PROJECT MUSE®

Religious Education in Indian Contexts

Samson Prabhakar

Studies in World Christianity, Volume 12, Number 1, 2006, pp. 50-58
(Article)

Published by Edinburgh University Press

➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/201833>

Religious Education in Indian Contexts

A programme in Christian Education that aims at holistic transformation would need a theory that has emerged in that context. It is crucial since the kind of Christian Education that we have at present in our churches has lost its cutting edge, because its underlying assumptions are alien to our present context. Therefore, in this article, firstly, I shall highlight the contextual realities from where educational theories are to emerge. Secondly, I shall focus on the question of how a specific contextual issue could be the point of entry for theories of religious education. Thirdly, I shall attempt to shed light upon the development of theories of religious education in the course of history, so that we know where we are standing today. And finally, I shall make an attempt to highlight what should be our theological, pedagogical and practical responses to the most important contextual challenges, namely plurality and poverty, so that a relevant Christian Education for India can be worked out.

Firstly, diversity and plurality are the basic characteristics of one of the largest democracies in the world, namely India. It is a multicultural, multi-lingual, multiethnic and multireligious nation. While it is a matter of pride that in spite of its plurality, India has remained one nation, it is also a matter of concern that the plurality has been the reason for many of its conflicts, outbursts of violence and atrocities against each other. Yet India is what it is because of its diversity and plurality and, thus, it is not one context, but a context of contexts.

Of the many pluralities, one plurality that stands out in India is the religio-cultural plurality, which is the prime reality and of particular interest to us since we are concerned about religious education. It is the religio-cultural plurality that distinguishes Asia in general and India in particular from the rest of the world. It is the most important aspect of India's identity as a nation. It may not be wrong to say that it is its uniqueness.

Inherent in the religio-cultural plurality in India is the often overlooked fact that Indian religiosity is not monolithic, but a multifarious web of interlocking layers and strands – both inter-religiously and intra-religiously. Just as there are various strands and shades of Christianity, there are also different threads of Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, etc. Indian culture can be said to be a carpet woven from all these threads; so also its spirituality.

Religious plurality in India also is characterised by scriptural plurality. Before the Christian scriptures arrived in India the people of India had already been nurtured for centuries by their own classics and scriptures like Vedas, Upanishads, Puranas and so on. In fact, the Bible is a latecomer to Indian cultural traditions. The history of non-biblical scriptures in India goes back to the remote past of the people. With their vitality, they continue to influence the lives of the people even after they have been converted to Christianity.

Another important aspect of Indian reality is its issue of poverty, struggle for justice and the suffering that goes with it. What Aloysius Pieris says about Asia in general applies to India as well. He describes the Asian reality as 'the religiousness of (Asia's) poor and the poverty of its religious'. The poverty of India is not only the outcome of widespread injustice, but often aggravated by natural calamities such as floods, draughts, famines and earthquakes, some of which may have an indirect link to the injustice, corruption and greed. Ironically in India more people die from religio-ethnic and communal conflicts than from hunger, starvation and disease, even though religio-ethnic conflicts are connected with the issues of socioeconomic and political injustice. It is also worth noting here that the process and project of globalisation has its direct influence on the poverty in India. Though it appears to have enlarged the size of middle class, it also has enlarged the size of the poor.

In India, religion seems to permeate everything. Even political structures and economic arrangements are religiously linked or motivated. There are instances where religious consideration has given birth to new nations; for example, Pakistan. A similar situation is that of Bangladesh, which for some time was East Pakistan. Even now religion plays an important role in politics. More often than not, ethnicity and religion are at the core of most of the violent conflicts in which each group tries to assert its supremacy over the other. Most of the economic crises in India and other Asian countries are easily mixed up with ethnic and religious issues. Many of India's religious problems have to do with ignorance and suspicion about those who are different and the growing religious

fanaticism and fundamentalism, all of which may have something to do with each group trying to assert its identity, which in turn may have something to do with a growing feeling of insecurity – political, social and economic. It is true that some of the religious rivalry and animosity have long histories, often associated with unresolved conflicts over sacred territorial spaces, ideological differences and a widening gap in economic and political power, which is attributed to globalisation and growing tendency of liberalisation and privatisation. Interplay of religion, politics, economics and the struggle for identity has resulted in an ethos of suspicion, conflict, war and violence. This seems to sum up the context of India.

Yet all is not lost. There are, in the midst of this chaos and confusion, things that are worth fighting for and worth looking forward to. In the midst of this, we do envision a life of abundance, fullness, peace, security and dignity. This is true not only of Christians but also among other communities.

In the midst of religious plurality, a number of Indian Christians have realised that living out such a vision calls for discerning what God in Jesus Christ is showing us in terms of relating with people of other faiths. We are now realising, more than ever before, how some of our missionary activities have contributed to the misunderstanding and enmity among Indians of different religious traditions. We are now searching for ways that help foster self-understanding and mutual understanding, self-respect and mutual respect and genuine friendship, neighborliness, partnership and community rather than seeking to merely 'win the souls for Christ'. When we begin to see and appreciate the common concerns we share, respect and value the differences that make up who and what we are, we may learn to live in peace and harmony, not merely *in spite of* our plurality, but *because of* our unique diversity. Our commonality is to be found in our common search for justice and peace and in unfolding our theological and spiritual resources. It is from this complex but fertile context that theories of religious education should emerge, if our attempt to educate our people should bear desired fruit.

Secondly, the significance of context in shaping the theory of any social science or theological discipline cannot be ignored. In biblical studies, for example, *Sitz im Leben* is so important that a reliable and credible exegesis of the text cannot be done without it. Theology of liberation loses its credibility unless it takes into account the 'social location' as the entry point for its methodology. Feminist or Womanist hermeneutics is unacceptable unless it takes the experiences of women as its basic tool for

interpretation. It is not different in the case of religious education. Theories of education are shaped by the context of the people. By 'theories of education' I mean the guiding framework for purposeful doing of educational practice. This framework guides the principle on which the mapping of the context is done, educational objectives are explained, rationale for the foundations of education is worked out, and the methods of the practice of education are informed. Without intentionality the activities of education loses its focus and everything becomes education. When everything becomes education, nothing is education. The intentionality begins with a clearer understanding and proper description of the context. It is through this process that one reaches the problematic of the community for which education is intended. Educational theories should emerge out of the analysis of the context.

We have seen that the context of India is characterised by its plurality and diversity. Therefore there can only be theories of education rather than one theory relevant for all the contexts. If we look for one common denominator of the pluralistic context, it is the very reality of plurality itself. Therefore, in the Indian context, religious education does not only imply the plurality of education theories but also that these theories must strive to address the reality of religious plurality.

The question of relevance is very important, especially in the case of practical theological fields like Christian Religious Education. Therefore, borrowing, adopting and transplanting of theories and practices of religious education from the West does not work if we are really concerned about our autonomous identity as Indian-Christians, for borrowing something from outside our own soil raises the question of possible implications in terms of our vision, goal and identity as Indian-Christians. The lack of contextuality is the problem that our theologising is suffering from. Christian Religious Education is not an exception. The fear of contextuality and the fear of syncretism seem to be the root cause for our alienation from the cultural and religious kinship of our context.

More than ever before, the reality of plurality of religions and diversity of cultures of our context raise serious pedagogical questions for educational theorists and practitioners. What is the kind of attitude we should aim towards developing in the learners about other religions and people of other religions? What kind of response should we envisage from our learners towards the reality of religious plurality? How do we integrate the concerns of justice in our attempt to respond to religious plurality? What sort of world-view should we project in and through our educational

activities? These questions call for a framework of religious education that makes its entry through the analysis of the contextual issues.

Thirdly, the strength of educational theories rests on their relevance and appropriateness to the situation prevalent in a given time and space. Therefore, no theory is absolute and final. Theories function as a guiding principle of educational activities in a given context. This does not mean that a theory of education should compromise with whatever evil is prevalent in the context, or with opposing forces in a context. The primary aim of an educational theory is to bring about a 'new order of conceptions leading to new modes of practice'. Furthermore, as Paulo Freire puts it, 'no education can be neutral' in the sense that either a theory of education would lead to 'domestication' or it would foster 'liberation' and therefore any theory of education will have political implications.

What is true of theories in general is also true of theories of religious education in particular. Even though there are no spelt out theories undergirding the practice of religious education during the early period, throughout that history we can identify a kind of frame of reference underneath the practice of education.

During the pre-exilic period for example, education was centred on family life providing the major setting for nurture. Through family rituals, story telling and interpretation, discussion or question and answer, a Hebrew child absorbed the meaning of life and a particular orientation to life shared by the family and clan. Theoretically speaking, the education at the pre-exilic period was aimed at teaching people to live as a community and the community's traditions through families. Education meant religious education for life in the community, through family and its value system.

The exile disrupted the stable pattern of family life and created a situation where there was a crisis of community's identity and destiny. This necessitated a broad based educational institution other than the family. Though the situation necessitated this change, the intentionality of establishing educational and religious institutions like the synagogue and its related schools cannot be ignored. Maintaining the religious as well as cultural identity became the primary goal of education. The media for it were the teaching of the Torah, the Hebrew language, and the oral and written scriptures by the rabbis. The focus shifted from home to school, from a narrow to a broad frame of reference. Education in religion formed the basic curriculum both at Jewish homes and schools. Religious institutions (synagogue) provided the necessary infrastructure for the education.

When we come to the New Testament, we may have to divide the period into two, namely that of Jesus' time and the period that of his followers immediately after the death and resurrection of Jesus. It goes without saying that Jesus was the guru par excellence. The content and conduct of his education centred around the coming of God's reign on this earth. His was not only a view of education, but the way of education as well. His teaching and preaching, his healings, his way of living and seeing the people all pointed to the imminent coming of God's rule, which demanded a response from the learners. In the case of Jesus it is impossible to separate the theory from the practice of education.

The period immediately after the death and resurrection of Jesus brought about a significant shift in the content and methods of education and thereby a shift in the implicit theory of education. The focus now was on the living presence of Jesus Christ with the power to bring about a holistic transformation. Appropriation of the gospel was the basic content and conduct of Christian Education. As we all know, the patristic period is characterised by the challenge of teaching the new converts from non-Jewish and pagan religions. This required long periods of instruction in the newly established faith before one could share in the sacraments of the church. Moreover, to defend the faith of the church from the influence of Paganism and Hellenism, the church needed highly educated apologetics, which resulted in the establishment of catechetical schools, where classical languages and philosophies were taught. Here, too, we see the contextual challenges bringing a shift in the theoretical framework of Christian Education.

In the Medieval period, the institutionalisation of Christianity as the imperial religion posed new challenges to Christian Education. Mass baptism posed a further challenge, as it required intensive instruction, which was practically impossible. This was followed by what is known as 'The Dark Ages' when monasteries became the centre of all education. Formal education was affordable only to a few and the rest were educated through non-formal means like drama, architecture, mosaic, rituals, sacraments, liturgies, etc. Educational theories underwent drastic change in response to the contextual challenges and possibilities, sparking a search for sound doctrines, dogmas and interpretation of faith that would keep the institutionalised going in the midst of heresies and schisms.

Then came the period of Reformation, which was marked by the division of the church. The Protestant faction emphasised the importance of the Word and its proclamation, whereas the Roman Catholic faction emphasised the sacraments and their celebration. Consequently, theories

as well as the practices of Christian Education underwent a radical change. The questions of identity, doctrines, rituals, the concept of church, ministry and so on became the basis of educational theory.

The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries saw major socio-economic forces that influenced the educational endeavour of the church. The industrialisation accompanied by urbanisation and modernisation had its impact on all aspects of human life. The most obvious impacts were social mobility and dislocation resulting in the disintegration of social institutions like family and community, and the emergence of materialism and individualism. Coupled with these were the new social and political ideologies and theories of human behaviour. All these led to the evolving of common educational curricula comprising all disciplines. In most places in Europe, the church remained the dominant agent and force in education, but in other places newer forms of schooling arose, thereby shifting the church's relationship with educational institutions.

The greater shift in the theories of Christian Education came when the missionary organisations of ecclesial denominations took over the ministry of education as well, which resulted in the shift in educational objectives, content and methodology, all geared to serve the interests of Mission Boards and organisations. The primary objective was the conversion of non-Christians to Christianity, which inevitably made the indigenous people feel that they are aliens in their own land. Indian-Christians still suffer the pain of alienation and identity crisis.

The twentieth century can be described as the century of ecumenism in the history of Christianity. Ecumenical movements all over the world have affected the way one perceives Christian Education. Various theories and practices have emerged as a result of ecumenical movements.

It all began with the WSCF's (World Students' Christian Federation) vision to witness to Christ's presence in the academic community, rather than emphasising conversion. Interdenominational cooperation became important in witnessing to Christ's presence and in pursuing the quest for the unity of the church. Consequently the focus of educational ministry was shifted from doctrinal and confessional issues to ecumenical and inter-religious and inter-cultural issues. Of course, this shift in emphasis was gradual. There was also a shift in the perception of the very term 'ecumenism', as well. From a movement within Christianity, ecumenism was understood to be much broader than to include inter-religious concerns and from there to include 'the whole inhabited earth'.

Understood in this sense, inter-religious dialogue as well as harmony is

considered as part of the much bigger task of ecumenical education. Witnessing in religiously plural societies like India is seen as entering into a healthy and enriching relationship with other religions. It encourages individuals in search of meaningful religious experience and a holistic spirituality. It is particularly important now in India, when there is a growing tendency to view people of other religions with suspicion and even hatred based on prejudices, and thereby creating an atmosphere of violence.

Therefore, Christian Education needs to be a 'spiritual' process that motivates the learners to build a new ethos of mutual trust, mutual respect and mutual learning, and thereby moves towards a holistic spirituality. It needs to be a deliberate attempt on the part of the Christian community as a whole to create an environment where we look at each other with creative, constructive and critical minds with the goal of learning from each other. This kind of education would enable us to recognise and respect the 'otherness of the other' as we always try to recognise, respect and even revere the 'otherness of the Other' even our Creator.

And finally, when we attempt to evolve a programme of Religious Education in India, we should be sensitive to all these issues. Our theory of Religious Education should be theologically sound and pedagogically viable and at the same time it should emerge out of our faith response to the reality of plurality and diversity. After all, Christian Education is a mode of faith-articulation. In this sense it is faith-formation.

Various approaches to plurality have been identified in the past by those who are challenged by it. But it would suffice to say that in responding to the plurality of religions we have inherited an undesirable tradition from our fore-parents, who were influenced by the western missionary ideas and ideologies of seeing 'others' as evildoers, with varied and unexplained fears such as the fear of syncretism and the fear of relativism. But we should work towards an environment in which we cannot afford to absolutise our own religion and faith-articulation in the context of plurality. It is necessary to be critical of our own religion and its practices before we try to find faults with other religions, heritages and faith-articulations. We cannot afford to ignore the inadequacies of our own religious traditions, if we want to build openness towards other religions.

Therefore, it becomes the primary task of religious education in India to develop an attitude of appreciation of the good and beautiful in other religions and also to respond to the issues of poverty and injustice in terms of our faith-articulations, so that they help us in the process of faith-

formation. The objectives, content and methodology for a programme in Religious Education in India should be found in these issues.

Samson Prabhakar completed his BD and MTh at United Theological College, Bangalore and received his doctorate from the University of Bern, Switzerland in the field of Christian Religious Education. He taught in the Department of Christian Ministry at UTC before taking up his present post as Director for Research at the South Asia Theological Research Institute of the Senate of Serampore College (University). He is an ordained minister of the Church of South India.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- de Souza, C. 1994. *Catechesis for India Today*. Bangalore: Kristu Jyoti.
- Kalathuveetil, T. 1991. *Shared Praxis as Christian Religious Education*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Prabhakar, S. 2003. *Essays on Christian Education and Liturgy*. Bangalore: SATHRI/BTESSC.
- Prabhakar, S. Towards a Christian Education for an Inclusive Community, *Bangalore Theological Forum* 28, 25–45.
- Prabhakar, S. Towards an Education for Peace with Justice: Problems and Prospects, *Bangalore Theological Forum* 36 (1), 37–50.
- Prabhakar, S. Towards an Indian-Christian Religious Education, *Bangalore Theological Forum* 31 (1), 49–63.
- Samartha, S.J. 1991. *One Christ – Many Religions*. New York: Orbis Books.
- Taylor, J. Marvin (ed.). 1976. *Foundation for Christian Education in an Era of Change*. Nashville: Abingdon Press.