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Contextualization in Theological Formation in India Today Religious Context

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Contextualization in Theological Formation in India Today: Religious Context

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Introduction

First of all, I am very grateful to the organizers, Institute of Missiology Mission, Aachen, Germany and Institute of Dialogue with Cultures and Religions, Chennai for inviting me to this workshop on the evaluation of the Theological/philosophical Formation: Results and Perspectives. At the outset I would like to make myself clear that, first, I would be talking about my experience of theological formation within the tradition of Catholic theological formation in India. Second, I would limit myself to the religious context of theological formation.

Currently Catholic theological formation is guided by a number of documents of the Universal Church which are religious in nature. The important among them (which directly deal with the formation) are Vatican Council's Decree on Priestly Formation, *Optatam Totius* (Oct 28, 1965), *Sapientia Cristiana* (John Paul II, Apostolic Constitution on Ecclesiastical Universities and Faculties, April 15, 1979), and *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis* (Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education, 1985), *Pastores Dabo Vobis* (John Paul II, Post Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, on the Formation of Priests in the Circumstances of the Present Day, 25 March 1992), *Fides et Ratio* (John Paul II, Encyclical Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Relationship between Faith and Reason, 14 Sept. 1998), and Conferences of Bishops also have drawn up their own programme for priestly formation (for India Conference of the Catholic Bishops of India has drawn up *Charter of Priestly Formation for India*, 2004). Vatican Council II documents, especially *Optatam Totius*, have become the guide and source of all other later documents related to priestly formation within the Catholic Church.

At present theological formation and education is directed by the Sacred Congregation of Catholic Education which is guided, in turn, by the conciliar and papal documents on priestly formation. Its specific aim is to form future priests within the Catholic Church tradition. So, in India Catholic theological formation in seminaries and theological faculties is guided by the above mentioned Church documents and directed by the norms laid down by the Sacred Congregation of Catholic Education.

From the above it is clear that the theological formation in India has inherited the 'Greco-Roman thought' which the Church has gained from her inculturation in the Greco-Roman world (cf. *Fides et Ratio*, no.72) in imparting theological education down the centuries. Vatican Council II brought about a new self-understanding of the Church and its mission in the world. No dimension of Church's life was unaffected by it. As a result the theological formation and education of its people especially future priests also was affected to a great extent. On the one hand, the conciliar documents, clearly spelled out the contents of the theological formation and education (*Optatam Totius* 16), on the other, it recognized and

looked at the religions and cultures of the world with esteem (cf. *Lumen Gentium* 16-17; *Ad Gentes* 9; *Nostra Aetate*), for they also possessed ‘goodness and truth’. Yet in this movement towards the other religions, it is stressed that the ‘Church cannot abandon what she has gained from her inculturation in the world of Greco-Roman thought (cf. *F Ratio* 72). Within this background I would like to offer my reflection on our Indian religious context which the theological formation and education must take note of.

The religious context of theological formation/ education cannot be seen in isolation from the general context of India and her neighbouring countries of Asia and the global context. It is a commonplace to say that Indian context is characterized by ‘a diversity of cultures, a plurality of religions, and massive poverty of the majority of population’¹ but the complexity of the context is not sufficiently taken into account. We have to pay heed to the global context wherein newer forces have emerged, which are deeply affecting the cultures, religions, poor and the marginalized groups. In other words, it is made complex due to the rise of the movements of peoples-centered search for a stronger sense of identities, uncontrolled spread of globalization, the coincidence of religion and violence (religious fundamentalism), secularization of society (this-worldly materialistic immediate experience of fulfillment), degradation of creation, new discoveries in science and technology, pervasiveness of the wireless world, and we can add the rise of aggressive assertion of nationalistic identity in opposition to the neighbouring nation-states, which have brought about immense degradation of the human and non-human life and that of the earth. We need to seek new theological responses to these new human situations and theological formation of people also. Within such global context I shall limit myself to offering some reflections on the religious context of India.

Catholic theological formation and education needs to be placed within the broader Christological perspective of fulfilling Christ’s mission of “go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age” (Mt 28: 19-20). Within this general missiological background, (mission of God initiated by his Son and passed on to the Apostles, and they, in turn, handed on to the Church- all the baptized), *Optatam Totius* 16 presents the content and purpose of theology. On a close study of this article we discover two dimensions of theological pursuit which are religious in nature: first, the challenge of acquiring a thorough understanding of the Christian faith tradition, and second, the overwhelming presence and the impact of other religions among whom the Church experiences herself as a “little flock” (cf. Lk. 12:32). No theological formation and education can take place without taking the above two dimensions of the religious context. I now propose to articulate typical religious context and some new challenges which emerge from it.

In the present scenario of this ‘little flock’ in India we would have probably more candidates for priesthood from the Dalit and Indigenous communities. The life of faith of these communities is deeply shaped by their ‘double-belonging’ to – Christian faith as well as their traditional faith. Their socio-cultural and economic background would be mostly that of middle class. Hence, there is need for new approaches for theological formation/education.

An inculturated and thorough understanding of the Christian faith tradition

In our country and Asia at large, generally speaking, it is understood that theological formation and education is primarily for those who would be future priests and it is available in Greco-Roman thought. It has no use for a person who would not become a priest because it does not lead to being employed in the job-market (a career) and earn a living. This has even affected the clerical students negatively. We see how quite a many clerical students who excel in secular university studies but do not seem to apply themselves completely in the pursuit of a thorough understanding of the Christian faith for their own deepening of faith and those of the other fellow believers whom they are called to shepherd. Sadly their number is unusually large. There are a few who intellectually excel in theological studies in order to ascend to the higher ecclesiastical offices which lead to certain careerism. Nevertheless there are quite a sizable number of persons who give themselves in acquiring a thorough understanding of the Christian faith. This situation calls for evolving a **hermeneutical approach** to theological formation and education, that is, the teacher and the students, all engage in critically reinterpreting their inherited faith as well as their present total context. In this process neither they discard the inherited constitutive faith elements and tradition because they come from outside, nor do they keep carrying the dead weight of enslaving elements of the inherited religion, nor gobbling up postmodern new experiences, and other egocentric and purely homocentric visions of life (religious or secular) which offer only immediate experience of fulfillment. This approach helps a student to become a hermeneutical being, namely, he or she is rooted in his/her constitutive faith tradition as well as ever open to new manifestations of God and his salvific will in the ever changing human and world situation.

This hermeneutical approach implies three initiatives in theological formation/education: **first**, to search for a fresh understanding of the sources of theology, scripture and Tradition, in an inculturated Indian peoples' way of understanding which otherwise is now available in an inherited in Greco-Roman thought. Indigenous liberative nucleus of anti-greed and anti-pride attitude, values and way of life is drowned by Greco-Latin philosophical thoughts.ⁱⁱ This approach would free us from "inculturation-liberation debate" of 1970s and early 1980s along the lines Aloysius Pieris has suggested.ⁱⁱⁱ **Second**, to adopt the non-dualistic manner of understanding and direct the theological formation/ education towards transformation of both clerics and laity into co-responsible subjects of evangelization/transformational ministers because of their baptism so that they could live out their Christian faith as evangelical salt (Mt 5:13), light Mt 5:14-15), leaven (Mt 13:33) and fragrance of Christ (2 Cor 2:14-15) as individuals and as a community. Such an initiative would free ones Christian and ecclesial identity from remaining chained to the practice of going to the church (building) for ritual obligations to experience God. Dichotomy between 'home' and 'church' is overcome. **Third**, to re-discover Indian ecclesial identity as communion of communities, because various cultural groups of people have accepted the Christian faith. Furthermore, this identity must also take seriously the aspect of three ritual churches – the Latin Rite Church, the Syro-Malabar Rite, and the Syro-Malankara Rite. Thus,

the theological formation and education need to take into consideration such a complex reality of the Indian Christian religious traditions.

Multiplicity of religions with their ancient roots in India

Catholic theological formation and education need to take cognizance of the presence of many vibrant religions with their ancient roots in India. Here we need to accept the fact that religion and culture are overlapping dimensions of one salvific destiny. Christianity according to the tradition that came to India with the coming of St. Thomas, one of Twelve disciples, to India. The whole Asian continent is a ‘home of religions’. India and the whole subcontinent’s religious landscape (where the caste structure the dominant religion permeates all walks of life) has worn many a forms during the past centuries along with the changes in socio-economic (Industrialization, capitalist economy, globalization, growth of science and technology) and political life (political independence). As far as the North Indian experience go, states in which the Dalit and Indigenous communities constitute a sizable number of Christians a movement of constructing the religious structures of worship in public places and road sides seems to have increased in recent years. Thereafter, state and court legitimation is sought through agitations in the name of ‘respecting the religious sentiments and belief of people’. It is beyond the scope of this little paper to talk about how every religion faces new life situations and fashions its religious identity among other religions. But the fact is that today **religion has been catapulted in the public domain** causing untold misery, violence and hatred among religious communities instead of equality, justice, peace, love and brotherhood-sisterhood, which the religions profess. Moreover, there is a concerted effort to paint Christianity as an ‘alien’ religion and not an Asian one due to uncritical fundamentalistic interpretation of history and showing other religions as destroyers of national unity, integrity and culture.

Positively speaking, our religious context is marked by scriptural religions and non-scriptural religions. These two streams of religions are called by different names: major religions and folk/indigenous religions. Generally great importance is given to the first category of religious traditions and the second category of religions are ignored because they are considered as mired in this worldly concerns. At this juncture Aloysius Pieris’ insight into Asian/Indian religiousness, namely, it is composed of ‘two complementary elements: a cosmic religion functioning as the foundation, and a metacosmic soteriology constituting the main edifice’^{iv} is helpful. It implies that the metacosmic soteriologies – Hinduism, and Buddhism are ‘never found in abstract “textual” form but always “contextualized” within the worldview of the cosmic religion of a given culture, creating a twofold level of religious experience, each level well integrated into the other.’^v

But today we need to accord an equal importance to the cosmic religions which are found among the tribal/indigenous peoples. They have primal vision of reality – an abiding interrelationship of divine, human and nature (cosmic), all-embracing sense of ‘sin’ and liberation, and utopia (new earth and new heaven’) which could help our understanding of religions. There is a relationship of interdependence in place of dependence and independence (which are non-libertive). Hence, the current theological formation/education

must be sensitive and re-discover the peculiar and complex relationship that exists among the so-called great religions and cosmic religions and bring the latter at the center of theological discourse on religions.^{vi} Such an endeavor cannot but necessarily be interreligious and discover their liberative power against modern human and cosmic problems and creation of all embracing wellbeing.

Second challenge to theological formation/education is increasing incidents of religious conflicts and riots directed against Christian community as well as other minority religions. There is a spate of the birth of organizations which directly or indirectly oppose and assault Christian ministries and community. Furthermore, enacting of anti-conversion bill euphemistically called ‘freedom of religion bill’ in six states of India^{vii} speaks loudly and violently against the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This calls for a new approach to theological formation/education and new response. Asia in general and India in particular are going through certain complex and aggressive way of asserting one’s religious identity. This is not for any genuine search for the deep roots of one’s identity but for one’s irreligious purpose of social, political, and economic hegemony. They are, in fact ‘mammon worshippers’ (people driven by greed and pride) who belong to the dominant religious groups. It is also to be noted that they enlist all the mammon worshippers of other religions in order to achieve their goal. A myth (belief) is created that the people of other religious communities are destroying ‘our’ religion, identity and nation. Other religions are projected as potential threats to one’s religion and identity. After the demolition of Babri Masjid in Ayodhya two processes seems to be vigorously operative in creating such a myth: a) process of inclusion-assimilation and b) process of exclusion-aggression.^{viii} Religion-based riots are the expression of exclusion-aggression process engineered by the strong religious community to preserve its supremacy in the public socio-economic and political domain. This assertion of supremacy can be easily achieved by circulating among its adherents that threat is coming from the other religion(s). In the process greatness of the religion is equated with how aggressive one could be against other religion(s) and use religion for satisfying one’s mammonic greed and pride. Thus, religion’s potential for liberation from all bondages is aborted. This is a great theological challenge in India today. We need to pay attention to the unholy alliance of religion (led by self-projected and self-styled religious gurus and religio-cultural organizations) with the political powers (Government, political parties and leaders), economical powers (rich families and corporate families), and the dominant communities. In the last analysis such an alliance seems to lead to acquiring economic power with the seemingly ‘neutral’ face of politics and economics.

Third challenge, in the face of above religious scenario theological formation may be expressed in the following manner: as a result of the theological formation all the formees are able to collaborate with people of good will from other religious groups; they master not so much some techniques but become people who inspire people to come together and propose a great vision of common good and brother-sisterhood and social skill to realize that vision. Inter-religious collaboration, whatever form it may take, cannot be left to some specialists. To be a person filled with the interreligious spirit and ability to work with the people of various religious groups is no more an option, but a way of being of a person who is theologically

formed. That is, such a person becomes the face of God who desires all peoples to be saved (cf. 1 Tim. 2:4). Such a person would be certainly rooted in his core religious belief while he is at home with people of all religions.

Finally, to my mind, today we need to sit among the tribal/indigenous religions and listen to what they have to say to us (unfortunately certain section of it has not only become arrogant (driven by corporate pride) but also engrossed in an individualistic and greedy pursuit of amassing wealth with the help of non-indigenous groups/organization, political parties by imitating and adopting their irreligious ways) about engaging in the indigenous hermeneusis of ancient lores and indigenous tradition in order to creatively respond to the contemporary reality of fragmentation and dehumanization. At the same time, Christian theology also needs to be sensitive to inseparable dimension of religion and culture as understood in the subcontinent and ‘incarnate’ Christian mystery of salvation in the indigenous theology. In this theological pursuit, the current manner of ‘inculturation’ more inspired by dualistic understanding of religion and culture calls for a serious hermeneutic approach in the face of indignation against the Church for allegedly usurping their symbols.^{ix} In the background of contemporary experience of human and cosmic (nature) degradation tribal/indigenous vision of the rhythmic dance of divine, human and nature in which the human drummers and dancers co-operate with the primordial drummer, God, opens up a new horizon of the emergence of ‘new earth and heaven’ which every religion dreams of and works for it. Theological formation/education needs to articulate how ‘greed and pride’ driven human tries to break that harmonious life-giving abiding dance of divine, human and nature (cosmic) by his/her ‘mis-step’. In this way our theological formation/education is to be conceived in such a way that it enables us to understand critically our religious context (in its liberating as well as enslaving aspect which need to be weeded out) as inseparably interwoven with other religions’ (liberating and enslaving aspects which need to be weeded out also) and socio-cultural, economic and political dimension of human situation. In the light of such understanding of the context Christian theological formation/education is challenged to embark boldly upon the formation of people who are capable of creating a climate for harnessing liberative zeal of all religious traditions in the service of God’s mission, (service of God’s poor) through collaborative socio-political common liberative action.

I believe that theological formation/education presupposes rootedness in one’s faith tradition. It takes seriously the way religion is lived, how it is misused and made ir-religious. For religion (the way it is lived out) can make one a ‘demon-incarnate’ or ‘God-incarnate’. Tribal/indigenous peoples’ religion and their life provides a fresh perspective which is capable of offering a critique of human being (as an individual and as human community) and forms an individual person and the whole human community which are more ‘human-cosmic-divine’ here and now.

ⁱ Peter N.V. Hai, “Reflections on the Future of the FABC’s Theology of the Laity” *East Asian Pastoral Review* 49(1/ 2012), p. 108.

ⁱⁱ Aloysius Pieris, “A Theology of Religion Dictated by the Poor Towards a Recovery of Our “Christian Identity in Asia,” *Third Millennium* 16(2/Apr-Jun 2013), pp. 19-22.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid., Aloysius Pieris proposes, “a paradigm in which religiousness and poverty, each in its liberating as well as enslaving dimensions, would serve as two poles of a tension constituting the dynamics of an Asian theology of liberation.” p. 16

^{iv} Pieris, *An Asian Theology of Liberation*, New York: Orbis Books, 1988, p. 71.

^v Ibid, p. 72.

^{vi} Pieris, “A Theology of Religion ...”, pp. 16-17.

^{vii} The states are: Oddisa (Orissa Freedom of Religion Act 1967), Madhya Pradesh (Madhya Pradesh Dharma Swatantraya Adhiniyam 1968), Arunachal Pradesh (Arunachal Pradesh Freedom Religion Act 1978), Tamil Nadu (Tamilnadu Prohibition of Forcible Conversion of Religion Ordinance (2002), Gujarat (2003) and Himachal Pradesh (2007). These legislative measures are the example of institutionalization of Hindutva. As early as 1967 it became evident that the conversion was not just with forced conversion, but conversion to any religion other than Hinduism and especially Christianity and Islam. These state laws are biased against Christianity and Islam. They are an institutional legitimization of the law passed by the state legislatures.

^{viii} See Francis Gonsalves, *God of Our Soil: Towards Subaltern Trinitarian Theology*, Delhi: ISPCK, 2010, pp. 66-71.

^{ix} Pieris, *An Asian Theology of Liberation*, pp.51-58. In these pages Pieris has made a very pertinent reference to ‘forging of an indigenous ecclesial identity within the soteriological perspectives’ in the wider context of Asia before its too late.