

Ecumenical Vision: Perspective of Indian Seminaries

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I. Three Encounters

This paper will be centered on two questions. One: What is 'our ecumenical vision' which we want to affirm from the perspective of 'seminaries' or more correctly from the perspective of 'theological education' in India? Two: What is the response of the Board of Theological Education of the Senate of Serampore College (BTESSC)? The second question actually is directly related to the response of member seminaries, study/research centers and the Churches. But before looking to these two questions, I want to refer to three personal encounters related to my involvement in theological education, which possibly will serve as a background to the discussion of this paper.

The first encounter was one I had as a theological student at Serampore College. I was in my B.D. final year (1966-67), when we were sent to Durgapur, an industrial town, for 'extension programme' for two weeks at the Ecumenical Industrial Institute. At that time the Director of that Institute was a missionary, Dr. Kenyan Wright. While traveling in his car, we were discussing the purpose of 'theological education' and Dr. Wright posed a question: "Don't you think to equip the saints or God's people for their ministry in this world is the whole purpose of theological education?" (Eph.4:11-13)

The second encounter is a recent one, which took place during a Curriculum Revision – Phase II meeting of the Boards of Studies of the Senate of Serampore College in Chennai from October 6-7, 2008. Here I was not a student, but part of the theological educators. In the opening of this meeting on October 6, we had some special guests, including Dr. K Rajarathnam, Master of the Council of Serampore College. It was Dr. Rajarathnam who made two points in his brief remarks, which Dr. Ravi Tiwari has summarized very nicely in the report of this meeting, and which reads as: "First, curriculum revisers must be innovative, bring in new thinking and thus move forward. They need to come out of their inertia towards change; they should not be bound to old paradigms of thoughts and practice, nor be mere clones of previous academicians. Second, continued efforts need to be made to ensure that theological education is relevant to the context. We should not be content with innovative within the theological campus, but should stimulate the Churches to engage maturely and responsibly in contemporary society. Concerns of social analyses, issues of women, Dalits, tribals and other marginalized and oppressed groups should be relevantly incorporated in the new curriculum" (p. 2). In this encounter, the expression "nor be mere clones of previous academicians" struck me most.

The third encounter is a very recent one. As some of you will know, the Centre for Dalit/Subaltern Studies, New Delhi, which is a member of BTESSC, where I now work, is having a number of research-based programmes related to theological education. One of the

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programmes of the Centre is a special doctoral programme, which is being run presently in co-operation with two universities in The Netherlands. In connection with this programme, we had a week-long 'contact programme' with our five research students from November 19-24, 2008 in Delhi. Our main resource persons were two Dutch professors, who are supposed to be experts in contextual theologies. It was in our review meeting that I had a direct encounter with these two professors. While the main objective of our Centre's doctoral programme is to enable research students to be the future 'organic theologians or intellectuals,' our guest professors were insisting that our students should live in an academic atmosphere – i.e. in the University or seminary campus rather than in the actual context (field) or in their work place, which is the Centre's pre-condition for accepting a student for the research. Here I observed a resistance to change.

These three encounters represent personal insights into theological education, yet these I hope will serve as background to the remaining discussion of this paper. So let us now return to the two questions, which were raised in the beginning of this paper. *First*, what is our ecumenical vision? *Second*, what is our response as BTESSC?

II. Ecumenical Vision

I want to begin the discussion of this section with a quote from one of my editorials, written for the official magazine of the Church of North India for July 1997, in response to the WCC draft vision statement known as 'Towards a Common Understanding and Vision of the World Council of Churches'. This quote is actually a comment on St. Paul's vision (Eph. 1: 9-10):

St. Paul is having a vision of cosmic unity in Christ... Here the vision of St. Paul has not only crossed the boundaries of the churches; it has even gone beyond the human boundary of ecumenism, because here ecumenism is shown embracing in it the whole created world. According to this vision, the perfect universal harmony or the unity of the whole creation is seen in Christ. Here the narrowness of our organic unity got dismissed automatically and instead of that it becomes part of God's wider plan of cosmic unity in Christ (pp. 179-80).

St. Paul's vision has laid down the foundation of a wider ecumenism, about which some of us talk today.

I am sure most of us will know that in the month of September 1997, based upon various debates and reflections, the Central Committee of the World Council of the Churches adopted 'a policy statement' on its 'Common Understanding and Vision', which later was introduced to the member churches and ecumenical partners for study and action. I could not follow up on what happened afterward, but I did look into the 'policy statement' in order to see if it has anything relevant for our discussion. The document indeed contains a number of points of discussion, which can be helpful for us to understand the 'ecumenical vision'. Here I am giving three quotes, for the purpose of this paper:

(1) "The ecumenical process which led to the formation of the WCC was not only a response to the Gospel imperative of Christian unity. It was also an affirmation of the call to mission

and common witness and an expression of common commitment to the search for justice, peace and reconciliation in a chaotic, warring world divided along the lines of race, class and competing national and religious loyalties" (p. 6).

(2) The Council: "recognise facets of ecumenical vocation which have taken on a higher profile in recent years, including concerns for upholding the integrity of creation, relating to people of other faiths and promoting processes of education which enable the Christians to think and act ecumenically" (p. 18).

(3) "In this age of fragmentation, the WCC's task of global witness and coordination may take greater significance. But this is not a 'superior' role. All councils, in so far as they serve the ecumenical vision of wholeness and healing, are gifts of the same Spirit and expressions of the same fellowship in Christ" (p. 22).

The most important phrase in these quotes which need our attention is "promoting processes of education which enable Christians to think and act ecumenically." The truth referred here in this statement can be taken as the basic foundation of vision and mission of an ecumenically oriented theological education in any given context.

Besides looking to the policy statement, 'Towards a Common Understanding and Vision of the WCC', I tried also to look for some Asian sources dealing with the question of 'ecumenical vision' from a seminary perspective. For this purpose the outcome in the form of a small book of the Manila Consultation held on 10-14 August 2004 on the theme, 'Ecumenical Theological Education in Changing Context: Hopes, Challenges and Priorities' was very helpful. In this booklet, Dr. A. Wati Longchar, based upon the views of Simon Oxley has summarized the vision of ecumenical theological education in these words: "Therefore, the vision of ecumenical theological education cannot be narrowly confined to ministerial training programmes of the churches alone; rather it involves equipping the whole people of God. It is *Laos*—the whole people of God. It is an ongoing process in which the whole people of God are empowered for formation and transformation of all communities. It searches to build a just and inclusive community in the context of the people of other faiths and ideologies." (pp. 9-10)

While agreeing with the summary of Dr. Wati Longchar of the vision of ecumenical theological education, I also agree with the findings of Dr. Hope S. Antone on the 'State and Prospects of Theological Education in Asia', particularly what she has said about the ecumenical seminaries: "There are the *ecumenical seminaries* which constitute a minority group in Asia and their curriculum includes a bit of ecumenism, comparative study of religions and (sometimes) dialogue (very often not required but as electives)." (p. 2). This is also true with most of those seminaries, which are members of the Board and the Senate affiliated with Serampore College (University), which are supposed to be in principle ecumenical in nature.

Among the Senate affiliated, a large majority of the seminaries are what Dr. Antone refers to as denominational and nondenominational, which put emphasis either on denominational content and church growth or on church planting and traditional concept and practice of mission (p. 1). This point brings us to the discussion on the second question related to the

response to the ecumenical vision of the Board of Theological Education of the Senate of Serampore College.

III. Response of SSC and BTESSC to Ecumenical Vision

In this section, a brief introduction to BTESSC is first given. BTESSC is the advisory body of the Senate of the Serampore College (SSC). In the second part of this section we will look into the vision and mission statement of SSC and BTESSC and also some of the concrete steps the Senate and Board have taken to respond to this vision particularly through the process of revision of curricula of the Senate of Serampore College (University).

(a) BTESSC

The Board of Theological Education (BTE) was established by the National Christian Council of India, in which the institutions in Pakistan were also associated. But later as a result of two joint consultations of the Senate and BTE in 1969 at Bangalore and in 1972 at Yeotmal, an idea was born to have one national structure to deal with theological education in India, which included both formal and non-formal.

As a follow-up of the above two consultations, in 1975 the Senate constituted the present Board of Theological Education of the Senate of Serampore College (BTESSC). A constitution of the Board was also prepared, which was approved by Serampore College Council. Based upon the experience, the constitution was reviewed and revised in 1980 in which it was agreed that the Senate should continue to be the One National Structure with BTESSC acting as an advisory body. Between 1981-1984 further attempts were made to improve the constitution of the Board.

For more than three decades now, advanced theological research continued to be one of the main concerns of the Board. During the 1980s this concern became more real when it was decided to have at least (or to begin) one advanced research centre in the country to develop, co-ordinate and facilitate research at doctoral and non-degree levels. This centre was to emphasize indigenous and contextual relevance. Thus, in 1989 the South Asia Theological Research Institute (SATHRI) was established in Bangalore.

A number of programmes came into existence since 1987. To avoid overlapping of concerns, the Senate revised the constitution in 1994. The Senate continued to clarify the role and functions of its organs, including BTESSC. Finally, with serious efforts which continued for about two years, both the Senate and the Board brought out a completely revised constitution and offered to the country 'One National Structure for Theological Education in India,' which was adopted by the Board, Senate and the Council in February 2005. Presently we are all working under this constitution of 2005.

The Board's composition is very unique in its nature. It draws its membership from almost all over South Asia, because among its 50 Senate of Serampore College-affiliated colleges, one is from Nepal (Associated Theological Education in Nepal), two from Sri Lanka (Christian Theological Seminary and Theological College of Lanka) and one from Bangladesh (St. Andrew's Theological College). Beside the geographical spread, 50 member colleges

also represent the major Protestant, Orthodox, and Evangelical and Pentecostal Christian traditions. There are also about seven direct members representing the major churches in the country.

Besides the theological colleges, the Board has 15 members representing institutions and research centres, which are recognized by the Senate as having co-operative functions in the theological field. The General Secretary of the National Council of Churches (or his or her nominee) is also a member of the Board. Two members represent the Serampore College Council on the Board.

The other unique nature of the Board's membership is that it does not take only three teachers as members by rota from affiliated colleges. It also takes six students by rota every year from these colleges. Two educationists from the secular fields are also nominated to the Board membership. The Board can also co-opt up to two persons, whose expertise is beneficial to its work. Besides these categories of members, the functionaries – e.g. Registrar, Director of Research and other senior officers of the Senate are ex-officio members of the Board.

Care has also been taken that in each category of members, women membership is fixed very clearly. The total membership at present is 87 persons on the Board.

The Board's functions include the following:

- i) Reflection and pioneering on new methods and styles in theological education in relation to the need of the country and of the Churches.
- ii) Production of theological literature in general and theological text books in regional languages through the Board for Theological Text Books Programme of South Asia (BTTBPSA).
- iii) Promotion of the welfare of theological teachers and students.
- iv) Development of ecumenical co-operation among Theological Institutions and their Libraries.
- v) Promotion of relationship between churches, Theological Institutions and Study Centres.
- vi) The Board shall recommend names of persons to be considered by the Senate for nomination to be appointed as senators, officers, chairpersons and members of Committees. (*Constitution 2005, p. 8*)

The Board's work as an advisory body is related to all organs of the Senates, but the Committee for Ecumenical Relations and Church Ministries is one of the main implementing committees for programme of the Board. The Secretary of the Board acts as the Convener of this Committee. The overall work of the Board is co-ordinated by its Secretary, who is the officer of the Board. The Senate President is the Chairperson of the Board.

(b) Vision and Mission of Theological Education in India

In the Constitution of 'One National Structure for Theological Education in India', the statement of vision and mission is given:

We believe that the Triune God has offered the possibility of renewal of life and hope for the entire creation in and through Jesus Christ, and that as an instrument of God, the Church is called to be involved in God's mission of liberation, reconciliation and community building among all peoples through varied forms of ministry.

Set in the midst of people of other faiths and ideologies as well as situations of life – negating forces – we are called upon to equip the whole people of God to respond to the contextual challenges critically and creatively by being faithful to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

In light of this faith and self-understanding, we seek to equip ministers, leaders, scholars and the whole people of God to be committed to creative discernment of and active participation in God's liberative mission in the world at large and in south Asia in particular by providing programmes of theological study and ministerial formation at various levels through affiliated colleges and institutions. (pp. 3, 4)

From this statement one can find the content of the 'vision and mission of theological education in India.' But question may be raised whether the theological education imparted in India in varied forms through the member seminaries is in tune with the ecumenical vision contained in this statement. Until now in general our theological education system has followed the western curriculum introduced by the missionaries. Also the local context of the people has not been taken seriously, particularly the majority, which include Dalits, Tribals, Other Backward Classes and the minorities whose percentage goes more than 80%. These factors indeed have created a gap between theological education and the people, including the churches.

But during the last decade of the 20th century and as we entered into the 21st century, pressure through awareness created by the various subaltern groups, particularly Dalits, tribals and women on one side, and pressure of the Spirit on the other side, have made the academic community more and more conscious about this gap between theological education and the people at large. The recent responses of Indian theologians belonging to different subaltern communities are proofs of this truth, which we very clearly found in recent publications of BTESSC/SATHRI. One example is *Together with People* (2004), which deals with themes like "Ministerial Formation in a Context"; "Paradigm Shift in Theological Education: Advocacy to Solidarity"; "Theological Education of the People, with the People, for the People"; "Diversified Theological Education and Religious Education for Indian Context: Challenges and Response". Another example is *Ecumenism in India Today – A Search for a Relevant Ecclesiology and Churches and Theological Education in India*, which deals with themes like "Ecumenical Realities in Indian Context Today"; "Wider Ecumenism and Ecclesiology"; "Alternative Approaches to the Ecumenical Movement and Emerging Ecclesia from Women Perspective". Dr. John S. Sadananda, President of the Senate of Serampore College, in his foreword to the latter wrote: "These papers raise question about the text and context to know how the inherited understandings of the Church are helpful in our time and context and in this process challenge us to do innovative exercises in order to be a Church with a holistic and ecumenical vision" (p. 3). These are just two examples of how the BTESSC is getting more and more active in fulfilling its functions assigned to it particularly to encourage more reflections with new methods "in theological education in relation to the need of the country and the Churches."

The other best example is SCEPTRE'S work in the area of theological education. Through this programme the Senate of Serampore has added new elements to its strategy to reach the people in general. SCEPTRE offers new degrees and diplomas – e.g. Diploma in Christian Studies, Bachelor of Christian Studies, Master of Ministry, and Doctor of Ministry. These degrees are not meant to produce academicians or more pastors and bishops. These are meant to strengthen the ministries of those who are already with the churches or in the secular world in different vocations or callings. This means that theological education offered through these degrees and diplomas is meant to strengthen the relationship with the people, so that those who go through the process of such education will be able to work not 'for' the people, but 'together with the people'. I see here the possibility of getting the vision and mission of the Senate and Board incarnated in the context of the people.

The Senate of Serampore College's initiative of curriculum revision is the other bold step towards carrying forward the spirit of its vision and mission. The Senate, together with the representatives of its affiliated seminaries and other BTESSC members, was involved in this very extensive and expensive process for the last two years. It took the first step of radically revising the curriculum of its basic B.D. degree, which it hopes to start implementing in mid-2009. Before closing this discussion, I want to quote from the detailed report prepared by Dr. Ravi Tiwari, titled 'Initiating Revision of Curricula-III' and from his report of the Meeting of Boards of Study held in Chennai on 6-7 October 2008.

The first quote is:

In all the regional consultations one concern expressed was that there should be a wholesome balance of academic learning, ministerial orientation, missional commitment, ecumenical inclusiveness, practical training and personal formation in the theological education. Scholarly growth in the knowledge of the word of God and the word about God down through history and of the various related issues and challenges is important. So also training and equipping students for the diverse forms of ministry is essential. As far as missional commitment is concerned, it is not simply a matter of teaching some compulsory courses in mission, but of giving an evangelical, prophetic and holistic transformational thrust to theological education. The concept of ecumenical inclusiveness has reference to relationships with peoples of different genders and with all of God's creation. The dimension of personal formation also includes the aspect of team work and community formation. The emphasis on individual excellence usually encouraged in most theological colleges needs to be tempered with the accent on community well-being. Theological colleges should not be mere degree-oriented institutions but discipleship training centres. (p. 29)

The second quote is:

Contextual relevance must be taken seriously; adherence to traditional paradigms should be given up in favour of radical change in the curriculum. Rather than grouping the marginalized or the oppressed in one general category, they should be named specifically such as dalits, adivasis, women, etc. Not only concerns of dalits, tribals, women and other marginalized groups, but also global structural trends should be addressed. (p. 2)

IV. Conclusion

Based upon the overall discussion of this paper I want to affirm that any claimed 'ecumenical vision' from the perspectives of the seminaries or otherwise should have the following three basic directional elements: one, 'wholesome balance'; two, 'contextual relevance'; and three, 'holistic transformation'.

I want to close this paper with a hope that it will initiate further discussion which will lead us towards affirming our common vision of theological education in our region – South Asia.

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