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Impact of Excellence and Relevance in Contextual Theological Formation on the Church and Society

A Pastoral Approach

Prasad Pinto

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Impact of Excellence and Relevance in Contextual Theological Formation on the Church and Society: *A pastoral Approach*

J. Prasad Pinto OFM Cap

The theme of my brief deliberation is ‘How excellence and relevance in contextual theological formation impacts the Church and the wider society’. Before me, some have already discussed the nature of contextual theology and how it is relevant in furthering the realization of the Kingdom of God Jesus had envisioned. Every theological reflection takes place in a particular context in history. It is done to seek answers to life-questions in living realities of people and make faith meaningful and life-giving. The Gospel challenges every life-situation and seeks to transform it, all people, societies and cultures into a new creation, which we call the Kingdom of God. Contextual theology, if sincerely done, cannot but empower the students/formees for the transformation of self and the society.

Arrival of the Christian Faith in India and acceptance of Indian culture: Historically Christian faith came to India in different waves and mainly in Western garb. Together with it Western Ecclesiastical structures, including theological formation of priests and religious were introduced in India. This kind of theological formation was confined primarily to Diocesan and religious seminarians and it was highly institutionalized. India was colonised by the Portuguese, the French and the British for a very long period and since Christianity was linked to colonising powers, who considered themselves superior, even the native Christians came to be branded as ‘foreigners’ in their own mother land. The mode of theological formation in content, method, text books, life-style, methods of prayer, meditation, worship and social involvement in the society remained primarily Western.

As the spirit of nationalism and self determination grew all over the world, especially in the colonized countries, Indian nationalism too picked up momentum. The early pioneers of Indian theology belonged to the period of Indian nationalism and the struggle for political independence. The attempts and methods of most of these pioneers were to experience Christ and God’s Spirit already present among the Indians and in all their traditions and scriptures. They saw a continuity of salvation history begun in the Old Testament times. Most of those Indian theologians were also engaged in dialogue with the religious traditions of our country, Indian Scriptures and classical as well as modern Indian philosophical systems. They tried to translate Christian faith and doctrines as well as Western theology into Indian cultural, philosophical and religious categories, so that they might be understood and received by the Indians. However, they were mostly confined to Brahminic upper caste traditions and classic scriptures of India and inadvertently bypassed the little traditions of the vast majority of the Indians. Recent methods of contextualizing theology by some prominent Indian theologians like Samuel Rayan, Sebastian Kappen, Michael Amaladoss and Wilfred Felix have been to understand and interpret Christian faith in the light of the religious and secular realities of our land. This process of theologizing, which we can call really Indian and genuinely Christian is taking shape. It is still in a process of growth.

Vatican II (1962-65) gave a push to the process of all round inculturation that was already taking place in India. The National Seminar on ‘Church in India Today’ in 1969 at Bangalore gave a much

desired momentum to the process of all round contextualization. The Federation of Asian Bishops' Conference (FABC) founded in 1972 wholeheartedly endorsed the process of inculturation in Asia. In 1974 a national theological seminar considered even "the inspiration of non-Christian Scriptures as a distinct possibility" and suggested their use in liturgy and prayer. And in fact many religious communities and prayer centres started using these Scriptures carefully and selectively. But all that came to a halt in 1975, when the Chairman of the CBCI Commission for Liturgy sent a letter to all Bishops and major superiors forbidding the use of Indian Anaphora and the use of readings from Non-Biblical Scriptures in the liturgy. He did so on the instructions of Cardinal Knox, the Prefect of the Sacred Congregation for Divine Worship. Further, in 1989 the Congregation of Catholic Doctrine, Rome, issued a warning against the spiritual writings of the very popular and well accepted guru Tony D'Mello, who sought to integrate Christian Faith with Asian Spiritual traditions. Then on, Indian theologians began to be watched and controlled in various ways; and the Document *Dominus Jesus* (2000) of Rome attempted to slow down the process of all round inculturation.

Inculturated Intellectual Formation: Any authentic formation implies that a formator accompanies his or her formees in all the aspects of life and activities. Similarly a contextual theological formation implies incarnational involvement of both the formee and the formator in the living realities of the people as Jesus lived with his apostles and as it took place in ancient Indian *guru-sishya* (teacher-student) relationship in the *gurukul* system of education. If such a process takes place in contextual theological formation in India today the result would be that the Indian Church would have leaders, animators and pastors empowered to grasp the living realities, capable of reading the signs of the time, interpret and discern them in a life giving way in order to evolve grassroot programmes in furthering the realization of the Kingdom of God, which is nothing but a human situation, where there is freedom, fellowship, harmony and justice for all. The actual situation today, however, is far from satisfying.

Impact of contextualized theological formation on the Church and society: Excellence and relevance already achieved in contextual theology:

Right from Vatican II, several serious attempts were made to make the Church in India contextualized or inculturated. The first two major attempts were the establishment of the National Biblical, Catechetical and Liturgical Centre (NBCLC) at Bangalore in 1967 under the dynamic leadership of D.S. Amalorpavadass and the second, the organization of the National Seminar on 'Church in India Today' in 1969 at Bangalore. Since then the NBCLC has played a major role in setting in motion intellectual formation in India and the National Seminar on the Church in India Today gave a required endorsement and momentum to the process of intellectual formation. The NBCLC organised several national and regional seminars, conventions, meetings and training programmes on Biblical, Catechetical, Liturgical, Pastoral and Social issues. With these attempts intellectual formation of the people was widely accepted all over the Indian Church. Within a few years several Dioceses established their own pastoral renewal centres on the pattern of the NBCLC. Those who had undergone intellectual formation abroad and in India also established Theological, Biblical, Liturgical, Catechetical, Church Historical, Missiological, Moral theological, Canon law, Indian Christian Spirituality, Ashram Life and other associations. All these associations have done substantial contextual theology and the outcome of several seminars, conventions, studies and

researches have been published and are available in the market for the seekers of intellectual formators.

Some Specific Contributions:

Almost every theological Centre or Association as per its competence has dwelt on i) Renewal of the Christian Faith in India, ii) Contextualized deliberation in the fields of one's specialization and iii) Current Indian realities in reference to human rights, social justice and Church's involvement in them. Here are a few examples:

The NBCLC had organized several seminars, such as The Asian Seminar on Religion and Development in 1973, The Research Seminar on Non-Biblical Scriptures in 1974, Praying Seminar in 1975, The Research Seminar and Pastoral Consultation on Ministries in the Church in 1976, Indian Christian Spirituality in 1981, The Research Seminar on the Indian Church in the Struggle for a New Society in 1981, Popular Devotions in India in 1985, Research Seminar on Sharing Worship – *Communicatio in Sacris* 1988, and God's Word Emerging in India 1990.

The CBCI Commission for Seminaries had organized a national seminar on Seminary Formation at Pune in 1971, International Theological Seminar on Mission: Theology and Dialogue at Nagpur in 1971, All India Consultation on Evangelization at Patna in 1973, Theologizing in India at Pune in 1978, Towards an Indian Theology of Liberation 1986, and has published *the Charter of Priestly Formation* in 1988.

The Indian Theological Association ever since its foundation in 1976, has made serious theological and contextual studies on themes like, Political Theology, Reconciliation, Liberation, Socio-cultural Analysis, Communalism, Religious Pluralism, Role of the Theologians, Inculturation, Church and Society, Future Vision of the Church and Society, Violence and Corruption. The Associations' Statements after every Annual Meeting and Study till 2002 are also published in *Theologizing in Context: Statements of the Indian Theological Association*, (ed. Fr. Jacob Parappally, Dharmaram Publication, Bangalore, 2002). Some of the most recent publications of the Indian Theological Association are: *Hope at the Dawn of a New Centenary* (2000), *What does Jesus Christ Mean? The Meaningfulness of Jesus Christ amid Religious Pluralism* (2001), *Hindutva: An Indian Christian Response* (2002), *Renewed Efforts at Inculturation for an Indian Church* (2002), *Christian Commitment to Nation Building* (2003), *Society and Church: Challenges to Theologizing in India Today* (2004), *Hindu – Catholic, Brahmabandhab Upadhyay's Significance for Indian Christian Theology* (2008; see also ITA Website: www.itanet.in). Ever since Vatican II and the National Seminar on the Church in India Today, more and more students have been doing research on contextual theology and obtaining M.Th. and doctoral degrees either from Indian Centres of theological formation or from Europe. Most of the students of theological formation go through the statements and the books published by the Indian Theological Association and other Associations for their research. It is obvious that the intellectual or theological formation that has been going on all over India is slowly and steadily percolating down to parish and family levels and it is visibly seen in and through various grassroot level programmes, ministries and in active participation of Christians in current issues of the local and national Church.

Impact of Contextualized theology: Some Examples

It is not easy to assess the impact of contextualized theology on the church and society since theologizing contextually is itself an ongoing process and a quest to be relevant and life-giving. The context goes on changing and so is theologizing. Yet we could indicate some broad lines of development and impact.

1. People are becoming conscious that they are the Church: Vatican II had spelled out a new understanding of the Church that it is a human-divine reality. The Church is the people of God. The hierarchy is at its service for the realization of the Kingdom of God. The Church is also the sacrament and servant of the Kingdom of God. This new self understanding of the Church has been further elucidated in innumerable seminars, workshops, publications and periodicals ever since Vatican II. As a result, most of the Christians in India have come to accept that the Church is the people of God and they have developed positive regard for other religions and cultures. The meaning of grace, salvation, conversion, evangelization and liberation has become more and more holistic and in tune with Vatican II teaching. For example many Christians, who today accept the presence of the Spirit of God in other religions and Scriptures, readily co-operate with other churches and participate in inter-religious dialogues and prayer meetings. So also they collaborate with other churches and the NGO's (non-Government organizations) on various issues of justice and human concerns. Evangelization is understood not so much as adding numbers to the visible church-body rather a continuation of God's mission and a service in furthering the Kingdom of God within the society here on earth.

2. Centres of intellectual formation are situated in the living context of people: Many theological formation centres are in the realistic situations of India with chances to know the best and the worst of India, such as Indian religiosity, temples, mosques, churches, gurudwaras, religious celebrations, star hotels, parks, fountains and centres of entertainment, and also slums, and places of exploitation, dacoity, bride-burning, communal tension, slums, filth and hunger, cruelty and compassion – places of contrasts and tensions. These are right places to do theology contextually, provided the students are guided well.

3. Church's Stand on the discriminatory Caste System is made clear: From the time the Christian Faith has been accepted in India, the discriminatory Indian caste system has been accepted knowingly or unknowingly in Christian living in a varying degree. Now as a result of contextual theologizing, the Catholic Bishops Conference of India in its meeting at Tiruchirapalli in 1982 took a firm decision on the elimination of the discrimination against *dalit* Christians. It said: "We state categorically that caste with its consequent effects of discrimination and caste mentality has no place in Christianity. It is in fact a denial of Christianity because it is inhuman. It violates the God-given dignity and equality of the human person. God created man in his own image. Thus human dignity and respect are due to every person and any denial of this is a sin against God and man. It is an outright denial of the Fatherhood of God, which in practice renders meaningless the brotherhood of man." With such contextual theologizing a process of elimination of the caste system has certainly begun though it has been regretfully slow.

4. Human rights and dignity are defended: Mainly because of the overall growing awareness of human dignity and rights, several Christian grassroot liberative movements have emerged all over India to bring about transformation in the society. Many Christians who have gone through the intellectual formation have wholeheartedly either joined or supported such movements. Some of

them are: fisher folk movement, *dalit* movement, Narmada Valley Bachavo Andolan (Save the displaced people of Narmada Valley), environmental Chipko movement (*chipko* means hugging the trees in order to protect them from the feller's axe), domestic workers movement, unorganised workers movement, displaced people's movement and migrant workers movement. So also several social research and analysis centres like Indian Social Institute Delhi, Bangalore and Guwahati, and centres that promote conscientization and grass root movements have come up in several parts of India. They are doing praiseworthy work in matters of justice, human dignity and human rights.

5. Christian Collaboration and Networking among People's Groups has grown: There is now in India a federation of all groups who work for the marginalized and stand for human rights and dignity. It is called NAPM (Notational Alliance of People's Movements), which is a collective alliance of diverse people's movements and organizations and likeminded people that struggle across India against injustice, exploitation and communal, ethnic, caste- and gender-based discriminations. It struggles along with *Dalits*, *Adivasis*, women, fisher communities, minorities and other organized groups to bring about social, political and economic justice based on equality, simple living, and self-reliance. Nearly 300 organizations are members of this Association. Christian participation in this alliance is keenly felt and observed. For example, in Jharkhand, people's movements animated by Jesuit and other Christian activists have effectively blocked a number of Government mega-projects, which would have taken away the land of the poor tribal people. Some of the blocked projects are: a) Netarhat Field Firing Range for the Military routine practice, b) Trdurma dam, c) Aalu pahar dam, d) Koel Karo dam, and e) National Park in Hazaribag district, the hub of Christian community, known as "Lievens Mission".

6. Mass Media is better utilized: In recent years, involvement of the Church in mass communication for the dissemination of life-giving values has grown remarkably. Several Christian Television channels are operative in different parts of India. More and more Christian participation is taking place on national television Channels in debates and discussions, the focus being upholding and defence of human dignity and human rights. Christians have been taking up issues like environmental protection, communal harmony, inter-caste marriages, police brutality, displacement of the poor while allotting their land to multinational companies.

All round development has taken place in various arts like dancing, street-play, music, liturgical and devotional singing and production of musical CD's in every regional language.

7. Legal Aid Cells established: In Indian society the poor find it hard to obtain justice due to ignorance, and expensive and lengthy legal battles in the courts of law. In recent years, the church is awakened to the helpless plight of the poor in obtaining justice through legal systems, especially with regard to land and several human right issues. As a result several religious Congregations and Dioceses have established Legal Aid Cells to empower the poor in obtaining justice.

Some Challenges:

1. By and large contextual theologizing still remains a class room exercise: Since the centres of higher theological formation are structured in Western models, the daily routine, material furnishing, facilities of mass communication and theologising atmosphere are seen to be of the richer class. There is a danger that most of the contextual theologizing might remain confined to the formal class rooms with characteristics of the dominant class of India. Difficulties are also

experienced in shaping a contextual vision of mission in students for a life-long commitment and dedication to serve nearly 65% of the Christian population of *dalit* class and a greater portion of the Indian poor. Nonetheless, serious efforts are made by several religious congregations to live simple community life very close to the living realities of the poorest of India.

2. Over dependence on Western funds still remains unavoidable: For centuries the Western Church has been doing theology for the rest of the world Church, and most of the present professors have been trained in the West. The several centuries' old dependence on the Western Church has created a deep dependence and craving for security among a good number of professors and this insecurity does not allow them to be creatively free in living and theologizing contextually. Those who have lived for years in well established huge institutions certainly have difficulties to live and theologize from small, humble and poorer living places. The speed of contextual theologizing is very slow, because theologizing has to happen within the ecclesial situation that has deep roots in foreign origin and support. The controls from abroad and the academic structures required for international recognition render contextual theologizing overcautious and devoid of creative freedom.

3. Rapid cultural changes of modern times pose new challenges: India is in a process of rapid changes. The effects of globalization, consumerism and free mass media are felt across all sections of the people. Hence theologizing from the side of the majority of people who are poor demands internal transformation by the power of the Spirit Jesus gave us. India has been for centuries traditional, but the modern India is rapidly changing. The Church too is changing. At present there is a search for a deeper identity in the Indian Church by integrating local religious and secular issues of India.

4. Many students are showing openness to the living reality of the vast majority of the people and have begun to read the signs of the time and affirm that God is in the world and in the history of the people, and thereby theologize from the part of the majority of the peoples' living realities. They are also realising the need to be contextual theologians and the need to internalise Christ's vision, and to be human, to be inter-being and inter-religious. They do not hesitate to show concern and interest on the human rather than purely ritual or Sabbatical.

5. Emerging basic two trends: As contextual theology is taking place both at the level of intellectuals and ordinary people, two types of worship have emerged. One is of classic form with classical music and symbols that follows all the norms and rituals decided by the officials, and the other is going beyond that; it is of peasants, *dalits*, youth groups and others engaged in social transformation with singing and dancing, with drums, locally composed songs and local symbols. In recent years hundreds of Christian hymns and songs have been composed almost in every regional language.

6. Need for collaboration with other centres of theological formation: Theological formation centres have realised that they cannot impart theological formation alone without taking inspiration and help from other institutes, research centres, service organizations and non-governmental organizations and liberative movements and environmental groups. A healthy inter-dependence and collaboration in theological formation is growing.

7. Pluralistic contextual theology: Indian situation is pluralistic; hence contextual theologizing has been pluralistic. It is also in a state of flux, though the basic vision of the Gospel is clear. In the midst of change and plurality, certain trends are discernible. By and large three types of groups have emerged. Some groups have quickly understood the meaningfulness of relevance and contextual theologizing and have accepted to grow contextually transforming their former world view with an attitudinal change. But another group of students and people have got further upset with changing forms of Christian thinking and worship and have further closed their mind for anything new. The third group of students and people have just superficially accepted the new terms and concepts but without any substantial attitudinal change towards the world, cultures, religions, worship, exploitation and poverty of the people. They neither feel the need to bring change in religion and worship, nor do they stress on the incarnational involvement in the living realities of the people and the need for social analysis.

8. Christian faith in Civic Space: To live the Christian faith in civic space means interpreting the Gospel for secular society to understand and appreciate and to find Gospel-inspired responses in varied contexts, such as education, political involvement, Church organization, ethics and media. Thus from the very beginning, Indian Christian Missions, animated by theologically trained personnel were specially involved in education and provided it to all irrespective of sex, caste, and religion. Those educated improved their economic status and social standing. Rural-based schools and boarding catered to the weaker sections and offered *Tribals* and *Dalits* opportunities for growth. This in turn has effected gradual transformation in the society. Christian involvement has promoted Kingdom values of equality, justice, human dignity, freedom and harmony. This is also one of the Christian contributions to the democratic set-up of India. In fact today more and more Christians participate in political activities with Kingdom values. As a result many Christians have been serving the nation as governors, chief ministers and ministers, MPs and MLAs, though not all of them have played an edifying role. Yet a vast civic space still seeks to be filled by Christian transformative involvement.

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