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# TRANSFORMING THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION FOR PEOPLE IN THE MARGINS

*Wati Longchar*

## Introduction

It is a great honour for me to contribute an essay in honour of my long-time friend and colleague, Dr. Nyambura Njoroge, with whom I worked in strengthening ecumenical theological education in Asia and the Pacific. Realising that the future strength of the ecumenical movement and church lies on how much the churches invest on theological education, we tried to highlight communities who were excluded from the ecumenical table and accompany theological associations in institutionalising some key ecumenical issues such as peace and justice, HIV, disability and to strengthen regional ecumenical networks. In this chapter, I would like to highlight the importance of transforming theological education for marginalised people.

Theological education plays a key role in the life of the church and society. It is encouraging to see various theological institutions making serious attempts to respond to the changing demands of society by offering various degree and diploma programmes, and organising workshops and consultations on life cutting-edge issues. We also see initiatives such as the Commissions on Women, Commission on Dalit/Indigenous Concerns and Contextual Theology among others to meet the contemporary challenges of the church and society. The initiative on new patterns of theological education, the promotion of ecumenical relationships between the seminaries and the churches, and the empowerment of women and marginalised groups, are some of the noteworthy areas. We can see that subaltern and other related fields have brought about significant changes in theological education. But the question is: Who decides the content of theological education? Whose experience, perspective and location are taken as the norm?

## Some Issues Challenging us Today

A hundred years ago, the centre of Christianity was Europe. Today, Christianity is declining in its former heartland and increasing significantly in Africa, Asia and Latin America. Although some Christians still live in the Americas and Europe, they claim a smaller share of the total Christian population worldwide today. It means that the majority of Christians live in non-western world today. David Barrett's *World Christian Encyclopedia*, estimated that there are now about 2 billion Christians in the world, that is, one-third of the world population. Given current demographic expectations, it is projected that in twenty years, more than half of Christians will live in the non-Western world. It is said that there will be a considerable shift in global Christianity's centre of gravity. Though the majority of the Christians live in the non-western world, we still follow the western theological education system. One would say that theological education content and pedagogy are still shaped by the Enlightenment paradigm of Euro-centric modernity which is deeply rooted in the conquest of nature and the demonisation of others, especially ethnic or indigenous people and marginalised<sup>1</sup> communities. Most of the theological teachers are products of this paradigm and we do not see significant change in the teaching and learning process in our academia. Can this paradigm liberate people in the margins? Does it provide sufficient scope to integrate the voices and needs of marginalised people?

Where do most Christians in the non-western world live? The majority of the people who embraced the Christian faith are marginalised people – indigenous or ethnic people, dalits and people from the lower strata of society. The majority of the people in the margins live and struggle in the rural or semi-rural places. Can a few middle class educated theological educators, educated in the west and mostly living in cities, decide the content and pedagogy of theological education for rural people? For marginalised people?

What is the core purpose of theological education? Are we going to focus on producing exclusive denominational leaders who would act as priests

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<sup>1</sup> It refers to people have been generally referred to or seen as recipients or objects of churches' mission. People in the margins have been the victims of churches' missionary expansion and theologies that took shape amidst colonisation and legitimized historical processes of discrimination and oppression of the weak and the vulnerable.

of their particular denomination? Do people in the margins give importance to denominational interests? Whose interest are we teaching in theological schools?

## Theological Education and People in the Margins

I want to make a few critical references on the Enlightenment education paradigm, which we still uphold, to show that we need a new paradigm of theological education to integrate the voices and experiences at the margins and bring transformation in the life of marginalised people in rural and semi-rural contexts.

1. It is a fact that the present education system in Asia, as well as in the global south, is an integral part of the colonial legacy. The main purpose of education during that time was to produce clerks to serve in the colonies. The content of the courses was designed to maintain the privilege and power of the colonisers and the subjugation of the colonised, and to produce generations of people who will never question or challenge the ruling elite, but simply accept unjust relationships. The education system has been developed in such a way that students are not challenged to think otherwise. Students were expected to memorise what they were told and they were rewarded for reproduction of what they were taught. Thus, it negates creativity and critical thinking.<sup>2</sup> Students were also not given the choice to think differently. We still follow a modified form and continue to operate within the Enlightenment framework, giving more importance to classical traditions. This is one of the reasons why graduates mainly seek white collar jobs. Education is designed to make students faithful employees of the master, but does not help students to think, “how many people can I empower to make rural people’s lives better?” The increasing number of unemployed graduates in the global south is an integral part of colonial education system.
2. We need to acknowledge the fact that the present crisis of unemployment among young people is a product of the colonial education system. The unemployment problem is not so visible in those so-called

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<sup>2</sup> Waziyatawin Angela Wilson and Michael Yellow Bird, “Beginning Decolonisation,” in *For Indigenous Eyes Only: A Decolonization Handbook*, eds. Waziyatawin Angela Wilson and Michael Yellow Bird (Santa Fe, New Mexico: School of American Research Press, 2008), p. 1.

“developed” countries. What is happening in the global south? The higher literacy rate means a higher unemployment rate. It takes fifteen years for students to earn their first degree and parents also spend a large amount of money for their children’s education. Yet, after obtaining degrees, many join the “depressed club”. The number of unemployed young people is alarming. How can we expect people to live in peace and harmony when there is a high rate of unemployment? How can we expect that there will be no corruption and insurgency movements? The insurgency movement is flourishing and becoming like an industry in some countries. Everywhere people are fighting for resources and it will continue if we do not change the current education system. Theological graduates are also roaming around without jobs. Why should we have a theological college if we do not contribute towards solving growing unemployment? A college or a university should contribute towards generating jobs and sustainability.

3. Theological education is becoming like a free market in Asia. There are more than a hundred colleges in metro cities like Seoul, Manila, Jakarta, Chennai, Bangaluru and Yangon. Even in Nepal with about two hundred thousand (2 lakhs) Christians, there are about thirty theological colleges in Kathmandu city alone. Dimapur is a small city in Nagaland, but there are about forty-five theological colleges! Do we need so many theological schools? Is this trend not a serious problem? Who are the people teaching in these colleges? Most of them are graduates of the main-line Protestant theological schools. Sadly, some of the institutions demonise other cultures and religious traditions, ignoring contextual realities of people in the margins.
4. The present dominant pedagogy in theological education tends to focus more on cognitive advancement, giving prime importance to transmitting philosophical and theoretical discourse of elitist traditions and resources. That is why our theological curriculum is overloaded with classical theology, history and biblical interpretations. Subjects on social transformation of the rural masses are not given importance. Many people still think that studying theology in the west is superior. Of course, they may have better facilities, but that does not mean that they offer more relevant theological education for our context. The western model, content and pedagogy of education is not a solution in all contexts.
5. Upholding the western university system as normative, the other forms of education are relegated as primitive and not important for

academic pursuit. Cognitive assessment – examination centred, syllabus controlled, and sheltered/protected campus-oriented education is an important aspect of the dominant education system and this system alone cannot bring transformation among the marginalised communities. It is a sad reality that the present accreditation or affiliation criteria of theological associations or universities are geared towards protecting the interest of the elitist system and hierarchy of power.

6. The general assumption is that theology cannot be done without philosophy. The ethnic/indigenous traditions are not regarded as philosophically deep enough to articulate theology; and are not valuable resources for doing theology and contain no value for doing God's mission. Indigenous people and other marginalised groups are looked down upon socially and their spiritual traditions are branded as pagan, heathen, barbaric, savage, idolatrous, primitive, unnatural, uncivilised, irrational, abnormal, evil, demonic and inferior. Though a significant community of the Christians in Asia and the global south are indigenous people and other oppressed communities, most of them come from rural places. They are forced to study dominant classical theology which has almost nothing to do with their ministerial context and their lived experiences. We teach our students something which is alien to them. People are enslaved by the classical-philosophical model of doing theology. This is the reason why indigenous and other marginalised people's ways of being are threatened and they are on the verge of losing themselves. Can an education system that has demonised them for centuries transform them? How can such a value system give a sense of dignity to them if we do not make a radical departure from the present education system?
7. One of the major concerns of theological institutions is to equip people to serve the poor, powerless and exploited communities, or people who are victims of injustice. But many theological graduates are not interested in serving in the rural places; sadly, many young people are not interested in pastoral ministry, and are more interested in materialism. Strangely, theological graduates who cannot get an opportunity to work in urban contexts or white-collar jobs are looked down upon as incapable and cannot compete with other colleagues. The rural place is seen not only as backward, but also as a place of punishment. This is one of the reasons why we have many theological graduates who are not employed, or unemployable in rural settings. The proliferation of theological education in urban places is also an integral part

of this education system. Today, graduates are happier unemployed in urban areas than being employed in rural places, whereas people in the rural places are facing lack of leadership and service. Most of the indigenous people live in rural or semi-rural contexts, but graduates are not given adequate preparation to deal with the problems of rural masses. There is a serious defect in the present education system. The mushrooming of colleges, prayer centres, house churches, NGOs, schools, and colleges in urban places is a manifestation of such a phenomenon. Theological education and Christian ministry are becoming an elitist urban biased profession. What has gone wrong with our theological education and with the general education system? Where is the morality and commitment in today’s education system?

Graduates are not interested to serve in the rural areas because of wrong content and orientation, thus, there is need for a paradigm shift from the present system to a more progressive theological education. A few examples may be cited as follows:

### Current Approach Area of Integration

Strong interrelationship between Theology and Philosophy; elitist classical tradition; cognitive development; limited practicum.	Strong interrelationship between Theology & Social work – Development approach; margin’s tradition; community development; practicum emphasis.
Compartmentalised/disciplined degree- oriented approach	Integrated/interdisciplinary skill-oriented approach
Spiritual formation in protected campus	Spiritual formation amidst secular world
Scope of job is mostly limited to church or church related works, especially priestly function to perform rituals.	Scope of the job is not only limited to church and church-related works, but also can serve as community organisers, rural development workers and creative entrepreneurs upholding Christian values and principles.
Graduates prefer to serve in urban contexts; rural is seen as a place for punishment.	Graduates prefer to serve in rural context; rural is seen as the place where God has called to serve.

The above critical comments should not let us to assume that we should discard the Enlightenment education system altogether. One cannot deny the fact that the present university system has made a tremendous contribution to doing theological research and praxis in the lives of people and the church globally. Its contribution towards scientific and critical thinking drawing on philosophical resources is highly commendable, and we need to integrate some of those tools in our context. However, western thinkers are highly critical today that the Enlightenment paradigm of imparting scientific knowledge rooted on the conquest of nature, demonisation and exploitation of peoples in the margins at the expense of market expansion has caused much damage to the world. It has inflicted tremendous pain on marginalised people, and the natural environment on which we are dependent. They struggle to correct this one-sided paradigm and alternatives are explored.

### **Why the Margin's Voice and Experience in Theological Education?**

The CWME-WCC mission document, "Together Towards Life" (TTL), is a groundbreaking theological work. The emphasis "FROM *the margins*" makes this theological affirmation different and significant. Mission is no longer seen from the centre of power to powerless, but from the powerless to the power(ful). This calls us to think and do mission differently. We need to look for new wineskins to preserve the new wine. We need a new church structure and ministerial orientation. This demands a new framework of theological education and pedagogy. The present paradigm is not adequate.

"FROM the margins" is a clarion call that theological education will be incomplete without peoples in the margins; it is not only an issue of priority, but a theological imperative. The incarnation of God in Christ Jesus took place among people at the margins. People who gathered or followed Jesus were people outside of the power structure. They were people without any political power, nor religious authority; women, children and poor people like the shepherds who were landless and who did not have any legal protection and from whom the rich people refused to buy even milk and vegetables. The wise men, strangers in Jerusalem, who brought precious gifts to Jesus, refused to be subjected to empire obligations. They were asked by the empire to report about the birth of Jesus. Instead, they

left by another route to Galilee to protect the life of Jesus.<sup>3</sup> In short, people who welcomed Jesus were those outside of the power hierarchy; these people were not allowed to enter the temple and did not have any political influence. Jesus was not born in a palace, but in a manger, a ragged cowshed, an open and unprotected place. The people who were missing during the birth of Jesus were the rich men, rich women, the king, queen, prince and princes, high priest and priests, nobles and other high officials. The birth of Jesus was astonishing, threatening news for those decision makers. They never expected that God would be revealed among the lowly people. God chose the ‘margin’ – the people on the underside of history – to inaugurate God’s reign for bringing justice and peace. This is the biblical witness. Today those people who have been excluded from the dominant power structures are:

- disabled people whose presence is seen as a burden to their family and society; whose gifts and potentialities are never acknowledged, while they are seen as objects of charity, sinners and cursed by God;
- LGBTIQ people who are seen as those with psychological and mental imbalance, being abnormal and indulging in sinful same-sex relations and acts;
- people living with HIV who are seen as drug abusers, sexual abusers and cursed by God;
- indigenous people who are denied their culture, spirituality and land; their homelands, their language and for survival amidst displacement and dispossession; being the poorest communities in their own land and whose culture, customs, rituals, sacred shrines, places of worship, sacred music, ceremonial dresses, traditions, and handiwork are commodified for commercial purposes; and who cannot compete within the dominant capitalist market system;
- migrant workers who are exploited for maximum profit and forced to perform dirty and dangerous work without social security;
- farmers, labourers who survive by selling their labour in the scorching sun and rain;
- dalits who suffer socially and religiously as the lowest group of the caste system bearing the stigma of untouchability, and whose touch, shadow and sight pollutes the people of other castes;
- women who are treated as inferior, subordinate beings whose bodies are commodified as mere objects of enjoyment and pleasure for others.
- black people who are struggling against the cultures of racism that consider them as *inferior* and *unworthy* – *deny* them the right to live with *dignity* and deprive them of “*life* in all its fullness.”

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<sup>3</sup> See for detail see my article “Rerouting mission and Ecumenism in Asia” in *They Left by Another Road*, Wati Longchar, *et.al.*, eds (2007), Chiangmai: CCA, pp. 187-198.

God's voice from the margins is distinct. They need to be heard and their vision of life should form the basis of theological education for their transformation. We need a new theological framework, language and practices to accommodate their yearning for life. The gospel writer records the story of the rich man and Lazarus. The parable is about two persons – one in the “Centre” – the rich man; and the other one in the “Margin” – Lazarus (Luke 16:19 ff.). Where and in whose context do we hear God's voice? Where do we locate theological education? Lazarus, on being subjected to miserable inhuman conditions knew what it meant to be thirsty, hungry, in pain and to beg in front of someone's gate without dignity. The rich man who was partying and having sumptuous meals everyday could not understand Lazarus' pain. Similarly, the rich who are protected by an unjust power structure cannot understand the pain of the indigenous and other marginalised people in our society. Individuals who are not in a position to understand the suffering of the people cannot bring solutions to the people in pain. Operating from the vantage point of those on the margins unveils creative possibilities for new understandings of mission and hope for the future of humanity. Margins are really the partners of God in realising fullness of life. In the biblical account, we encounter God who chooses the poor. God does not opt for the poor out of paternalistic compassion, but in order to make clear that God stands in solidarity with those who are sinned against, the victims of all systemic injustice, those who are taken advantage of, and those made vulnerable. Indeed, the mission of God that Jesus understood and pursued was a mission of realising the reign of God with those considered the last and the least, the sinners and outcasts. Indigenous people, women, persons with disabilities and other marginalised groups who have been marginalised for centuries have the epistemological privilege of knowing what affirms life and what denies it; what helps communities and what hurts them; what contributes to their well-being and what circumvents it. From the margins, they bring first-hand knowledge of the suffering that accompanies exclusionary practices as well as unmask the forces that work against God's will in the world.<sup>4</sup> Through their lives and struggles for life, they hold forth what God wants in the world while also bringing a reservoir of hope, resistance, and perseverance that is needed to remain faithful to the promised reign of God.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> A draft WCC document on “Mission from the margins,” a process initiated by Just and Inclusive Community, October, 2012, p. 1.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, p. 1.

The change can take place only when marginalised people raise their voice and theological education is located in their context.

Theological education must, first and foremost, address the concrete local problem affirming global vision. In other words, we need to train leaders who can discern the signs of the times and be prophetic leaders in the given context. It demands rigorous scientific research and critical thinking, yet it must be pastorally relevant, applicable and spiritually nourishing education. Academic pursuit, not from the elitist-dominant perspective but from the margin-dominated perspective, is the need of the hour. Life-engaging and transforming theology is to be practised from the experience of marginalised people.

Though the majority of Christians in Asia (also in the global south) are indigenous, we have not liberated ourselves from the classical and philosophical model of doing theology. We teach our students on material which is alien to them. In fact, we are enslaved by the philosophical model of doing theology.<sup>6</sup> Since the indigenous value system and other dominated traditions do not come under the scheme of the dominant power value discourse, they were discarded. This is the reason why their ways of being are threatened and they are on the verge of losing as people with rights and identity. How can we be liberated and give a sense dignity to marginalised people if we do not make a radical departure from the dominant education system?

## The Needs of Peoples in the Margins

The needs of the peoples in the margins are different from those who live in urban contexts and the affluent world. Marginalised people need transformative theological education. We can affirmatively say that the present curricula and pedagogy will not bring social transformation and dignity among the marginalised masses. Theological education must prepare leaders to serve among marginalised people. The leaders need both social and spiritual transformative skills. The people in the rural and semi-urban settings do not need only speculative and grant classical philosophical narrative construct of theology. They need a theological education that promotes and emphasises:

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<sup>6</sup> We also should note that theological students are decreasing in the West due to the lack of contextual realities.

- spiritual nurturing or spiritual formation for social transformation,
- contextual and community centred transformative Bible reading method,
- transformative theology,
- de-colonising critical thinking skills,
- multi-economic community development skills,
- community organisation skills,
- social development,
- human capacity enhancement skills,
- protection of land and resources,
- productive and sustainable use of land,
- preservation of culture,
- peace education,
- gender justice,
- health, healing and wholeness,
- human rights and justice,
- preservation of music and dances from objectification and marketisation,
- preservation of identity, customary laws, language and traditional wisdom.

People in the margins need church leaders who are committed and skilful; who can nurture the community not only spiritually but also can transform community life. Therefore, we need to design courses to train:

- Leaders who are committed to transforming the country and the world at large
- Leaders who are committed to serving both in the rural, semi-urban and urban contexts
- Leaders who are fully equipped to address the problem of rural and urban masses, both spiritually and physically
- Leaders who can be a force for social change
- Leaders who are capable of various multi-task-skills such as farming, health care, marketing and prophetic preaching
- Leaders who can enable people for transformation
- Leaders who can transform the life of the rural poor
- Leaders who can interpret the Bible and communicate effectively to the concrete life situation of the people
- Leaders who are able to discern differently and act differently, locating in the context of the margin and challenge the dominant enslaving power
- Leaders who can handle administration efficiently
- Leaders who can organise people's movement for change
- Leaders who are equipped to help people in times of crisis – person, family and community.

Does the present dominant education paradigm provide this scope? No, it does not and there is hardly any scope in the present education system. For example, if a course is designed on ethnic/indigenous theology, the dominant community will not register for it unless it is a mandatory course. The same applies to feminist theology; male students will not register the course. Some teachers from the dominant communities who teach the course also do not take it seriously. Instead of empowering the students, some teachers disempower them. Many graduates do not aspire to serve in rural and semi-rural places. There is something wrong in the system! Therefore, we need to do it differently and to intentionally integrate God's voice from the margins. A college or university focusing on an alternative model located in the context of the margins can bring a positive transformation in society.

It is a great challenge for us to study religion from a transformative perspective and also reverse the education system emphasising on "transformation" of rural masses and of the poor community. Theological colleges can take critical steps to decolonise the elitist system of education and it is here that theological education can make a decisive and significant contribution for the transformation of our society.

## **Content of Theology Education**

Marginalised communities need a community oriented and transformative theological education that is academically, and yet passionately, emotionally, practically, pastorally, and prophetically related to and involved in the concrete problems and needs of the people who face religious violence, armed conflict, displacement, corruption, unemployment, violation of human rights, and continued oppression of minorities, patriarchy, gender discrimination, violence, stagnation of the church, demonisation of their traditions, cultural practices, poverty, human trafficking, substance abuse, lack of development or one-sided development, forced conversion and re-conversion, empowerment training for both surrendered and active freedom fighters (undergrounds) and other forms of exclusion and discrimination faced by marginalised people, persons with disabilities, people living with HIV, LGBTIQ, farmers and migrant workers. People are caught up with many problems and issues due to long years of isolation, for example:

- Colonisation of our culture, history
- Colonisation of our mind
- Identity crisis
- Tribalism/Majoritarianism
- Racism
- Lack of infrastructure development
- Lack of economic independence and self-reliance
- Poverty
- Political instability
- Prosperity theology
- Spiritual bankruptcy
- Corruption, moral degradation
- Generation gap
- Unemployment
- Environmental crisis
- Urban-rural divide
- Mass migration to cities in search of jobs
- Idleness of young people
- Migrant workers.

## Conclusion

Though we appreciate the great legacy of dominant theological education, we realise that uncritical acceptance of the dominant education system has contributed significantly to the destruction of self-esteem, other-worldly spirituality, detachment from the world, devaluation of cultural knowledge, and imposition of the belief that marginalised or rural folk traditions and ideas are more inferior to those of the mainstream. We also realise that the present theological education has not contributed enough to economic self-reliance, political justice and social justice. Rather, it promotes spiritual arrogance, elitist attitudes, prosperity spirituality, negative attitudes to rural masses and their cultural heritage, power consciousness, unemployment, consumerist lifestyle, lack of contribution to social transformation, urban-elite consciousness and spirituality, and so on. It is time that we look for an alternative model with a global perspective, yet intentionally located in the context of the margins where people are struggling for economic justice and rights; struggling to liberate themselves from poverty; for land rights and development; struggling with dependency on government; identity and cultural preservation and transformation of rural communities.

Therefore, colleges must design a theological curriculum to produce committed persons rooted in liberative religious and Christian traditions, who are hard-working, self-sufficient, truthful, courageous, skillful community organisers and spiritual leaders. The present elitist philosophical, meditative and anthropocentric education system – does not address these issues. A paradigm shift from this elitist education system to a transformative movement oriented theological education of the poor and marginalised is, thus, crucial and imperative for us. This reversal is possible only when theological education is located in the context of the margins. It is here that theological colleges should take the courageous stand and endeavour to make a difference among the people.