

12. Personal Experience of Difference and Convergence: Teaching Moral Theology in Sri Lanka and Rome

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Since I have been asked to reflect under the above title with the main purpose of stimulating further reflection on teaching moral theology in two culturally diverse contexts, I limit myself to a few brief remarks on my personal teaching experiences in two very diverse contexts.¹ In what follows, I will use a first-person narrative style by which both differences and convergences will emerge on their own, even if they are not explicitly stated.

Teaching in Two Different Continents

I have been teaching theological ethics for the past twenty-eight years. I teach theological ethics mainly in Sri Lanka (Asia) and in Rome (Europe) during the two halves of every year—a semester each. Thus, for nearly three decades, I have had the annual experience of teaching on two different continents to two very different types of students, and in rather diverse cultural contexts, as I shall explain below.

In Sri Lanka, I have taught at the National Seminary of Our Lady of Lanka (NSA), Kandy since 1995.² In the past, in addition to this, I also

¹ This presentation concentrates exclusively on my personal experiences of teaching.

² Only major seminarians aspiring for the priesthood—both diocesan and religious—study in this seminary. In the past, this seminary served as the one and only papal seminary for the whole of South Asia—that is, for India (which then included present Pakistan and Bangladesh), Burma, and Ceylon (Sri Lanka). It was established in 1893 under a special decree of Pope Leo XIII as the papal seminary for South Asia, and was shifted to Pune, India in 1955. Currently, it is administered by the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Sri Lanka (CBCSL) and is the main academic center for theological studies in the country. It has an average annual student population of some 250 seminarians from a majority of the local dioceses and religious congregations. At times, students

taught for many years at the Aquinas University College, Colombo; the Theological College of Lanka, Pilimathalawa (belonging to the non-Catholic Christian Churches in Sri Lanka); and the Sinhala Lay Theologate, Colombo. At the first three places the medium of instruction is English, while at the last place, the Sinhala Lay Theologate, instruction is in Sinhalese, the main local language in Sri Lanka.

Every now and then, I also teach theological ethics elsewhere in Asia—for example, at Dharmaram in Bangalore, India, where I have taught intensive courses a couple of times. In Rome, I have been teaching at the Pontifical Accademia Alfonsiana since 2005, at the Pontifical Beda College since 2011, and at the Pontifical Urban University since 2018. At the first and the last places, I teach in Italian, while at the second place, I teach in English.

Thus, I have had unique experiences as a professor not only in Sri Lanka and Rome (two very diverse cultural contexts) but also *within* Sri Lanka and Rome. This is challenging, but it has also given me invaluable teaching experiences that have enriched me as a moral theologian—something which I would have never learned from books or through academic speculation.

My Experiences of Convergence and Divergence

Teaching in Asia (Sri Lanka)

Just as in the rest of Asia where I teach, in Sri Lanka my students hail from diverse cultures, mainly Sinhalese and Tamil. In a country that has suffered ethnic tensions for nearly three decades, the fact that the language of teaching is English certainly serves as a bridge-builder for the two main linguistic communities of the country, though today only a few in the Sinhalese and Tamil communities fluently speak English. Their lack of a

(mainly belonging to religious congregations) from countries such as India, Pakistan, Indonesia, and a few African countries also study here, occasionally giving it an international feel.

working knowledge of English is the main disadvantage of teaching theological ethics in English in Sri Lanka. Although most of the seminarians and religious are given courses in English for two to three years (or even more) in their respective formation houses before they join the theological curriculum of the major seminary (NSA), their level of the language remains quite weak.³ As such, one wonders at the end of their theological studies how much of what was taught has had the desired effects on them.⁴ My first-hand experiences tell me how these students in general tend to think first in their own local idioms and languages, and then make efforts to express themselves in English (quite an uphill task for them), especially when those who have some courage (to express themselves in English) raise questions during my lectures. The same holds true when they respond to questions during oral examinations. Most of the academic papers assigned to them and their answers on written exams also clearly portray an inner struggle with the language. Even at the Aquinas University College and the Theological College of Lanka (TCL), I have had similar experiences.

Consequently, there is a general tendency among the students in Sri Lanka to learn by heart whatever is taught, especially the notes given, and then simply to repeat them at exams, whether they really understand what they express or not. This tendency is further reinforced by the system of education prevalent in secular studies in Sri Lanka. Even when courses are taught in the local languages—Sinhalese and Tamil—the predominant practice is for the teachers to give notes and ready-made answers to the possible questions that may be asked at examinations (even at public examinations, such as the GCE—General Certificate of Education, Ordinary and Advanced Level Exams). In my experience, this has become

³ Of course, there is an entrance exam, mainly to check their knowledge of English, but getting through that exam often does not mean that the candidates have a good working knowledge of English.

⁴ In addition to serving as “a bridge-builder” between the two main ethnic communities, teaching in English has other important advantages—such as the availability of theological literature in English and the availability of a ready-made theological vocabulary that the two main local languages lack.

a sort of a “spoon feeding,” and does not help students to internalize what they study, nor does this system encourage students to themselves do any further personal research through extra readings around the relevant subjects, or even to merely reflect on what they study. Often, a parrot-like repetition is all one gets at the exams. In order to avoid this danger, and also to encourage the students to do personal studies (and thereby internalize what they study), as a rule, I do not give notes (except when strict definitions are necessary). Instead, in my courses on theological ethics, I encourage students to take down their own personal notes as I deliver my lectures. I also refer them to various articles and books, which hopefully make them get engaged enough to do at least some reading around the subject(s) concerned.

Being a theological institute that is affiliated with Rome’s Pontifical Urban University (the “Urbaniana”), the syllabus for each of the courses of the theological curriculum in the NSA is prescribed by this University. The lecturers are expected to strictly adhere to these syllabuses. Although the list of what is known as “theses” (topics or themes) sent by the Urbaniana allows three local contextual theses to be incorporated into the list, the authorities at the National Seminary are not interested in doing so, for whatever reason. Consequently, the theological curriculum is mostly oriented towards classical European theology, even though the seminarians hail from Sinhalese and Tamil backgrounds (coming more from villages than from urban cities) and will be later ministering as priests mostly in their own Sinhalese and Tamil contexts.

Since the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Sri Lanka (CBCSL) is the custodian of the National Seminary, the questions that can be discussed during the lectures are quite limited, because most of the lecturers are reluctant to entertain theologically controversial questions lest they irritate the bishops, who are the ones who appoint the lecturers. Moreover, most of the lecturers themselves are not interested in dealing with contextual topics relevant to their particular courses but simply stick to their syllabuses as prescribed by Urbaniana. For example, in theological ethics, the question of population control and the Church’s official teachings on

artificial contraception is dealt only within the contours set by the Urbaniana. At the same time, most of the seminarians are themselves highly conservative and rarely ask questions that are “outside the box,” so to speak. Even those who do raise important, critical questions have to think twice because of the risk of calling their own orthodoxy and loyalty to the magisterium and her teachings into doubt. To be considered eligible for ordination to the priesthood in contemporary Sri Lanka, orthodoxy and loyalty are a must. This has prompted a tendency that at times amounts to blindly repeating what the hierarchical Magisterium teaches without expressing any doubts or raising any questions. Moreover, the teachings of Vatican II are not dealt with as a separate subject in the seminary theological curriculum, and they are only given a passing reference in some sources. Obviously, in such an academic context, whenever I, as a lecturer of theological ethics, make it a point to raise some controversial ethical issues or to base my remarks on Vatican II documents (along with other moral sources such as scriptures, tradition, etc.), I am the odd man out. But so far, for some thirty long years, I have continued to teach two of the most controversial areas of theological ethics—human sexuality and marriage.

However, at the Theological College of Lanka (which is run by various non-Catholic Christian Churches), the questions and issues raised by the students (who also aspire for ministry in their respective churches) are very different from those raised by the Catholic seminarians at the NSA. Moreover, as a lecturer at the Theological College, I have to base my moral lectures mainly on scripture and at times on the Fathers of the Church and on some traditional elements, but never on the “hierarchical Magisterium,” as the latter is not theologically relevant for the students there. This is a unique experience and a challenge for me as a Catholic professor of moral theology.

At the Sinhala Lay Theologate in Colombo, which was begun in the late 1980s, things are even more diverse, in the sense that most of the students here are lay (non-seminarians) and some of them are married and working. They study theology voluntarily and show a greater interest in

the lectures, and they also bring in certain issues of morality to do with their day-to-day living, in sharp contrast to the NSA students (who are non-working, non-married seminarians). Could this be due to the fact that they live in society and in their respective families, and thus that they are surrounded by various living issues relevant to theological ethics? Or could it be due to the fact that their medium of instruction, reflections, and theological idiom are in the local language and cultural categories? One of my biggest challenges in teaching in Sinhalese has been finding the correct vocabulary for theological terms. It was only in the 1990s that a few dictionaries of Sinhalese theological terms were written for the first time, and even now, after nearly three decades, it certainly is an uphill task at times to find the correct theological terms in the local language and idiom.

Interestingly, at all the places I teach in Sri Lanka (and in Bangalore, too), the students in general are quite open to interfaith marriages, whereas they are not as open to LGBTQ issues or the questions raised by those who are divorced and remarried. Could this be due to the Asian cultural esteem of marriage and family that still prevails? Could their openness to interfaith marriages be a result of their multireligious and multicultural Asian context? Compared to their European counterparts, the theology students in Sri Lanka are more interested in issues related to social ethics. Could this be due to the socio-economic context in which they live?

Teaching in Europe (Rome)

At all the three places where I teach in Rome, I use a lecture style, and I teach in Italian and English. At each place, there are students who come from various countries across the world, with interesting variations or divergences. Basically, the Urbaniana is theologically quite orthodox and the students themselves in general are very orthodox too, whereas at the Alfonsiana students are willing to ask more skeptical questions, even though they are also quite orthodox. At both these universities, a serious problem for the students is expressing themselves in Italian, which is the only language of instruction. But at the Pontifical Beda College, the

medium of instruction is English, and almost all the students have a good knowledge of English.⁵ Here, the students mainly have “late vocations” to priesthood, in the sense that they have joined the seminary at a mature age, often after having worked. The students’ attitudes towards moral issues are evenly divided—some raise troubling issues and questions, while others wish to simply toe the line of the official Church without rocking the boat, as it were. However, with regard to sexual ethical issues, my students at Beda have been unique, in the sense that almost all of them hail from the English-speaking “First World” countries, and their issues of concern are very different from those in Asia. For example, with regard to LGBTQ issues and remarried Catholics, their general thinking is quite liberal, in contrast to their counterparts from Asia, whom I teach. Could this be due to the liberal societies or cultural contexts from which most of them come? Could it also be due to the fact that their own kith and kin are more affected by LGBTQ issues and civil remarriages? However, compared to their counterparts in Asia, most of the students at Beda are not that open to issues of social ethics.

A Few Notable Experiences

During my many years of teaching theological ethics in both Asia and Europe, I have observed a very interesting but troubling phenomenon common to the students in both Sri Lanka and Rome. When I myself was a student/seminarian in the 1980s in Bangalore, India, most of us students used to trouble our professors by raising thorny questions and controversial ethical issues. In responding to us, our professors at that time had a torrid time defending the Church’s official magisterial teachings while we continuously challenged some of those teachings. Surprisingly, in recent times, the scenario has changed completely and radically. Now, it is I (the professor) who keeps on asking thorny questions and raising

⁵ As a result, most of them have free and lively conversations with me during my lectures compared to their counterparts elsewhere in Rome who follow my courses in Italian.

controversial issues in order to provoke constructive responses among my students, and it is my students who go on defending the magisterial teachings! The role of professors and students seem to have switched. My students go all out to defend the official hierarchical Church teachings, often passionately and uncritically. I regard this role change of professors and students as an inevitable consequence of the official hierarchical domesticating or taming of theology and theologians during the decades since the 1980s, and the imposition of a single type of theology in almost all the seminaries and centers of theological studies. The obvious negative consequence is what we notice today, namely, that theology is almost always a mere repetition of what the hierarchical magisterium teaches! No critical thinking or alternative ways of thinking (irrespective of the diverse cultures in which the Catholic Church finds herself all over the world) has been seen in the recent past, and now we seem to be reaping the repercussions of that.⁶

As already mentioned above, in Rome, at both the Alfonsianum and the Urbaniana, the students are from various cultures all over the world, mainly the so-called “Third World” countries of Latin America, Africa, and Asia. However, at Beda, as mentioned above, they are mostly from English-speaking Western cultural backgrounds pursuing “late vocations.” Their attitudes toward and questions about theology are in sharp contrast to what students at the Urbaniana or at the National Seminary in Kandy would be asking.

Moreover, I have observed that some students—both in Sri Lanka and in Rome—have come to seminaries with very fixed theological ideologies, which they try to impose on any theological discussion. This is generally true for those who have joined seminaries later in life, who seem to have somewhat fixed ideas, and have a very limited appetite to learn anything new in theology. For example, for such students, there is nothing to learn with regard to the theology of human sexuality or bioethics because

⁶ Interestingly, it is not just the contemporary students. A number of professors of theology belonging to the younger generation are also victims of this.

everything in those two fundamental areas of moral theology has purportedly been settled, either by Pope John Paul II or by the ideology of North American “pro-life” movements. Moreover, in both Sri Lanka and Rome, I have noticed an alarming rate of ignorance of both fundamental moral theology and of the history of moral theology in my students.

Conclusion

From what I have written, it should be obvious that the experience (and communication) of one language (or expressions of such experiences within a given cultural context) cannot be accurately translated into another. Moreover, the different influences of diverse lived contexts on persons (whether students or professors) inform some of their convictions about human existence, including those related to theological ethics. My own experiences of teaching moral theology in Sri Lanka and Rome show that the depth of experience possible in one language, or the expression of that experience through particular cultural symbols/terminology, cannot simply be translated into another. At least some fundamental contextual differences seem to be rather constitutive and so cannot be easily overcome.



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