



Curriculum Theologiae

How is Theological Formation Done Today Is there an Integration with Other Disciplines

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<https://doi.org/10.48604/ct.122>

Submitted on: 2013-12-19

Posted on: 2013-12-19

(YYYY-MM-DD)

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How is Theological Formation Done Today? Is there an Integration with Other Disciplines?

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I had a good opportunity in the year 2006 to undertake a study on the curricula of Catholic Theological Colleges in the States of Tamilnadu, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra and Kerala. I visited 18 theological centres (seminaries and institutes), held interviews with either principals or deans, and studied the academic handbooks which gave the list of courses taught. I enquired specially into the way the curricula integrated courses on other religions and secular disciplines into theological education. I found that all the colleges taught subjects on other religions and secular disciplines. They invariably taught subjects on ethics and philosophies of the major religious traditions, and of other disciplines like ethics, psychology, sociology, cultural theory, communication theory, political theory, etc. A few colleges inducted the services of experts, even non-Christian scholars, to teach these subjects.

In addition to teaching other disciplines, some colleges took their students for 'immersion programmes' to pastoral fields, where they did empirical studies and learned from the people. These exercises gave an opportunity to open the minds of the students to other methodological avenues of doing theology.

Catholic theological Institutions are only one component of the total field of Christian theological formation in India. Other theological Institutions which come under the educational agencies like Senate of Serampore and Asian Theological Association (along with its kindred associations) take the theological formation in India to further richer experiences; And, the Chairs or Departments of Christian Studies, functioning in secular State and Deemed Universities, give a specific thrust in the area of integration with secular disciplines. The latter ones, especially by their very location in secular Universities, offer good opportunities for integration of theological formation with other disciplines.¹

The efforts of all these Institutions do point to a measure of integration of other disciplines in our theological education. However, the depth and character of this 'integration' have to be gauged by relating it to further levels of theological formation by asking questions like, 'Do researches integrate other disciplines effectively in their methodologies and interpretative schemes in their pursuit of theological knowledge?', 'Do theological publications integrate other disciplines in their writings?', 'Do theological students who grow to be theological teachers integrate the insights of other disciplines in their teaching and writings?', 'Do theological students who grow to be pastors integrate the insights of other disciplines in their pastoral praxis?', etc. A short reflection in this regard is in place here.

Based on my general observation, I would like to undertake this reflection by relating to the five typologies proposed by Richard H. Roberts on the integration of theology to social sciences.²

1) Complete Exclusion of Social Sciences

At one extreme end of the spectrum, we find this method which excludes the integration of other disciplines, especially the social sciences in theological formation for the fear of dilution of theological doctrines and teachings. Those who follow this method do literal reading of scripture,

¹ It would do well to undertake a research on these institutions with regard to the integration of theological formation with other disciplines.

² I am aware that 'social sciences' are not the only component of 'other disciplines'; but, perhaps they are the closely related ones to theological formation in terms of method and content.

dogmas, and traditions. Paradoxically though, they do employ the modernist schemes of social sciences in order to discredit the very role of social sciences in theologising. Such stances, as obviously seen, produce fundamentalisms of various kinds.

Samples of this trend are found in not a few of our theological formation houses, researches, publications and pastoral practices. This fundamentalistic trend emerges, sadly though, especially by way of reacting to our contemporary world characterised by the fear of religious plurality and moral relativism.

2) Capitulation to Social Sciences

This type employs the methods and conclusions of social sciences in their study, research, teaching, ministry, etc, but tend to neglect the theological dimension, especially its normative aspect. The pull of historicism weighs them down, and they end up with historicist tendencies, and deterministic conclusions. They fall victims to unmeaning fragmentation of life, corresponding to the fragmentation of disciplinary fields.

This type of one-sided integration is especially found in the realm of conclusions with which theological teachers, ministers, and writers work. The disciplinary autonomy of social sciences impress upon them heavily, and they fail to examine or question their conclusions theologically. However, this is not to deny the presence of good theologians who interrogate the conclusions of social sciences from the perspective of humanistic and theological ethics.

3) Utilizing social sciences for essentially theological projects

This type tends to co-opt other disciplines into theological methods and visions. Failing to come up with a dialogical approach to other disciplines, this type of integration works with pre-concluded 'theological' themes lack context-sensitivity. Methods of other disciplines are utilized with a modernist bias to 'prove' the validity of theological claims.

The fact that most of the subjects on other religions and secular disciplines are taught by our own theologians, even deonominationally marked ones, point to a certain co-opting tendency on our part. *Our* specialists in *other* disciplines, though some of them are more throughgoing than specialists in other disciplines, may not stand the test of critical enquiry or rise up to the standards of disciplinary specialisation.

4) Theology and Social sciences as co-inherent

This type treats theology and social sciences to be inherent in one another. Theologians, who address themselves to historical contexts, always speak with the aid of other disciplines, and social scientists who relate themselves to contemporary reality work with goals much larger than the positivistic and utilitarian framework. Thus there takes place a co-inhering between theology and social sciences.

Within this type of integration, we find in our colleges at least two sub-types: one, a superficial type, and the other a descriptively interpretative one. In the superficial type, which goes on parallel lines – social sciences are studied parallelly, and their insights are incorporated in an ad-hoc mechanical fashion. On the other hand, in a descriptively interpretative sense, a non-deterministic integration between theological formation and study of social sciences does take place in our centres.

Those who come under the latter type adopt the phenomenological descriptive method in research, teaching and writing. Realising the unfathomable depth of religious experiences, they make a thick description of them, without going into positivistic conclusions.

5) Radical break between theology and social sciences

This type conceives a radical break between theology and social sciences because of the incompatibility between the two. John Milbank's radical orthodoxy, for example, treats the secular theory as heretic and incompatible with theology. Roberts names it as 'quasi-fundamentalist,' which projects itself to be a postmodern variant.

We do find today theologians, pastors, and theological writers, who situate themselves within this intra-textual framework, and shut their doors against other disciplines. They take to unilateral rhetorics of faith, and emerge as professional 'managers of souls'.

During the recent years, we find a retreat in theological institutions from 'going forth into the world'. Seminarians study theology in a quasi-professional fashion, training themselves to be managers of religious affairs. A concern for learning our tradition cannot be faulted. Perhaps, it is an outcome of the ever-growing functional differentiation of spheres / fields of the lifeworld. As specialization increases or intensifies, different fields emerge distinctively. However, it should not end up with making us pure managers of souls, in a fragmentary sense, which defeats the very purpose of theological formation.

In addition to these five typologies, I would like to add one more, which could be a meaningful alternative today:

- 6) Hermeneutical Mutuality of theology and social sciences to nurture the healthy tension between normative sciences and critically interpretive sciences

Today we need to envision an integration of theological formation and other disciplines at a deeper level, which can respond to the demands of autonomy of different disciplines on the one hand, and the need of inter-subjective communication for greater goals of justice, peace, and harmony on the other. This would necessitate an integration beyond exclusion, one-sided inclusion, parallelism, and superficial mechanical integration. It can only be an open-ended hermeneutical mutuality, which keeps nurturing itself through an on-going dialogue, including the critical dialectical negation, between theological formation and other disciplines. This will ensure excellence in our pursuit of knowledge on the one hand, and meaningful contextualisation of theological formation on the other.

It may be noticed that generally, in areas related to Church history, Scriptures and ethics, insights from social sciences are usefully employed. But, in areas of systematic theology, the problem of normativity of theology and the relativistic insights of social sciences seem to clash. Holding on to a healthy tension between them should be our goal.

It may be observed that our theological formation is characterised by aspects of all these typologies. However, there is the danger of extreme form of intra-textual orientation to theological formation looming large today. But, the promise of opening up to other disciplines is also present in our theological formation. The following could be some indications of this promise:

- In the traditional context, we used to get students from mainline denominational Churches to undergo theological formation. Today we get students with multiple backgrounds. We get independent students who have completed engineering, medicine, law, physics, and other secular sciences, and whose continuing search land them in theological formation centres. Thus, there is a visible criss-crossing of disciplinary boundaries among those who participate in theological formation today.
- The Department of Christian Studies at the University of Madras responds to the search of yet another category of students who are mostly non-Christians who take up a diploma course with us on Ethics and Human Resource Management. Those who work in corporate companies, especially the IT world form the major section of these students. The necessity of doing higher studies in areas related to ethics is being felt by these students, and I hope that this necessity will be increasingly felt in the days to come.

- We have a good number of students, who are from independent churches, who wish to undertake studies on Christian scripture or on different subjects of Christianity. These are young students who take up theological studies by way of shaping their future career.
- The kind of research projects undertaken in our Department privilege the method of empirical theology. They undertake empirical studies incorporating the research methods of social sciences (quantitative and qualitative) and explore the world through an overarching theological concern. They begin their enquiry from empirical data gathered through social science research methods, and theologise upon them interpretatively. Needless to say that they integrate other disciplines in their pursuit of knowledge within a theological horizon. These types of studies are to be found in other theological centres as well.
- There is a general orientation among those who undertake researches in our centres to relate their researches to the life-context of the people, especially the subaltern people of our country. In this they are led to explore the insights and methods of other disciplines by way of contributing to social transformation. This intones a very positive note in our theological formation.

These positive notes give us the hope that our theological formation will continue to dialogue with other disciplines even amidst the danger of fundamentalism. It would do well to undertake a detailed research on theological formation as undertaken in all the denominational institutions which will throw more light on the character of the integration with other disciplines.

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