

Missionary Training and Spirituality:  
spiritual formation in theological education.

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The nature and function of theological education continues to foster an animated and fruitful debate that encroaches on the topic of spiritual formation in theological education. The purpose of theological education, we are told, ranges from the study of the knowledge of God, to a very practical reflection on our intersecting the justice of God in a fallen world. The questions have focused on identifying the core of theological education. Should the core of theological education be the pursuit of sapiential knowledge of God? Is theological education primarily a theoretical reflection upon the *praxis* of ministry? Does theological education exist principally for the professional development of church leaders? Should spiritual and character formation be a natural outcome of theological education? Or, does it impede the pursuit of sapiential knowledge of the divine? Should theological education be chiefly concerned with how the servants of God intersect the experiences of others in relation to justice and God's mission on earth?

Several reviewers of theological education (especially Kelsey and Banks) have proposed an eclectic approach and would affirm most of the above. For the sake of economy, this paper is based on an eclectic approach, like that of Robert Banks who proposed four functions of theological education; classical (the pursuit of divine knowledge), vocational (professional or clergy development and certification), confessional (serving the practices of the church), and missional (theological education which includes the perspective of what God is doing in the world).

Regarding the topic of spiritual formation in theological education, this writer appeals to the observation made by Linda Cannell:

*Spirituality grounded in experiences of faith in relation to the event of the gospel, and buttressed by ongoing efforts to understand, is the best out-working of the human desire to know God. We can accept ... that rational theology is in some way subordinate to spirituality, but we also need to accept that spirituality is undone without efforts of reasoned understanding. (Cannell 2006, 92)*

This discussion is worthy of greater elaboration, but suffice to say: sooner or later, the pursuit of theological studies must be grounded in some practical outworking. Surely, the acquisition of more knowledge about God is, by itself, an inadequate outcome for theological education. Knowledge about God should

inspire love for God, and love for God, obedience to God. The very well known initial verses in chapter twelve in the epistle to the Romans also serve as a reminder to balance our goals when it comes to these pursuits.

*Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God— this is your spiritual act of worship.<sup>2</sup> Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is— his good, pleasing and perfect will.* Romans 12:1,2 (New International Version).

The spiritual act of worship that the Apostle Paul refers to is the offering of our whole selves as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God. The King James Version uses the expression “your reasonable service”. The word in question is *logiken*, from which the word logic is also derived. The second verse also refers to a transformation that occurs through the renewing of our mind. Therefore, we see a link between acts of obedience and the renewing of our minds. Worship itself is reasonable, not simply rational, but also spiritual. This link is not merely implicit, because we cannot really have one without the other. In this way, neither can we imagine the pursuit of theological education without the pursuit of spiritual and character formation.

### **Defining the Task of Spiritual Formation**

First, this writer needs to make a brief clarification about spiritual growth and character formation. Defining spirituality is itself no small matter. A brother from India recently reflected on the vast diversity amidst world faiths (and non-faiths) with respect to the pursuit of spirituality. K. John Amalraj wrote, “*True spirituality is a live, continuous personal relationship with the Creator God that fulfills my deepest human longings for inward and outward peace and gives me meaning and purpose for everyday life.*” (Amalraj 2009). This simple definition works for this writer because it describes something that is living, related to the divine, effective in producing inward and outward peace and provides meaning and purpose in our daily lives.

Spirituality is about all relationships: with God, with one’s self and with others. Though this paper focuses on spiritual formation in missionary training or theological education, the matter of character formation will also arise. These two are inseparable. A person who pursues spiritual growth will also discover areas of the character that are in need of transformation. In this writer’s mind, these are not synonymous, but closely related. As a student learns to love and obey God, she also discovers that she must love her neighbour, and that may imply the development of character qualities not previously valued, like generosity, graciousness towards others, self-sacrifice, etc. So, spiritual formation relates to ones relationship with the divine, but cannot be separated from one’s self in relation to others.

## Competencies, Outcomes and Spiritual Formation

If we embrace spiritual formation as a core task of theological education, we can begin to ask questions regarding how to achieve this end. How does one actually go about helping others grow spiritually? The language around this question is necessarily awkward. Teaching spirituality is not a complicated matter. Linda Cannell reflects that seminaries, when challenged to produce spiritual growth merely add another course (Cannell, 2003). The problem with teaching spirituality is that we all know how easy it is to endure teaching that produces little learning, and there is no greater challenge than to experience real learning when it comes to spiritual growth. After all, that which is hardest to measure (assess) is most likely also hardest to teach!

This discussion is also germane to the external pressures brought upon the academic community under the Bologna Accord. (Jurgensen: 2006 and 2007) Around the world academic accrediting bodies are requiring educational institutions to demonstrate the achievement of expressed competencies. There is already growing concern about this model approach to education on the grounds that it all too easily overlooks the affective domain, *i.e.*, the spiritual and character formation of those who embrace the study of theology. Academia naturally resists addressing affective learning goals because these cannot be objectively measured. Yet, spiritual formation, if it is to be affirmed as a function of theological education, is an affective undertaking. It was Ted Ward who warned of potential complications:

*Thinking of Job requirements and necessary competencies in terms of learning tasks, however, leads to several dangerous habits. First, it leads to presumption that skills and knowledge are the only sorts of qualifications that are important to establish qualifications. (What about character traits and moral judgment?) Second, it exalts the qualities of a person that can be assessed through objective testing. Testing objectively justifies a piecemeal mode of teaching that dehumanizes our development and growth process. (Is it enough to assess the stuff on information shelves and to come up with scores for the skills that a person possesses?) Third, it overlooks the human quality of interrelationship. A person is not simply the sum of what is remembered and what can be done with that information. (Does fragmented facts and catalogs of information add up to fair representation of one's personality, style, sensitivities, and being, a true assessment of the person?) (Ward in Cannell 2006, 10).*

For this reason outcomes based education or curriculum emerged as an alternative phrase. Strikingly similar, yet more inclusive, outcomes easily embrace learning goals relating to spiritual or character formation. Competencies speak to us of measureable qualifications for certification.

Outcomes are the ends, final results or learning commitments that serve to underpin the curriculum, and can include cognitive, skill related or affective learning goals. The language of outcomes based education is friendly to the three areas or types of learning common to theological education: cognitive (knowledge or understanding), psycho-motor (skills and abilities), and affective (spiritual and character formation).

### **Intentionality and Generating Difficult Outcomes**

Whether the process is called competency based or outcomes based training is really not as significant as the question of methodological procedure. Though methodological procedure implies intentionality we will be surprised to discover that, in many institutions, not all outcomes are addressed intentionally and this is specially true when it comes to the affective domain. Spiritual and/or character qualities are normally expressed as desired outcomes of theological education. When institutions are asked to demonstrate where and how these outcomes are generated, vague references to times of worship or prayer are made.

Educational theorists warn us that Affective outcomes are not easily generated in the context of formal education. When Allen Thomas talks about conversion, perspective transformation, or paradigm shifts, he states these “are likely to occur only in the learning domain” (Thomas 1991, 96). That his reference to the “learning domain” is synonymous with informal education can be seen in that he also states “. . . so much learning in this domain does not take place as the result of explicit teaching” (Thomas 1991, 96), and “learning that results from teaching has predetermined, and usually socially acceptable, goals, whereas learning that results from collective action is unpredictable and continually challenges the status quo” (Thomas 1991, 96).

Our reliance on methodological procedures that serve to acquire knowledge, understanding and to develop critical and analytical skills, is the primary cause of failure to achieve affective outcomes. In other words, we do not use the correct methods to transform character and develop spiritual growth. Ted Ward reminds us; “Real people have real feelings, not just disembodied information systems called brains. Thus, thinking always occurs within some combination of emotional colorations.” (Ward 2001, 123).

Intentionality also addresses another concern, inappropriate contexts. The three domains of education also correspond to three contexts. Cognitive learning is best suited for the context of formal education, which we associate with schools, institutions, classrooms and graded systems of assessment and development. Behavioural learning (Psycho-motor or skill development) is best suited for the context of nonformal education, which should be associated with on-the-job learning, systems of certification, and the demonstration of competence in specific skills. This is a very significant area of learning when we consider the ministry skills needed for cross-cultural Christian workers. Finally, Affective learning, or spiritual growth, character formation and attitude transformation, is best suited for the context of informal education, which

includes the vast amount of learning we acquire throughout our lives in the contexts that are outside of an organized or systematized experience.

Here is a conundrum. Outcomes are best generated with a high degree of intentionality. Yet, the very definition of informal education requires the lack of intention and measurability. When learning becomes intentional and systematized it ceases to be informal and migrates towards nonformal or formal. Yet, educational theorists will tell us that the affective domain is most effectively addressed through processes of socialization and informal education. This is where the concern for contexts must be raised. Perhaps, we cannot be intentional about providing learning experiences to generate affective outcomes, but we can be intentional about providing the kinds of contexts in which we can anticipate and know that certain outcomes will be generated.

When asked how are affective outcomes generated? Affective outcomes relate to the "being," the character and spiritual qualities of a person, which are observable only through outward behaviours. Behind the expressions of outward behaviours are attitudes. When attitudes change, a person's character is transformed and spiritual growth may occur. Attitudes can change and the most effective means of transforming attitudes are through instrumental (operant) learning and observational learning. (Zimbardo and Leippe 1991, 44 and 51). Instrumental (or operant) learning is the result of an individual learning on their own through exposure to experiences within a given context, it produces attitude transformation out of life's experiences. Observational learning is strongly relational. Participants observe a model (a professor, a missionary in residence, an international student, a pastor, etc.) and assimilate desirable qualities.

A factor appearing to influence the immediacy of this kind of learning is the perceived suitability of the model in the mind of the learner. "Observational learning is greater when the model is powerful, when he or she is seen as having much control over the observer's environment and its resources" (Zimbardo and Leippe 1991, 51). This does not negate, however, that any model whether "powerful" or not, can eventually produce the same results. Arthur Cohen agrees that "who" says something is as important as "what" is said. However, long-term results tend to even out due to, what he calls, the "sleeper" effect (Cohen 1964).

To effectively address the spiritual and character quality outcomes we need to use appropriate methods in the correct contexts. Because the kind of modeling that occurs in the context of formal education is severely limited, most of the attitudes and spiritual / character qualities that are desired will not be observed. This is especially true for cross-cultural training. Desirable methods and contexts will be highly relational and will require our programs to develop learning experiences outside of the classroom or ministry practice. Mentoring programs, advisor groups, peer facilitation groups, and other highly relational experiences become the fruitful ground of spiritual maturation and growth. This growth is not easily measured, but we know it occurs in the context of authentic community. Practitioners and professors need to engage students socially outside of the context of the classroom, in the context of authentic community. This is where attitudes will be modeled, observed and acquired.

Unfortunately, the business of providing an education does not value highly relational experiences that foster this immeasurable learning. Professors are not paid to socialize with students. Times of spiritual activity, praying and caring for one another, are frequently seen as an imposition on the already busy schedules of professors. Of course, this places the spiritual and character formation goals of the program at risk. Worse, their absence sends an entirely different message and model, which students cannot help but acquire. Perry Shaw reminds us that the Null and Hidden curricula play a significant role in the education of theological students (Shaw 2006). By failing to intentionally address outcomes, we will end up generating other outcomes, some not at all desirable. Can we really afford to shift these responsibilities on others? Can an educational institution say “spiritual growth is the task of the Church or the home”? An academic career rewards the pursuit of more knowledge and publications, but rarely notices the personable and friendly professor even though she may have the greatest impact in the life of the students. The question of theological education and spiritual formation implies an intentional process on the part of the institution. Institutions need to value the unique demands of the affective outcomes and begin to resource these outcomes if they are truly desired.

### **Integral Curriculum Development and Spirituality**

Affirming that theological education includes spiritual formation is just one of many assumptions that educators bring to the table. Protestant theological education has blossomed into a rich canopy of spiritual expression. We find amongst our communities historical approaches to spirituality that include pietist, puritan, separatist, and the holiness movement, amongst others. Spiritual formation has a distinct look and feel in each one of these contexts. Yet, within these distinct expressions of faith our theological education builds on similar structures or foundations.

If we affirm the importance and central role of spiritual formation within Theological Education or missionary training, we place ourselves before a commitment to develop curricula that generates desired outcomes in the affective domain and specifically, producing spiritual growth and character qualities. This can be achieved only when we re-examine our educational assumptions, our methodologies and the contexts in which we seek to provide learning experiences.

An integral curriculum approach seeks to generate outcomes in all of the areas of needed learning. The needs of the whole person are addressed and learning resources are allocated accordingly. This will inevitably require sacrifices and adjustments in our training programs. Knowledge will be viewed as instrumental and not an end in itself. Fewer classroom hours will be allotted for the acquisition of knowledge and understanding. More resources will be directed towards acquiring needed skills, as well as generating expressed desirable spiritual and character outcomes. For a description of a process to develop an integral and outcomes based curriculum, the reader is referred to the

book *Integral Ministry Training Design and Evaluation*. (Brynjolfson and Lewis, Eds., 2006).

A couple of simple metaphors could be used to describe our educational assumptions and commitments. First, consider the metaphor of dividing up a pie. If an institution's curriculum were like an apple pie or a pizza and we were dividing it into three slices according to our educational commitments. How big of a slice would go to formal, nonformal, or informal education? Second, consider what a balanced meal (proteins, carbohydrates and vegetables) looks like. If the plate was dominated by any one of the following: protein (meat or vegetable derived), potato (or pasta, bread, etc.), or vegetables, we would not say the meal was balanced. So, we ask the question, how balanced are our programs of theological study? If we are honest, we will admit that one element of the balanced educational diet far outweighs the rest.

### **Setting the stage: a unique moment in time for theological education.**

The impact of the Bologna Process is still being felt on theological education. (Jurgensen: 2006 and 2007) The North American context is in a quandary where seminaries are being asked to quantify the achievements relating to specific outcomes in the area of affective learning. Accrediting bodies are requiring seminaries to demonstrate that spiritual growth and character transformation has occurred (if stated as desired outcomes). Efforts are being made to develop methods to assess spiritual growth. The present is an optimum moment to rethink and to reshape our educational assumptions and commitments.

This paper began with a reflection of the place of spirituality in the theological education or missionary training and this question goes to the heart of the rationale for theological education. Certainly, a balanced approach to the role of spiritual formation in theological education recognizes the singular importance of spiritual formation during theological education. On the other hand, our theological programs of study are not designed to intentionally achieve affective outcomes like spiritual growth and character formation.

Related to all of this is the question of what the stakeholders of our institutions desire. We need to re-engage the Church and Christian service agencies, and develop curricula that meet the training needs expressed by those who use the services of the trained. We will fail in our task if we merely consider what the needs and interests of the students are. What do our churches want, pastors or theologians? What do our mission agencies desire, missionaries or missiologists? Is spiritual growth and character formation an important value expressing the training needs as perceived by the church? Most likely.

Speaking as one coming from an independent church background, with the wonderful privilege of having attended a variety of churches including Pentecostal, liturgical, and non-liturgical, free-church and Baptist, this writer is struck by the choices church governing boards make when searching for a pastor. For example, a multi-staffed church recently promoted an associate pastor to senior pastor whose training background was limited to commerce and

accountancy. More striking, however, is the fact that this church is located only twenty minutes drive from the denominational university and seminary. This appointment sent shivers through the Theological faculty at the seminary. Why would a church appoint someone without theological training? This is now a common question that many seminaries are asking. The answer, in part and perhaps misguided in and of itself, relates to perceptions that many in our churches have regarding theological education and the lack of spiritual growth and character formation.

Now, with pressure from our stakeholders (the churches and Christian service agencies who presumably will employ our graduates) on the one hand, and from accrediting bodies and agencies (whether associations or government agencies) on the other, our institutions of theological education and ministry training are corralled into a position that surely will force some action. We express commitment to spiritual formation through explicit outcomes or competencies, which please both students and stakeholders. However, ours is now the difficult task of reshaping our methodologies and contexts of instruction to ensure that the achievement of these outcomes can be demonstrated. This is indeed, a unique moment in time for theological education.

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