

Journeying Together into the New Era of Theological Education in Asia: Some Food for Thought on Our Journey

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~~It is interesting to note that both ATESEA (Association for Theological Education in South East Asia) and the CCA (Christian Conference of Asia) celebrate their 50th Anniversaries in 2007. In fact, both ATESEA and CCA share very similar history:~~

- Both organizations emerge out of our Asian countries' colonial past / legacy.
- The constituencies of both organizations (i.e. the churches and the seminaries, respectively) are products of Western mission.
- Both organizations have to deal with Christianity being a "potted plant"—and as ecumenical pioneer D. T. Niles had said, the pot must be broken so the plant can take root in Asian soil.
- Both organizations came out with a strong Asian consciousness—in fact many of their leaders were just as involved in the nationalist struggles of their respective countries, calling for a reclaiming of Christ as Asian and of Christianity as Asian religion.
- Both organizations have to deal with the reality of plurality of ethnicity, cultures, religions and spirituality.

I appreciate the ATESEA planning committee for choosing the theme of this jubilee celebration. "Journeying Together into the New Era of Theological Education" reflects a call to celebration of the past—i.e. the achievements of ATESEA. And indeed there is so much to celebrate—concretized by the unique Critical Asian Principle that has guided the work of ATESEA as well as by the quality and increasing number of graduates from its graduate program.

The theme also reflects the hope that the present leaders have for the journey ahead. Indeed, there are many *challenges on the journey*. In the process we need to listen to the *voices of those on the journey*. It is in this spirit that I would like to offer some *food for thought for the journey* ahead.

Challenges on the Journey

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The challenges that ATESEA faces as an association of theological education include the contextual realities of Asia. These are like roadblocks that we have to be aware of and consciously deal with. After all theological education is supposed to deal with issues of life—not only with issues of the after-life. Jesus the Christ came in order that we might experience the reign of God right now. These contextual realities or roadblocks include the following:

- Globalization and war on terror—along with its resulting forced migration and human trafficking of people and the displacement of communities.
- Rising religious fundamentalism which is true of all religions—which can be seen as a response to a sense of threat or insecurity in the wider community.
- Injustice: this is reflected in the massive poverty of people despite the obvious wealth in natural resources and the widening gap between the rich and the poor; the ongoing political repression of dissenting voices by dictator governments or governments aligned with the countries of imperial tendencies; and the continuing and escalating violation of human dignity especially of women, children, marginalized peoples.
- Natural calamities have rocked a number of countries and communities in Asia—e.g. the tsunami, floods, earthquakes, etc.
- Various epidemics have erupted and are continuing to spread—e.g. HIV/AIDS, bird flu virus, etc.
- The escalating problem of environmental degradation and devastation, along with the resulting symptoms of climate change and global warming.

I am very sure that you can add a lot more to this selected list. And I enjoin you to do that.

Other challenges that face us as we journey on can also be the mechanical or technical problems that our vehicles of theological education (i.e. our seminaries or educational institutions) experience while on the journey. Mechanical or technical problems arise due to many reasons—ageing machinery; inappropriate use of the machine, poor maintenance of the machine, etc. These technical problems are clearly reflected in the kind of model of theological education we currently have, which I believe is either one of the following:

(a) Noah's Ark Model. This model is rooted in the belief that the role of theological education is to prepare the chosen ones who are sure of salvation for the task of saving others from damnation. According to Indian theologian Dhyanchand Carr, in this model, "the church comprises of people plucked out of the evil world which is set for damnation and they need to be kept undefiled and pure to enter their heavenly abode."² Thus, theological education under this model would be preoccupied with keeping ourselves holy while regarding those who are not with us or part of us as the unholy that we must guard against if not strive to convert to our fold.

(b) Great Commission Model. This type of theological education is rooted in the belief

² Dhyanchand Carr, "Innovative Methods in Theological Education," in *CTC Bulletin*, Vol. XIX, No. 3 (December 2003), p. 79.

that the Christian mission is to follow Matthew 28:19-20 faithfully, which means to go far and wide in order to win the whole world to Christ. This model is behind the zealous mission orientation of Asian missionaries today who are now traveling to various parts of Asia and the world, believing that their task is to Christianize the whole world. We all know about the hostage crisis in Afghanistan involving a medical mission team from South Korea sometime in 2007. In spite of strong warning from both the Korean and Afghan governments not to go to Afghanistan, this group of Korean Christians went ahead in the name of medical mission. But due to aggressive mission practices of many so-called Christian missionaries, any kind of mission is now suspected as a cover for the desire to convert, or really proselytize, others into the Christian fold.

These two models are definitely not the most relevant or appropriate for our context in Asia. The Noah's ark model cannot work in our context of religious plurality—where many of the world's living religions came long before Christianity and continue to thrive till today. The Great Commission model is questionable because even the name/label "Great Commission" is not something that Christ himself gave. The gospels are full of many commissioning statements. And when we look at how Jesus the Christ understood and carried out his mission we can tell that it was not so much for his religious community to become big or his religion to expand in order to obliterate other religions. Christ's mission was simply to share God's will for fullness of life for all. We need to affirm the model of Jesus the Christ whose shortest sermon (in his Nazareth Manifesto) reflects the vision, mission and goal of ministry—to be in service to those in need and to proclaim and realize God's will of fullness of life for all.

Some Voices on the Journey

Meanwhile, we also have to listen to the voices on the journey. There are so many voices on our journey. But I have chosen/selected only some representative voices that I heard recently —from students, theologians and religious leaders, and returning scholars. We must consider these voices as gentle questions, signposts if you will, that we must heed. Otherwise our theological education may be continuing but not necessarily relevant or addressing the needs of the people we are trying to reach out to.

(a) From participants in the Asia Conference of Theology Students (ACTS)³ ...

- Why can't our seminary curriculum include Asian contextual theologies, feminist theology, interfaith relations, inculturation, etc.?

- Why can't our seminary encourage the use of other Asian religious scriptures and indigenous elements in worship?

- It would be good if seminaries could increase financial and moral support and send more participants to ecumenical conferences.

³ Taken from recommendations made by participants of the Second Asia Conference of Theological Students (ACTS 2) held in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia in July 2004.

(b) From theologians and religious leaders ...

- How can theological education curriculum move from exclusivism to pluralism when that (i.e. exclusivism) has been the content of our teaching all these years?⁴
- It is difficult to keep adding new subjects to our curriculum when we already have a lot to cover in our own fields.⁵
- It seems that our proposed actions are simply a reaction to certain problems. What can we draw from our religions that will help prevent a problem from happening in the first place? Much of our actions are only in reaction to arising issues of problems. What do we have in our religious resources that will prevent such problems⁶
- Why does ATESEA keep on insisting that we include feminist theology in our curriculum or make sure we have lots of feminist theology materials in our library? This is not relevant for us—we already ordain women.

(c) From returning theology scholars...⁸

- "I had more access to Asian resources when I studied in the US than in my country."
- "I came to appreciate my Asianness and our Asian plurality while studying abroad..."
- "My American professors expected me and other Asian scholars to know our Asian theologies. It was embarrassing that I did not know anything..."

What do the challenges and voices mean for theological education? There is a clear lack in our theological education. Although ATESEA has done so much in terms of campaigning for the Critical Asian Principle (CAP) as the guideline for theological education in Asia, it seems that many of our theological education institutions are still stuck with the old and traditional ways and models of doing things that were imported from outside and oblivious to the contextual realities in Asia. So do these challenges and voices mean there is a need to revise the curriculum—e.g. add more subjects? Do they mean there is a need to assess or evaluate the existing paradigm or model of theological education? Should we just go for cosmetic renovation or genuine efforts at innovation? It is always easy to

⁴ A question raised by a Christian theologian at the Asian Religious Leaders' Conference on Peace in Chiang Mai, Thailand in November 2007.

⁵ Feedback from some theological teachers shared at various occasions.

⁶ Feedback from a Buddhist lay leader during the Asian Religious Leaders' Conference on Peace in Chiang Mai, Thailand in November 2007.

⁷ From a church leader during the accreditation team visit in July 2007.

⁸ From a sharing of returning scholars at the Ecumenical Leadership Development Training held in Bangkok, Thailand on 22-25 November 2007.

go for renovation. But it is more important and more urgent to go for innovation. What is needed is new wine in new wineskin.

Western Critique of the Contemporary Paradigm

It is obvious that many of our seminaries or theological education institutions are stuck with the ways and models that were brought to us long ago through the early missionaries, or which are continued today with much zeal. So it would be helpful if we also listen to what is going on in our older "sister" seminaries from the West. Interestingly, many of our older sister seminaries in the West are already doing their own critique of the contemporary paradigm in theological education.⁹

Their critique included a revisit of the humble history of the seminary and how it evolved from informal "parsonage seminaries" to formalized in-residence theological institutions. The earlier form of parsonage seminaries was like log colleges which required college or equivalent education and then followed by divinity study under the tutelage of a minister. The prospective ministers supported themselves by tutoring or teaching in college. It is obvious that the parsonage seminary was church-based in the sense that a practicing minister mentored the students through their studies.

Later on, the parsonage seminary was replaced with the formalized seminary. As students grew in number, more needs must have been felt and hence the change. The formalized seminaries required in-residence training as preparation for future service. These formalized seminaries were believed to:

- Give sufficient length of time to study;
- Provide access to a good library;
- Promote ability to specialize in an area of study;
- Allow greater devotion of all available time for study and teaching;
- Allow students to profit from other ministerial candidates, forming friendships that could promote harmony in the church; and
- Promote the unity and one-mindedness in the church by having ministerial students taught sound doctrine in one institution.

This change from informal parsonage seminaries to formalized in-resident theological institutions marked a shift not only in form but also the nature of theological education: from laying the foundation for lifelong pursuit of wisdom to focus on intense mastery of academic disciplines for professional ministerial service. The marks of the contemporary paradigm are:

⁹ Jeff Reed, "Church-Based Theological Education: Creating a New Paradigm", a paper presented to the North American Professors of Christian Education (October 17, 1992). It can be accessed online.

¹⁰ It is important to remember that Friedrich Schleiermacher came up with this structure as part of his attempt to make a strong case for including theology in the founding of the University of Berlin in 1810, purposively a research-based and professional education university. See David Kelsey, *Between Athens and Berlin: The Theological Education Debate* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1993).

- Residential education is accepted standard.
- Schleiermacher's three-fold curricular structure¹⁰ became the framework of the seminary curriculum: (a) historical studies, including the Bible; (b) interpretation of Christianity, including theological, sociological and psychological interpretations; and (c) work of Christianity in the present.
- Intense mastery of academic disciplines became the goal, replacing the laying of the foundation for the lifelong pursuit of wisdom.
- Pastors as mentors were replaced by professors and scholars.
- The degree system became the accepted standard of measuring preparedness for ministry.

For more than two or three decades now, Western theological institutions have been revisiting or evaluating the contemporary paradigm. They have realized the need for shifts due to the following reasons :¹¹

- Enormous cost of doing theological education in Western institutional seminaries.
- Graduates of formal institutions are often ill-equipped or lack the gifts and abilities to truly lead.
- Inability of formal structures to meet the needs of the rapidly expanding Two-Thirds World church.
- Call from discipleship and church renewal movements for the church to go back to its roots of the New Testament form and function.
- Emergence of the technological society, where knowledge and information is easily disseminated across geographical boundaries.

Consequently, their recommendations include the following:

- Shift from traditional, academic-based accrediting systems to non-formal assessment procedures, accommodating formal, non-formal, and informal forms of theological preparation.
- Shift in emphasis from residential in-service to church-based in-service model of ministry preparation.
- Shift of the foundational training back to local churches, with seminaries assuming a resource role to the churches.
- Shift of the primary ministry context of professors back to local churches, becoming resource scholars and mentors for training proven and gifted leaders in churches.
- Shift from centralized to decentralized staff, locating them back into strategic local churches.
- Shift away from costly institutional overhead by selling unnecessary properties related to large in-residence programs and focusing on serving as resource centers

¹¹ Reed, p. 5.

to area churches.

- Shift from a fragmented curriculum based on Schleiermacher's model to a model more consistent with the unfolding agenda of scriptures and current needs of churches.
- Shift from a curriculum based on systematic theology to a curriculum based on biblical theology and theology in culture, relevant to the belief framework of a given culture.
- Shift from an academic, testing course design to a wisdom, problem-posing course design model.

What about our Asian critique of the contemporary paradigm?

Is it true that "if Western seminaries sneeze, our Asian seminaries immediately begin to show the signs of a cold"? So shall we follow what is going on in the West? So what is the difference between our theological education and theirs?

Or have we become the zealous defenders of whatever it is that we have inherited from the West in the past even when they are already discarding it? For example, much of the West has discarded the narrow orientation of mission that is set on Christianizing the world—but now we tend to be the zealous promoters of such a mission orientation.

It is worthwhile reflecting on the Western critique and proposals as they seem to also speak about us and our theological education. But we need to add our own Asian perspective because of our particular contextual challenges in Asia.

Beyond the question of how feasible our vehicle is for the journey ahead, there are some important foundational questions we have to think about:

- (a) Does our theological education make a claim to know God completely and to provide answers to every question? Then, isn't our God too small? According to Prof. Kosuke Koyama, who is one of the early leaders of ATESEA, "Religion is relationship *from* the unknowable ultimate."
- (b) Does our theological education foster or stifle critical thinking? Why are we so afraid to expose our students to Asian sources of wisdom—the other Asian religions and cultures? Why do we keep them from knowing our different Asian theologies, including Asian contextual and feminist theologies? We impoverish our students if we continue the old paradigm which shuns our own Asian cultures and religions, and our own Asian theologies.
- (c) Integrating new areas in our teaching does not always mean adding new subjects, though that may be necessary in some cases at some time. But what is more needed now is for teachers/professors to continually update themselves to be equipped in integrating Asian contextual theologizing, feminist theologizing, interfaith concerns, and drawing on our rich cultural heritage and religious wisdoms in our teaching no matter what field or discipline we may have specialized in.