

MODELS OF THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION FOR TEACHING GENDER AND HUMAN SEXUALITY
SPATS CONSULTATION/PACIFIC CONFERENCES OF CHURCHES GENERAL ASSEMBLY
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Introduction

Let me begin by offering my thanks to the SPATS leadership team for inviting me to accompany you at your Religion, Gender, and Sexuality Consultation, for allowing me to listen to your presentations, discussions, and debates.

Let me also give a brief description about FTESEA's, renamed at our recent board meeting as the Foundation for Theological Education in Asia and the Pacific (FTEAP), a brief description of FTEAP's commitment to this initiative on religion, gender, and sexuality. It began in 2016 when a member of the board of the foundation attended a consultation in South Africa on women's leadership and how very quickly that conversation turned to a discussion on the marginalization of the gay, lesbian, and transgendered community in church and society - how their marginalization paralleled in specific ways, that of women who were also struggling to be recognized as leaders in church and society. Discussions about commonalities centred on issues of heterosexual male power and privilege before taking up the challenge to determine what needs to change in theological education to break from the present power structure in church and society to an inclusive theology and praxis.

On her return, this board member challenged the board to think about a similar kind of consultative process that might be useful in Asia and the Pacific. As a result, the board authorized its Educational Initiatives Task Force to begin such a process, however our progress was cut short by the onset of the COVID pandemic and only began again in October 2022 as part of another meeting in Manila, which Rev. Rusi attended.

The first step of the process began with research, that is, a sociological study based on information submitted by various schools within the Association of Theological Schools in South East Asia. The results were limited in that the questions addressed primarily women's leadership with few related specifically to LGBTQIA+.

At that meeting we also approved a concept document and a process for the way ahead. One underlying concern for the most part left unstated was whether the different regions in Asia and the Pacific would participate. The good news is that so far in spite of some reservations, Myanmar, the Philippines, Indonesia, Nepal, the women's resource centre in Korea, Japan, and Taiwan, Serampore College and this region have agreed to participate. This meeting continues what is a series of national consultations that will result in, for want of a better name, a Trainer Meeting for principals/deans, senior administrators in Indonesia in 2024.

FTEAP is clear that our role is one of facilitation and of providing financial resources that hopefully make it easier for each group to determine what is needed in its context. We have no definitive outcomes for this work. Rather our goal is to walk alongside the various national associations that have agreed to participate as they discuss and determine what gender/sexuality inclusion is for their region.

A few assumptions do guide this initiative: first, the need to distinguish between gender and sexuality, viewing them as two different components of our identity as human beings – one, primarily physical and the other a cultural and societal construct. FTEAP also, stating the obvious, affirms that the word gender includes both men and women in spite of the fact that so often when the word “gender” is mentioned immediately people think “that’s about women.” Our working assumption is that men and women and LGBTGI + persons have gender constructs into which they have been enculturated by the church and society.

Teaching gender and sexuality as theological educators

As I looked at your schedule for this consultation, I wondered what I might contribute. In the end having served as a Professor of Biblical Interpretation and Homiletics as well as serving for 18 years as principal of a seminary, I elected to focus on issues of pedagogy.

First, an attempt to frame the issue of pedagogy: In a 1996 article Kwok Pui Lan, a Chinese feminist theologian, frames the handover of Hong Kong to the Chinese in terms of the challenging work of “decolonizing minds”. By this she means the cultural practices that need to change for the complex process of decolonization to be realized. This process she describes in the following way:

Decolonization of a colony involves not simply a political turn-over but also complicated, controversial and contested changes in cultural practices. (Underlining mine; Kwok, 1996: 211-12)

For her this means asking questions about what has been accepted as true, questioning familiar thinking patterns, and separating out seemingly coherent discourses. For me, our work in teaching religion, gender and sexuality is about a similar complex process of questioning familiar patterns of thinking and acting that over time have become normative, even truth.

Pui Lan, in another article, quotes the French philosopher, Michel Foucault who breaks down this complex process in a different way. He writes.

each society has its own regime of truth...: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements and the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true. (Quoted by Kwok 1989: 26)

In other words, our comprehension of reality can be held captive to theories of knowledge, frameworks of meaning, authoritative scripts set out as absolute by those whom we accept as authorities to name truth. These frameworks may be culturally or contextually conditioned but once established are difficult to question with the result that they become enculturated, normative, and hence are understood as universal, as true in all circumstances and contexts.

FTEAP's initiative is an invitation to re-examine the powerful and authoritative religious and cultural narrative or narratives about gender and sexuality that is held as normative in the Pacific. It also invites you to ask whether you believe an alternative pattern can or should be created.

The Eurocentric Myth and the Colonial Legacy

As many of you are aware "decolonization of the mind" and decolonial theory focuses on exposing a mythic European construct called the Eurocentric exceptionalist narrative that emerged in the late 15th, early 16th centuries.

This myth embodies the way Europe set up an ethno-racial, and I would add a gender/sexuality, hierarchical classification of the European versus the non-European. This meant the imposition

of the “white/European/heterosexual male” identity over all dimensions of power: economic, political, social, cultural, and religious (Fernandez-Alban 2012: 4). In other words, Europe claimed for itself a narrative that affirmed its superiority in every way over all others. As a result, the worldview of others who were on the underside of this violent system needed to be suppressed. As “others” in this mythic framework they had to be convinced of its truth not only by a dismissal of their values and practices but by physical force and/or psychological manipulation.

A concept of disorder was applied to those considered “other” resulting in their dismissal through a series of negations: “they were not fully human, they were not civilized enough to have systems, they were not literate, their languages and modes of thought were inadequate” (Tuhiwai Smith 2006: 43) and that “their sexual practices were barbaric, unnatural.” Christianity’s role in this colonizing worldview was to “order the disorder,” that is, to “Christianize” the “Other” into this mythic framework. This resulted in silencing and excluding not only alternative systems of belief, values, and practices, that is, alternative worldviews.

Decolonizing Minds in Canadian Theological Education

Let me give an example from my Canadian context. For Canadian theological educators, we realized how powerfully we were held captive to certain ways of viewing reality and truth became through the exposure of a system of residential schools that we in Canada accepted as civilized and God ordained. In this system a partnership was formed between church and government to remove Aboriginal children as young as six from their homes, place them in residential schools where many remained year-round, removed from their Indigenous spiritualities, languages and culture. The aim of such schools was to remove all traces of the “Indian from the child.” They were to become “white and Christian.”

I have been unable to find any voices within my denomination’s leadership decrying our role in this system. All seemed to be held captive to the Eurocentric imaginary framework, unable within our seminaries and in the teaching of theology – perhaps more particularly in the way

we interpreted the Bible - to recognize the assumptions and biases that we presented in our theories of education, our curriculum and practices to generations of those going into ministerial leadership.

Recognizing the sin of the Canadian churches' complicity in residential schools provides a starting point for my thinking about a reframed model for the teaching of religion, gender, and sexuality. Questions like: Does Foucault's claim about societies and truth-making make sense? How is truth evaluated? What techniques, procedures, or discourses are given priority in the construction of truth? What scripts or voices are accepted as authoritative truth-tellers? And of course, where did I as a church leader locate myself in terms of truth-making or truth telling?

Or looking at it another way, how is the challenge before us similar to Kwok Pui Lan's thoughts on decolonizing minds? What needs to be examined in our system of theological education so that current understandings about sexuality can be opened to dialogue, discussion and debate?

Reframing Gender and Sexuality: Some thoughts for theological educators

Pierre Bourdieu, a French sociologist focuses on how people are conditioned into society, the ways in which past events and structures shape current practices and structures and, equally important, that condition our very perceptions of these (Bourdieu 1984: 170). He also maintains that such conditioning is not fixed or permanent but that change does occur over time and demands a clear process. (<https://www.powercube.net/other-forms-of-power/bourdieu-and-habitus/>).

Bourdieu also names the way biases, beliefs and assumptions are central in the act of sense-making. In other words that a self-critical knowledge can become 'a powerful tool to enhance social emancipation' (Navarro 2006: 15-16).

Charles Taylor, a Canadian philosopher, focuses on the images, stories and legends through which people make sense of their social existence and how they share these images, stories, and legends with others so that it becomes a collective understanding resulting in shared practices. For Taylor, these shared practices are often more powerful in fostering change than theory, which is usually the possession of only a small minority. (Taylor 2004: 23).

How is this helpful to theological educators: For both these academics there is the understanding that self-reflection or personal agency, what we call **formation** in theological education can become a powerful tool to challenge hierarchies/marginalization. They also affirm that when facing certain situations, the collective legends, images, and stories, can change patterns of enculturation.

For me as a theological educator and church leader, the work of Bourdieu and Taylor raises questions about the need to reflect more on **what we choose to teach and how we choose to teach**. Are there certain pedagogies that are more suited to promoting critical thinking about gender and sexuality in church and society? If so, what might such pedagogies look like?

Briefly - Three Voices one from Brazil, a second from South Korea and third from the United States and their Possibilities for Teaching Religion, Gender, and Sexuality

These three voices and their views on a transformational pedagogy in theological education have been helpful to me in thinking through how to teach gender and sexuality. I offer them, hopeful they open helpful conversations in this context.

In 1968 **Brazilian scholar, Paolo Friere in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*** called for the development of a **critical consciousness** in his students to tackle what he considers humankind's central problem, i.e., how we affirm our identities as human beings. Central to such as system is the breaking down of what he calls a banking model of education. In this system a teacher has the knowledge, which he/she "deposits" into the minds of the students who memorize and recall what they have been taught. Students then continue to make "withdrawals" throughout their lives. He proposes, a "problem posing model," which seeks to teach students how to view the world critically, how to raise questions and how to analyze why certain problems exist. For Freire education requires a model of praxis, which is an interaction between teachers and students consisting equally of abstract theory and concrete action.

His work signals that for teaching and learning to be meaningful, it must involve **the heart and hands as well as the head**. This emphasis on “critical involvement” focuses on theory being embedded in the crossroads of everyday life; it is incarnational.

Hyun Sook Kim of Yonsei University in South Korea insists that theological education must move away from its enlightenment [Eurocentric] framework to embrace the pluralism of the contemporary situation. From his perspective this means a focusing away from religious questions that address personal, subjective spirituality to embracing the public sphere with its human need and suffering (Kim 2007:425).

He calls this a “conversation” model, which like Bourdieu’s focus on self-awareness, begins by a self-acknowledgement of the power of ideologies to distort one’s thinking. His model requires all in the conversation (faculty, administrators, board members and students) to identify openly their social location, that is, their biases, beliefs, and assumptions. In other words, faculty who teach in the area of gender and sexuality need to identify the social location from which they speak and recognize that they must be open in attending intentionally to the social location of each participant in the conversation. This model not only requires mutual understanding in which common goals that include all in the process are established but also an intentional focus on the interrelationship and interdependency of curriculum, pedagogy, and the environment” (Kim 2007: 431).

Kim, aware of the limitations of the clerical and theory-to-practice paradigms as well as the discipline-based structure of theological education (Tuhiwai Smith 2006: 67¹), speaks of welcoming a plurality of worldviews that works to lead those participating into new understandings of what has remained hidden, seen as deficient or even heretical. His model requires a refocusing, a process of “letting go” of previous concepts and patterns, and here I would add practices. Taiwanese theologian, Shoki Coe, described this “letting go” as “not

¹ Hear the voice of Tuhiwai Smith speaking of discipline-based knowledge.” Their histories (of disciplines) are kept separate and ‘pure.’ Concepts of ‘academic freedom’ and ‘search for truth’ and ‘democracy’ underpin the notions of independence and are vigorously defended by intellectuals. Insularity protects a discipline from the ‘outside’ enabling communities of scholars to distance themselves from others and, in the more extreme forms, to absolve themselves of responsibility for what occurs in other branches of their discipline, in the academy and in the world.”

throwing the baby out with the bath water” yet fully aware that keeping “the baby in cold, soiled water” compromises its life” (Coe 1974:7).

Such a model is deliberately ideological in that there is a shared commitment to the transformation, both of the participants in the conversation and of the context, local and global, in which they live.

Mark Taylor, a professor at Princeton seminary, focuses on the difference between what he calls Theology with a capital T and the theological. He views Theology as distinct from the theological in two senses. He explains that Theology with a capital T in theological institutions in the west and in other contexts tends to focus on doctrinal topics of God, creation, sin, Christology, Holy Spirit, church, eschatology, and so on, all of which provide an ordering function, its parts drawn from established church formulae, creeds, and the biblical narrative’s view of history. Strictly observed, such a focus structures a sense of “orthodoxy” (Taylor 2011: 12), which Taylor argues operate as a web of symbols, both defining what is appropriate to theological education and setting a framework for what is acceptable and what is not. (Taylor 2011: 12).

Distinct from this, is the language of the theological, that is images in song, poetry, story, literature, painting, etc., which for him “convey and constitute the haunting power of peoples bearing the weight of the world.” For Taylor, this haunting power both threatens what is “orthodox” and promises alternative patterns and lifeways” (Taylor 2011: 9). He argues that “in terms of liberatory and transformative potential, Theology’s doctrinal language is no rival to the symbolic language of such an art-force” (Taylor 2011:14).

The second difference between Theology and the theological concerns the binary relationship in which Theology situates transcendence and immanence. Instead, Taylor uses the term “transimmanence,” which he defines “as a practice or reflection that steps *into* and moves *within* the political” (Taylor 2011: 15). It refuses to be locked in place as an either/or binary, (Taylor 2011:15).

In this understanding I see the incarnation, where in the person of Jesus Christ, transcendence and immanence meet at the crossroads where life is lived with both joy and suffering resulting

in discernment of what contributes to human flourishing in all its aspects – spiritual, political, economic, and social.

Let me end with a few words about my focus on gender and sexuality as a feminist!

As a feminist whose primary field is biblical interpretation, my priority continues to be the investigation of those larger, often invisible, frameworks of meaning, which control how we tell the biblical story. As a teacher of homiletics my concern has been to probe and understand how such narratives impact the way in which these stories become truth in the hearts and minds of modern listeners. Following earlier interpreters, I did not use the term decolonizing but rather saw my work as that of a “resistant reader,” which means asking multiple questions from multiple perspectives, looking for new or previously dismissed or silenced ways to frame text and context. Increasingly central to this work has been a critical analysis of the intersection of gender, race, and class. In agreement with feminist scholarship, which focuses both on deconstruction and reconstruction, I now perceive that in “decolonizing minds” we need to include “decolonizing bodies” if theological education is to reconstruct religion, gender, and sexuality.

Conclusion

In the context of religion, gender and sexuality, the challenge is to risk exploring new models beyond the western focus on a **discipline-based, theory to practice, doctrinally focused curriculum of theological education**. It necessitates trust that a multi-voice plurality can move theological education toward a model that Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza names “an emancipatory educational space” (Schüssler Fiorenza 2009).

I have spoken more than enough. Let me leave you with a final question: what kind of pedagogy might be generative for you as a professor or church leader as you contemplate issues of religion, gender, and sexuality in this context?

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