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Theological Education in Asia:

An Indigenous Agenda for Renewal

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One of the characteristics of the modern era is the linking of people everywhere into global networks. With cheaper and safer travel, people cross national boundaries and carry ideas and products to distant markets. An important outcome of this globalisation for Asian theological education is that many Asian scholars go to the West for their graduate studies and return to occupy key faculty positions.¹ While this can bring about a healthy cross-fertilisation of ideas, a blind copy of the western models² of training with a wholesale incorporation of curriculum and philosophy, without thoughtful critique and recognition of contextual differences is disastrous.

This paper critiques this phenomenon and proposes a different agenda for renewal. First, it outlines the consequences of a blind copy of the western models. Second, it discusses specific issues and problems inherent in the western models which Asian theological institutions must be wary of in their enthusiasm to emulate. Third, and the most significant section of this paper, concerns philosophy. Effective renewal is founded upon a cogent indigenous philosophy of theological education based on sound biblical and theological principles. The last section raises some pertinent questions for a more relevant model of training.

Consequences of Uncritical Importation of Western Models

A major weakness of the uncritical acceptance of the western models is that they are irrelevant to Asia's unique and diversified social and cultural contexts. Bong Rin Ro, Asian scholar, provides a sharp critique.

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Western evangelical theological schools emphasise the inerrancy of Scripture and orthodox theology versus liberal and neo-orthodox theologies. But these are not major issues in Asia. Rather, the prevalent areas of concern are poverty, suffering, injustice, communism and non-Christian religions.³

Emilio Nunez, Latin American scholar, believes that a blind copy of the western models will not only result in dependency which can kill initiative and creativity among indigenous efforts, but a curriculum which is not sensitive to contextual needs will produce decontextualised thinkers and theologians.⁴ A brief survey of the past five years of the *Asia Journal of Theology* reveals that apart from some articles on ecumenism, feminism, pluralism, and Islamisation, there is little written about critical Asian issues of communalism and ethnic violence, poverty and suffering, corruption, materialism, urbanisation and modernisation. Asian scholars must develop their theological agenda from the Asian church and her contexts if they want to be true to their theological tasks.

A third consequence of uncritical importation of the western models is that it can be viewed as vestiges of imperialism which the Asian church will do well to discard in the wake of widespread nationalism. In a survey of theological education in Taiwan, Jonathan Chao, President of Christ College in Taipei, laments that one college received all its missionary lecturers from Asbury seminary and sent all its scholars to the same seminary, while another preferred Westminster or Calvin.

Such theological loyalty doubtlessly perpetuates conflicting branches of western theological schools of thought and extends American and European theological battlefields to Taiwan. Is this not theological imperialism? When will our western colonialist friends grant us theological freedom and independence?⁵

Perhaps the greatest blindspot of such a thoughtless copy of the western models is Asia's undue fascination with western gadgets and technology, a mindset largely prepared by Hollywood and Disneyland, and fed by the direction most of the urbanised Third World is moving – toward secularism and rationalism. Paul Stevens, Academic Dean of Regent, asks the daunting question: How is it that, knowing the church in the West is in decline, Third World denominations are so hungry to get this sort of ministerial training that the West offers?⁶

He notes the irony of the situation.

In the history of theological education the ambiguity of the present moment is ironical: a western theological degree is for most aspiring Christian leaders in the developing world a *sine qua non*

at the very moment when those most responsible for that education have never been less sure of the integrity of the enterprise.⁷

Issues and Problems Facing the Western Models

Western theological education is facing a crisis of identity and mission. Many doubt its viability and relevance to the church. Delegates at a 1992 *Gospel and Our Culture* meeting in Chicago drew up a list of concerns facing the future of the North American church, and one quarter of them revealed uneasiness with the current nature of theological education.

A major critique of the western models is Edward Farley in his highly acclaimed, *Theologia: The Fragmentation and Unity of Theological Education* (1983). To him, theological education has become a plurality of disciplines each with its own method. This results in hyper-specialisations with no faculty responsibility for integration and fosters development of area fiefdoms and entrenched political structures resistant to change. Yet, to transcend the old "theological encyclopedia" approach to the "theory-practice encyclopedia" is to turn theological education into mere pragmatics and technology. Farley recommends that we reclaim *theologia* as the "unity, subject matter and end of clergy education."⁸

While I agree with Farley that the goal of theological education is the development of theological understanding, his weakness is that he neglects the larger categories of the ministry and mission of the church.⁹ Moreover, he does not start nor interact with the authority of revelation. Christopher Duraisingh, interim Moderator of the WCC, notes perceptively that Farley's *habitus* model is still mired in a paradigm that is essentially individualistic¹⁰

A second weakness of the western models is the strong church-school dichotomy with its attendant problems of integrating theory with *praxis*. Although historically, theological institutions were products and servants of the church, they now develop a theological agenda independent of the church. The church criticises the seminary for doing theology which is irrelevant to her historical and immediate needs. Christopher Walters-Bugbee notes that it is:

...little wonder, then, that theology has acquired such a sour reputation among the laity of late; held captive so long by academia, it now appears to many entirely superfluous to the common life of faith, an enterprise reserved exclusively for the few hardy souls who find pleasure in battling around words like "phenomenology" over breakfast.¹¹

In Canada, Keith Clifford, notes that seminaries are more concerned with their relationships with the universities, which control government

funding, and the Association of Theological Schools (ATS), which control accreditation.¹² What is often not realised is that the problem of integrating theory and practice cannot be understood without reference to the ecology and environment in which ministerial education occurs. When seminaries covet comparison with universities for status reasons, they become subject to the university's norms. Thus, they unwittingly subscribe to the tenure and promotions criteria which traditionally emphasised research and publication over field work and clinical experience.¹³

Such a change of loyalty has produced discontent even within the confines of the seminary. Michael Griffiths, Professor of Mission at Regent College, scathingly attacks seminaries for teaching as though they are producing scholars, and choose professors solely on their academic standing without regard to ministry criteria. The result is that when students need "street credibility" to make an impact upon evangelism and church growth, they are taught by highly intelligent scholars with "library credibility" who relate better to books than to people in the midst of life.¹⁴

Perhaps the greatest draw back of the church-school dichotomy is that western theological education has taken on an individualistic mentality of her culture rather than working out of the community model in Scripture.¹⁵ Theological training is based on the theory of individual conversion and vocation, unrelated to community. Students are selected and trained apart from their supporting community and then placed in communities which do not know them, may or may not like them, and may or may not find them suitable.

This is diametrically different from the biblical model of commissioned leadership (Acts 6:3; 13:1-3). The sacraments testify to the community nature of the church. Baptism is not so much an individual decision as a public incorporation into community. The Eucharist is not just for private devotions, but a community meal which signifies the sign and bond of unity (I Cor.10:16). Thus, the western individualistic model is not only unbiblical, but unsuitable for the Asian contexts, which highly value family and community.

James Hopewell, Director of the Rollins Centre for Church Ministries at Chandler Seminary, proposed the "congregational paradigm" as the solution to the church-school dichotomy. This is not just contextual field education, or more interaction between seminary and the church, but the adjoining of seminary and church to form a "redemptive community." Ministerial education using the congregational paradigm requires both a knowledge of theology and congregational dynamics, which call for the tools of cultural anthropology and sociology.¹⁶ A critique of Hopewell is

that a focus on exegeting the community and culture reduces theological education into a social science programme which feeds "inner ecclesial" needs at the expense of the missiological mandate of the Church.¹⁷

A third weakness of the western models concerns pedagogy. Western theological institutions have embraced the Greek model of schooling without awareness of its inherent problems. The Greek model stresses the primacy of the intellect, and sees the whole of educational life as integrated by one's cognitive centre. Thus, it is not uncommon to find intense scholarly debates in seminaries about theories of justification without a parallel concern for sanctification or Christian vocation.

Ivan Illich notes that the school as an institution has wrongly equated teaching with learning. He recommends that we adopt a "de-schooled" frame of mind, and consider the school as only one way a society learns. Experience, culture, history and reflection are just as legitimate, if not more effective.¹⁸

Another pedagogical weakness is that western theological education has little understanding of how theory relates to practice. The theory-to-practice, study-followed-by-field-education approach, although widely deemed deficient, still undergirds most of seminary teaching and learning. Students will amass large quantities of notes "for future ministry use." Linda Cannel and Walter Liefeld, professors at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, note perceptively that quantity of information does not equal quality education. Students will learn much more, and develop critical lifelong learning habits if "we taught them to reflect rather than regurgitate."¹⁹

Ward and Rowen used research from the field of professional training and proposed a rail-fence metaphor for integrating cognitive knowledge with field education in theological education.²⁰ My critique is that although they call for a dynamic interaction between theory and experience within a community of reflection, their metaphor is rigid and

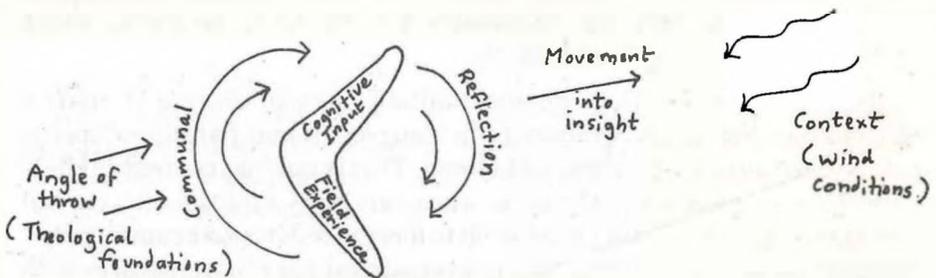


Fig. 1: The Boomerang Metaphor of Integrated Learning

lacks the nails (theological foundations) which hold the whole structure together. A more dynamic metaphor is that of a boomerang.

The twisting of the boomerang (communal reflection), which represents the dynamic interaction between cognitive knowledge and field experience, is essential for movement (insight). A successful launch depends on a correct angle of throw (theological foundations), which takes account of wind conditions (context).

Such a view of learning calls for a new set of teaching skills among seminary professors. Success in class does not so much depend on mastery of content, but quality of classroom climate, group processes, and the needs and intellectual backgrounds of students. The teacher becomes a facilitator rather than an expert, and encourages the community of learners to see themselves as enabling each others' learning through a process of reflection, challenge and problem solving.²¹

Development of an Indigenous Philosophy of Theological Education

Although it is not wrong to borrow ideas from the West, one must undergird one's model with a cogent philosophy of training. It is not enough to make cosmetic changes to a model if it is to be relevant to specific needs. Chao calls for innovation rather than renovation.

A critical and historical analysis of traditional missionary models of ministry exported from the West shows that it is built on the administrative structure which reflects Roman mentality rather than the functional structure of service in the New Testament. ... This kind of rethinking, although by no means new, implies that any attempt to "improve" present forms of theological education is not enough. What we need is not renovation but innovation. The whole philosophy and structure of theological education has to be completely reshaped.²²

A cogent philosophy of theological education comes from a biblical understanding of the Gospel, theology of the Church, mission and the task of theology. Duraisingh notes that the major weakness of the western models is that they neglect the vital aspects of ecclesiology and mission. He calls for the reaffirmation of the apostolate as the singular *raison d'être* of the Church. Mission is not one among many functions of the Church, the Church is a function in God's mission. If the Church is the instrument and expression of the Kingdom (proclamation and embodiment of the gospel), then the goal of theological education is to "form" people in congregations so that they can participate in God's local and global mission.²³

In a similar vein, Orville Nyblade, African scholar, notes that the purpose of theological education, in its most simple form, is to enable Christians to do theology. If the Church is a community of believers who reflect upon the meaning of their faith, and then going out to serve in accordance with the conclusions of their reflections, then theological education should facilitate this theological task. Thus, theological education exists for the purpose of doing theology, and should not be the function of an elite.²⁴

John Stott believes that a biblical doctrine of the Church attests to its dual character of "holy worldliness." The Church is a community called out to worship God (I Peter 2:5,9), and sent back to witness and serve (John 17:18; 20:21). Thus, she is simultaneously "holy" (distinct from the world) and "worldly" (immersed in the life of the world). This dual character of the church lies at the heart of her theological task. For Scott, to do theology is to practice "double-listening," to the Word and to the world.²⁵ In this sense, the church theologises as she critically reflects upon Christian *praxis* in the light of God's word.

In sum, an indigenous philosophy of theological education must undergird any Asian model of training. A cogent philosophy must interact with a biblical understanding of the Gospel, ecclesiology, mission and the task of theology. The purpose of theological education is not training in abstract theological thought for respectable scholarship, but to "form" people in the Church so that they can effectively participate in God's local and global mission. Theological education should enable Christians to do theology. To the extent that Asian theological education

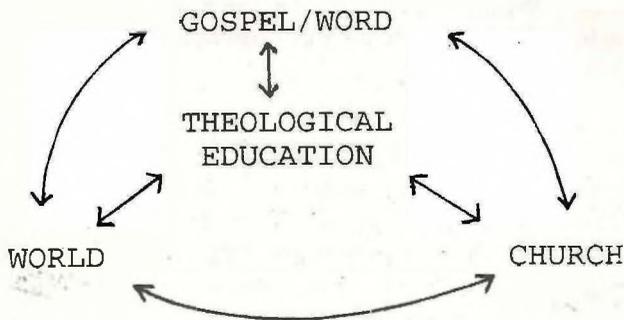


Fig. 2: A Biblical Philosophy of Theological Education. Adapted from Kinsler and Emery eds. *Opting for Change* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library & Geneva: WCC, 1991)

is not equipping Asian churches to critique, inform and transform their contexts and cultures in fulfilment of the *missio Dei*, it has failed its crucial task.

Aspects of a More Relevant Model for Asia

What are some aspects of a more relevant model of training? Nunez proposes three important philosophical questions which every wise theological educator must encounter.²⁶

1. *Who do we want to educate theologically?*

Presently, theological education in Asia is limited to fairly young students who have given themselves to "full-time" ministry. While we should not discourage commitment among our youth, one questions the wisdom of regularly commissioning youthful leaders in a society which values experience and age. Moreover, if the Church is the whole people of God, each member with equal responsibility for the embodiment and proclamation of the kingdom (I Peter 2:9-10), then theological education should be available for all willing learners in the church.

Walter Wright, President of Regent College, on his recent visit to Singapore, Malaysia and Hong Kong, reports that the critical shortage of "full-time" pastors there may question the immediate relevance of Regent's laity emphasis.²⁷ Yet, even if we could train enough full-time pastors, Asian churches will probably not be able to support them all. If we really believe in the "priesthood of all believers," then theological education should effectively equip lay leaders who already shoulder significant leadership responsibilities in the churches. Since it is difficult for Asian leaders to leave their jobs (loss of seniority, even of their jobs), we must find more innovative ways to bring theological education to the market place. In this light, TEE assumes critical relevance.²⁸

2. *For whom and for what do we want to educate them?*

Western theological education has sadly become the prodigal of the Church. This misadventure has resulted in a serious loss of mission and is the root of a whole series of theory-praxis problems. This church-school dichotomy is the greatest setback of western theological education.

Seminaries are products of the Church and they exist for the mission of the Church, just as medical schools exist for the health of a country, and military academies exist for the safety of a nation.

If seminaries exist for the Church, what is the nature of ministry to which we should train our students? Ross Kinsler and James Emory, pioneers of TEE in Guatemala, note that Eph.4:11-16 provides essential guidelines for church ministry which every theological educator will do

well to heed.²⁹ God has distributed various gifts (and ministries) among his people and it is not centred in one ordained pastor (v.11). The primary task of ministers is equipping (enabling, mobilising, training), and they are to equip the body so that they form the primary agents of ministry (v.12a). Ministry goal is body development for world service (vs.12b-13). This is the only effective deterrent against spiritual infancy and false doctrines (v.14). Finally, growth results from the development of individual parts (vs.15-16).

In this light, the Church and her ministry are not only the focus, but the most appropriate context for theological training. Theological education should be intimately related to the discovery and development to spiritual gifts.³⁰ This means that church-based models are more than just a good idea.³¹ Such a locus and focus of training necessitates review of contemporary evaluation criteria which is largely summative and norm-referenced. Since ministerial education includes professional skills development, assessment should be formative and criteria-based.

3. How do we want to educate them?

Asian seminary professors of the Asia Theological Association indicate that "creative teaching" is the least important, and "theological grounding" as the most important factor in the *ICAA Manifesto on Renewal of Evangelical Theological Education*.³² This is sad because educational approaches are foundational to the effective conveyance of Christian truth. If we limit ourselves to the lecture method, we should not be surprised at the ineffectiveness of much of our graduates' ministries in the church. Recent educational theory reveals the critical importance of integrating theory and practice in the context of reflection. If we discard this important insight, we will continue to reap the bitter fruit of ineffectiveness. In this sense, renewal begins with the faculty. Key questions are, "What is our commitment to effective teaching? Do we value research and writing skills more highly than teaching skills? What kind of faculty development programme do we promote? Why?"

Conclusion

The globalisation of the world reveals the glaring truth that the Church is both local and global. Theological education should make use of this rich diversity within the universal Church in her struggle to be faithful. A model limited to local perspectives is parochial, blind to her shortcomings, and ignorant of the insights and wisdom of the wider Church. Yet, an imported model suffers from irrelevance and insensitivity to local needs. This agenda for renewal calls the Asian church to develop an indigenous philosophy of theological education based on a biblical un-

derstanding of the gospel, church, mission and task of theology. Only then will we be wise to differentiate the strength from the weakness of any model, including our own.

Notes

1. Harvie M. Conn, "Theological Education and the Search for Excellence," *Westminster Theological Journal*, Vol.41 No.2, (Spring 1979), 318.
2. Although there are slightly different emphases, the Western models of theological education this author refers to are generally characterised by a clear church-school dichotomy, with the curriculum divided into the four distinct domains of Biblical studies, theology, church history and practical theology. This model has virtually become sacrosanct and is seen in almost every seminary catalogue, from Protestant to Catholic, liberal to conservative.
3. Bong Rin Ro, "Training Asians in Asia: From Dream to Reality," *Evangelical Review of Theology* 14 (January 1990), p.55.
4. Emilio A. Nunez C, "The Problem of Curriculum" in *New Alternatives in Theological Education*, C. Rene Padilla (ed.), (Oxford: Regnum Books, 1988), p.76.
5. Jonathan Chao, *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* Vol.9 No.1 (Fall 1972).
6. R. Paul Stevens, "Marketing the Faith – A Reflection on the Importing and Exporting of Western Theological Education," *Crux* Vol.8 No.2 (June 1992), p.8. Although Stevens refers to African denominations specifically, I take the liberty to include denominations in the Third World generally. See Conn, *op.cit.*, pp.318-320.
7. Stevens, *op.cit.*, p.7.
8. Edward Farley, *Theologia: The Fragmentation and Unity of Theological Education*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), pp.ix-xi.
9. Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza, "Thinking Theologically about Theological Education," *Theological Education* Vol.24, Supplement II (Spring 1988), p.90.
10. Christopher Duraisingh, "Ministerial Formation for Mission: Implications for Theological Education" *International Review of Mission* Vol.81 No.231 (1992), p.39.
11. Christopher Walters-Bugbee, "Across the Great divide: Seminaries and the Local Church," *The Christian Century* Vol.98 (1981), p.1157.
12. N. Keith Clifford, "Universities, Churches and Theological Colleges in English-Speaking Canada: Some Current Sources of Tension," *Studies in Religion / Sciences Religieuses* Vol.19 No.1 (1990), p.3.
13. David Hopkins, "It is true what they say about Theory and Practice," Paper presented at the Conference of the Western Canadian Association for Student Teaching (Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, March 13, 1981). See also Brian V. Hill, "Theological Education: Is it Out of Practice?" *Evangelical Review of Theology* Vol.10, No.2 (April 1986), p.176.
14. Michael Griffiths, "Theological Education need not be Irrelevant", *Vox Evangelica* Vol.20 (1990), pp.11-12.
15. Ted Ward and Samuel F. Rowen, "The Significance of the Extension Seminary" *Evangelical Mission Quarterly* Vol.9 No.1 (Fall 1972), pp.21-22. See also Vincent

- Donovan, *Christianity Rediscovered*, (New York: Orbis Books, 1978/1991), pp.86-90.
16. James Hopewell, "A Congregational Paradigm for Theological Education," *Theological Education* Vol.21 (Autumm 1984), pp.60-70.
 17. Duraisingh, *op.cit.*, p.37.
 18. Ivan Illich, *Deschooling Society*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1970/1971).
 19. Linda M. Cannell and Walter L. Liefeld, "The Contemporary Context of Theological Education: A Consideration of the Multiple Demands of Theological Educators," *Crux* Vol.27 No.4 (December 1991), p.23.
 20. Ward and Rowen, *op.cit.*, pp.23-27.
 21. See C. Roland Christensen, David A. Garvin and Ann Sweet, *Education for Judgment: The Artistry of Discussion Leadership*, (Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 1991). The Harvard Business School has adopted the discussion method for all its courses. This excellent book contains personal reflections of these professors who change from lecturing to the discussion method, which outline helpful foundations to discussion learning.
 22. Jonathan Chao, "Education and Leadership," in *The New Face of Evangelicalism: An International Symposium on the Lausanne Covenant* C. Rene Padilla (ed.), (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1976).
 23. Duraisingh, *op.cit.*, pp.33-34.
 24. Orville Nyblade, "Curriculum Development in Theological Education," *Africa Theological Journal* Vol.20 No.1 (1991), pp.42-43.
 25. John R.W. Stott, "Evangelism through the Local Church," in *One Gospel – Many Clothes*, Chris Wright and Chris Sugden (eds.), (Oxford: Regnum Books and The Evangelical Fellowship in the Anglican Communion), pp. 13-28. Also John Stott, *The Contemporary Christian: Applying God's Word to Today's World*, (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1992), pp.24-29.
 26. Nunez, *p.cit.*, p.73.
 27. *Regent World*, Summer 1992.
 28. See Ted Ward and Samuel Rowen, *op.cit.* Ward and Rowen argue persuasively for the extension seminary based on historical, demographic, theological and pedagogical reasons.
 29. Ross Kinsler and James Emory, *Opting for Change*, (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library & Geneva: WCC, 1991), pp.3,35.
 30. C. Rene Padilla (ed.), *New Alternatives in Theological Education*, (Oxford: Regnum Books, 1988).
 31. Church-based, models of theological education are more than just church-housed. While the latter typically makes residential courses available through extension centres (churches), the former sees ongoing ministry as a crucial part of ministerial training. It provides critical context for the learning and integration of course content. An excellent church-based model is the Conservative Baptist Seminary of the East, P.O. Box 611, Dresher, PA 19025, USA. See Robert W. Ferris, *Renewal in Theological Education: Strategies for Change*, (Wheaton, IL: Billy Graham Center, 1990), pp.119-126.
 32. Ferris, *op.cit.*, p.39.