Education in Multiculturality
Education to Interculturality

In Ecclesiastical Institutions of Higher Education
and in Formation Communities
for Catholic Consecrated Life in Italy

Edited by
Enrica Ottone – Luca Pandolfi

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Front cover
Pavel Égüez, *Grito de los Excluidos*, mural en cerámica.
Cotacachi, Ecuador 2001
(Photograph by Luca Pandolfi, 2007)

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Diversity always proves a bit frightening, for it challenges our securities and the status quo. [...] In the face of cultural, ethnic, political and religious diversity, we can either retreat into a rigid defense of our supposed identity, or become open to encountering others and cultivating together the dream of a fraternal society.

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POPE FRANCIS
Speech to the Hungarian Episcopal Conference
Apostolic visit to Budapest, September 12, 2021

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Opportunities and Challenges of Intercultural Encounters in Religious Education Centres

❖ Robin Sahaya Seelan

Abstract

Intercultural Encounters enrich our formation today, as it is an indispensable element of our contexts, both local and global. The article focuses on the challenges and opportunities that both formees and formators face within the experience of multiculturality and prepares the ground to transit from multiculturality to authentic interculturality. It analyses the "spaces within" formation centres, double consciousness and epistemological pluralism and wants the reader to consider the presence of three opportunities, namely ontological assumptions (understanding ourselves and the world around us), historiographical enquiry (studying local histories) and sociology of absences (studying the silence and silenced voices). What we need today is "Intercultural translation" which acts as the basis for opening up new spaces for communal resistance and social struggles. This way our formation centres will help holistic training and enable us to offer glory to God.

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Introduction

Human encounters are not that easy to assess. Each of us carry within us a past, some of which is inexplicable, either for want of right words in another language or for the inability to describe those experiences because of its contents, either too sacred or too inhumane. When two humans interact, especially when they are from two different cultural settings, these encounters are complicated, even more so when these two humans are candidates for religious life, now within one 'mono' cultural setting of the religious life, noticeably, within the frames of a religious formation centre.

Religious formation centres face the double tasks of introducing or strengthening "formees" into a new "religious culture", along with sustaining the good or positive elements that the formees bring with them from their native cultures. These tasks are further complexed because the formators too continue to grow in a religious culture of their particular congregation and have a greater awareness of their own respective native cultures, and decide either to distance themselves completely from it or immerse totally in it, or strike a midway. Additionally, since religious formation takes place within a wider setting of the universal church, the tasks are further complexified. In other words, intercultural encounters in religious formation settings need to be carefully understood and analyzed for efficiency and relevance.

The purpose of education within religious formation is two-fold. Primarily, it is to help formees learn basics of philosophy, theology, consecrated life, etc. But beyond this, it is to help the formees and the formators discover the society from different angles. As Du Bois said in his 1903 seminal work *The Souls of Black Folk*, «The function of the university is not simply to teach breadwinning, or to furnish teachers for the public schools, or to be a centre of polite society; it is, above all, to be the organ of that fine adjustment between real life and the growing knowledge of life, and adjustment which forms the secret of civilization»[1]. Philosophizing these, but focusing more on learning and education, this presentation offers a philosophical analysis using a phenomenological method and a deconstruction method, from the Indian contexts. It considers three challenges currently present in formation centres and also presents these as opportunities for a better formation in the Catholic Church.

1 The Indian Context

Religious formation in India cannot be mute to the things happening around. The growth of intolerance, fundamentalism, communalism, increasing poverty, polarization and hatred, etc. continue to affect us, collectively and individually. Treated with suspicion, facing hostility from It is necessary to sincerely delve deep into the socio-cultural realities and realign our formation accordingly, especially at the level of education, chiefly philosophy, theology, and spirituality. The following paragraphs are developed against this background.

2 Spaces within

There are three players in formation centres: formees, formators, and religious structures. Structures have a "juridical life" and therefore need to be considered as a key player too. These players operate within the formation centres which are "practice spaces" and thus, in a way, protective spaces too. They are meant to be safe spaces wherein the formees can learn, discover, and shape up one's own self, chiefly in collaboration with the other two players. The term "practice spaces" also indicate that mistakes, especially in understanding one's own self and culture and accepting others with their specific cultural backgrounds can arise. Yet, it is inevitable and, in a way, essential too, to grow up as 'intercultural persons' in multicultural set-

tings. As formees enter into "religious" spaces, a feeling of difference or strangeness emerges as the "religious culture" is different. This strangeness makes the person who enters either ashamed of his or her own specific culture or feels too proud or superior to "adjust" to the new setting.

On the other hand, the formators, with all goodwill, can sometimes fail to "understand" the formees with their specificities, especially with regard to their worldviews, way of relating, behaving etc. They forget that the formation houses are "spaces" within which the younger ones need to grow. The formators face an additional challenge of "generation gap". With rapid changes happening within cultures, the gap between elders and young people is another factor which needs to be accepted and understood, especially in the context of formal education within religious formation. Religious structures have evolved over "time-tested" practices, and therefore, they expect the formees and their formators to "fall in line", as it invites them to enter into a new "religious culture", which is often distinct and separate from the "outside" social cultures. While structures are indispensable, the tendency to become overtly institutionalized becomes problematic. Rigidity, categorization, compartmentalization, etc. can make intercultural contacts artificial, if not outright denial of existence of cultural settings for the formees and the formators.

A related issue is the "universality-uniformity" type of understanding of religious culture. Since there is certain universality in congregations, the desire for uniform practices in each of the houses, especially in formation houses, can occupy that space that the individual or a collective body might seek to have. When uniformity overrides individual cultural factors, then interculturality becomes difficult. Seeking a balance between both these can be cumbersome, but nevertheless, necessary. The idea of universality can also bring in "elitist approaches" in architecture, etiquette and courtesies, and could also inject feelings of inferiority in the formees and formators. This needs to be kept in mind especially when sometimes our theologies and philosophies can appear to be elitist, namely, those that negate the existence of social injustices, especially in the context of India.

3   Double consciousness

The second challenge is the integration of "double consciousness" of the formees and the formators. For instance, a Jesuit from India might be conscious of his identity as a Jesuit as well as being an Indian. In the Indian context, this double consciousness is further complicated – another dual consciousness appears – caste and language. In a way, the identity of a former has different layers: religious, national, linguistic, and ethnic. Interculturality, then, becomes more challenging in this case, especially when the candidate or the formator does not want to reveal one or the other identities mentioned above. «It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity»[2]. During the course of his/her religious formation/education, attention to this element will help the former to discover oneself.

Caste consciousness is quite complicated in India since a sense of shamefulness, which is attached to the caste, especially if one comes from a "lower" caste, is attached to it. The social hierarchical mind-set does not get diminished just because one becomes a "religious". Though rigorous spiritual training does bring certain changes, it appears that these are insufficient. Isolating oneself from the social situation is not a solution, for we have to come back to the society again for ministries. Therefore, a thorough context-based analysis of the society is needed at the time of formation. More specifically, placing our studies in the context of the people cannot be underestimated.

In the Indian context, we cannot deny the effects of colonialism, though seven decades have passed by since independence. There are various features that we have appropriated unto ourselves from the colonial era, even without a conscious effort. To note and understand the residual effects of colonialism is an important step in understanding who we are. One also needs to note that despite Christianity being in this land even before "India" was born, the tag that it is a 'foreign religion' still continues, partly because it has come to be identified with the British and the Portuguese who were once colonizers.

A constant tension between uprootedness and belonging takes place all the time in young minds. It can also be found even in those finally professed formators. The spiritual idea of belonging completely to the Lord does not take away one's own historicity or historical links with one's own culture. The dilemma between these two cannot be summarily dismissed as irrelevant to the idea of interculturality, for one cannot be intercultural without "crossing over" and understanding the other, lest they fall into the pit of "better-than-you" attitudes.

4   Epistemological pluralism

A third challenge in intercultural contacts and encounters in formation centres is related to epistemology. Are there several ways of knowing? As products of Eurocentrism, Vedic-centrism, Brahmin-centrism continue to dominate our thinking patterns, there is a challenge to learn from others, without placing an axis point. Unfortunately, much of our theologies and philosophies are still Euro-centric, and a heavy concentration on Western Philosophy is placed. How does this affect interculturality? In Intercultural relations and communication, there is an element of de-centering. But with emphasis placed on the West, other cultural philosophies get sidelined.

Epistemological pluralism appreciates and acknowledges the fact that there are many ways of knowing. The current education system (both in formation centres and in other educational systems) relies solely on information gathering and passing to the students, well placed within some syllabus. Apart from this, quite often a top-down model of instruction is considered the normal way of learning. Models and theoretical frames that have emerged from other cultural contexts are universalized or are presented as methodologies worth imitating in local contexts, without minding learning from the local cultural contexts. A heavy dose of Eurocentric ideas is absorbed both consciously and at the subconscious levels.

What is essential is to make use of multiple epistemologies to understand complex issues, knowing that these epistemologies can be made use of to complement each other. Both in content and method, when only a mono-type is presented as the best way, then there emerges a hierarchical type of understanding, resulting eventually in stereotypes. Setting up "standards" or "qualities" based on the West has its advantages, but it also has its flaws. It is often based on certain type of skills, competence, expectations etc., to which the Western world is already adept. In the process local traditions, knowledge, skills etc. are ignored and neglected. While competence is based to assess the 'best' out of certain 'uniformity', the idea of competition itself could vary. Learning to accommodate each other's approaches, competencies, knowledge bases is a real challenge in multicultural formation.

Another issue is the "perspective" being offered. The "subaltern perspective" is often ignored, leading to 'epistemic violence'. The subaltern perspective is considered to be non-existent in many of our education pattern, for they are not presented in 'standard formats'. For example, the philosophies of certain tribes or Dalit castes are not scripted in epic-style prose, or in essay-type books. Instead, these are encapsulated within oral traditions, which include stories, proverbs, wisdom sayings, performing art forms, etc, commonly termed as "folklore". In Antonio Gramsci's

analysis, «folklore is the perspective that subaltern groups have on their lives and surrounding world»[3]. These might fail the set formats of the academic world. Yet these voices need to be heard and epistemological pluralism includes them as well. Unfortunately, "majoritarianism" mind-set remains in many of our institutions, and this hinders learning from the marginalized cultures. And at the most, when such learning does take place, they are placed as "fringe topics" or "additional" elements and they hardly come to be recognized as important factors.

This issue is also related to resistance to leave known horizons. Such resistance emerges because of conditioning. As Jiddu Krishnamurthi, an Indian Philosopher noted, "even our conscience is conditioned". This also means that our knowledge is conditioned and our resistance to new learning would always be there. New paradigms of learning tend to be treated with suspicion in traditional teaching modes. How we wish that Paulo Freire's method of education be taken seriously in centres of learning in our formation houses! Freire's method emerges from his context and offers a pedagogy of the oppressed.

(5) The opportunities

The aforementioned three challenges – spaces within, double consciousness, and epistemological pluralism – are also opportunities to grow in interculturality. In addition to these, three other factors could be considered as opportunities in religious formation:

Ontological assumptions: Unlike other religions, there is a space for reason, growth, and change in our understanding of ourselves and the world around us. Faith and reason are not considered contradictory in the Church, but as complementary to each other. With greater awareness of the existence other philosophies and theologies, the current time is best suited to question many of our ontological assumptions on our relationships with ourselves, God, the others, and with nature. Interrelated and interdependent as we are, awareness of human dignity, freedom, etc. provide us with further opportune time, especially in the wake of the upcoming Synod 2021-23, the just ended COP 26, COVID-19 etc. It is also an opportunity to become aware and to check the processes of "othering" that takes place within. There is the "Exotic Other" in which there is «a fascination with the inherent dignity and beauty of the primitive/undeveloped other, and the "Demonic Other", represented as inferior, negative, savage and evil»[4].

Historiographical enquiry (Studying Local histories): A lot of time is spent on learning world and national histories, but not much is done in terms of learning regional and local histories. How many of us have been taught about the history of our local parishes, cultures, villages, towns, etc.? More than often, these are overlooked or considered insignificant. At the most, those who become missionaries spend time in learning about the culture of the missioned place. But beyond these, formation in seminaries can offer courses leading up to understanding the local cultures of the place where they are stationed, the cultures of those formees who come from other places, and the cultures of the formators too. Inculturation as a process is both an opportunity and a challenge. In the process of religious education, it is essential to observe and acknowledge a lack of sense of belonging to the local culture where the Gospel is planted. Apart from mere 'symbolic' changes, an in-depth study of inculturation is a real need in religious formation/education. Such studies have twofold purpose: to get the Gospel rooted in the native soil, and second, to respect local cultures. Indigenization is another process. It is not the same as interculturality but is equally important. It is closely related to interculturality, for many indigenous people (we call them tribals!) have now come forward to serve the church as priests, brothers and nuns.

«Indigenization benefits everyone; we all gain a richer understanding of the world and of our specific location in the world through awareness of Indigenous knowledge and perspectives. Indigenization also contributes to a more just world, creating a shared understanding that opens the way toward reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. It also counters the impacts of colonization by upending a system of thinking that has typically discounted Indigenous knowledge and history»[5].

"Sociology of absences": This idea and term was developed by Boaventura de Sousa Santos, a sociologist. The term refers

«both to the general silences *around* particular experiences and the way in which these silences are actively created *through* particular processes. It enables an address of what is marginalized, suppressed, and of what has not been allowed to exist in the first place. It focuses on the processes that obstruct connections to be made between different struggles and knowledges to demonstrate how the "incompleteness" and "inadequacy" of counter-hegemonic forms is produced»[6].

Our formation has both a need and an opportunity to study these 'absences' or "silences" or "silenced" voices. In the context of India, this is an opportune time for us to get ourselves familiarized, especially as the Church is increasingly becoming aware of the voices of oppression. The context of the Dalits, Tribals, widows, Transgenders and others need more to be understood. Getting engaged locally is thus an imperative, not only on the pastoral front, but also on the social and cultural areas as well.

Intercultural translation is what is needed today in religious education. This concept, expounded by Boaventura de Sousa Santos

«seeks to put forth a conversation between different knowledges that are anchored in different cosmologies. Intercultural translation, in a sense, is a tool that inaugurates and allows the sharing of struggles and risks premised upon making absent knowledges visible and the various layers of oppression intelligible. Consequently, intercultural translation acts as the basis for opening up new spaces for communal resistance and social struggle»[7].

Conclusion

Our contemporary society continues to see vast changes and it is too difficult to grasp the speed in which these changes are taking place. One of the changes is noticed in our way of living together in multicultural settings. While on the one hand, there is deep misgivings and intolerance, there is also on the other hand, positive elements of mutual co-existence. Religious formation centres cannot be blind to these, especially in its educative elements at various levels, including at the university educational level. Identifying a few of them from the Indian context has been the focus of this paper. We need such a focus in order to become relevant in our ministries and in our lives as religious, seeking to glorify our Creator.

Endnotes

1. W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, McClurg & Co, Chicago, IL 1903, 52.

2. *Ibid*., 38.

3. A. Gramsci, *Subalternity*, "Global Social Theory", 2021 (https://globalsocialtheory.org/concepts/subalternity/; https://archive.is/JFdtU).

4. Cf. N. Mambrol, *Postcolonialism*, "Literary Theory and Criticism" 2016, (https://literariness.org/2016/04/06/postcolonialism; https://archive.is/MNcvZ).

5. *Curriculum Developers, Indige*nization. BC Campus Open Publishing, 2021 (https://opentext bc.ca/indigenizationcurriculumdevelopers/chapter/the-need-to-indigenize; https://archive.is/evQWJ).

6. *Sociology of Absences*, "Global Social Theory" 2021, (https://globalsocialtheory.org/concepts/sociology-of-absences/; https://archive.is/IDLxl).

7. *Intercultural translation*, "Global Social Theory" 2021, (https://globalsocialtheory.org/concepts/intercultural-translation/).