. To that extent it is divisive and debilitating. Therefore in theological education it is imperative to study the nature and scope of action. It must not be self-defeating. Action may betray the cause and should not conceal but reveal the true nature of Christian theology.

Conclusion

In this article I have attempted to indicate the normative nature of theological education in terms of liberation, empowerment and unification. But I have also suggested the finite and fragile nature of our enterprise as the Bible, Jesus the Christ and the Church themselves are questioned and challenged. We have lost our original certainty or definiteness of these realities. On the contrary, they have become parts of the *vessels* that we use in theological education. In theological education we are not exclusively obsessed with the 'spiritual'

or 'religious' nature of theology or theological education. But we are beginning to perceive its secular-sociological and natural dimensions. In this sense such an education has continuity with other educational enterprises. This opens up the vista or the horizon of theological education. But ultimately, we need to affirm the distinctiveness or differentia.

Common memory, loyalty and meanings lead us to a common fellowship. We must be willing to learn from each other.¹⁰ A theological community comes into being through interpersonal, inter-subjective communion. We have to affirm this personal, intimate quality of theological education. Thus theological education in India continues to be full-time residential which gives us proximity and intimacy. It becomes an experimental, experiential community, learning the meaning of liberation, empowering and unity through living and learning together. It is for this reason we talk about the Serampore *family* or the Bishop's College family. Both are institutions but with this added, extra or necessary quality that make them distinctive. We are a fellowship sustained by the power and presence of the Holy Spirit. It is a gift and not just a natural outcome of social processes. We should not overlook this bi-polar character of theological education.

We must remember that we are engaged in *theological* education. Therefore it must have a religious meaning and significance. Theological education has to be promoted by a "broken reed" (Is. 36:6) and an "earthen vessel" (II Cor. 4:7). From this perspective we must realise that in theological education we do not use those terms — liberating, empowering and unifying — only as sociological terms but theological. God is liberating, empowering and unifying. That indeed is divine initiative and action. It is divine purpose and goal. Thus the incarnation is an affirmation of God's liberating, empowering and unifying action in history. It is our awesome freedom and responsibility to identify with the incarnation in theological education — making flesh and blood of ideas and ideals, of goals and meanings. Enfleshments have their limitations but more important they are living and vital, relevant and meaningful. Indeed we positively affirm and reaffirm that theological education is a treasure which we have in earthen

vessels. We must celebrate this happening, thank God for it and pick up the gauntlet.

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- 5 Ched Meyers, see also Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza, ed. *Searching the scripture: A feminist Introduction* Vol. 1 (London SCM Press Ltd., 1993)
- 6 James Gustafson, *Treasure in Earthen Vessels: The Church as a Human Community* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1961), p. 52.
- 7 Cited by Sidney Mead in "American Protestantism since the Civil War I. from Denominationalism to Americanism" in *Journal of Religion*, Vol. 36(1956), p. 11. The demolition of the Babri Masjid on Sunday, 6th December 1992 by the BJP-RSS-VHP nexus TS indicative of the upsurge of Hindu nationalism and fundamentalism.
- 8 See Rt. Rev. E.W.Talibuddin, *Transition: A Historical Reflection*: Bishop's College (Calcutta: Bishop's College, 1996)
- 9 Somen Das ed., *Swami Vivekananda and Christianity: Towards Harmony With Justice* (Calcutta: Bishop's College, 1994), pp. 58-59. See also Somen Das, *Dharma of the Twenty-First Century: Theological-Ethical Paradigm shift* (Calcutta: Punthi Pustak 1996). See also Supplement to *The Indian Journal of Theology* on Theological Education, 1968, pp. 1-33.
10. See *Asia Journal of Theology*, Vol. 2, No. 1 April, 1988 on Theological Education; *Indian Journal of Theology*, 1971, Vol. 20, No. 4, pp. 189-197 and Vol. 29, No. 3 & 4, 1980 and *Religion and Society*, Vol. XXXI, No. 3, Sept., 1984; Vol. XXVIII, No. 4, Dec. 1981 and Vol. XXXII, No. 3, Sept. 1985.