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# Context and Content in Theological Education: A Creative Dialectic

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In some ways, I feel rather like an interloper in this gathering. I am not involved in Theological Education at the moment but in Religious Studies, and the dynamics of the two disciplines differ in their presuppositions, the intentionality of the participants and the instructors, and the context and content of the discussion. I do not, however, feel like a complete stranger. For the purposes of this presentation, I have mined my memories of over ten years in theological education at a Roman Catholic Seminary, I have spoken purposefully to theological students from the Lutheran, Anglican, Mennonite and Roman Catholic traditions and I have chosen four books and two articles, in particular, in order to focus my thinking for this event.<sup>1</sup> Of its very nature, the topic is utopic and not patient of complete and exhaustive discussion, so I have chosen to break apart the concepts in the title of my presentation, then to deal with some special issues, and finally to attempt a strategy for the future.

My whole approach was formed a few decades ago at Teachers' College when I heard someone quoting George Leonard who defined all education as helping participants to "achieve moments of ecstasy". This would seem, at first glance, to be particularly apt for theological education, and occasionally indeed it is. It seems to me that this consultation must focus on the less than ecstatic moments in this time of multifaceted transition, keeping in mind the difficulty of attaining any real sense of perspective, since we are all so intensely involved in some dimension of the total discipline. The presence of women in formal theological education is relatively new. My own efforts to acquire a theological education were thwarted just

three decades ago, and, like many women of the "tradition" I used my ingenuity and got in through the back door of classical studies. Women are now present in increasing numbers and welcomed—if only sometimes for economic reasons—but there remains a remarkable consistency about the context and the content of the discipline. Changes have occurred in both context and content, but they are, for the most part, circumstantial and accidental. The heavy weight of nostalgia and "tradition" prevent the most radically required initiatives.

Feminist scholars have developed a methodology for exploring various aspects of the Christian tradition that moves in six stages and I intend to follow that path. The first step is to notice the absence of women from the field. This may seem contradictory to the previous observation, but when the official, traditional, foundational theological documents and much current literature about theological education are examined, women are indeed absent. Women are absent in significant ways and the doing of theology itself has traditionally been based on the absence of women. Besides, as we shall see, the authoritative voice of women is almost entirely absent from traditional theology and therefore from the curriculum of theological education.

The second stage is to notice that when women *are* present it is most often in an apologetic, trivial, circumstantial or even hostile way. Women appear as after-thoughts or sub-sets. They need to be tacked on as extra courses. They have to be discovered as the "underside" of history, the objects of legislation, not the subjects of achievement. Misogyny and androcentrism form the backdrop to women's presence and the institutional and educational patterns built on these foundations are still, by and large, the context of contemporary theological education. The male monastic and university contexts still loom large.

The third stage is compensation, whether in history, theology, spirituality—or curriculum formation. Attempts are made—laudable and founded on good-will—to rectify the situation. Courses are added—as well as womens' washrooms. A space is created for "women's concerns" or, as one author puts it, "perspectival theologies". The implication of all compensatory attempts is that there is an agreed-upon common base that is "true" theology and around this is added a cluster of special interests for the benefit of the new consumers. But

the common base, the "tradition" is not touched, nor, indeed, can it, in theory, be touched. Compensation has its values because it does indeed respond to the spiritual and educational needs of a whole new constituency of women and men. Much important integrative work is done. But a huge work of deconstruction also takes place because it is especially in such compensatory courses that a critique (sometimes formally feminist, sometimes not) takes place. Compensatory curricula have become a watershed in the study of religion and theology. One cannot just add a few courses on women in ministry, the women mystics, feminist theology or the churches' response to women and expect everything to proceed as usual. It is here that a sorting out process takes place among both students and teachers.

Some fear the questions that are raised about contemporary identity and ecclesial functioning and tuck their new knowledge away in a safe compartment. Some are so distraught at new perceptions on deeply felt present pain that they must withdraw temporarily from the process of learning. Some indeed go to reject the "tradition" and all that it stands for—Christianity seems irreparably patriarchal and autocratic in its style. Some become issue-oriented and often a thorn in the side of the educational administration. Their new knowledge and awareness are brought to bear on every conceivable topic and committees and classes get bogged down in animated discussion at best, and *ad personam* hostilities at worst. And others proceed to a whole re-processing of the tradition and slowly develop a new awareness and a new critique.

This introduces us to the fourth stage. For the most part, theologates have not taken this step. Much of the work of the first three stages will have fallen on the shoulders of willing women faculty, most of whom will not have encountered formal feminist theology and critique in their own theological formation. They have had to become "experts" partly for their own survival, partly in response to the needs and questions of women students. For the most part too, this extra work will have gone unnoticed or even will have been resisted by the official administration of the theologate. The work of the next three stages, however, demands consistent scholarly endeavour, an explicitly supportive academic environment and a progressive re-ordering of the theological curriculum. What

is also required is the public problematizing of the issue of women's presence in theological education, to borrow a phrase from Paulo Freire. Theological institutions have to "come out" on this issue. The continuing presence of women and men together in theological education is a concern of the whole institution and of the churches served by these institutions. Today, a kind of wall has been reached that might be called the limits of niceness. Being well-disposed toward women is no longer adequate. The time has arrived for a radical and consistent probe of the situation together with long and short term plans for the re-direction of theological education. There is no doubt whatever that some institutions will consider themselves incapable, for whatever reason, of taking this next step. Neither is there any doubt that many of the ecclesial communities which they serve actively resist such a move, even while many desire some of its benefits.

The fourth stage, then, is a recognition that a new approach is needed, which, in essence, is both relational and contextual. Most Christian history and theology have proceeded as if men were the only actors on the scene. The implications of celibacy are that indeed they were. But, of course, that was never true at any time in the history of Christianity, even when celibacy was the norm. The sixteenth century reformations, in abandoning celibacy, raised the question of the relationships of women and men in the Christian dispensation but did not solve it. But there never was a time in Christian history when the interactions of women and men were not central to the doing of theology. Theology was done against the backdrop of the exclusion of women and this theology has constituted the "tradition". The relationships of women and men are of the essence of the theological task. Men did their theologizing in a world marked by particular attitudes toward women and also toward non-clerics of both sexes. Their anthropology was crucial to their theology. Everything, from God-metaphor and God-language to human culpability and human gracing was marked by this context. Every person, from pope to peasant, as Augustine might say, was participant in this worldview of graded participation.

The fourth stage is the stage of contextualization. No further steps can be taken unless this is done and the journey is barely begun. It is at this stage that the theological task becomes interdisciplinary in an entirely new way. The tried and

true definition—*fides quaerens intellectum*—becomes fraught with difficulties. What *fides* do we mean? Whose *fides* are we presuming? Which *fides* is normative for the tradition? And who does the *quaerens*? What resources are made available or considered acceptable for this *quaerens*? Were some, by anthropological definition, never allowed to take an active role in *quaerens*? Can some do the *quaerens* for all? And who decides this? And finally, what kind of *intellectum*? Is this an *intellectum* to be shared and available to all? And are some, again by definition, presumed incapable of the act of *intellectum* because they are carnal, or, as we might say today, embodied? What exactly is the act of *intellectum*? Many are familiar with studies on women's ways of knowing. Do we know what men's ways of knowing are? The tradition, after all, focused on what it considered to be universalist human ways of knowing.

And finally, what have sex and gender to do with learning? The question must be asked both personally, relational, contextually and institutionally, because traditional theologizing—the very structures of the theological tradition—have been presumed to be conducted apart from sex. An important pedagogical question raises its head here. Are we educating asexual students who are not really present? And are we ignoring the students who are actually present, embodied, inculturated and relational? What relationships exist between faculty and students? Has this dimension of the teaching/learning transaction been explored in the context of theological education?

Enough has been said to demonstrate the entirely radical nature of this step in this process. The scholarly literature is voluminous and beyond the capacity of anyone as a kind of hobby or even an avocation alongside all the other tasks. And the literature, whether in history, theology, sociology, anthropology or spirituality has barely begun. Theologate can no longer rely on the good will of women and a minority (still a huge minority, according to students' testimony) of men to carry forward the task of facilitating the theological education of women and men together. A total institutional commitment is necessary. And, as our "traditional" methodology and structuring of theological education was integrally linked with the shape of ecclesial life, so also will any change in theological education profoundly affect the life of congregations, parishes, ministers and all believers. And donors are not going to like it.

I can be brief about the final two stages because they are so far ahead of us in terms of practical implementation. The fifth stage consists in the systematic challenging of the discipline of doing theology. It is true that some of this task has been begun, but almost entirely in ways peripheral to mainstream theological education. Some of this work is being done in lonely and seldom affirmed studies of advanced degree students. Each one has to stake her (more rarely his) claim to the effecting of a new methodology. New tools at the level of epistemology, research (in all the disciplines) and evaluation are only beginning to be elaborated. The last mentioned—evaluation—raises the question of the end result of theological education. What kind of theologically educated person are we producing? What kind do we wish to produce? Is it possible to be considered theologically literate or articulate today without having one's consciousness and one's relationships, not to mention the content of one's learning and the quality of one's faith, touched by the radical implications of women and men doing theology together? The final stage will be, of course, the total restructuring of the theological enterprise. Not only is this not being attempted, but in numerous ways is being actively resisted. The role of the new worldwide religious fundamentalism plays a part here. This modern religious phenomenon (not to be confused with true conservatism) is bent on polarizing traditions and inevitably chooses as the enemies of religion one's co-religionists rather than the real enemies of injustice, materialism and all forms of domination and exploitation. The "feminists" are among the perceived enemies in another classic example of blaming the victim.

A final few words will conclude this section. One would presume that theological schools would be in the forefront of this movement of radical re-interpretation and renewed praxis. That, however, is not the case. It is salutary to see how other educational bodies—even some engineering schools, for example—are engaged in a more intentional restructuring of their institutions. It is also essential to remark that some steps have been taken. Even the compensatory tasks have been extraordinarily liberating for faculty, students, and for theological education itself. When asked about the resources present in the tradition for inspiration and motivation for a life of discipleship, women can be as wholeheartedly committed as

men. But theological education has reached the point of the two roads. The one not taken will determine the future of the enterprise.

It is time now to take a very cursory look at some of the special issues involved in the current practice of theological education as a way of raising to consciousness some of the usually hidden dynamics of participating as a woman in theological education. The presumption here is that the world of theological education was designed and continues to be run as a man's world. Despite often sincere efforts at modification of the structures, and despite heartfelt collaborative ventures, this remains the case. The presence of women has, so far, just raised some of the questions; it has not altered the structures. Given this situation, women faculty and students have some choices to make about how they will conduct themselves, choices that are sometimes conscious, but largely semi-conscious. In many ways, all women go through the stages already identified.

Some either choose to ignore or actually do not see the operative dynamics. They are happy, profess no discomfort, and are intent on learning the tradition as presented to them. Sometimes they are conscious of suppressing questions or of needing to work twice as hard to get inside the system, but, on the whole, they find their studies satisfying. Often, the first glimmering of inequity comes with a first pastoral experience. It is clear that the socialization of women conditions them to be cooperative, even sometimes to be ingenious in discovering how to survive as creatively as possible.

One of the most general coping mechanisms of women students is caution. One learns to question cautiously, to trust sparingly, to seek precise instructions so as not to get caught in misunderstandings. One learns to ask the right question and to hold oneself in readiness for any exigency. One is cautious in the use of one's own voice and learns not to use the woman's voice as the voice of authority. One learns to authenticate and annotate what one says so that one will never be caught as the sole authority for what one says. Besides, women have had to learn caution in relationships, whether with faculty or other students. Women walk cautiously around the campus and choose cautiously whom to sit beside and whom to befriend. Women choose the times of classes cautiously so as not to get caught around campus after dark unnecessarily. For

most women, faculty and student, caution is so much a habit of mind that we rarely notice. For other women, caution is a painfully learned behaviour in the aftermath of hurtful experiences.

For other women students, the option taken is to engage in low-grade murmuring, which occasionally breaks out in full force. This is a choice for marginalization and such women experience both the advantages and disadvantages of choosing the margin as the locus of their being. On the positive side, the margin as a place of perspective provides some clarity of vision. One sees much more clearly how the institution functions; patterns of action/reaction become apparent, and a certain amount of safety is experienced. On the other hand, the margin eliminates the experience of belonging, puts one continually on the defensive and creates the need for other associations for mutual support. This, in turn, often gives rise to institutional suspicion, further aggravating the sense of being "outside". Being marginalized, whether by choice or design, in terms of location, also indicates marginality in terms of the content of theological education. Truth is elusive and one is constantly in the position of re-interpretation—of language, concepts, faith statements and vocational commitments. This common ecclesial experience of women is not only replicated in theological education but also intensified.

A final option to be considered for women students is naming oneself as feminist and claiming to operate from the perspective of a feminist critique. Though this leads to instant visibility, it is often a more comfortable position than the margin. Christian feminists have evolved an elaborate, yet simple, but all-pervasive critique. The ground is firm. One can discover a voice of authority which can be personally appropriated and often completely resonant with one's own experiences. Feminists are also marginalized by the dominant tradition, but adopt as part of their critique that they are in the process of re-claiming the centre. The experience can be much more liberating than the constant loose-tooth quality of the low-grade murmurers. Feminists see themselves as peers, engage more easily in dialogue, sometimes abrasive, but from a stronger position. Once a stand has been taken, a Christian feminist woman can move from the seduction of issues to the effort involved in personal transformation. The strong biblical current

in feminist theology also allows feminist women to experience a more consistently positive conversion experience.

It is obvious that such categorizations do not exhaust the possibilities or even describe any one individual or group of individuals. They simply allude to some of the options that women face nearly all the time.

Women faculty have their own options to make. As well as any one of the above positions, many women faculty choose to be special advocates of women students. This advocacy is time-consuming, emotionally draining and can also be costly in terms of the faculty woman's position and authority with other faculty. Occasionally, this task is associated with a presumed "typically feminine" behaviour of mothering, occasionally it is interpreted as crossing the lines of authority in an interfering way. There is no doubt that this kind of advocacy work can give women faculty a great deal of informal power in the institution. They hear the stories. They become confidants. They learn a great deal about the underside of the institution. Fortunately for most institutions, women treat this power with professionalism and skill. They add enormously to the trustworthiness of the institution in the eyes of the students.

Such activity often puts women faculty in a difficult position. Choosing to promote the sense of self among women students, choosing to help them speak in their own voice, choosing to hear these voices as authoritative is all in itself subversive activity. It provides an alternative way of being for the institution, while it is free to continue in its "traditional" mode. Often, this very activity marginalizes the faculty member and leaves her as the lone voice speaking for women on committees and councils. All in all, there is often little time left over for creativity in one's field or even for socializing with other faculty. One must also raise questions about the authoritative voice of women faculty in students' eyes and what students come to expect from them. Is there an expectation of parenting rather than professional academic behaviour?

One other set of issues needs to be named and that is the recognition and naming of the myths that govern the running of the institution. Each institution has its own set of these, but theological institutions tend to have some characteristically updated versions of ancient myths. Among the most notable of these is the myth of collegiality. Some analyses speak of

the "tyranny of the collegial". This is an old myth with a new name. It refers to male sociability and gives the impression that the central operational dynamic of the institution is not about power. Pronouncements in the name of collegiality conceal the power dynamics of the institution and can shroud a multitude of sins. Those in power are free to be at one time flexible, at another inflexible, all in the name of collegiality. Collegiality is invoked as a positive Christian alternative to other forms of decision-making and often only succeeds in creating an in-group which guides the rest of the group to preformed decisions in the name of collegiality. An interesting aspect of collegiality is that forms of women's collegiality are seen as unfair and no longer necessary in such collegially-minded institutions. After all, are we not all colleagues now?

The myth of objectivity may be the most frequently invoked myth in academia. It is used to describe "real" theology as opposed to "perspectival" theologies. It is used surreptitiously as a form of moral and theological absolutism to inhibit open discussion on certain subjects. It is invoked to stem attempts at real institutional self-critique, and to plead the existence of at least some "truths" that should not be tampered with. Most often it is not even used consciously, but is the presumed back-drop to every class in theology. It is often called, without qualification, the TRADITION, as if the tradition were formed without context, perspective or bias and not in need of any unmasking or exegesis. Closely allied to this are the myths of fairness and meritocracy. Theological institutions invoke such high ideals that they are presumed to be fair and unbiased in hiring, promotion, and all personal dealings. Secrecy walks hand in hand with these myths and is seen as the natural way to assure fairness to all. While some women experience this as "crazy-making", it can be almost unconscious to those who most benefit from it and often great disappointment is expressed that motives are questioned and results suspected.

This mythology has enormous and pervasive influence on the pedagogical practices of a theological institution. Collaborative and participatory procedures are often encouraged at the theoretical level, nevertheless there is a narrow band of possibility, because theology, especially, is seen to create the need for its own particular kind of authoritative pedagogy. Closure on discussion is easily invoked and the experience of women as one theological locus is easily discounted.

While the recognition of the inner dynamics of power in an institution is always a first step toward a new future—and education and theology are always about power—it is time to try to pin-point some particular strategies that may provide a map for the journey toward the institutional inclusivity of women and men in theological education. This exercise is fraught with peril because such maps by their very nature need to be worked out collaboratively. Theology exists at the intersection of past fidelity, present call and future commitment. If it is not an enterprise conducted in an atmosphere of trustworthiness and self-worth, the whole process is vitiated. While curriculum is important and must be under constant revision, perhaps the most important task is that of teaching students to think theologically and to evolve an effective praxis of Christian love and justice. Such a task is always contextual, and the current context of theological education is the side-by-side presence—sometimes arm-in-arm presence—of women and men. In other words, unlike past theological education, it takes place in the context of full female/male human interaction.

A four-fold process for facilitating this change has been elaborated in different places, with slight variations. This process now has the status of being in the public forum but was first elaborated in 1983 at the Anglican Sheffield Conference on *The Community of Women and Men in the Church*. Despite fears of separatism articulated by both women and men, the first step is the interaction of women with women. Conventional socialization and normative traditional seminary and theological formation have made this a necessity. Women have to discover their voice. It is a delicate and long drawn-out task. Researchers report that it takes a committed feminist at least five years to alter her patterns of speaking in the direction of inclusivity. For the foreseeable future, then, the gathering of women with women—intentional and fully encouraged gathering as an explicit part of theological education—needs to be on the agenda of theological institutions. Women have always gathered at the fringes, precisely because their voices were not heard nor their concerns fully addressed by their groups. The gathering advocated here is in continuity with these experiences but as explicit policy in the interests of sound theological education.

The next step is to explore the “normal” interactions of women and men in the theological community—including min-

istry and worship experiences—in a full and open critique. Here again, the voices of women need to be attended to with special care. Certain forms of church life are still considered normative. Women are, at best, new; at worst, intrusive. Many forms of clinical pastoral education have tackled this topic, but the classroom, the interactions of women students with male faculty and of male students with women faculty have not been part of the discussion. The interactions of various religious authorities also come under review here. Maybe nothing can be done to alter some situations, but the quality of the interaction must be open to examination.

A necessary third step is the interactions of men with men where this interaction is raised as the subject of theological discussion, and not of personal pique or sociological interest. In many ways, this is uncharted territory. One-sex communication is easily distrusted by the excluded side. The temptation is usually to skip this stage on the plea that men have been talking with men for ever. That, however, is not the case. The exploration of “masculinity” and its interconnections with theology has rarely been the subject of discussion among men. Privilege has concealed the dynamics of power in their lives. Their allegiance to the tradition articulated by generations of male theologians needs to be examined and explored for its blind spots. The seduction of a too-easy exercise of reconciliation in the interests of “humanity” needs to be resisted “manfully” at this stage. The full meaning of humanity awaits the input of many unheard voices and reflection on many uncharted experiences of the rejected segments of humanity.

And finally, we return to women and men together. The biblical vision of the church manifesting a new community of women and men is being tested daily in our classrooms as well as in our congregations and parishes. In our classrooms, especially, we can have a “trial-run” of a new ecclesial model. Our own vision will always dictate our praxis and our vision will be based on our own faith and ecclesial experience. Here, I think, we have two choices—either the choice of being “perspectival”, that is, taking “tradition” as is and filling it out in compensatory ways, hoping against hope and being constantly grateful for small mercies: “I really think things are changing”, or “The Bishop smiled today, maybe...”.

Or we can espouse a much more radical choice rooted in what I have come to call “anticipatory fidelity”. We can try

to envision, imagine a world, church, theology school, congregation free of sexism, racism, homophobia and then begin to evolve an effective praxis for the implementation of this vision.

This step is often preceded by a period of profound despair. One feels that the institution is intractable, that nothing is ever going to change. Patriarchy and androcentrism are too strongly embedded. Like the Roman emperors of old, "we have a wonderful future behind us". In many ways, I think that this is an accurate description of our situation. It is unlikely that the grip of patriarchy will ever be completely loosened. When we then set about creating an alternative way of living according to a vision of inclusivity, then despair can turn to exhilaration. The institutional context remains but it ceases to exert its power on our lives in destructive ways. This life of anticipatory fidelity is as demanding as it is thrilling and as frustrating as it is inspiring and profoundly satisfying. It demands the kind of radical conversion that can only be called evangelical. It remains as a choice to be dealt with by every school of theology which aims to educate theologically women and men together.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Books consulted:

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