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Normativity and Context in Practical Theology with a View to the Conditions in Africa

In this paper I shall try to enrich this academy by describing my social context from which we do Practical theology. My task is to provide an experience of context in a different location. Your task is to provide the philosophical, psychological, theological and intellectual engagement all of you bring from academics in Practical theology in the Universities. The result I hope will be a much richer intercultural practical theological engagement.

In order to address the task of the social context for a Practical theologian, I will like to ask the following questions. (1) What is practical theology? (2) Who is a Practical theologian? Before, I attempt a definition for you, I must acknowledge that I am aware of the many excellent definitions some of you sitting here have offered. My own definition is informed by and based upon a critical reflection on your definitions and my social context.

In my view practical theology is an academic theological discipline which critically reflects on the human encounter with the divine, and the impact on such an experience on the totality of daily human lives and their communities. In this definition the human encounter is holistic. By holistic I mean that human life consists of the social, the cultural, economical, political, psychological, and the spiritual.

When the experience of the encounter between the divine is brought to bear on all these dimensions of human life, there arises issues of continuity and discontinuity between those who have this experience on their personal life styles, and those who do not.

There are also issues of continuity and discontinuity between this particular experience and the traditions or belief systems through which this experience is interpreted or expressed in a particular socio-cultural and politico-economic milieu. A practical theologian by this definition is a theologian who can critically reflect on the interplay between religious experience, the tradition or belief systems through which that experience is interpreted or expressed and the cultural, spiritual, and psycho-social context and the economic and political status of that person or group of persons.

A practical theologian inevitably does her/his critical reflection utilizing insights from the social sciences, the human sciences, the physical and medical sciences. Furthermore, a practical theologian by this definition may or may not share the tradition or belief systems, and social context of the believer. It therefore, means that a Christian practical theologian can critically reflect on the religious experience of Africans and African Traditional religion, and their social context as well as Hindus and Hinduism and their social context. This is where the unique task of the practical theologian especially the Christian practical theologian comes in. The unique task of a Christian practical theologian is best expressed by Tracy thus:

„The Christian theologian stands in service both of that community of inquiry exemplified but surely not exhausted by the contemporary academy and to that community of religious and moral discourse exemplified but not surely exhausted by his own Church tradition. If that same theologian as herein understood, is to fulfill his service of critical reflection, he must start the inquiry without an assumption either for or against the meaning, meaningfulness, and truth of the symbol or doctrine under analysis“ (Tracy 1975:239).

By the very nature of the unique task of a Christian practical theologian, she/he must by necessity also utilize insights from the social, and human sciences, physical and medical sciences to critically reflect theologically without losing or selling out his/her Christian perspectives. One must do so with such honesty and integrity that allow for clear areas of differences in areas that may exist between the belief systems and social contexts of the believers in question and those of the practical theologian.

Hence the ability of a Practical theologian to engage the social context demands a willingness and commitment to deal with multiple complex problems unique to the task of the practical theologian. Yet, as all of you know too well, the social context provides the ground to a practical theologian to be declared a saint or a heretic. Because the boundary between the two for a practical theologian is often very blurred. For, it is a tall order for a Practical theologian to critically reflect on an experience of the encounter with the divine which is expressed or interpreted through a particular belief system utilising perspectives from the social, human, and medical sciences without becoming either a sociologist, an economist, a political scientist, a phenomenologist of religion, or a cultural anthropologist. The task of the practical theologian is further compounded by the complex problems of the experiences of context in different locations. The varied contexts inevitably create varied contents of practical theologies. Such varied contexts

and contents raise some fundamental questions for all practical theologians. I shall cite one or two of them here.

It is a truism that communication affords us the possibility of sharing stories of human encounter with the divine. More importantly, without communication, the very existence and commitment to the unique task of practical theology is impossible. However, the question is how do we communicate? Whose language, signs, and symbols of culture, socio-economic context, precepts, and concepts do we use as normative? Even though most of us, if not, all of us here are Christian Practical theologians, the fact still remains that our experiences and our interpretations of these encounters are largely coloured by our socio-economic contexts and stations. As such I am tempted to agree with Karl Marx that there is hardly any decision of even Practical theologians that is totally free from the conscious or unconscious influence of our own economic interest. And I will add other cultural and philosophical entrapments.

Furthermore, our experiences and interpretations are also coloured directly or indirectly by the value systems of the larger communities we are part of beside our membership in the Christian community called the Church. Therefore, the experiences of the Context in different locations present the practical theologian with an enormous task.

This task becomes almost impossible, if we define different locations to include the cultural, social, economic, political, the racial, sex, the first world, and the two thirds world. All these complex multiple unique tasks of the practical theologian intend raise complex multiple methodological questions for the practical theologian. These methodological questions are not only conceivable, but necessary in order that the practical theologian will find a place among the theological disciplines, the human, social, physical and medical sciences. Therefore it is not sufficient for the practical theologian to merely state that he or she has adopted one method or another simply because he or she believes them to be true or convenient. The fact that in studying the issues of faith, a practical theologian starts from one perspective rather than from another is not only an individual accident but vitally necessary in order to make clear the methodological questions needed to critically reflect, explicate and articulate the nature and the value of the principles underlying his/her systems of practical theology.

I shall now share with you some examples of experiences of context in different location. As I stated at the beginning of this presentation, my objective in this paper is to enrich this academy by describing my social context from which we do Practical theology. My task is to provide an experience of context in a different location. Your task is to

provide the philosophical, psychological, theological and intellectual engagement all of you bring from academics in Practical theology in the Universities.

I shall now present the general African context and that of Ghana in particular. I must admit that most of my observations of the African context are informed by the situation and my experiences in Ghana. I will also like to acknowledge with gratitude that these experiences in Ghana that I share with you came out of a workshop jointly organised by the Development Office of the Presbyterian Church of Ghana and the Environment Department of the Christian Council of Ghana held at the Presbyterian Women's Centre, Abokobi, from 18-21 April, 1995. The theme was „The Economic realities and the Family in Ghana“. The participants included youth and youth workers, staffs from different types of NGOs, house wives, single parents, lawyers, teachers, hospital administrators, professors in sociology, Economics, and theologians.

If we are to believe the Western press on the so called economic recovery in Africa, Ghana is projected by the IMF, the World Bank, and some Western governments as a model of economic recovery story, and political stability. No doubt, there is relative peace in Ghana as compared to Somalia, Liberia, Nigeria to name but a few. The government has also done some good things. At least, it has made a u-turn from its authoritarian and oppressive policies as a military government. Notwithstanding some of these good changes, a critical examination of the daily lives of Ghanaians reveal a picture of an economic recovery and political stability contrary to what opinion posters of the Western presses say. I hope some of you may know or even have lived in similar experiences to this case so that you can draw from your experiences to empathetically understand our context and the enormous task of a Practical theologian in such a context.

The Ghana case I present has raised some fundamental questions about the task of a practical theologian in Ghana. We are all struggling in Ghana to deal with these problems and I am humbly presenting them for your critical reflection and responses as Practical theologians in different locations, yet who stand in solidarity with all of God's people especially those of the household of Christ. I also cite the Ghana case because it raises afresh for us in Ghana how one applies the issues of justice, liberation, and peace in the Gospel of Jesus Christ who has come „that they may have life and have it more abundantly.“ (John 10:10b).

The ethos of traditional Ghanaian religion is to acquire power for protection, mediate, or transfer power to fight against all evil powers, de-

viant behaviours, and other powers that diminish peoples' quality of life. The process of acquiring or transferring power was through rituals. However, this traditional ethos is undergoing irreversible changes through the introduction of Western education, Christianity, economic and political systems, secularity, and military skills.

Nowadays, people know that when you obtain good Western education, you get a good job, and you are paid with lots of money. You use your money to build house(s). When you are also sick, you can get the best medical services that money can buy, even if the sickness is neither curable nor even treatable. Some of those who do not have good Western education know they can do business. Doing business in some cases means one over invoices in order to give some officials some percentages of the money obtained from such practices. In this case power is acquired through corruption and not through rituals.

One can also acquire power by denouncing the traditional religion and replace it with a „Do it yourself“ religion that meets the demands of the traditional religion with Western commercial overtones which meets the needs of people living under the yoke of structural economic adjustment programme managed by a military government that magically transforms itself into a civilian government. Such a „do it yourself“ religion has the characteristic of Freudian type of religion in which such a religion serves as a powerful deflection (Freud 1961). One can also get power by gathering and mobilizing some soldiers and civilians who are power hungry, to overthrow a legitimate government, impose fear, and oppression in order to remain in power and become powerful.

Others also get power by being part of a government not by merit but through some connections. In this case such an official goes to a Western government asks for some inappropriate aid. Sometimes this aid may be guns to silence their own people or an aid that involves some technologies that are far expensive to buy and even far more expensive to maintain in preference to those that are affordable and less expensive to maintain. The purpose of contracting such an aid is to get a huge percentage „kickbacks“ in foreign money on the part of the officials of the receive country. One of the purposes of the officials of the giving countries seems to be their need to temporarily lower (be it temporarily) the giver country's unemployment rate for short term political gain in the polls.

A couple of years ago, the government of Ghana was so eager to become a friend of the West. So, in the name of Economic structural Adjustment, the IMF and the world bank devised an aid package for Ghana with the condition that all services previously paid for by the

government be privatized. It seems for some reason the IMF and the World Bank did not see it fit to make Justice, Liberation of the poor, and political freedom, and accountability as a necessary condition for their aid.

The sad fact is that as a result of accepting this aid package, all health services are outside the reach of most of the people especially those in the rural areas. Basic primary education is also becoming so expensive for the rural folk cannot afford to send their children to school. The net result here is a nation of mostly unhealthy people and increasing numbers in illiteracy.

I shall like to draw on Boff's three mediations as conceptual tools of communication to enable me articulate for myself the Ghanaian experience firstly. As you are all aware, in therapy begins with the ability to name one's experience. Secondly, Once I can get a language in which I can use to do critical reflection our experience then I can also share with you that experience. I am doing both here. In my view a practical theologian in my context needs the analytical tools referred to by Leonardo Boff as the three "mediations" of liberation theology. By mediations, Boff defines as "... a means with which [liberation theology] is endowed for bringing to realization what it proposes to itself as an end." (Boff & Boff 1984 :5). The three mediations are the socio-analytical, the hermeneutic, and pastoral practice.

The socio-analytical are the necessary instruments we use to look at the perceptions of our social contexts. The instruments necessary to "improve our perception of 'contradictory reality,' so as to overcome the ingenuousness, the empiricism, and the moralism that prevent us from acquiring a critical knowledge of..." our social context or what Boff calls "the socio-analytical mediation". (Boff & Boff 1984 :5).

Firstly, with the help of the socio-analytical, we can see the contradictory reality. We see reality, the empirical facts of the contrast between the rich and poor. We can see the facts of unemployment, of few rich people at the expense of more poor people, of luxury houses built at the expense of the disappearance of affordable houses, the importation of more expensive foreign foods at the expense of cheaper home grown foods.

Secondly, we move from seeing the facts of the socio-economic reality to an awareness of the interrelatedness of these facts, which inevitably invoke our critical Christian consciousness. For the practical theologian, there is a direct relationship between the diminishing quality of life of the individual, the unjust socio-economic structures imposed in society by the privileged few and the proclamation of Christ

that „the Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has appointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight too the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord“. (Luke 4:18-19).

The application of such a socio-analytical on the Ghana situation reveals the following: The long term ability of Ghana to compete in both human and material resources in highly technological twenty-first and twenty-second centuries are being sacrificed for short term political gains. I must also add that the governments that urge the IMF and World bank to force third world countries to implement such structural economic adjustment policies are on the contrary doing all possible to create jobs for their people as well as build various social assistance for the less fortunate in their countries. Are we to assume that in these policies presuppose a notion of a superior human in the West and an inferior human being in the third world? The basic fact is that implementing these policies do not produce better economic recovery. If such a recovery exists, then it is beyond the recognition of most Ghanaians. Rather, the obvious results that Ghanaians can see and feel is that life in Ghana is clearly divided between „the few have and the large have not“. The implementation of the policies have also given rise to a context through which the definition of power, and means of acquiring, and mediating such power is clearly different from the ethos of traditional notion and means of acquiring power. The meaning of power simply but no means simplistic the means to threaten or intimate others, rub them off their livelihood by denying them jobs, education, good health facilities, and create economic insecurity and iniquity, yet be able to speak and convince the Western World that all is well. The only ethic at work is survival, and staying in power at all cost.

As practical theologians we can all agree that social analysis alone is not unique task of a practical theologian as well articulated by Forrester (1985), Browning (1998), and Tracy (1975:3-13, 64ff), to name but a few. Social analysis should a practical theologian to calls „hermeneutic mediations“. The hermeneutic mediation is the special privilege task of the practical theology in which we allow the liberating love of God to confront the contradictory social reality. We ask such fundamental questions as where is God in this contradictory reality? What does the word of God say? What is a Christian response? How have Christian other previous Christian interpretation of the kingdom of God, Justice, love, sin, forgiveness, grace, Church, humanity, prevented appropriate Christian responses and in some cases have resulted in producing this contradictory reality? But we must avoid what

Boff calls „bilingualism“ (Boff & Boff 1984:10)). In order words we should avoid a theological engagement which produces a theological parallel of the contradictory reality.

In the case of Ghana, the hermeneutic mediation of Justice, liberation, and peace have not produced their desired results not so much of any bilingualism. Rather, it is because we have failed to see the relatedness between individual sin and structural systems that produce injustice, oppression and chaos. In other words individual salvation is stressed while the need just socio-economic and political systems are neglected. The individual and collective prayers of intercession are also stressed, while collective political actions should aim at addressing injustice and political oppression are neglected. Most Ghanaian Christians take seriously daily Bible reading their devotional lives. However, there is less critical dialectical engagement of the Scripture, personal lives, the oppressive sociopolitical and exploitative socio-economic systems imposed from within and without. The application of hermeneutic mediation in the Ghana social context is compounded by the fact that there constant paradigm changes. Even, among Christians, there are such fast paradigm changes between the conservative and liberal groups of the mainline Churches. There are also the Independent African Churches, and the mainline Churches. Among these two groups are the traditionalists and the progressives.

In such a fast changing context paradigms of yesterday may become meaningless today, and paradigms of yesterday may also appear irrelevant on the surface. However, a critical look seems to suggest that symbols of yesterday and today are revisited to help them deal with the new contradictory social realities.

Therefore there is an urgent need for a critical theological pastoral hermeneutic mediation has to come out from this fast changing situation on the one hand and yet taking seriously the old symbols with which they bring to the new contradictory social realities on the other. Such an approach if Ghanaian practical theologians are to influence the mediation of pastoral practice, which in my view is the goal of the practical theologian of any context. Hence it only logical that we shall thirdly and lastly look the mediation of the pastoral practice or what Browning calls strategic fundamental practical theology.

The socio-analytical and hermeneutic mediations should enable practical theologians to propose a „mediation of the pastoral practice“. The mediation of the pastoral practice by definition is the strategic pastoral agenda we shall enable God's people to experience Justice, liberation and peace. In the words of Boff it is a „search out for the viable, sensible avenues down which the liberation of the poor can travel, within

the framework of religious, political, military, ideological, and economic forces..." (Boff 1984:5) At the beginning of this presentation I mention that the Ghana context has offered a challenge to practical theologians in Ghana on how we deal with the issues of Justice, liberation and peace. In my opinion the Ghana context demands one must pursue the issues of Justice, liberation, and peace simultaneously. However, there are some paradoxes in Ghana which makes pursuing Justice and liberation almost improbably for peace to exist. I shall now point out these paradoxes in the following paragraphs. *It is obvious that there is enough frustration, disappointment, feeling of anger and rage because of injustice, oppression, and chaos among the masses of people to mobilize for pastoral action. The easiest thing to appeal to their feelings and mobilize them into action to address the injustice, oppression and chaos. However, Such approach will inevitably lead to catastrophic massive chaos and violence beyond the management of anyone. One cannot also guarantee that such a pastoral mediation will get nationwide cooperation between the city dwellers and the rural dwellers. That is why I suggested that the means of achieving justice and liberation almost makes the existence of peace impossible on the one hand. On the other hand the present state of affairs is only an alibi for injustice and oppression.*

Another insurmountable problem in the Ghana context is how to locate the centre of the concentric relationships. For example, there is the circle of poor. Among other circles of the poor are ethnic, religious, political kinship, and sex. Therefore it is difficult, if not impossible to determine whether one can succeed to mobilise people on the basis of injustice, oppression, and peace rather than their ethnicity, religion, or kinship. The recent problems in Somalia, Nigeria, Rwanda, Angola, the Middle east, and Northern Ireland point to the complexities of such a pastoral mediation.

It is no exaggeration to suggest that the complexities of the consequences have led to some of the pastoral mediations earlier pointed, by some the mainline Churches in Ghana. In that respect their efforts are better appreciated than other situations where are seemingly pastoral paralysis. The lesson we draw from all these as Christian pastoral theologians is that our discipline is by its very nature not only interdisciplinary, but also holistic. It is also contextual as well as intercultural. Therefore, we need each other, yet each one of us must exercise integrity in maintaining the standards of the discipline while at the same exercising responsibility to be creative. For me, it is such a challenge of practical theology that inspires all my efforts in the discipline, and my hope to grope with all the complexities.

References

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