

Doing theological education in a poverty and oppressed context: a philippine scen...

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DOING THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION IN A POVERTY AND OPPRESSED CONTEXT:

A PHILIPPINE SCENARIO

In February 2005, the author interviewed 27

theological educators from three different Protestant-Evangelical seminaries in the Philippines regarding the role of theological education in addressing the problem of poverty and oppression. Partial but important conclusions appear in this short article. The first section of this article speaks about the present situation of theological education in the Philippines as perceived by theological educators.

The second section speaks about the necessary recommendation to amend the present conditions. Present Perceived Conditions of Theological Education in the Philippines The perceived purpose of theological education to be contextually relevant does not match up with the disciplines in which their graduates excel. Theological educators believe that theological education exists to serve their churches and their denominations through equipping future church leaders for contextually relevant church ministries.

A few of them also pointed out that one of the purposes is to develop church workers who would become catalysts for social transformation. However, a majority of these theological educators also believed that their graduates excel primarily in the area of Biblical scholarship. Biblical scholarship, according to the understanding of these theological educators, refers to competency in Biblical languages, translation from the original language to English, Biblical exegesis, and systematic theology.

Scholarship is perceived as simply engagement of the Biblical texts, theological literature and reformulation of theological confessions that

adhere to denominational confessions. Consequently, Biblical studies ignore the social realities of the church with which the Bible is supposed to engage. Ministry to the poor and oppressed was rarely perceived as a discipline where their graduates excel. Theological educators pointed to colonialism, among other factors, as the major rationale for the relative lack of attention to poverty and oppression.

Theological educators identified colonialism as the major reason for the relative lack of attention from theological education in the Philippine towards poverty and oppression. Other factors exist but many of them could be attributed to the aftermath of colonialism, such as the dualistic orientation to theology, the lack of models for theological education, and a Western curriculum that tends to favor middle-class Americans. Protestant missions contributed to the cultural and educational expansion which America espoused as its colonial policy in the Philippines.

Theological education wore colonial clothing from the very beginning. Such education miseducated the early Filipino Christians because it modeled theological education from the West which was designed for middle-class white America, dualistic in viewing reality and therefore alien to the contextual reality of the country. [1] To borrow Paulo Freire's word, Filipinos became "objects" or depositories of knowledge crafted in the West instead of becoming "subjects" who would have the ability to critically observe, analyze and make conclusions about things essential to their contextual reality (Freire 2000, 3, 4).

Consequently, theological education disconnected itself from the real life issues of the Filipino people. The presence of colonialism continues to be seen though the power of money coming from the West according to a former dean of a seminary. Despite the commendable efforts of theological educators to raise social consciousness and to equip students to minister to the poor the relative lack of attention to poverty and oppression continues.

Despite the efforts exerted by theological educators to raise social consciousness and to equip students to minister to the poor, they could not help but witness the perpetuation of the relative lack of attention to poverty and oppression. They pointed several reasons. First, the inertia of the colonial mentality contributed largely to such perpetuation according to one professor of a seminary. Colonialism deeply affected the value system of the Filipinos. Their colonial mentality considers all things American to be far superior, and this feeling extends to American theological education.

Second, theological education did not strive to find a model that best educates future Christian workers according to the context of the country. It remains academically and biblically rigid, and composed of curriculum that lacks social sciences in order to develop in their students' adeptness in social analysis. Third, powerful voices in the church opposed addressing poverty and oppression. And lastly, many professors were unwilling to integrate courses about social issues which may jeopardize their disciplines, and there was a lack of training for seminary professors in this area.

Despite the acknowledgement that colonialism and all its aftermaths derailed theological education from addressing poverty and oppression,

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there was no evidence that theological schools have attempted to change the basic educational system. One of the academic deans admitted, “ Basically, the theology that we teach is similar to what is taught in Trinity and in Fuller. ” One of the professors in the discipline of systematic theology from one seminary commented, “ We are just parroting theological issues from the West (SA1 2005).

And two professors from another seminary recognize that their school does not “ indigenize their teaching, theology, and Biblical interpretation” (SC4 2005, SC6 2005). Immersion of students in rural or urban poor areas for a brief time and other educational efforts do not add much to their awareness. It is not surprising that ministry to the poor was mentioned insignificantly as a discipline in which their students excel because Biblical scholarship from the Western model receives a greater educational value than what the contextual reality of the churches requires.

For a short period of time, students are immersed in rural or urban poverty but for most of their educational experience, they immerse themselves in Western theological education. If the present perceived conditions will continue to prevail in theological education in the Philippines, the following implications will ensue: (1) theological education will continue to be contextually irrelevant and therefore the relative lack of attention to poverty and oppression will continue; and (2) theological education will continue to be foreign in its own land.

Recommendations Considering deeply the above-mentioned conclusions and implications, the author recommends the following: (1) define Biblical

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scholarship in a broader dimension; (2) emancipate theological education in the Philippines from colonial influences and mentality; and (3) reflect on the Reign/Kingdom of God as a model for theological education in a context of poverty and oppression like the Philippines.

Define Biblical scholarship in a context beyond academia and toward the contextual realities of the church. Biblical scholarship from the understanding of most theological educators is limited to the academic rigor of Biblical languages, translation, and exegesis of the text, systematic theology, and research. Biblical scholarship should be understood beyond academic interpretation of the Biblical text and literature.

Such scholarship tends to over-specialize formal theological disciplines to the neglect of life application and other important disciplines such as the social sciences. It is devoid of learning about the history of the Filipino people, its culture and values and how to cultivate and use them in training church leaders for Filipino churches. Unaware that their theological education is inherited from Platonic and Augustinian heritage, Filipino church leaders struggle with how to engage the real and contextual issues in their own country.

Consequently, Philippine theological education produces experts in theology but who are unable to synthesize and internalize their doctrinal statements with the concrete and social reality of the churches. Mannheim reminded us that lack of “awareness in social affairs” or “the lack of comprehensive sociological orientation” is one major problem in the academia (Mannheim

1971, 374). [2] Neglecting the social and concrete reality of the churches is a major problem in Biblical scholarship today in the Philippines.

Theological educators should take heed to what others described as scholarship. Linda Cannell in her recently published book, *Theological Education Matters* (2006), quoted from ATS Standard and Ernest Boyer to insist that theological scholarship should “ extend beyond the theological school’s immediate environment to relate it to the wider community of the church, the academy, and the society (Cannell 2006, 289). The ability to integrate the discipline and inquiry beyond the academia to the contextual reality of the people is very important.

Coe likewise suggested this understanding of scholarship for theological education in Two Third World countries when he said, “ The excellence to be sought should be defined in terms of that kind of theological training which leads to a real encounter between the students and the Gospel in terms of his [her] own forms of thought and culture, and to a living dialogue between the church and its environment” (Coe 1973). Biblical scholarship does not cease with exegeting the Text alone but also concerns exegeting the context of the churches.

Theological education should train and equip its students in the social sciences in order for them to have the ability of a legitimate and conscious effort to get closer to the historical truth, to remove mystifications, to understand the forces that influence and determine social, economic, and political life, and to formulate an honest language whereby one can theologize responsibly and obediently in the midst of those particular

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historical realities. Sapsezian 1973, 259) Mannheim argues that “ sociology appeared as a help in understanding the deeper sources of deterioration in our moral and cultural life, caused by the disintegration of tradition and the prevailing social structure” (Mannheim 1971, 373). [3] Emancipate theological education in the Philippines from colonial influences and mentality. This is not a fresh thought by the author.

Lee Wanak had already voiced this need for the Philippine Association of Bible and Theological Schools in 1993, but it seems to have gone unheeded because the recent doctoral research study between 1999-2000 indicates that theological schools in the Philippines remain unemancipated from Western influences (Antone 2004). The findings and conclusion of the author’s doctoral research in 2006 compels him to recommend it once again. Since colonialism is the major cause for lack of relative attention to poverty and oppression in the country, theological education should be emancipated from it.

Brueggemann urged theological education to become an agent of emancipation for the sake of those who have no voices in the society—the poor and oppressed (Brueggeman 1986). Unless theological education itself is emancipated, the task of becoming an agent of emancipation is a daunting task. Due to a colonized mentality, Lee Wanak correctly observed that Filipino Christian workers have considerable difficulty on the “ skills of problem solving, decision making, and leadership” (Wanak 1993, 36).

Citing a certain Albert Bandura (1986), Wanak wrote that such “ inability is largely due to deeply ingrained feelings of inferiority and dependency

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resulting in a corporate sense of learned helplessness” (in Wanak 1993, 37). Oppressed people have generally lost their independence in problem solving and decision making. Colonial education did not develop creativity within the colonized people from their indigenous resources; instead, it developed dependency and paternalism in them.

Some theological educators pointed out that Filipino evangelicals remain inferior to their Western brothers and sisters. A theological educator in one of the prominent seminaries in the country said that Filipinos are “socialized to believe that what the Americans teach is normative and absolute in theology” (SC6 2005). A female educator in another seminary pointed out that Filipinos “have a poor perspective” of themselves. She continued, “They believe that the Americans are better than us. The Filipinos failed to realize that he or she has the ability to theologize.

They failed to see their indigenous capital and that the experience of God cannot be separated from their indigenous experiences” (SB7 2005). An emancipated theological education looks dreadfully at indigenous experiences of the people for the social construction of their reality instead of emphasizing knowledge for the sake of it. Indigenous leadership should be encouraged in theological education. Indigenous leadership will not blossom among the Filipinos if they remain under the influence of colonial mentality.

Problem solving and decision-making are important to effective leadership, but with the persistence of the inability to solve problems and make decisions under colonial mentality, Filipino leadership will remain inferior to their Western counterparts. Another problem about leadership is the “king

on the mountain” syndrome where leaders consider themselves as king over all matters of life (Harris 2003, 1-6). Filipinos most often considered leadership as power and theirs for life. Older leaders cling to their positions because of mistrust of young and blossoming leaders.

Leadership is also equated with power rather than servanthood. Wanak suggested that emancipatory theological education should take the path of “servant leadership” (Wanak 1993, 47). Servant leadership knows how to bring the rich resources from the context and Biblical text. It is, according to John Harris, “stepping down to lead” (Harris 2003, 7-12). The motif of emancipatory theological education rises from two factors: (1) the concept of Jubilee which shaped the language of the Kingdom hope for the poor (Lk 4: 18, 19, cf.

Isa 61: 1, 2; Lev 25: 8-55) and, (2) the Truth which every educational endeavor should pursue. Emancipation derives its essential character from the Truth. There can be no genuine emancipation of any sort based on lies but-only on Truth (John 8: 31-32). The next recommendation provides a theological reason and foundation for doing theological education in a poverty and oppressed context like the Philippines. The Reign/Kingdom of God: A Theological and Educational Paradigm God is central in theological education because he reigns.

His reign exists in a tension between its present (cf. Matt 6: 10, 7: 21, 18: 3, 26: 29; Mk 14: 25; Lk 14: 15; 22: 16-18) and not yet reality (cf. Matt 4: 17, 11: 12, 12: 28; Mk 1: 15, 9: 1; Lk 17: 20-21). George Ladd pointed out that in its present reality we enter into its blessing and enjoy it in part until its total

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consummation when we realize the blessings of the Kingdom in the perfection of their fullness (Ladd 1952, 22, 23). Two attributes of the reign/Kingdom of God such as incarnational and sacramental highlight theological education that is modeled after it.

Incarnational Theological Education Theological education in the reign/Kingdom of God is essentially incarnational since the reign of God is Christological. Incarnation involves unparalleled humility of the God-Son when he emptied himself, dwelled among humankind and obeyed the Father even to the ignominious suffering and death on the cross. The Apostle Paul grasps this incomprehensible Christ-event and its implication to life in Phil 2: 5-9. An incarnational theological education dwells in the midst of the people it seeks to serve.

Dwelling in the midst of the poor and oppressed requires take two actions for theological education. First, theological education should empty itself of the “ besetting dangers of elitism and authoritarianism in both the methods and the goals of its ministry” (Pazmino 1988, 235). Theological education should not be an institution where elitism, authoritarianism and arrogance rule its classrooms. One of the problems in theological education in Two-Thirds World countries is that there is so much theological information but so little education.

It is education in the sense that transforms students to become more fully human as the image of God characterized by obedience as servants and children. In Freire’s words, education is “ an act of knowing and an exercise of freedom, a critical approach to reality” (Freire 1974, 23). But students

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absorb more theological content than how and why they should learn the subject matter they are learning. To make the situation worse, a theological content developed in a context other than the students' context are what the students delve to learn.

One of the theology professors in a seminary in the Manila commented, Most of the theologies that we have now here are imported from the West and therefore are not relevant to the situation. We are just parroting theological issues from the West. We quote Augustine and Calvin, but what is that? (SA1) To aggravate the situation, their learning proficiency is evaluated through their ability to reproduce and defend the same theological beliefs reflecting denominational curriculum or professorial stand. Someday, those who are graded excellent will teach in the same way they were taught.

This process of learning spawns consumerism in theological education. Dwelling in the community of the poor and oppressed creates social consciousness for the learning experience of learners (teachers and students). Schipani observes correctly when he says, “ education for peace and justice is a conversion process, an education of the heart, a spiritual vocation where we are ‘ touched’ by the victims of injustice. . . . ” (Schipani 1997, 36). In the case of theological schools in the Philippines who are already dwelling in the community of the poor and the oppressed, there is no need to move schools to any poor areas in the country.

Both teachers and learners can experience what Makarenko called a “ sense [of] the communal need of a common struggle” if they identify themselves with the community (quoted in Spring 1980, 22). Theological educators

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dwelling in the midst of the marginalized community could easily engage in a purposeful and careful socio-cultural assessment in the community about the nature and dynamics of the prevailing causes of dehumanization and what sustains them. Learners could discern in the light of God's vision and mission the realized concrete socio-historical context of poverty and oppression.

However, theological education in the Philippines in general lacks this experience. Second, dwelling among the poor and oppressed should involve the willingness to learn with the poor and from their context instead of coming to them as experts with ready-made curriculum. Only a curriculum that comes out of social and critical analysis of the context can equip students with the ability to address social issues. Cushing suggested that “the overriding context for theological education for ministry is the pastoral situation of the local and regional church” (Cushing 2000, 1).

Theological education does not exist in a vacuum but co-exists with the church it serves in a given context. Pazmino asserted that, before an educational agenda can be proposed, there must be a critical and careful analysis of cultural context (Pazmino 1997, 163). Theological Education Is Sacramental Theological education in the reign of God is sacramental because it is essentially Christological. Jesus Christ is the “primordial” sacramentum (sacrament) of God (Schillebeeckx 1963, 13). The Latin Vulgate translated the Greek word *mysterion* (mystery) in the epistles as *sacramentum* (Suggit 1993, 666).

The Apostle Paul spoke about the incarnation of Christ as the revealed *mysterion* in the divine will of God (Rom 16: 25-26; Eph 1: 9, 3: 9; Col 1: 26-

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27; 1 Tim 3: 16). Jesus stands at the center of sacramental theology because he stands not only as the mysterrion of God but also the embodiment of the grace of God. Jesus Christ is the materialization of everything God promised in his grace to humankind. Since Christ is the center of sacrament, then, his reign is sacramental. Theological education in the paradigm of the reign of God likewise is necessarily sacramental.

The sacramental character of education transmits the grace of God and brings the reality of God's promise of emancipation to humanity. It allows God to fulfill his promise of emancipation for the poor and oppressed. Emancipation of the poor and oppressed refers to the unshackling of all fetters that dehumanize and marginalize the poor and the oppressed; thereby, restoring their human dignity which the Imago Dei ascribes to it. " True education" according to Paulo Freire " incarnates the permanent search of people together with others for their becoming more fully human in the world in which they exist" (Freire 2000b, 96).

Emancipation emanates through the process of raising social consciousness towards transformation. Social consciousness is the quintessential awakening of moral responsibility in people's life in order for them to become agents for social transformation. The community of faith in Jerusalem shows to us that this social consciousness can transform the whole city for Christ when in one accord they renounced proprietorship of their private properties and shared the proceeds to the needs of the poor (Acts 2: 44, 45).

In this sense, the community of faith itself becomes the sacrament—the means of grace to the people (Davids 1992, pp. 91-104). [4] Through social consciousness, the community can reconstruct their society which is wrecked by evil social structures and which causes poverty and dehumanization. Theological education can help reconstruct a community if it shares the social consciousness of that community and, if its students become morally responsible to integrate social consciousness into their life-time vocation for Christ.

Anton Makarenko reminded us that a morally justified need is for a member of a community to sense the communal need of a common struggle and by certain awareness of his duty toward society (quoted in Spring 1980, 22). It is the duty of theological education to increase learners' consciousness to the level of what Freire called "critical consciousness" to enable them to become agents for social transformation. [5] Jayakumar Christian asserted that people can only become agents of social transformation in the life of the poor if they first of all have experienced transformation (Christian 1999, 23).

Transformation takes place in the inner experience of learners. It is a spiritual transformation. [6] Spirituality is who we are authentically inside—the "belly" from which springs of living water flow (John 7: 38). What has transformed inside will flow naturally outward. Transformation does not happen only in the cognitive domain but must engage the spiritual level as well. [7] It is along this belief that theological education should be incarnational because the dynamics that brings to the imagination and affective domain of the learners are transformative forces.

The socio-cultural dimensions of our beings relates to the intersecting dimension of cultural, structural, political and religious context where we dwell. Sacramental education seeks to transform its students in order for them to become agents for social transformation. Social transformation is vital in the Kingdom's social agenda because: (a) the parables of the mustard seed and the yeast (Matt 13: 31-35) speak about the subversive yet powerful intention of God's reign to transform society; (b) the ethical demand of God from his people to become salt and light in the world (Matt 5: 11, 12); and (c) the sacrament of baptism (Rom 6: 1-4; cf. Cor 5: 17) in which the community of faith testifies to the reality of the newness of life in Jesus Christ. The eschatological vision of the reign of God is to transform the world and to reclaim it under God's reign. The eschaton has already dawned; theological education has an assignment to fulfill—to transform its students and through them to transform the lives of those who suffer in poverty and oppression. Summary This article features only partial but important segment in the conclusion of the research study of the author.

Some of these conclusions are: (1) the perceived purpose of theological education to be contextually relevant does not match up with the disciplines in which the graduates of seminaries excel; (2) theological educators pointed to colonialism, among others, as the major rationale for the relative lack of attention to poverty and oppression; and (3) despite the commendable efforts of theological educators to raise social consciousness and to equip students to minister to the poor, the relative lack of attention to poverty and oppression continues. The above conclusions imply that (1) theological education will continue to be foreign in its own land; (2) theological

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education will continue to be irrelevant and therefore the relative lack of attention to poverty and oppression will continue.

Because of the implication that the relative lack of attention to poverty and oppression will continue, the author recommends the following: (1) define Biblical scholarship beyond the academia and toward the contextual realities of the church; (2) emancipate theological education in the Philippines from colonial influences and mentality; and (3) reflect on the Reign/Kingdom of God as model for theological education in a context of poverty and oppression like the Philippines. Art G. Ordonia, Ph. D. Associate Professor of Educational Ministries

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The author assumed that education is a vital weapon of people striving for economic liberation, political independence, and cultural renaissance.

[2]Mannheim understands this “ awareness” to be “ not mere accumulation of knowledge but, it means both in the life of the individual and in that of the community the readiness to see the whole situation in which one finds oneself, and not only to orientate one’s action on immediate tasks and purposes but to base them in a more comprehensive vision” (Mannheim 1971, 374).

3]For laying down social theory as ground for religious education, see Thomas Groome (1980); Paulo Freire (2000a); Allen J. Moore (1982); and Malcolm F. Warford (1974). [4]If sacrament is to be understood in the knitted relationship of spirit and matter, the community became the tangible sign of invisible and holy sign of grace (David 1992, 103). [5]Critical

consciousness is an influential force that can lead toward transformational

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action, “ to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take actions against the oppressive elements of reality” (Freire, 1970, 19). 6]@NOXYklov»» OaFt?? o{|}? ™ ? ©A? Y G [r E ?? V`ty{€ii? Uuouo? e? e? eae? eUeUeUe? al???? ®|z!—”—”—<„€„|„|„ x„| hR\$hj= Uhu= A h Ahi? h” e? hi? 5? hIn Dorr (1984) asserts that our spirituality is formed by what shapes and moves us. According to him, our embodied spirit is molded partly by our genetic heritage, environment before and after our birth, the results of our own choices; it is move by the center of our being—the heart (p. 20). [7]See Tisdell (2003); Tisdell and Tolliver (2001) for the role of spirituality in adult education.