Curriculum Theologiae

Contextualization in Theological Formation

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https://doi.org/10.48604/ct.118

Submitted on: 2013-12-19
Posted on: 2013-12-19
(YYYY-MM-DD)

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CONTEXTUALIZATION IN THEOLOGICAL FORMATION

All theology is contextual. In the first millennium of the Church theology was mostly a commentary on the Scriptures proclaimed at a particular place and time. It is in the early centuries of the second millennium that universities sprouted across Europe, theological chairs were founded and theologians encountered Greek philosophy. Philosophy then was claimed to be the handmaid of theology. But as a matter of fact it became the mistress of theology, structuring it according to its own conceptual and logical categories like the various causes, form and matter, substance and accidents, etc. Theological thought, expressed in rational categories, became unique and valid for all times and places, because reason transcends space, time and individual persons. Spiritual realities were reduced to things, if not material objects. Anything to be real has to be something, a substance. For example, Jesus' real presence in the Eucharist has to be substantial. So one has to speak of transubstantiation. God has to be a substance too, the Supreme Being, the Prime Mover. We can see how a particular philosophical framework, not only structures theological realities, but limits them and seeks to make itself universal. I have nothing against a particular philosophy in a particular spatial and temporal context interpreting spiritual realities in its own terms. But what I object to is claiming universality for it, because it is rational, as if human reason is beyond all conditioning – a myth challenged by post-modernism. It is in such a situation that we have to assert our freedom to reflect on spiritual matters from our own historical and philosophical perspectives. The dethroning of reason and the questioning of its ability to reach out to anything beyond the material world in post-modern philosophy by people like Martin Heidegger, Jacques Derrida, Emmanuel Levinas and Jean-Luc Marion makes our task easier. In the 20th century, Europeans themselves, like Henri de Lubac, Yves Congar, Marie-Dominique Chenu and Karl Rahner, have been moving away from Scholastic theology. Though these were criticized at first, the Second Vatican Council has rehabilitated them. So, we do not need to be apologetic about promoting contextual theology. As the actual Indian context will be explored in the papers to follow, I shall limit my attention to the contours of contextual theology itself.

Theological Reflection: An Interplay of Contexts

When a community of Christian believers reflects on and searches for meaning in their lives with a view to making them better in view of their pilgrimage towards the Kingdom of God, there is an interplay of contexts: the context of their lives, the context of the faith that challenges them to conversion and transformation and the context of the sources of their faith in Bible and Tradition. The focus here is obviously ongoing life that seeks to be transformed. A good understanding of the life-situation and of the light of revelation is necessary. But the understanding is not for its own sake, but in view of life and action. That is why the traditional description of theology as *Faith seeking understanding* seems quite inadequate. In a recent book I have suggested that *Theology is believers searching for an experiential understanding of*

God as relevant to transforming their lives in the world. Theology is first of all not a product – a treatise – but a process, a search conditioned by a life. The protagonists of the search are believers, not faith – especially, not faith as a body of doctrines that needs to be explained and defended. The understanding that the believers seek is not a mere rational, philosophical understanding, but an experiential one, am insight or an intuition. The object that they seek to understand is not faith, but God who speaks to them in various ways and themselves trying to respond to God's invitation and inspiration. Such an understanding is not for its own sake, but in view of action for transformation, precisely because the context is one of a journey – a pilgrimage. The understanding is therefore necessarily oriented to action, to life. It is not simply what is called *orthopraxis*. I think that theology retains a cognitive dimension, though it is experiential, not merely rational and objective. In life, an element of subjectivity is in tension with what may be perceived as objective factors.

Theology as a *Marga*/Way

Theology, understood in this manner, is not mere knowledge, but a way of life. That is why I wonder whether we should speak of *Theosophy* – Wisdom about things divine – rather than of theology, which focuses on the word. Theological formation is not the communication of information about divine realities that are available to us through testimony as compared to scientific knowledge that is accessible to reason. It is rather an initiation to a manner of being and acting. It does not concern the other world beyond this one. Rather it deals with life in this world, illuminated by Reality that transcends it, but towards which it is being drawn. It is a *sadhana* or spirituality – a *marga* or way. Such a vision of theology certainly demands new ways of theological formation, of teaching and learning. Pastoral programmes in theological training are not merely practical applications of spiritual and moral principles learnt in the class room, but integral dimensions of a process in which they shape, not only our minds, but also our hearts and lives. They provide material for our reflection, helping to contextualize it. That is why theological knowledge is not merely intellectual, but experiential. The Pastoral-Theological Cycle developed by practitioners of liberation theology offers us one model of the method of theologizing. It starts with life and its many problems and questions for the believers, because there is an obvious, experienced discord between the ideals of the Kingdom of God and our way of life. Our ideals as well as our way may not be clear. Analysis helps us to sharpen these questions. Correlation of our questions with the sources of our faith is the deeper theological moment, helping us to a mutual interpretation, both of life and the sources, in the light of each other. A certain clarity, as well as conviction, that are born out of such correlation enable us to discern ways of life and action that can lead us to a transformation of our lives and of our world. Newer experience may lead us to fresh questions and the cycle of search continues. Our theological institutes have pastoral theology and various kinds of field work. We have to see how much they are integrated with each other so as to lead us both to intellectual illumination and to transformed way of life, individually and as a community. Life then is the primary context of theological formation. This context is not the source of theology but conditions and

directs it. The real source is the correlation of our faith experience and the sources of our faith, namely the Scriptures and Tradition. But we know now that our faith experience too may be a source of revelation because it offers us the "signs of the time" (*Gaudium et Spes,* 4) that we are called to read in view of discerning the presence and action of the Spirit of God in the world today.

Our Sources as a Context

In this correlation, the sources of our faith, namely Scripture and Tradition, also function as contexts in which we interpret the meaning of our life in the world today. The Scriptures, of course, are a privileged source of God's self-revelation. That revelation does not come to us as dogmatic formulations, but stories of God's interventions in human history. These stories were interpreted, understood and narrated by the scriptural authors in their historical context and we have now to re-interpret them in our context and retell those stories. I think that these sources have undergone two kinds of broadenings in contemporary faith experience. On the one hand, we believe today that the Spirit of God is present and active also in the cultural and religious traditions of other peoples. Bl. John Paul II has affirmed this in so many words in his encyclical *The Mission of the Redeemer.* (No. 28) What God has manifested to them is not irrelevant to us, especially in the perspective of God wanting to bring all things together as evoked by Paul in many of his letters. (cf. Eph 1:3-10, Col 1:15-20, 1 Cor 15:28) It becomes even more relevant to us if these people happen to be our ancestors. The second kind of broadening is the exhortation of the Second Vatican Council in its document on *The Church in the Modern World* to read the 'signs of the time': "At all times the Church carries the responsibility of reading the signs of the time and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel, if it is to carry out its task." (No. 4) There are two points here that have to be carefully noted. The events of the world are not brute facts but signs through which God speaks to us. Secondly, these signs have to be interpreted in the light of the Gospel. So we have to distinguish a primary revelation in the Gospel and a secondary one in the 'sign of the times'. Anyway, we also interpret the Old Testament in the light of the New. This will also apply to God's self-revelation in other religions. WE should remember however that interpretation is not reduction. This broadening of the sources of revelation will lead us to question the usual idea that revelation is over with the death of the last Apostle. But Jesus told his disciples: "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth." (Jn 16:12) I see no reason to limit this promise to the Apostles, because the Spirit is given also to us and continues to be active in the world. Therefore the context of the revelation with which we correlate our life experience is quite wide today.

The self-expression of the faith of the Church is not limited to the Gospels. It has been transmitted to us through twenty centuries of the life of the Church, through many saints and teachers. Many ecumenical councils have tried to spell out the faith in concrete formulations, when it was being misinterpreted by some. These definitions were contextualized by those so-called herecies. It is surprising, however, that, while we feel free to tear apart the scriptural

sources by using various techniques of interpretation, we seem to treat with kid gloves the formulations of dogmas. Often, these set limits beyond which we cannot go rather than spell out positively anything. For example, to say that the Son is generated from the Father simply affirms that he is not created. We do not really know what generation means, except that it is a participation in the divine nature. But then we too can become participants in the divine nature as Peter tells us. (2 Pet 1:4) All this needs interpretation and perhaps re-expression rather than simple repetition. Such reinterpretation will, of course, depend on our cultural and living context. Interpretations influenced by Platonic and Aristotelian philosophical systems are not normative for us. While we need to interpret, we cannot ignore our sources. But at the same time we also have to accept that these sources have been widened. And these sources too can interact among themselves to bring forth a richness that we cannot imagine, but also inevitable questions.

The Symbolic Way of Asia

It is now almost traditional to say that the Asian way of thinking is different from the European one. While the European rational approach is a dichotomous one seeing things in terms of 'either-or', the Asian holistic approach speaks in terms of 'both-and'. The real reason for this is that the Asian way of thinking is deeply symbolic. Sebastian Brock, an expert on St. Ephrem (the Syrian), suggests that, as different from the legal approach of the Latins and the rational approach of the Greeks, the approach of the Syrians to theology and spirituality was symbolic and poetic. This would be largely true of the Indian tradition too. It is not that reason is neglected. But it plays a subordinate role. As Paul Ricoeur said: "The symbol gives rise to thought". Without the symbols, there will be no thought. This is the third kind of context that influences Indian theology. The primary reference of modern Shivism and Vaishnavism in India are its poets. The Bhagavad Gita is a poetic text. Even Sankara wrote devotional poems. The Indian tradition affirmed that all that we can really say about God is not what God is, but what God is not: *neti neti* - not this, not that. Apophatic theologians like Denys the Areopagite said the same. But we try to approach God through images, symbols and poetry which seek to evoke in us an experience of God rather than describe God to us. Unfortunately we are still tied down to Latin legal structures and Greek-Scholastic rational thought patterns. In a recent book I have tried to explore the meaning of Jesus for us through images like the Sage, the Way, the Guru, the Dancer, etc.

In the introduction I briefly referred to the European image of God as a Supreme Being, who is outside of creation as its creator, as a watch-maker in relation to a watch. Some suggest that it is this creationist understanding that has led to secularization. A watch, once it is made, does not need a watch-maker to function. The Indian vision of reality is, on the other hand, *Advaitic*. God and the world, God and the humans, the humans and the world are *not-two*. God is Absolute Reality. The humans and the world are dependent realities, related in being to God, a relation that can be distorted, but not broken even by sin. Organic scriptural images like the Vine and the branches and the humans as the body of Christ illustrate this communion. Raimon Panikkar has pointed out how Jesus, in his own person, is the realization of cosmothendric

communion uniting God, the human and the cosmos. He is the Real that all of us are called to realize in ourselves. On the last day, Jesus will be the fullness of this communion and in Jesus the whole cosmos will be in communion with God, as Jesus promises on the last day of his life: "As you Father are in me and I in you, may they also be in us." (Jn 17:21) Paul saw this as God being "all in all". (1 Cor 15:28) Such an advaitic understanding will radically transform much of our spiritual and sacramental theology which is now based on an interplay of causes and results external to each other, demanding all sorts of mediations. Our vision of salvation will be advaitic divinization rather than redemption through expiation and satisfaction.

Symbols and Pluralism

What is special about images and symbols is that they are pluralistic. A poet multiplies symbols to communicate to us his/her experience of reality. They convey a cumulative meaning that is non-exhaustive, leaving place for other symbols. The symbols communicate, not only meaning, but also an experience. In order to understand a symbol we have to recreate it through our own imagination, drawing from our experience of life in the world. It involves not only the head, but also the heart and the body. It is a holistic experience. Our people have it in their popular devotions. But it is cut off from our theology which remains cerebral and western. A symbolic/poetic theology will be a work of art rather than science. Medieval theology tried very hard to establish itself as a science. Post-modern philosophy has thrown out its scientific pretentions by limiting even reason to an indirect knowledge of the material world.

Conceptual reason can be only univocal. Symbols are necessarily pluralistic. They enrich our experience cumulatively. But unfortunately some adepts of conceptual reason consider all pluralism as relativism. It betrays an ignorance of the symbolic process of knowing. Post-modern thought, denying the possibility of rationally knowing the real, reduces all statements about the real to individual projection. This of course is relativism. But multiple symbols of the real going beyond conceptual rationality are not relativistic, but relational. They are not creations of the subject, but plural images of the real. The symbols participate in the reality in some way. If I speak of love as fire, it indicates that my heart is 'burning'.

There is also another source of pluralism in theology. I have indicated above the broadening of the sources of revelation. God does not reveal to us rational-conceptual formulations concerning God's divine nature. God is revealing Godself in God's actions in history. History is pluralistic humanly and culturally, in space and in time. Therefore God's story of self-manifestation is pluralistic. The symbols that such manifestations give rise to will also be pluralistic. Such pluralism is enriching, unlike a concept which impoverishes by abstracting a universal concept from an already limited sense impression, depriving it of all the characteristics that make it real. Contextual theology, therefore, is necessarily pluralistic. Since it refers to one and same Absolute and Ultimate Reality it will be convergent and enriching. It will be art and poetry rather than a science.

Open to the Future

A historical context is always dynamic. It is a tense moment between the past and the present. It is constantly moving towards the future. St. Paul speaks of God gathering all things (Eph 1:3-10), reconciling all things so that Christ may reach his fullness (Col 1:15-20), so that "God will be all in all" (1 Cor 15:28). Christ proclaimed and inaugurated the Kingdom of God which will reach its fullness as a cosmic community of freedom, fellowship and justice, including creation too. (Rom 8:21) The Word of God has to become incarnate in every part of the world so that the whole cosmos becomes the body of God. (1 Cor 12:12-31) But today we see a world that is fast globalizing. But what we are having is a wrong kind of globalization that is universalizing poverty, inequality and injustice aiming at a uni-polar, monochrome world. So we Christians are facing a tremendous challenge. Any theological reflection anywhere in the world today cannot ignore this factor. Unfortunately a particular tradition speaks of Christ's fullness in the past. In Jesus we have the final word of God. Everything has been achieved in his resurrection. The good news of Jesus has found its perfect and definitive inculturation in Greek culture by the 4th century after Christ. This is normative for all other times and regions. In this perspective, theological reflection will be constantly looking back to a perfect past than to a present in constant movement towards a fullness in the future. The Second Vatican Council did open the windows of the Church and started a period of dialogue and collaboration of the Church with all the peoples of the world, with their cultures and religions. But after 50 years there seems to be a movement to close the windows with a nostalgic look towards the past, centred in Europe. Contextual theology will have to open up the windows again and move out to every corner of the world, using the dynamic of globalization, but confronting its injustices. This is a challenging task. We have to be in the world seeking to transform it into the Kingdom from within. In a fast changing world we have also to be moving fast confronting and handling new challenges without being uprooted. So contextual theology should enable us to be strongly rooted and at the same time be alive to change. Such theology will be dynamic. It cannot be the calm transmission of a readymade system, but a method with resources ready to meet any eventuality. If we are not involved in making history, we will be cast aside by a fast moving world.

If we are interested, not only in personal, but in community and global transformation, this cannot happen without dialogue and collaboration with people of all kinds at all levels, even people who do not seem to feel the need for God. As I have mentioned above, the Second Vatican Council did try to open up the Church for this. As Pope Francis has been pointing it our recently, especially to the clergy, it is not enough to keep our doors open to welcome others; we need to go out through them to the world where people are, starting with the bottom up, that is, with the poor, rather than wait for the people to come to us.

Theological Formation

After these rapid reflections on contextual theology, let me say a word about theological formation. If theology is not a body of knowledge to be communicated, but a way of life into which people have to be initiated, India certainly offers us paradigms that can be considered. In India young people are initiated to deeper theological reflection and transforming spiritual life by the Guru-Sishya system with a personal focus. One learns though living together with the Guru and the other disciples. Though there are moments of common instruction, much is done through personal reading, reflection and meditation. I do not think that a personal formation for transformation is possible without personal contact. To be effective this cannot be a large group in which personal attention and relationship will not be possible. Big numbers is a problem in most of our theological centres. While some necessary lectures can be held in common, people can share life and learning together in small groups with a special mentor/Guru. This involves a tutoring rather than a lecturing system. This means that the mentors are trained and capable of guiding such groups, without being specialists. We may make a distinction between basic theological formation that takes place in such groups and advanced study and research that happens in a more academic setting. People doing advance studies will probably be a smaller number. Even they could have personal guides who will help them to integrate what is being studied. A group system is being tried in many centres. May be it needs to be evaluated and perfected, not only for life, but also for study.

Such a project of theological formation may lead us to revise the philosophical formation that precedes it. To my little knowledge, we have turned out very few real philosophers through our various philosophical schools. We seem to teach them histories of European and Indian philosophies than a real method of philosophizing. If we teach them to look at life in the world, to ask questions, to read and reflect – that is, to philosophize - then they will be better prepared for theological reflection.

Conclusion

As a transition to the following papers on the different contexts of Indian society, may I permit myself a couple of general remarks. Nearly forty years ago (1974) the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences spelt out a triple dialogue of the Gospel with the many poor, the rich cultures and the living religions of Asia as the task of the Church in Asia. The situation has not changed very much. But the special elements in the Indian context that theology has to confront are the discriminations and inequalities of the caste system and the way the women are treated in society. Social inequalities are not peculiar to India. They take various forms in various regions. Women are at a disadvantage everywhere. But the forms that they take here are special and need to be addressed. It is a question of respecting human dignity and freedom. The vision of the Kingdom of God is meaningless if such inequalities continue. Can we say that the success of our contextual theologizing will depend on our ability in freeing the minds and lives of our theologians from such inequalities? That could be a touchstone of the transformation that we seek. That will translate in the Indian context the new commandment of Jesus: "Love one another as I have loved you!" (Jn 15:12)

 https://doi.org/10.48604/ct.118

Secondly, India is the cradle of many world religions. They are the religions of our ancestors. They are not irrelevant to us. Theology in India will necessarily be dialogical. Such a dialogue need not be external, but internal in which the theologians seek to integrate their past heritage with present realities. External dialogue may not be integrative in the same way, but will pose a different kind of challenges. We need to be open to both.

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