PEDAGOGICAL ASPECTS OF THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION IN THE 2020S: THE PRACTICALITIES OF RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE, EDUCATION AND FAITH STUDIES

- PART I -

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Abstract. This paper analyses various pedagogical approaches to teaching theological education to young children, adults and theology educators themselves. Critical issues are considered, for instance: To what extent does the theology teacher's personal philosophy and inner self influence the choice of pedagogical approach? Did people learn theology best by passive learning from lectures and textbooks, or are some forms of theology best taught using active pedagogy, for example, experiential learning, roleplay or site visits? Active pedagogy, such as community engagement, role play or problem-based learning, was most effective in contextualising theological learning. Teaching methods such as group work and interfaith swaps were English-speaking-oriented, impeding interfaith theological education with Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and ethnic religions. Other global religions may not have been viewed as favourably as Catholicism or Protestantism, due to a lack of translation. Theology practitioners were often learners, as well as teachers in educational settings.

This paper is part of a two-part series. The second part will explore the role of interreligious dialogue, education, and studies in theological training.

Keywords: theological education, practical theology, practical dialogue, practical education

INTRODUCTION

Globally, the six most practised religions are Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and ethnic religions specific to particular

groups. Chinese traditional faiths, including Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism, also hold significant influence (LSE Religion and Global Society, 31 January 2021). Despite differences in scripture, these major religions share common values, such as a commitment to diversity. Theology upholds equality among all followers, regardless of age, culture, or social standing. Therefore, theological education—regardless of faith—must foster dialogue within the communities it serves.

These interfaith perspectives also prompt us to realise that education holds the "cure" of the widespread social malaise. Hence, it is not an exaggeration to propose that the "vaccine" to end the hidden pandemic, *i.e.* the prevailing inequality and injustice that has plagued humanity for so long, is precisely to be found in our education system, only if it is inclusive, human-centred, caring, and only if it works to nurture the well-being of all and realise opportunities for all.

As John Dewey cautioned, unless we do so, we will rob our children of their tomorrow. (Guerrand-Hermes Foundation for Peace Research Institute, 16 October 2020)

Theology is the systematic study of religious belief. The study of theology can help people develop a deeper understanding of their own religious tradition and/or someone else's religious belief. Classically theology can discuss and consider supernatural events either literally or figuratively. The religious concepts of divinity and revelation can be considered using religious epistemology, which relies on the acceptance and belief of a spiritual being. In contemporary terms, theology can provide various religious perspectives on responses to the COVID-19 global pandemic; UK Brexit; a military airstrike; or a natural disaster (Corpuz 2020, e236).

This means that theology may help demonstrate how suggested policy formulation will address a contemporary situation or need, through a particular religion. Theology is also a medium by which people can explore spiritual ways of interpreting the reality of their or other people's surroundings (Ouwehand *et al.* 2019, 438). The focus on divinity is important as theology begins with the

assumption that the divine exists in some form, which people can perceive. For example, the divine can appear to a person in a mental, physical, a social reality, or for some people, a spiritual or supernatural state (*The Spiritual Life* 2025). Evidence of divinity manifest in people's socio-historical accounts is best expressed when documented by others. This is a hitherto different dynamic of theology, as there is the requirement that a third person has seen, witnessed, a form of divinity interacting with another person, and then recorded as such. People (plural) then develop a belief system based on what they have experienced, including spiritual and supernatural events as witnessed by others. There is an element of contemporary manifestation of "personhood" here (Lingua 2022, 1299). One's persona is changed by an inexplicable event, divine intervention, as explained by a passer-by who, for example, witnessed a person whereby pure fortune avoided being run over by a car. After such a near-death experience many people find a religion. In this sense, the study of theological assumptions merges with an interface of the philosophy of religion.

Theology enables people to structure their lived experiences, empowering people to develop an understanding of how or why they can choose or have chosen to live their lives a certain way. Theology can utilise ethnographic, experiential, historical and philosophical arguments to articulate, critique, defend, explain, promote and understand various religious issues (*The Spiritual Life* 2025). It is theology's capacity to explain why people have interpreted incidents in their lives or a religion a certain way, which in turn explains the importance of theology education. The third-party dynamic of theology, what has happened to a person must have been interpreted and witnessed by someone else, is best delivered by education. With education, people with diverse lived experiences or from similar social backgrounds can be taught a particular religion or multiple religions together. Theology students need to be taught how their religion or various religious faiths can be applied on a practical basis to deliver societal benefits to local communities (Bangert 2023, 32).

This paper is presented from the standpoint of practical theology, as described by Richard Osmer (2008). Fredrickson-Laouini (2021) contextualises the role practical theology plays in understanding and addressing societal issues, clearly indicating that development work must deliver community needs (*See* Manley-Tannis 2020, 13).

> Osmer's four-point frame for understanding (and doing) practical theology, (1) the descriptive-empirical task/what's going on? (2) the interpretive task/why is this going on? (3) the normative task/what ought to be going on? and (4) the pragmatic test/how might we respond? made perfect sense. (Fredrickson-Laouini 2021).

Practical theologian Bonnie Miller-McClemore (2012) underscored Osmer's (2013) later work. Miller-McClemore (2012) described four different ways to understand practical theology. These are: as an *activity* to followers, which carry out the tasks that need to be done. Also, practical theology is a *method* for religious leaders of any faith to follow. As *curricula content* to be present and taught during the delivery of theological education. As an *academic discipline* to feature as part of training religious teachers of any faith (Fredrickson-Laouini 2021; Council of England 2020, 38). Practical theology religious education is situated as follows. "Each understanding points to different spatial locations, from daily life to library and fieldwork and classroom, congregation, and community, and, finally, to the academic guild and global context." (Miller-McClemore 2012, 5; *see* also Sandberg 2020, 430).

THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION

Bell Hooks (1994, 5) believes in active pedagogy, a holistic person-centred form of pedagogy, teaching using lived experiences. For theology students to benefit from "engaged pedagogy", the teacher must be fully committed to epiphany and self-realisation, which reinforces their spiritual well-being. Students must be able to see that sense of authenticity, see the theology teacher's full

commitment to their educational advancement and spiritual needs. Bell Hooks (1994) argues:

> Progressive holistic education, "engaged pedagogy" is more than conventional or feminist pedagogy. For, unlike these two teaching practices, it emphasises well-being. That means that teachers must be actively committed to a process of self-actualisation that promotes their own well-being if they are to teach in a manner which empowers students. (Hooks 1994, 15)

Bell Hooks has an educational outlook which harmonises with Paulo Freire's (2000 [orig.1970]) position on education in several places. The latter issue he identified in the preceding quote resonates with Freire's (2000 [1970], 59) view that humanity is an exclusive right to support others. There is further alignment with Freire (2000 [1970], 2), the humanitarian element of theological education clearly requires a degree of critical consciousness. Theology students mustn't be banking repositories, empty vessels to be filled with non-contextualised knowledge (Freire 2000 [1970], 72). Students should be free-thinking, able to create solutions addressing people's lived experiences, in stressful circumstances where practical theology is required.

> Those truly committed to liberalisation must reject the banking concept in its entirety, adopting instead a concept of women and men as conscious beings, and consciousness as consciousness intent upon the world. They must abandon the educational goal of deposit-making and replace it with the posing of problems of human beings in their relations with the world. (Freire 2000 [1970], 79)

Parker J Palmer (2007, 6) explains the idea that teachers need to explore their inner life and the significant effect this self-awareness has on classroom practice. In essence "we teach who we are" (Palmer 2007, 1). Learning how to teach can involve adapting one's lived experiences and personal narratives into multiple identities. These teaching identities can change depending on the subject being studied, or more importantly the character and the nature of the students being taught. Palmer informs us, the internalisation of teaching involves three paths: intellectual, emotional and spiritual. He articulates the bringing of one's inner self to teaching as follows:

"When a person is healthy and whole, the head and the heart are both-and, not either-or, and teaching that honours that paradox can help make us all more whole" (Palmer 2007, 66).

The use of roleplay in theological education and multi-faith partnerships mirrors Anne Wimberly's (2005, 44) "story-linked" work. The need to appropriately question is supported as is the symbolic concept; transformational work must continue even in the most challenging circumstances. Harriet, the gun-toting female Moses, provides a useful analogy in getting this point across in a theology education session (Wimberly 2005, 47). Whatever form of pedagogy is used, active or passive, learning occurs in three phases: we have disclosure where people assess their lived situation, people's critical reflection of the situation, then self-learning, when the group discuss the experience. There is sufficient flexibility for story-linking to be used with group work, problem-based learning and roleplay. Christian scriptures were being considered through a contextual lens. It must be possible that story-linking (Wimberly 2005, 49) can be applied to other religious faiths, not just Catholicism.

A discussion of societal ethics would be helpful, manifest in the form of enabling theology students to address the issue of the "Clash of Ignorance" (*See* Jafralie and Zaver 2019, 90). "Clash of Ignorance" can occur when there is insufficient interfaith theological education, to minimise discrimination as a result of misinformation caused by globalisation (Jafralie and Zaver 2019, 90). Analysis of predominantly Western theology ethics reveals a dominant ideology (Clark *et al.* 2021, 628). Interreligious studies should reflect reality, acknowledging that some religious teachings on right and wrong may diverge from dominant religious ideologies. Some international observers argue that Christian theology oversimplifies the histories of communities harmed by its influence, often overlooking the ongoing inequalities faced by the colonised (Suna-Koro 2020, 40–41). Philosophical questions can serve as a lens for examining different religious perspectives on contemporary issues such as abortion, borrowing, money lending, gambling,

gender, homosexuality, organ donation, and suicide (Mikva 2020, 138).

Understanding the motivations of the theology educator is useful in the choice of teaching materials for learning classes. Theology teachers' motivation can also influence the choice of pedagogical approach in religious education settings (Unstad and Fjortoft 2020, 5; *see* also Khalid *et al.* 2020, 3; Mambo 2019, 8). Interreligious education can help present the student with hermeneutics, a process to obtain a deeper understanding of religious texts. There is effectively a challenge to communicating multi-faith texts or at least understanding them in religious collaboration settings, for instance, partnership development work (Berling 2020, 6; Maheshwaran and Sier 2019, 29). Some religions are best taught utilising alternative learning mechanisms to texts, for example, aural, visual, oral, tactile, the learner's biography, emotive avenues and motivation. Umashankar (2021, 231) describes this contact with the following term, the "multisensory engagement with the Qur'an."

If a teacher is inclined to deliver their theology practice on a spiritual basis, passive learning of interreligious studies will probably provide sufficient scaffolding. Alternatively, if a tutor prefers to transfer theological education knowledge through a teacher's direct experiences, they may choose a more active learning pedagogical approach. The scaffolding for community participation, citizenship or pastoral care, can be established using experiential learning or role-play active learning pedagogy (Berling 2020, 5). Experiential learning pedagogy—learning by doing—is particularly beneficial as it helps to nurture professional behaviours which cohere with theological education. Such hands-on pedagogy can help provide practical dialogue, education and theology skills required to contextualise pastoral care, for instance, to a recently bereaved person. Site visits have been found to be a particularly effective pedagogical tool by which to embed key concepts of theological learning (Long 2018, 78; Trotta and Wilkinson 2019, 27). Reflective learning could be used by teachers to examine what extent conflict, politics, and power struggles have had on various religions (Suna-

Koro 2020, 56). The use of reflective exercises and pieces also equips educators to be able to teach the numerous religious doctrines on which people's faith is based. An empirical research project could be used to apply practical theology to contemporary settings such as corporate companies, hospitals or prisons. Active learning role-play enables students to consider how various religions have impacted the shaping of ancient empires and the world today.

A theology teacher's motivation is crucial in interreligious education, why they want to learn shapes the effectiveness of their teaching. Places of worship have an important role as an educational institution, a place people attend to meet their learning needs (Mambo 2019, 20). Motivation influences curriculum design and curriculum content. Theological education motivation must be understood, so institutions ensure the learning enables pupils to embrace multi-faith teaching. Theological education enables religious learners and teachers to develop spiritually on an interreligious basis (Corpuz 2020, e236). Symbolic violence (Bourdieu 1991, 5) in the form of exclusion and misclusion of certain religions takes place. Inappropriate motivations resulting in the inclusion of other religions that support the dominant ideology can also be in operation nascent in the background (Matemba and Addai-Mununkum 2021, 14).

Theological education also assists religious teachers in considering some spiritual generic questions which apply to all faiths (Roebben 2019, 54). How did the Jesus movement turn into a church? How can God be one and three? At what point did the Church decide that Jesus was God? What is heresy, and why does it matter? How does Christianity relate to surrounding philosophy? What are the sources of Christian thought and doctrine? Did theology develop and change? All these concepts are described using Christian discourse, when globally there are clearly many other religious faiths. Most do however also apply to Baha'ism, Confucianism, Hinduism, or Judaism—this list is not exhaustive (*See* Corpuz 2020, e236). These concepts should apply to all faiths. In protestant theology, students investigate different Christian

religions whilst other faiths such as Hinduism or Islam remain unexplored.

Sacramental theology is situated in the area of practical theology (Suna-Koro 2020, 60). Critical analysis and delivery of practical dialogue, education, faith, and studies are key components of sacramental theology. Helen Cameron and others describe a model of theology as having four voices which are espoused, formal, normative, and operant (Madden 2020, 133). One pedagogical approach would be to use a form of simulation, religious teachers would be given a contemporary issue to present. Each student should be asked to critically evaluate a religion's view and practice in relation to that denomination's historical and doctrinal teaching. From a Christian perspective, particularly within Catholicism and Protestantism, sacramental theology holds that all human beings are manifestations of God's love and representatives of Christ (Glanzer *et al.* 2020, 48). This view affirms the inherent sacredness of all individuals, including those with differing religious beliefs. Additionally, there is a significant spiritual overlap, as concepts such as rebirth, reincarnation, and resurrection are present in multiple religions, suggesting shared themes regarding the transformation and continuity of the soul.

> All of creation becomes a manifestation of the divine, we experience the divine in all things. Hence Jewish and Christian mysticism are part of the divine manifestation. There is thus an elision first from theological unity of being, then to onto-theological unity of being, and then finally to a unity of being that is a theory of religious diversity and pluralism (a onto-theology of religions). (Epafras and Brill 2020, 13)

Religious teachers and students can learn to adapt humour as a coping mechanism, satire to highlight policies replicating inequality, and jokes, which contextualise social transgressions (Wagner and Symon, 27 January 2021). Comedy has a place when discussing aspects of war as part of religious education. Globally, many wars have been fought, often according to the combatants on the grounds of religion. At the end of some of these wars, it may be appropriate for people to joke and say, "I'm travelling back home

from home". This could happen if dispossessed or diasporic communities feel they can physically return to their homeland. Spiritually, the end of a war could mark the beginning of psychosocial healing, with sarcastic jokes being used to deliver genuine closure. Sarcasm can be employed in theological education to highlight the complexity of human emotions, such as the mixed feelings that may arise upon hearing of a former dictator's capture or death. Religious education classes offer a safe space for such emotions to be expressed and discussed, especially in multi-faith settings (Flensner and Von der Lippe 2019, 277). Humour, in this context, can serve as a tool for active learning, encouraging critical thinking and fostering deeper engagement during practical theology discussions.

CONCLUSIONS

Bell Hooks (1994), Anne Wimberly (2005), and Parker Palmer's (2007) contributions towards the pedagogical aspects of theological education in the 2020s can't be underestimated. Anne Wimberly's (2005, 47) "story-link" ork applies a form of roleplay and/or simulation pedagogy to learning. "Story-linking" can be applied to enable theology students to put themselves in another person's shoes. This will help them gain a better understanding of the culturally and ethnically diverse religions of others. The contextualising pedagogical element of "story-linking" (Wimberly 2005, 44) helps to introduce group work and problem-based learning to theological education. All three writers have several commonalities which illuminate the path towards pedagogical choice. To different degrees, Hooks (1994), Wimberly (2005), and Palmer (2007) all support teaching practices that enable people to learn from their lived experiences. This is experiential learning pedagogy—learning by doing—a pedagogical approach best accessed by working in the community. Another common theme

they articulated is how teaching should come from the heart, the inner self, and the soul, applying to all faiths and religions.

Theological education is more than a job to perform or a simple service provision; teaching becomes both a vocation and a profession. It is transformative for both the students, as delivery agents, and the communities they serve. Theology schools and educators can promote future-oriented goals, such as community partnerships and bridge-building, through a focus on learning culture, project-based learning, and internships. The active learning elements of this approach enable the use of "engaged pedagogy" for more expansive thinking and "self-actualisation" (Hooks 1994, 15). In practice, there is a shared focus on individuals having spiritual motivation and the desire to transform the communities they serve through a model of shared ownership. Spirituality is understood as common to all faiths and religions. The third-party dynamic in theological education plays a key role in personal transformation, often triggered by a spiritual or supernatural event witnessed by others. A significant number of people who experience such an event may go on to follow a religion of their choice. Theological education, taught actively or passively, helps individuals contextualise and understand various social, economic, and political aspects of their lives. By applying the ethos of collective ownership, students can deliver practical theology in real-world ways, such as assisting with welfare benefit forms or running a community food bank.

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