

Who Are We as Theological Educators? How Do We Train for a Church of the Poor?

The Situation of Women in Theological Education

Who are we as theological educators? How do we participate in and train for a Church of the poor? This is the question I have been asked to address at this consultation. Is it impossible for me, as a feminist, to separate this question from my context as a woman theological educator? I am very aware that, as a woman, I belong to that half of the human race which has been traditionally excluded from ordination, from preaching, from teaching, in the sense of being a part of the Church's public teaching ministry, and from the theological education that has prepared men for these roles. This is not a question of being a U.S. American, but a patriarchal culture that shaped all of Christianity.

This exclusion of women from theological education and teaching has shaped profoundly the form and content of Christian theology as it has been taught and preached. Not only have women not been able to bring their own experiences to theological education, but also theology has been biased by a need to justify the exclusion of women. Polemics against women as teachers begin very early in the Church's history. Already in the post-Pauline strata of the New Testament we hear the words "I permit no woman to teach. She is to keep silent" (I Tim. 2:12).

Polemics against women as theological teachers continue in the early Church orders of the third and fourth centuries. The *Apostolic Constitutions* of the late-fourth century argue that Jesus chose to commission men and not women and that the male is the head of the female and concludes that women are not allowed to teach. This viewpoint is reiterated throughout the Middle Ages and is renewed in the Protestant Reformation in mainline Protestant traditions who take the household codes and the Pauline proscriptions against women as teachers as normative.

These arguments continued to be echoed in nineteenth and twentieth

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century debates about women's right to preach and are being revived again today, particularly among Protestant fundamentalists. Although theological schools such as Oberlin College in Ohio admitted women to their course of studies in the 1840's, theological schools generally have been slower to admit women than other professional schools, and the efforts to exclude women from theological education continue today. The Vatican particularly would like to purge women from those faculties of theology where they have gained entrance, such as in the United States.

These polemics against women as teachers and preachers indicate that, in fact, the actual instances of women gaining some theological education through their own efforts and being seen as teachers happened continually in practice. Until some churches in modern times began to change their legal bars against women's ordination, the entrance of women into ordained ministry was not a real possibility. But it was always much more possible for women to gain, through personal gifts of religious insight and private study, some status as a teacher.

One must always remember that polemics against any group doing something means that some people are doing it and doing it well enough and with enough authority to threaten the establishment. Thus the continual polemics against women as teachers mean that the legacy of women as theological educators has been largely repressed and eliminated from the Church's teaching tradition. It has not been that women theological educators have not existed, but rather that memory of them has been erased. Those women whose names are remembered in the Church's legacy are either sanitized as saints, but not taken seriously as thinkers, or else marginalized as heretics and their books destroyed. Thus, for example, we know the names of the fourth-century women who founded women's religious communities, Paula and Melania. Jerome tells us that the circle of pious women that he knew were avid students of Scripture and the theological writings of the fathers, and often wrote to him about obscure points of theology and exegesis. But, although his letters are preserved, their letters are not preserved. A woman, no matter how excellent a scholar, did not belong to the public teaching tradition of the church, so her writings are not collected, published or carried down in the Church's tradition.

The legacy of this erasure of women from the theological tradition has shaped this tradition in ways that we are just beginning to recognize. It means that the tradition operates out of a pervasive androcentrism. All dicta about humanity or "man" in general really mean males and not females. Men are presumed to be the normative human beings. In practice this, of course, really means males of the elite, males of the educated classes of the dominant culture. It is this class of males that shapes the meaning of the word "human." Women, and all other males from the poorer classes and marginalized cultures, are invisible in the tradition.

When women are mentioned in the theological tradition, it is primarily to describe them as "other." They are the ones who are defined by the theological tradition as possessing only a defective humanity, as lacking in full capacity for reason and moral discipline, as unable to speak publicly or hold authority, and as those whose tendency to escape these male-defined limitations also defined them as ones who are to be punished, as those who got out of their place in the beginning, and are ever desirous of getting out of their place, and so must be continually repressed by negative proscriptions and declarations, if not by more brutally coercive means.

What does it mean to be critically aware of one's social context?

What is the meaning of this legacy of repression for women today who find themselves included in at least the margins of the enterprise of theological education? Does this mean that we forget this past history of repression and take up the task of theological education as it has always been done, seeking to fit into male definitions of theology? Superficially it would appear far easier to do so, for the system is most likely to reward those women who do things in the traditional way. It is hard enough to survive as a woman in theological education, but to do so as a woman critical of the patriarchal bias of theology greatly compounds the adversity. But this second step is essential if we are to be authentic to our history and contemporary task. In fact, to be a woman in theological education today is precisely to be required to be profoundly aware of the effects of social ideology upon theology.

Our own historical experience makes it very evident that the "faith of the church" and the "theological tradition of the Church" cannot be accepted at face value as socially neutral and universal bodies of knowledge. Rather, these systems of thought are deeply shaped by the social location of the theologian and the institutions of theology. There is no apolitical or neutral theology, but every theology carries the bias of its social location. Theologies that declare themselves to be neutral or "above politics" simply reveal by such statements their social location within the dominant classes and culture, and their naive and imperialistic universalizing of that social location.

A theology that is authentic must be conscious and explicit about its social context. This, however, does not mean that a theology done in the context of more privileged classes, cultures, races or gender becomes conscious of its social location by becoming explicitly racist, imperialist, chauvinist and patriarchal. There is indeed a particularistic theology arising in the United States at this time, as it arose in fascist circles in Europe fifty years ago, that becomes aware of its social biases precisely to affirm these biases triumphalistically. It declares that the mission of

the United States to impose its power on the rest of the world, and particularly on what it chooses to call its "backyard," namely, in Central America and the Caribbean, is divinely given. It has a divinely ordained mission to defeat the forces of "godless communism," even at the risk of destroying the planet itself. Its hubris is so overweening that it even imagines that if it unleashes a flood of fire upon the world, God will intervene to save the perpetrators, whom they call "the saints," while destroying all the rest of humanity which it considers not only its enemy, but the enemy of God as well.

Thus it is not enough simply to be aware of and affirm one's social location in the doing of theology. One must be clear that an authentic Christian, an authentic biblical theology, a theology which seeks truly to be a "word of God," must bring its awareness of its social location under a certain fundamental norm, and that norm is the preferential option for the poor. I believe there is a universalism in Christian faith. It is a universalism that does indeed seek the salvation of all peoples, of both men and women, of all cultures and races, and the salvation of all creation itself. But this universalism is falsified by the universalizing of the dominant culture, race, gender and nation.

A universalism which truly seeks the salvation of all people and creation must proceed by a critique of its own ideological biases. It must do this by a preferential option for those people who are left out of the dominant culture and economic system. Only by solidarity with those most disadvantaged by the dominant systems of cultural and economic privilege does one reach toward an authentic universalism, which includes those presently left out, which includes women in systems of culture and power monopolized by men, which includes people of color in systems monopolized by those of pale hue, which includes the cultures of Latin America, Asia and Africa, in systems of communication monopolized by Western Europeans and North Americans, which includes the peoples impoverished by those who monopolize the wealth of the earth.

One cannot include these peoples presently marginalized by the world systems of power and culture simply by expanding these systems in their present form and expecting this expansion at the top to "trickle down" to the others, but only by transforming this system. Transformation means a revolutionary process in which the culture and structures of society are fundamentally reorganized so that they begin with a priority of concern for the most disadvantaged in society. Poor women and female children are the most disadvantaged in the present system of hierarchical power based on race, class and gender. The poor black or indigenous female, particularly the youngest and the oldest, are where all the systems of marginalization, disempowerment and contempt for human life converge. Thus only by making the poor black or indigenous women our priority in our vision of redemption do we keep our theological vision right, for only

then is our theology oriented truly as gospel to the "last who are to be first in the Kingdom of God."

The Class Context of U.S. Theological Schools and Churches

How are we as U.S. American theological educators to keep our eyes truly on the last who are to be first in God's Kingdom; namely, on the poor black woman? We work in institutions run exclusively, until recently, by white males of Western European and Anglo-Saxon race and culture. Only recently have women entered these schools in sufficient numbers to even begin asking critical questions about the patriarchal bias of theology. At about the same time, the late 1960's, other critical theologians from the periphery of the dominant system began to raise questions in the academy. Black theology began to question the racial bias of theology. Liberation theologies from Latin America began to raise critical questions about both the Euro-American and economic biases of theology. Today, a rare seminary might hear a theologian doing contextual and liberation theology from Africa or Asia. But these critical theologies have seldom been integrated into the foundational systems of theological education. They remain on the periphery of the theological school, as they remain on the periphery of the perspective of the dominant system of power and culture.

By the very definition of graduate theological education, which prepares a person either for the ordained ministry or to return to teach in a similar institution of graduate theological education, those who enter these premises as students and, even more, as professors belong to the elite of their societies. This is true even of liberation theologians whose educational credentials mark them off from the poor of their societies. Even the rare black, Asian or Hispanic female in the student body, and they are almost non-existent among the faculty, will most likely come from the middle or upper strata of her society.

Thus when we speak of preparing students for ministry in the church of the poor, much less of participating in a church of the poor ourselves, it is difficult to know what this really means in any practical sense. The very sociological structure of theological education removes its members from the people at the base of society. Education itself, particularly post-graduate education, defines one as middle class culturally, even if one's income as a theological educator does not exactly compete with the managerial elite of the business world. Nevertheless, even economically, those who have access to secretaries, xerox machines, subsidized housing, maintenance workers and cleaning staff who repair and clean one's offices, are not among the poor. One's peers in the faculty, and even most of the student body, belong to the same class status, even if some of them may be female and some members of other cultures and races.

What then can it mean to speak of the poor black woman in the classroom of a U.S. theological school? Does this mean simply that one speaks about the poorest people of the world occasionally or even frequently? That we include verbal references to these folk in our symbolic vocabulary? Does it mean that we do theology in such a way as to raise the consciousness of our students about the realities of patriarchy, racism, and economic oppression in our national and global society? To include critical analysis of systems of oppression, and their ideological manifestations, in our courses in theology, ethics, biblical studies, and history is not unimportant. There is an enormous task to be done on the level of theoretical research and reformulation of the theological disciplines to incorporate a liberation perspective in all our fields of study. But it seems to me that this transformation of culture and consciousness cannot simply happen on a theoretical level, if it is not rooted in the actual praxis of the Church and the actual praxis that trains theological students for ministry. Theologians and preachers particularly have a tendency to think that they have done something because they have said something. We tend to think that our praxis is our theoretical activity itself, and so if we have spoken about the poor we have somehow done something about the poor. This allows us to be largely oblivious to our actual social existence and its effects or lack of effects on reality.

When we look at the churches for which our theological schools are educating a ministry, it is clear that few of them welcome critical theologies of liberation that address patriarchy, racism, economic oppression, or American imperialism. Religious observance does indeed cross class and racial lines in the United States. Indeed, churches are largely stratified by race and class in the United States. Different races, classes, and cultures seldom meet in the same congregation. This means that there are indeed churches of the poor, churches where most of the congregation is poor, black, or Hispanic and often mostly female, although the ministry will probably be male. But these churches are least likely to have an educated ministry and certainly not ministers trained in the theological schools where we (the members of this group) teach.

Moreover, these churches of the poor are often indoctrinated with an escapist theology that is oriented to life after death, miraculous healing and the even more remote hopes of upward mobility within American society. By and large, in American society, even the poor do not identify with the poor. They identify with the affluent; they hope themselves to rise into the next rungs of the society and they are taught to despise those poorer than themselves. This is why people like Ronald Reagan get elected president in the United States.

If the poor often do not identify with the poor, needless to say, the more affluent do not either, but each in their various enclaves of culture and comfort encompass themselves with religious symbols that sanctify

their well being and keep out those who are different. Here and there a maverick congregation struggles to cross racial and cultural lines and, even more rarely, to cross class lines, to include ministries to the most disadvantaged in the work of the Church. But even these more conscientized churches have difficulty escaping, or even being aware of, their paternalism. They tend to "help" the poor as people *other* than themselves, rather than really becoming one people in solidarity with the poor and empowering the poor to liberate themselves.

An Alternative Vision of Church and Theological Education

I frankly find it impossible to escape this class encapsulation of theological education within the present organization of both the churches and the seminaries. I can imagine an alternative system. That alternative system would be quite different from theological education or churches as we presently know them. They would begin at the base among the poor with gathered communities of people whose primary concern is the liberation of the poor and, through the poor, the whole society from class, race, and gender oppression. Theological education would be primarily based in the communal reflection of the base community itself, bringing Scripture and theology to bear upon the actual praxis of liberation of the community.

Such communities engaged in theological reflection on their praxis of liberation might gather for periodic *encuentros* with members of other communities to share their reflection and strengthen their solidarity. The person who has done specialized study in theology, Scripture, ethics, and other such disciplines would function as an organic intellectual within the base community, transforming and translating these disciplines in such a way that they can be both comprehended and utilized by the community itself as tools for their own critical consciousness in the liberation struggle. The job of such trained intellectuals would be, in a sense, to work themselves out of a job by empowering the community to do their own critical theological reflection.

There would be a place for schools that function as resources and training places for teachers and organizers of such communities where experts teach. But the model of theological education would be one in which the *people*, and not only the clergy, are the primary subjects of theological education. It is the community who are to become theologically educated and be able to do their own theological reflection. Thus, as long as theological education is about the training of clergy, rather than about empowering the people to become subjects of theological education, we will continue to have churches and theological schools modeled on domination and not on liberation.

In the Church of and for the poor, as I envision it, few theologians or

pastors would make their sole living from ministry or teaching. Such a pattern of a Church of the poor, and theological education in a Church of the poor, is not a utopian fantasy. It is already happening in *encuentros* of basic Christian communities in places like Nicaragua. I have also seen processes like that at work in other basic Christian communities around the world. But it is a model of theological education and Church widely separated from what we do in most of our churches or theological schools in the United States, including those of us who talk much about liberation theology or a theological education for the poor and the oppressed.