



Curriculum Theologiae

Theological Formation Today

Methods, Resources and Tools

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<https://doi.org/10.48604/ct.126>

Submitted on: 2014-01-16

Posted on: 2014-01-16

(YYYY-MM-DD)

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Theological Formation Today: Methods, Resources and Tools

Sr. Dr. Pushpa Joseph

The gift of theology to the church is our ability to be moved forward by our imagination under the power of the Spirit, to envision and re-vision, moving forward, being measured by God for divine purposes, and under the power of the Spirit to make a prophetic judgment on the world “moving forward in imagination, in mode of behavior, and in mode of reasoning...”¹

Theological formation in India is in a state of flux. The changes in Indian society as a result of technological advancements, new sets of values, new understandings of spirituality and life itself are some reasons for the same. In such a society how is theological teaching envisioned. This paper will dwell on the methods of teaching and learning employed and the resources and tools we have for the same.

The Lecture method and its implications for theological education:

Lectures have always been central to teaching in theological education and continue to be both the mainstay of many modules and the focus of student expectations of theological education. They are good for transmitting information from the lecturer to a large number of students simultaneously. This approach is based on the content. It is also good in providing a firm foundation on each subject in theology. The lecture method instills the following in the students:

- **A shared experience and a sense of belonging**
- **A framework / overview of the topic.**
- **Excitement for the subject.**
- **A personal interpretation or research angle.**
- **A personal learning experience captured in notes** (the lecture method is built on a process of *sravana*, *manana*, *nidhidhysana*).
- **New technologies**

Lecture Method: A Critique

Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza's prophetic critique of the models of education is relevant here. Schüssler Fiorenza identifies four prevalent educational models. She names them as the Banking model, the Master-apprentice model, the consumer or smorgasbord model and the therapeutic model.

The banking model is built on a one-sided approach. The main aim of the banking model is to ensure that the student acquires knowledge and stores it in memory. This is by and large a traditional approach to learning. As such it can also be called the factual accumulation and absorption model. In this educational-communicative model, the teacher is the expert. The teacher or author collects and deposits all the available knowledge and facts in the pages of their book or lecture. Readers/students absorb this knowledge by accepting and memorizing it. They repeat it when they want to prove their knowledge about something. The Brazilian

¹ Martin Hardy, *Theology and the Context*, New York: Routledge, 2006. p. 77

educator Paulo Freire called this model the banking model² because it treats knowledge like monetary funds. The teacher owns the assets and deposits knowledge. Students are only passive receptacles of this knowledge. Knowledge can be owned, sold, or stored as capital.

A study conducted in the metropolitan schools of India shows that most students are taught into this model in schools.³ Very often memory tests are conducted in order to note that the student is able to reproduce all that the teacher has taught. In most of our Indian schools and also in Church circles especially among wo/men it is this model that is upheld. Very often I have heard students say, ‘That teacher will give us marks only if we reproduce verbatim what has been taught us in class.’

Husain Poonawala, a student of class XII, from Bishop Cotton Boys School, Bangalore, in his article “Learning not Memorising” makes a scathing critique of the education system in India. He bemoans the fact that education in India has become “a tedious chore, instead of a means for learning.”⁴ This deterioration in the education system is manifested by the rush for tuitions, which is a very common feature of every city in India. Poonawala interestingly describes the everyday schedule of most students in a rather poignant manner.

“Ramu is studying in Class XII. His day is not an easy one. He gets up at 4.30 am in the morning, studies till 7am and then leaves for school by 8am. School hours are long and tiring, and when he finishes, he’s exhausted. He reaches home by 5 pm in the evening and leaves for tuition at 6pm. By the time he comes home, it’s 8pm. He studies till midnight, then goes to sleep. He wakes up the following day, only to resume the same cycle. This happens everyday. For a year, this teenage boy spends his time like this....Most students in class X and XII, go for tuition.”⁵

The system in short does not inculcate in students a mind suited to analytical and critical evaluation. “Many students, who can recite their entire textbook, would be flustered if you asked them to apply certain information to everyday life.”⁶ The frustration of the students at such a system is evident in the statement “We’re so frightened that we can’t even study properly.”⁷

The second model or approach is the master-apprentice approach.⁸ In this model of learning the author/teacher is the expert. The student is the apprentice who learns the methods and skills by imitating the master. The teacher serves as a model for his students. This model thus is emphatic about right methods and techniques.

The master-apprentice model perpetuates the belief that truth can be nailed down if one knows the right method. The teacher is the expert who controls the methods and knows the solutions to questions.⁹ Very often this model when stretched too far prevents the flowering of the student’s creativity. In the Indian context it also makes the student too dependent on the master. This model has also been misused in the Indian context in order to bring about a hegemony of the master as the story of the Guru Drona and the student Ekalavyan reveals.

² Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Wisdom Ways*, Op. Cit., 30.

³ Lekha Purushotham, Unpublished M.A. Thesis titled *Education in India – A Critical Appraisal*, submitted to the University of Calicut in May 1998.

⁴ Husain Poonawala, “Learning not Memorising” in *The New Indian Express*, Vibes, Wednesday, 30 October 2002, 1.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁸ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Wisdom Ways*, Op. Cit., 30.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 30.

The watchwords of the third pedagogical model are variety and ‘pick and choose.’ This learning approach is the consumer model, or smorgasbord approach.¹⁰ Smorgasbord is a Swedish buffet meal at which a great variety of dishes are offered.

In this model readers/students pick and choose what they think is useful. They buy books or subscribe to courses, as they would shop in a departmental store. The goal of this model is *dulce et utile* - utility and entertainment. For instance in some universities every semester begins with a “shopping period” during which students move from class to class like readers move from shelf to shelf in bookstores in order to select the most amusing, the easiest, or the most palatable fare.¹¹

If in the first model the teacher acts as a banker, in the second model the teacher acts as a master, but in the third model the teacher must act both as an expert and as a sales executive who is skilled in advertising his/her wares. Popularity and the numbers it has attracted becomes the yardstick for adjudicating the effectiveness of conferences and workshops or even Bible study groups.¹²

The catchphrase of the fourth model is ‘feel good.’ Schüssler Fiorenza has also dubbed it the therapeutic model.¹³ The fulfillment of the inner self in order to be spiritually edified is the main aim of this model. Books or workshops are selected and evaluated for how they make you feel. However they should not be critical or too demanding but should gratify the spiritual senses of the readers and students. Religious books or events are often judged as to whether they are spiritually edifying or esthetically pleasing. Commenting on the individual orientation of this model Schüssler Fiorenza says,

“Hence, books on all kinds of forms of spirituality abound. Biblical readings must especially address individuals and gratify their spiritual wants and longings. They are to give security and certainty in an ever-changing world and alienating society. Books and courses on how to pray and meditate with the bible are rife and are much preferred over those that seek to foster a critical engagement with it. The bible becomes an oracle for spiritual guidance that helps its readers to accept and submit to the demands of everyday life.”¹⁴

From Pedagogy to Andragogy; From Knowledge to Wisdom

Schüssler Fiorenza’s Wisdom model of learning ‘invites us to move to a different model of reading/learning that is able to integrate the positive aspects of all four of these models without falling victim to their self-alienating and distorting powers.’¹⁵ This model seeks to empower students as critical thinkers and challenge the self-alienating modes of knowledge production and assimilation.

The main aim of a feminist emancipatory, radical democratic model of education is to foster critical thinking and self-esteem that appeal both to reason and to the emotions. The basic assumption of such a model is that knowledge is publicly available to all who can think and that everyone has something to contribute to knowledge. As such the feminist wisdom model of education fosters the critical examination of one’s own presuppositions and of one’s own tradition and social location. In addition it fosters other centeredness and the ability to

¹⁰ Ibid., 31.

¹¹ I have seen this in a university like Harvard. However considering the fact that we Indians are catching on Western models with rapid speed, my strong hunch is that such shopping periods will find its way into the agendas of top colleges and universities in India.

¹² Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Wisdom Ways*, Op. Cit., 31.

¹³ Ibid., 32.

¹⁴ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Wisdom Ways*, Op., Cit., 31.

¹⁵ Ibid., 33.

think in the shoes of someone different from oneself and to see the world from the point of view of an other.

Contextual theology

There are many efforts to develop a contextual method of doing theology. As a significant part of its curriculum institutions assign students to a concrete social context and initiate them into socio-cultural analysis of the Indian situation. This enables the student to get a more competent and comprehensive grasp of the issues that affect the lives of ordinary people. Theological reflection is thus closely related to questions emerging from the context, thereby equipping each student to understand the Christian faith from within the Indian context and in dialogue with India's many religions.

George Soares Prabhu referred to the study of theology as more than an academic activity. He called it a *Brahmajijnasa*. It is a way of life designed to form men and women dedicated to the service of others by letting the inner Divine Light shine through them. Many, though not all, of its students prepare for the priesthood. The personal growth in enlightened religious attitudes of *bhakti* and *jñāna* are central to the aims of the study of theology. The main prerequisite is therefore a deep religious faith and a desire for contact with the Divine. But faith needs to be enlightened by objective and valid knowledge. Yet, neither true *bhakti* nor *jñāna* will be authentic if they do not emerge from a life of commitment to the good of others, without *karma*.

Some people are puzzled by the word theology although it is quite a traditional word. Literally it means the study or understanding of God. It is true that by its transcendence the Divine is beyond the scope of human rational study. There are other roads to contact the Mystery at the root of all existence. Religions have somehow given testimony to it. The study of religions and of other ways in which the concept and the reality of the Divine has impacted in human history forms the specific field of the study of theology. It includes the study of the great Scriptures, and the way in which the respective communities have understood their message. For Christians the Bible is primary but not exclude other Scriptures. There is also the study of religious history of humanity and of our own community and of the many expressions for the Divine found in history.

Theology is necessary if religion wants to avoid the pitfalls of irrationality and narrow fundamentalism. It is important to study our own faiths by using the gifts of reason and understanding, and the sense of the higher values, which nature, or rather God, has given us. Theology is not a rationalization of religion or of faith. Rather it helps faith be truly human, flourish and be fruitful within the complexities of life.

In contextual theologising the understanding of God and of the knowledge of God which our faith has given us takes into account the rich historical culture in which we find ourselves and is articulated in ways that make sense within this context.

The diversity among the students is representative of the diversity in India itself. The students speak various languages and bring their cultural treasures to expression during the yearly festivals that are celebrated. Besides the national festivals of India that are celebrated with appropriate liturgy, other major cultural festivals celebrated in many of the institutions of theology are (a) *Karam*, which is a tribal festival celebrated by the Chotanagpur adivasis (aboriginals), (b) *Onam* a harvest festival celebrated by the people of Kerala in south India, and (c) *Pongal* the harvest festival of Tamil Nadu, south India. At these occasions, through creative use of the media, dance, drama, music and other means, the students highlight the meaning of these feasts, their theological relevance and their impact in the lives of ordinary people. Other cultural activities include an annual cultural programme held in the college and

in Tihar Jail where the students work, as well as occasional skits and debates on themes of theological interest.

Fieldwork is an integral part of the curriculum. Every student is required to opt for and be committed to some form of fieldwork since the faculty considers guided socio-pastoral involvement as an essential dimension of doing contextual theology. Each student is put into direct contact with a specific community, especially the marginalized ones to gain direct experience of the negativities of life and the suffering of the poor. This context then becomes a locus theologicus — a site for a deepening reflection on the Christian faith and other faiths, as well.

Apart from these regular ministries, orientation programs and spiritual guidance in various schools and parishes are also conducted by students for youth. Students are also involved in Social and Media Action Group that creates awareness among the students on issues of injustice, violation of human rights, exploitation of women, decisions that affect the Dalits, tribals and children. They also takes initiative to organize and collaborate with other NGOs and agencies fighting for the rights of the oppressed and marginalized in the form of dharna and protests.

Regular pastoral reflection sessions are intended to integrate theology with the experience of the students in their fieldwork and vice-versa. In this way, the students are trained to cultivate a deeply human and Christian perspective of life that calls for committed response to the signs of the times.

For their pastoral and social ministries the students visit those in prison in hospitals and homes run for the destitute. They organize activities and tuitions for slum, railway stations and children. Some are involved in organizing religious services in parishes and give guidances to spiritual and youth groups (Small Christian communities, Youth catholic associations, etc.). They help also marginal groups into organizing themselves into self-help units: domestic workers from the tribal areas, rickshaw pullers and so on.

Such an approach draws from the cultural resources of dalits, tribals and women, the spiritual resources of the mystical and ashram traditions, from the narratives of pain and creative resistance of both individuals and communities and from religio liberation movements. Case Study Method involves seeking truth in particular cases. Narrative method taps imagination and describes relationships across time and space. This involves an organic or process approach to religious, moral, and theological education. The study of theology then becomes a process, a journey, a pilgrimage in which the pilgrim ascends to greater awareness and experiential knowledge of the truth.