

Theological Reflection on Campus Ministry: Our Context and Beyond*

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Contextually Sensitive and Theologically Sophisticated

“A Christian presence in higher education must be both contextually sensitive and theologically sophisticated,” says Dr. Richard Wood, President of the United Board for Christian Higher Education in Asia, in his recent annual report.¹ He continues, “Theology matters in the university context because it is there, more than anywhere else, that the intellectual respectability of the Christian faith is at stake.” Yes, my friends, theology matters. But why bother with theology? Because we all know, as members of Christian institutions of higher learning in Asia, that our witness can be crucial within our society to the credibility of the Christian faith. Our presence as Christians within our society should in itself bear witness to the fact that it is a viable option, indeed a compelling option, for the people of 21st century Asia to have faith in the Gospel of Jesus Christ in a manner that is academically respectable, ethically responsible, socially relevant, and personally fulfilling. In order to carry out such a daunting and

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almost overwhelming task, we must be “both contextually sensitive and theologically sophisticated.”

Now these two phrases have two separate meanings, but I would like to put them forward as simply one. To be “theologically sophisticated” means nothing less than to be “contextually sensitive.” There is no sophisticated theology that is not contextually sensitive. Contextuality is the key to the sophistication of theology. In fact, all theologies that have ever existed in the history of Christianity are heavily contextualized. Whether Greek or German or Anglo-Saxon, this is the only way that theology can be meaningfully constructed. Whether or not the theologians have realized the contextual nature of their theology is another problem which I will not address today. What we need today is a sophisticated theology, that is, a theology that is attentive and sensitive to our context. We need a theology of campus ministry that recognizes our context, a theology that shares our concerns, joys and sorrows. Reinhold Niebuhr once said, “Nothing is more incredible than an answer to the question that is never asked.” So we need to ask the right kind of questions, in order to get answers.

“Theology” as I use the word today, is less a name of the academic discipline that deals with the set of doctrines within each denomination, but is more to do with the investigation of what lies behind and beneath those doctrinal formulations, an intellectual exploration of what motivated people of tradition to form their thoughts into the form that we have today. It is an inquiry into the force that drives people of faith of all ages and places to goodness and evil, an inquiry into the human capacity for the loftiest ideals of self-sacrifice and to the basest corruption of those ideals by self-interest.

Different Modes of Theology

Before moving forward in the discussion, let me take a few moments to survey the different modes of theology as we see them in each of their contexts, in order to give us a perspective through which we can understand our mode of thinking. I will name four modes, learning from the argument of Roman Catholic theologian Robert Schreier.²

Theology had only one mode of functioning in the beginning, which was called “commentary.” Theology began as the art of interpreting the scriptural text that is divinely given. This is also the case with other religious traditions, as seen in the Midrash in Judaism, the Hadith in Islam,

and the Mahayana commentaries in Buddhism. In fact, the name “vedanta” in the Hindu tradition means just that: a variation of its sacred text “veda.” In the Christian tradition, theology was simply called *sacra pagina* (sacred pages), up until the time of Aberald. This mode of theology has been commonly carried out by weekly sermons, expositions and homilies. It is made available to the public within the context of local churches.

Gradually, however, theology became more focused on the scope and purpose of its effort. Instead of the text to be interpreted, theology became primarily concerned with the human subject doing the interpretation. It was duly called “wisdom,” for this type of theology would lead us into contemplation of the divine nature. Analogies and patterns become more important than logic and inference. Beginning with the patristic period, this mode of theology has been practiced in the Eastern tradition and has been maintained through monastic institutions. In this context, strong emphasis is laid on the spiritual pilgrimage of the soul and the training of piety.

Theology as an academic discipline, which is the mode we most commonly associate the word “theology” with today, came only with the rise of universities. Now it claims to be a body of sure knowledge, *scientia*, not just *sapientia*, and is systematically conducted and taught by full-time professionals. Theology has become highly specialized, because in the context of the university, there is a plurality of worldviews. Other systems of science were at this time also beginning to claim to be independent disciplines of knowledge. Theology in this mode is analytical, rational and critical. It seeks to explain intellectually what is believed — faith seeking understanding — even to those who do not share that faith. This Scholastic style was closely followed by Protestant theology as well, as we see in its prime example in Calvin’s *Institutes*.

After Hegel and Marx, theology made yet another turn, and focused more on social transformation. Within this mode it integrates social and historical actions with theoretical reflection on them. *Praxis*, as the combination has come to be called, is the hallmark of liberation theology, but by no means is this its exclusive property. Praxis has been in use since the time of Augustin, who tried to see the signs of the times in order to act accordingly, and is still a leading idea in the monastic tradition as well, where praying and working are mutually enhancing activities, as seen in the dictum, *ora et labora*. The relevant context is now much wider than church or monastery or university, for Praxis theology believes that God is active at every turn of human history. Schreiter calls Praxis theology “wisdom theology turned outward,” as it aims to do externally what

wisdom theology does via an interior path, though with the same intention.

The upshot of this synopsis is that theology has several, not just one, mode of functioning. Each has its own context, though obviously each overlaps with the others. Our question then is, what kind of theology do we need? What function or purpose or scope do we have in mind when we speak of theological reflection on campus ministry? Our context varies of course, depending on the country and culture, on the history, size and denominational affiliation of our institution. But I think we all have at least one thing in common, and that is the fact that we are all “sent.” We are sent by somebody else, who by nature does not belong to the place we go, to do the things that those who belong there cannot do. This characteristic of being “sent” leads us to a perception of our peculiar status: in a sense, we belong, but in another sense, we do not belong, to the place where we work. Chaplains are by definition those destined to live across thresholds.

Campus Ministry by Non-Professionals

Now, if a person is sent to a place to do the work that others cannot do, then we say that this person has a “mission.” Campus ministry is a mission. Immediately I must qualify what I have just said. It is very presumptuous and wrong to say that we do the kind of work that others cannot do. I need to make a small distinction here for clarification’s sake, between campus ministry as it is carried out by professionals like us, and campus ministry done by non-professionals. The distinction is often blurred of course, but it is still useful to take note of it. As a group of university chaplains, we must discuss the first aspect of campus ministry, namely, the work by those professionals appointed officially to the position by the sending body and approved by the host institution (normally but not necessarily paid, and certainly underpaid in most cases!). Yet before commencing with that discussion, we ought to underscore the fact that campus ministry can and will never be done effectively without the presence, activity, willingness and support of those who are not in the position of ministry, students and faculty alike.

If you trace the history of campus ministry back to its beginnings, it was first of all the activities of Christian students eager to promote a religious atmosphere on campus. They began to gather together and organize groups, sometimes a secret club or society, and they solemnly pledged among themselves to be faithful disciples of Christ on campus and thereafter. Such was the beginning of the earliest activity at Harvard in

1706 as recorded by Cotton Mather.³ Many of you may know the “haystack prayer meeting” of five students at Williams College in 1806 that eventually developed into the formation of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions. Those of us in the Methodist tradition may well tell the story of John and Charles Wesley starting their Holy Club at Oxford in the early 18th century. Again in 1895, it was the body of student leaders worldwide who responded most passionately to the call of John R. Mott and formed the World Student Christian Federation (WSCF). These are only recorded examples of many similar incidents. Campus ministry, at its beginning and at its height, was carried out in an excellent manner, without any involvement of professionals.

I can even add from my own experience that campus ministry is at its best when chaplains have nothing to do. When students gather on their own and initiate their activities, organizing a retreat or a work camp; when a professor puts up a poster telling the campus that he or she is hosting a weekly Bible study at home, these are the times when you know campus ministry is going well. On the other hand, campus ministry is wailing and failing when chaplains have to do all the work. You ask for help, nobody volunteers; you play the flute, nobody dances. That is the time when you know something is going wrong. I sincerely hope that one day we will all be out of a job, that our campuses will be filled with autonomous Christian activities, mutually ministered by each of the campus constituents, so much so that there will be no need for any professional involvement. We would all be jobless, or better yet, we could keep our jobs and let others do all the work! This is the ideal style of campus ministry in my view.

Sent with Mission

But for now, with that very modest hope in mind, let us talk about campus ministry as carried out by professionals, as most of us here are chaplains of one sort or another. I must repeat at this juncture that it is very important for us to keep in mind that we are “sent” to campus. No chaplain stands on his or her own authority. Our authority, if ever we have it at all, is not from us. We are commissioned, entrusted and dispatched to work in a university setting. I presume this process may not be all that clear for some of us here today, but that does not alter the fact that we are representing something that does not belong to the place where we work. I am going to discuss the three P-roles of chaplaincy in reverse order, from the easiest to the most difficult, with the sense of being “sent” in mind.

(P3-Professor)

Any institution of higher learning is by nature a secular place. A university may call itself a Christian university, as is the case with our host university here, or the university I am from. Our university officials may all sincerely strive to achieve and maintain and enhance the Christian character of our institution, but still it is not a church. Its fundamental theology is “salvation by works,” not “salvation by faith.” Any individual, student or faculty, who enters its doors is ranked according to his or her achievement, by grade point average, number of publications, and the like. In the university context, people compete with each other, try to excel and outdo others, in quality and quantity. The university is a place where members are judged and ranked in hierarchical order. And it should remain that way, as long as it is a university, whether it be Christian or not. For those of us who are professors, we know we belong to this culture. We are subject to the same rigors and requirements that others face, and again, there should be no side stepping this aspect of university life simply because we carry some extra burdens. I do not think I need to say any more on this aspect.

(P2-Program Director)

Let me go on to the second role of chaplaincy. Unlike in the third role, chaplains have a peculiar role here. We offer something that other program directors may not always offer. It goes beyond the ordinary wisdom found in the university context. On the one hand, it is our imperative to educate students in the values that are consistent with the Christian understanding of the created world and human society. Christian programs and activities on campus are intended as learning and training for students so that they may take up leadership roles in the future. We imbue our students with lofty ideals, in the hope that they may go out to advance such causes in regional, national or international settings, in private or public sectors, directly or indirectly.

At the same time, however, I think we should also prepare our students for the possible setbacks along the way. Love, peace, justice, equality, freedom, human rights, environment — we certainly ignite these visions within them, we infuse such ideals into them. Yet we have to caution them that it is precisely there that the limits of the human capacity for goodness are put to test, and often fail.

The Christian faith in its most fundamental and perennial core is a teaching of human sinfulness and salvation from it. To call a person a

sinner means foremost to establish the person as a moral agent, to hold the person morally accountable, capable of making decisions and taking responsibility. It is to recognize him or her as a person of integrity and ability who has fallen short of expectations this time. The underlying assumption is that we can do something for the betterment of our society. It is the source of humanism undaunted by the mounting difficulties ahead. Yet at the same time, the gospel proclaims salvation from our sinfulness. What this means is that the scripture sees us and defines us as a morally incapacitated subject, incapable of taking responsibility, as somebody in deep trouble, unable to save himself or herself. Please note, there is an ultimate contradiction built into our faith. On the one hand, it defines us as morally responsible, and on the other, it tells us that we are unable to stand up to the measure, that we are in desperate need of salvation which must be brought from the outside. Here we are looking at a fundamental issue of theological reflection.

If you recall the biblical account of the Garden of Eden, you will see a good example of what I have said. When God called to Adam “Where are you?” after he had broken the commandment, did he stand up and say “Here I am, hold me accountable for my deed”? No, he hid himself and blamed his wife instead — a scene all too familiar to those of us who are husbands. And for the many of us who are feminists here, Eve did not fare any better at all in that account. The biblical faith is a faith that surely puts trust in humanity, promotes humanitarian causes of peace and justice and liberty, but it goes beyond that. The biblical faith is a faith that sees us deep in trouble, so deep that we cannot save ourselves by our own ability, human society is incapable of solving its problems on its own. Yes, we should all follow God’s commandments and do the right thing, but if we could, there would have been no need for Christ and his salvation. In confessing Christ as our saviour, we confess our fundamental inability to be right and do right. We cannot save ourselves. We cannot create a just society and a peaceful world with our hands only.

I am not saying that we should discourage our students. I am saying that we have to present to them an insight that goes beyond the ordinary lessons of secular humanism. They have unadulterated hopes for the possibility of eliminating the evil and war through the goodwill of the concerned. But we do have to prepare them for possible disenchantment, based on the biblical understanding of human nature. All too often, we send out our students imbued with ideals too lofty to realize in three years, only to see them come back to school, defeated by reality, complaining that

the company they work for is too this-worldly. We should teach them to persevere.

All humanists, liberal or conservative, Marxist or Christian, are “children of light” within the parable of Jesus. They have such a firm faith in the goodness of human nature that they presume that people will naturally put their self-interest behind a higher law of public good. They are optimistic idealists and the children of light fail to understand the very lesson of the Gospel on human nature. The children of darkness know better. They are wiser, says Jesus — wiser in the sense that they know how persistent human self-interest can be, how it is at work even in our purest pursuit of admirable ideals. In our function as program directors, we should teach our students to be wise children of light, not foolish ones. We should teach them to be as innocent as doves, and, as wise as serpents. The insight should also enlighten them about their own nature. That is to say, we should tell them not to be too sure of their own goodness, that check and balance is always a good measure to counter possible disasters, and that human goodwill alone cannot achieve the society we long for.

(P1-Pastor)

So much for the second P. Perhaps everyone here would agree with me that the first P is most difficult to define. Here again, our reflection must be contextually sensitive, and hence theologically sophisticated. I will try to describe the kind of context that we find ourselves in, by way of telling a story.

Recently I experienced a tragic event with a student who had been taking my classes. I shall call her Mana in this paper. Mana was a bright sophomore student who had never skipped a single class, she was always attentive to my lectures and sat in a front seat, calm but responsive to the discussion exchanged. I had a sure hope of her becoming a top-notch student. Indeed she was. On the last day of my class, however, she didn't show up. I noticed her absence, but didn't worry much. However, she then missed the final exam and didn't submit the final paper for my other course, which was not like her. At that point I became uneasy. I checked with the student affairs office, and called her up. There was no answer. After several unanswered calls, I finally contacted her parents who lived a couple of hours away. Her mother's immediate response was to ask the security officer of Mana's apartment to open her room. When they opened the door, which was locked from the inside, they found her dead, she had been hanging from the ceiling for several days, probably from the day she

missed my class. Nobody knows for sure what made her take that final step. She looked very normal and stable and didn't show any sign of disorder or distress. But at her funeral service her parents told me that she had had a history of attempted suicides since high school, but that they were too afraid to check on her often lest she get irritated.

To me, she seemed to have had everything. Mana had a loving and caring family; she was presumably given ample financial aid as her father is a successful medical doctor; she was intelligent with good grades. Her social life was seemingly bubbly and vibrant. In short, she had everything a student of her age could hope for. She was looking at a bright future in front of her. And yet, that was not what she chose for herself.

Mana was not without friends, of both sexes, but she was incurably lonely. She lived in abundance, but she felt utterly destitute; she had talents and abilities, but she didn't know what to make use of them for. I myself felt powerless and ashamed, knowing that she hadn't seen in me somebody whom she could trust and speak to outside of the classroom. That might have been a little too much to hope for, but I still keep asking myself whether I should have been more proactive toward her. What scares me is the thought that she might not be alone in her situation. She may be just one example of many others who feel utterly lost, not knowing where to turn to, or who to turn to.

Gradually, however, I came to realize that my understanding might have been inverted. They are lonely, not because they don't have friends, but precisely because they have friends, and friends only. Thanks to the cell phone, they have too many of them. They are in constant touch with each other, exchanging brief messages of comfort and non-sense, but they keep each other at a distance. They choose to be with like-minded peers who do not disagree with them in any serious way. Students today are unanimously peace loving, anti-imperialistic, tolerant, permissive, and in favour of free choices.

Fellowship and communion, however, calls for a plurality of personalities. I know I am not alone, because I have people around me who are different from me in thoughts and words, oftentimes even to my irritation. You don't really feel like you are in company if you only hear what you want to hear. Easy friends do not say things that might disturb their relationship. Naturally, students stay away from their parents who sincerely but meddlingly care about them. They like professors who give easy A's for minimal assignments, thanks to the prevalence of student evaluations. Friends, parents, professors — there is nobody who would

really present them with an offence, confront them with a reality independent of their liking. No wonder they feel so lonely. They are surrounded with comfort and amenity, so much so that they cannot feel that there is anybody else who is not a carbon copy of themselves, who has a will, feelings and thoughts independent of them. That is what is missing in their lives today.

Pastors and professors, and campus ministers in particular, must be friendly to the students of course, but they should not only be friends. We need to challenge them if need be; we need to disturb them out of their comfort and prick their conscience; we may even test and shake their faith out of their easy conviction; and we certainly have to call into question their naïve confidence in what they see as the sure system of knowledge. At the heart of campus ministry, there is a dire need of presenting them with something that is not of their product, something that comes from beyond, a reality different from what they know. We are “sent” to represent that “something” — a being that is ever close to them for every joy and sorrow, even closer than they care to know, but a being that is radically different from their imagination, a being that does not take orders from their cell phone but demands their commitment instead, a being who makes claim on their lives and talents, their attention and their devotion.

Being a chaplain means being dependent on resources and authorities that are not our own. We do our work depending on somebody else. We cannot rely on our own resources. We are to convey what lies beyond us, beyond what is readily available at hand. Our job is to mediate the grace that comes through us to them, regardless of their situation or ranking in the university context. In this sense, we do not belong there. In fact, we should not. We should always be out of context in order to be right in our context. Being contextualized does not mean being conformed. Rather, it is our imperative that we remain uncontextualized to the university culture in this particular sense, because we are “sent” for that purpose.

From Duty to Celebration

In the Gospel stories, Jesus tells us to invite the blind, crippled and beggars to the feast. Please note the word Jesus uses, as Kierkegaard urges us to do. It is a “banquet,” a “feast.” When you gather all those who are less fortunate around you and offer a meal to them, would you call it a “feast”? It might as well be a charitable gesture, a meal for the homeless, a humanitarian food service. But Jesus wants us to have a “feast.” He wants

us to do it in such a manner that there is joy in doing it. We are not called simply to do the right thing, but we are called to rejoice in doing so.⁴ That is why Jesus is more than an ethical teacher. That is why the Christian faith is more than secular humanism. We are called to love, not merely to fulfil the call of duty. We are called to enjoy what we do.

At our university we have outlined the basic governing concept of our graduate program: it revolves around the idea of “conviviality.” “Conviviality” is a word once used by Ivan Illich, author of *Deschooling Society* (1973), to denote a happy and cheerful celebration as we see in a feast. It is a word carefully selected to best express our concept of promoting peace and justice in the 21st century. When the concept was still in debate, there was another word that came up. It was “symbiosis,” a term borrowed I think from biology, meaning “living together.” “Symbiosis” can mean a side-to-side coexistence, with possible exchanges of benefits. You live there, and I live here. You give me that and I give you this. We live next to each other, but please do not cross this line. Peaceful coexistence it sure is, beneficial co-operation it may even be, but is that all we as Christians look for? There must be something more. “Conviviality” means that we live together in such a way that we enjoy being and working together, just as Jesus would like us to in the “feast.” There is interaction, exchanges, crossing of the borders, lending and borrowing, moving beyond the allocated areas of living. We are not to be indifferent neighbours, but we are meant to be neighbours who live joyfully and happily together.

(And that is I think what Acharn Bancha talked about yesterday in his keynote address — not simply a “community,” but a “communion,” without which he would not have recognized me in that miserable condition, stranded and homeless as I was, sleeping on a sofa of the entrance hall ...)

Asia as we all know is a place where different religions and cultures meet. We do not have to be told of these truths from outsiders. We have been exchanging dialogues matter-of-factly. We know what it is like to live within a diversity of religions and a plurality of peoples. Our call, then, is to go forth from dialogue to co-existence, from co-existence to co-operation, and then from co-operation to convivial celebration of being and working together. Dear friends of ACUCA institutions, let us enjoy our mission. Let us point our campus neighbours to the fact that there is a world beyond. And let us cross our boundaries, celebrating our life together happily and joyfully. Thank you.

Notes

1. Richard J. Wood, "Report from the President," in *Living the Mission: Annual Report 2002–2003* (New York: The United Board for Christian Higher Education in Asia, 2003), p. 7.
2. Robert J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1985), pp. 80–93.
3. Donald G. Shockley, *Campus Ministry: The Church Beyond Itself* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989), p. 13.
4. Diogenes Allen, *Steps Along the Way* (New York: Church Publishing Incorporated, 2002), p. 87.