

INTERCULTURALITY AS PEDAGOGY

Challenges of Teaching and Learning Religion and Theology Beyond Borders

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Negotiating Otherness

‘Awareness of the other starts at the encounter of difference.’ At no time is this adage more discernible and verifiable, I believe, than in this day and age when diversity makes up the very fabric of societies, especially in the West. As could be seen in the issues and crises that plague multicultural and multireligious societies diversity definitely brings challenges. For some, especially for people who are relatively not exposed to those who are culturally or religiously different, it is discomfiting enough to sit beside the other on buses and trains or bump into them in markets or on the streets. How much more when the other is right in front of us (as professors) or right beside us (as classmates) in the classroom and in a religion or theology class at that?

Throughout the ages history tells us that religious and moral values are highly-sensitive territories, especially when these come wrapped in cultural embellishments. Such values certainly cannot be approached simply from a narrow curricular perspective, nor can they be reduced to the exotic gaze. So what challenges does a diverse classroom in theology and religious studies pose? What key issues ought to be paid attention to, for effective and meaningful learning to take place in a multicultural setting? I posit that two critical political processes sum up these challenges:

Politics of Identity

One of the very first things one has to contend

with in multicultural settings is identity politics. Take, for instance, language. Whether it is in verbal or non-verbal form, communication (whether inside or outside the classroom) often suffers due to language difference. First of all one cannot or one finds it hard to talk to someone who does not speak or understand one’s language. In the case of international/exchange students or recently-arrived immigrants even if they speak or understand the host country’s language or the medium of instruction in the classroom, differences or inadequacies in translations could not just bog down the discussion but also create misunderstanding.

I still remember, for example, my first day of class in my very first class for my doctoral studies in the Netherlands. At one point the Dutch professor asked if the class understood what he said. The class responded positively but then he repeated what he just explained and asked again if we understood. We were, at first, puzzled not just because of the repetition but also because the professor seemed at a loss. Things became clear for us, however, when he particularly asked my Sri Lankan classmate (also a new doctoral student) if he understood and my classmate, in typical Sri Lankan fashion, moved his head from side to side to indicate that he understood. But in the Dutch (and more common) view moving one’s head from side to side does not really mean ‘yes.’ It means ‘no’ or ‘not really.’ So the professor, now looking really perplexed, asked my Sri Lankan classmate again: ‘Do you under-

stand?’ My classmate, now looking confused why the professor keeps asking him if he understood, fortunately also verbally expressed his affirmative response this time, saying ‘Yes!’ The professor then said ‘But you were shaking your head?’ Luckily one of the Asian students quickly told the professor that, that is a gesture for ‘yes’ in the Sri Lankan context.

There are other important language-related problems that could arise in a multicultural classroom, particularly when it comes to facility or fluency in the language. A case in point is the medium of instruction. Without question, students and teachers must not just know the basics in the medium of instruction but be fluent in it for effective and meaningful learning to take place.

When I was teaching at a university in Chicago I once had an exchange student from Poland, for instance, who had difficulty coping with the class because of language problems, to the point that she regularly consults her Polish-English dictionary. My husband who used to teach in an international seminary, also in Chicago, even talks of having Chinese students who literally bring their language translator gadgets in the classroom. Oftentimes these are the very same students who will rarely participate in class discussion because they are not confident and/or fluent in the language of instruction and will also probably submit papers with poor quality because their knowledge of the language is limited.

Last but not the least accent also poses certain challenges. When I was teaching in a highly-diverse university in the United States with a lot of international students, I had to deal with all kinds of accents in speaking English from the English with an American accent to Spanglish (English with a Spanish accent) to English with various Asian and European accents. Once I had an exchange student from Bulgaria whose accent was quite thick I decided to regularly engage him in a conversation outside the classroom (especially during the earlier part of the semester) so my ears could get use to English with a Bulgarian ac-



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cent. Of course, my students would also have to contend with my English (with its Filipino accent) but fortunately I have not had problems along this line.

Contextual issues, particularly those that have to do with political, economic, and religious background as well as issues that have to do with gender, class, and race also figure in the challenges that stem from identity politics. Let me illustrate these with examples from my own experience studying Theology and living in a multicultural and interdenominational setting in the Netherlands. There is the female Protestant pastor who complained of not being included in the roster of celebrants for the daily religious service in the house because she is a Methodist and/or she is a woman (The house is made up mostly of Catholic nuns and priests and we had a Catholic priest as a rector). It was also quite enlightening to see Asian and African priests and pastors from predominantly patriarchal societies struggle to live without the usual comforts and deference accorded to priests in Third World countries, e.g. having someone to do their laundry or cook their food. Cooking is usually the one chore these student priests find most challenging so we used to joke around the house that cooking is the unwritten unit in the curriculum.

Politics of Epistemology

Epistemological differences also considerably account for daunting challenges in culturally

diverse religion and theology classes. Epistemology, as we all know, asks the hard questions: What is knowledge? How is knowledge acquired? What do people know? How do we know what we know? Different cultures arguably vary in the perception and production of knowledge and in analyzing its relationship with concepts like truth, belief, and justification. American theologian Elizabeth Johnson provides a good example of this in her book *Quest for the Living God*. In her discussion of the Hispanic image of God as ‘Accompanying God of *fiesta*’ Johnson argues that this image largely stems from the sociocentric-organic culture among Hispanics, which is different from the mainstream Euro-American culture that is considered to be more ego-centric contractual.¹

Epistemological differences can be explosive as this has ramifications on some of the foundational aspects of religious or theological education. Differences in intellectual styles and the cultural value accorded to these intellectual styles will have an impact when it comes to determining the nature and scope of what constitutes sound or better scholarship. There could be conflicts on research paradigms or research methodologies.

Differences in learning and writing styles could also minimize the effectiveness of the learning process and diminish the breadth and depth and, consequently, the quality of the scholarship. Arguably, there is no apolitical scholarship. Scholarly practices are inscribed in power relations. At an international conference on intercultural communication, for instance, a Hispanic participant who was then a graduate student at a renowned American university shared how he and his fellow minority students complained that, with the exception of a book by Gustavo Gutierrez, the reading list is composed of the works of ‘dead white dudes’ or Euro-American scholars.

Chandra Talpade Mohanty eloquently does a critique of this discursive nature of scholarship in ‘Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship in Colonial Discourses.’ Mohanty pos-

its that there is a certain mode of appropriation and codification of ‘scholarship’ and ‘knowledge’ about women in the Third World by particular analytic categories which take as their referent feminist interests as they have been articulated in the U.S. and Western Europe.² She goes on to say that this is one of the effects of the implicit assumption of ‘the West’ (in all its complexities and contradictions) as the primary referent in theory and praxis.³

Dutch theologian Frans Wijsen affirms this by pointing out that theological hermeneutics, indeed, largely remains a Western enterprise or that it is chiefly dominated by the Western philosophical tradition. At the same time Wijsen says this tradition is increasingly challenged by non-western philosophers.

He summarizes the ‘North-South Dialogue’ toward intercultural hermeneutics in four points: (1) In classical hermeneutics the aim is ultimately to understand oneself. It is an individualistic enterprise. The non-Western hermeneutics has a communitarian approach; (2) Classical hermeneutics is focused on harmonization. Intercultural hermeneutics recognizes differentiation. The other as a stranger is to be done justice. (3) Classical hermeneutics is seen as instrumental: the reader takes possession of the text, makes the text his/her own property. Intercultural hermeneutics is relational. And; (4) classical hermeneutics is based on a propositional understanding of truth; intercultural hermeneutics is based on an existential understanding of truth.⁴

Walter J. Hollenweger gives a concrete example of these power dynamics in scholarship in an article titled ‘Intercultural Theology,’ where he contends that if Kosuke Koyama, one of the most creative theologians from Asia, were to present one of his books to any of the European universities, ‘he would surely have failed because his understanding of scholarship and consistency clashes with that of the European-American.’⁵

On the other hand, it also becomes prob-

lematic when non-western scholars, who studied in the West, uncritically subscribe to western scholarship and use western epistemologies as a yardstick to criticize their group's cultural practices. Muriel Orevillo-Montenegro, for example, talks about a western-educated Filipino male theologian who did not recognize *In God's Image* (IGI)—the first and only feminist theological journal in Asia—as a 'scholarly' journal because its format resembles that of a magazine (each issue usually contains women's essays, poetry, and art illustrations of Asian women). What he failed to see, according to Orevillo-Montenegro, is the way (1) the creativity of Asian feminist theologizing is expressed in the journal; (2) it popularizes theology through a variety of forms of expressions and; (3) it is not stuck to the traditional format of dense words and high language that is not accessible to the ordinary person.⁶

Others, in the meantime, try to literally and uncritically import or transfer what they learned in their studies overseas to their home countries, without regard for cultural sensibilities or sensitivities.⁷ For priests and religious this could have problematic implications to efforts toward inculturation.

NEGOTIATING THE INTERSTICE: THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES ON INTERCULTURALITY AS PEDAGOGY

To be sure, globalization has accelerated the interaction between different cultures evolving such terms as 'clash of civilizations' to apprehend the phenomenon arising from the cultural encounter or interaction. More recently, 'interculturality' has emerged as a critical concept in the global economy of signs to describe the process implicating two or more cultures in a relationship that can take many forms namely, confrontation, juxtaposition, negotiation, and osmosis. In view of this I submit that interculturality is in itself a heuristic lens from which we can identify possibilities for greater effectiveness and success in multicultural religion and theology classes.

First of all, contextuality is a precondition for interculturality. In a religious education or theology classroom this means accepting the fact that there are different ways of understanding and forging a relationship with the sacred and that insisting on our ways and imposing our religio-cultural practices is tantamount to a form of control of memory and history. Interculturality requires that we do not fear the scandal of theorizing and making affirmations on cultural worldviews or practices that are devalued by or contradict the dominant consciousness. Interculturality does more than pay lip service to diversity. It celebrates otherness with a steadfast refusal to conflate diverse experiences into a false synthesis.

To be interculturally competent in a diverse religion and theology class, therefore, means not just learning about a group's cultural and religious beliefs or special days but also using or engaging these in various classroom activities or discussions in careful, purposeful, and meaningful ways. This means taking care not to make minority students, especially those who have little or no contact to their or their parents' homelands as 'representatives' or 'experts' of their ancestral cultures. In theological settings this also implies not automatically assuming or making minority as well as international students the experts or spokespersons of their group's contextual theologies.

The following reflective recollection by Puerto Rican-American theologian M.T. Davila, in a response she delivered at the Catholic Theological Society of America, illustrates this cultural trap:

As a Puerto Rican woman doing a Master in Theological Studies at the Boston University School of Theology, I was asked repeatedly what I thought of liberation theology. I was both resentful and jealous that my white male colleagues were more versed in Latin American theologies than I was. Second, I found it offensive that they assumed that the Puerto Rican feminist would, of course, be well acquainted with the liberation movement. I did not want anyone else telling me what field I was supposed to be good at or interested in or, worse

yet, that I owed it to ‘my people’ to become their theological spokesperson.⁸

Building or creating an intercultural classroom also means making sure cultures, especially the other’s culture, are not made to appear ‘exotic.’ In other words, it entails developing sustained and integrated approaches, perspectives and activities so the engagement of the various cultures does not look artificial or forced.

Secondly, interculturality involves sensitivity to the encounter, whether positive or negative, superficial or deep, between and among cultures. To teach and do theology the intercultural way, for instance, means attending to ‘the interaction and juxtaposition, as well as tension and resistance when two or more cultures are brought together sometimes organically and sometimes through violent means.’⁹

Kathleen Talvacchia, a former professor at Union Theological Seminary in New York, writes in *Critical Minds and Discerning Hearts: A Spirituality of Multicultural Teaching* that in multicultural teaching contexts, teachers must bring not just an understanding of individual persons in their own giftedness and limitations but also an understanding of the dynamics of social hegemonies. Talvacchia goes on to say that ‘a stance of perceptive attentiveness that embraces self-knowledge in community, solidarity, and compassion helps form the self-awareness, empathetic sensitivity, political consciousness, and social consciousness necessary for teaching in racial, cultural, gender, and class diversity.’¹⁰ In the first place different cultures and identities are not isolated but intertwined with one another. This much is true not just due to colonialism, continuing missionary activities, or the cultural hegemony of the West but more so because of the global cultural integration that is happening side by side with the globalization of religion, politics, and economics.

For the professor, being interculturally competent then entails seeing culture beyond

language and literature or cuisine, customs, and traditions but as connected or imbricated with other critical facets of people’s identities such as gender, class, and race. Moreover, it means understanding and engaging culture as a site of struggle that is embedded in the messiness of contemporary history, politics, and economics. As Asian-American theologian Kwok Pui-Lan posits authentic intercultural hermeneutics should heighten not only cross-cultural sensitivity but also underscore the relation between cultural-religious production and socio-economic formation.¹¹ It would then be good for teachers to discover, for example, not only WHY certain students like to start or include stories, poems, or songs in their papers but also be alert to WHAT stories, poems, or songs they are putting.

Clearly, interculturality is about constructing an approach to teaching and learning that promotes mutual understanding and living together. To practice interculturality is to recognize diversity as richness so much so that dialogue becomes a way of life¹². But as Hans-Georg Ziebertz argues in his book *Religious Education in a Plural Western Society* religious education in diversity must, ultimately, be an education in freedom. Ziebertz contends it is not enough to simply affirm plurality as a matter of principle. He argues that effective religious education in a diverse context is also about giving students, especially young people, the skills of differentiation. They should, according to Ziebertz, perceive difference and learn to understand and judge it, and, through the process of discussion, they should also be able to consolidate or revise their own position. Moreover, Ziebertz cautions teachers about adopting and teaching an *anything goes* attitude and challenges the ‘laziness’ of relativistic compromises. It is important, Ziebertz says, that teachers are prepared to engage in argumentative debate and to not shy away from factual conflict.

As far as Ziebertz is concerned religious education in a plural society must not just provide concrete instructions on how to act, but it

should also examine the plural religious-ideological environment, establish a concept of communication that understands communication as an educative method, and help in developing principles and criteria for a concrete form of judging.¹³

To be interculturally competent as educators then means being able to negotiate the interstice or the in-between places. Interstitial integrity or the refusal to rest in one place and make constricting either/or decisions¹⁴ is a fundamental attitude of intercultural persons. It provides the ground on which people who

live amidst cultural plurality are able to deal with, examine, and recognize differences. By negotiating the interstice, educators do not only become critically aware of and sensitive to different culture-based religious expressions, viewpoints, and practices that they can use or engage in the teaching and learning process. In doing so, educators directly or indirectly show students that this is simply the way to live in this day and age of shrinking spaces, in this one global village, where education would inevitably also have to be about and toward global citizenship.

ENDNOTES

1 A socio-centric organic culture regards a group, primarily the family, as the unit of society and the individual's identity is tied to this group while the Euro-American culture, *i.e.*, egocentric, prioritizes the individual over the group. Elizabeth Johnson, *Quest for the Living God* (New York: Continuum, 2008), 143, 147-147.

2 Chandra Talpade Mohanty, 'Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship in Colonial Discourses,' in *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, eds. Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Ann Russo, and Lourdes Torres (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991): 333-358, at 333.

3 Chandra Talpade Mohanty, 'Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship in Colonial Discourses,' 334.

4 Frans Wijsen, 'Intercultural Theology and the Mission of the Church,' <http://www.sedos.org/english/wijsen.htm> accessed March 6, 2012..

5 Walter J. Hollenweger, 'Intercultural Theology' <<http://theologytoday.ptsem.edu/apr1986/v43-1-article3.htm>> accessed November 16, 2008.

6 Muriel Orevillo-Montenegro, 'My Search for Asian Women's Voices,' *In God's Image* Vol. 26, No. 4 (December 2007): 23.

7 Florentino Hornedo, for example, points at the problem with theologians who form their theology in Europe and come to rural Philippines and try to make the Philippines Europe. Hornedo regards this as imperial theology. As quoted in Leonardo Mercado, *Filipino Popular Devotions:*

The Interior Dialogue Between Traditional Religion and Christianity (Manila, Phils: Logos Publications, 2000), 71.

8 M.T. Davila, 'Catholic Hispanic Theology in the U.S.: Dimensiones dela Opción Preferencial por los Pobres en el Norte,' <<http://www.ctsa-online.org/pdf/63/28.pdf>> accessed March 7, 2012.

9 Kwok Pui-Lan, 'Feminist theology as intercultural discourse,' in *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology*, ed., Susan Frank Parsons (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002): 23-39, at 25.

10 Kathleen Talvacchia, *Critical Minds and Discerning Hearts: A Spirituality of Multicultural Teaching* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2003), 29.

11 Kwok Pui-lan, 'Feminist Theology as Intercultural Discourse,' 34-35.

12 See Michael Amaladoss, *Making All Things New: Dialogue, Pluralism, and Evangelization in Asia* (New York: Orbis Books, 1994).

13 Hans-Georg Ziebertz, *Religious Education in a Plural Western Society: Problems and Challenges* (Munster: Lit Verlag, 2003), 25-27.

14 See Rita Nakashima Brock, 'Interstitial Integrity: Reflections toward an Asian-American Women's Theology,' in *Introduction to Christian Theology: Contemporary North American Perspectives*, ed., Roger A. Badham (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1998), 183-196.