# Evangelical Review of Theology
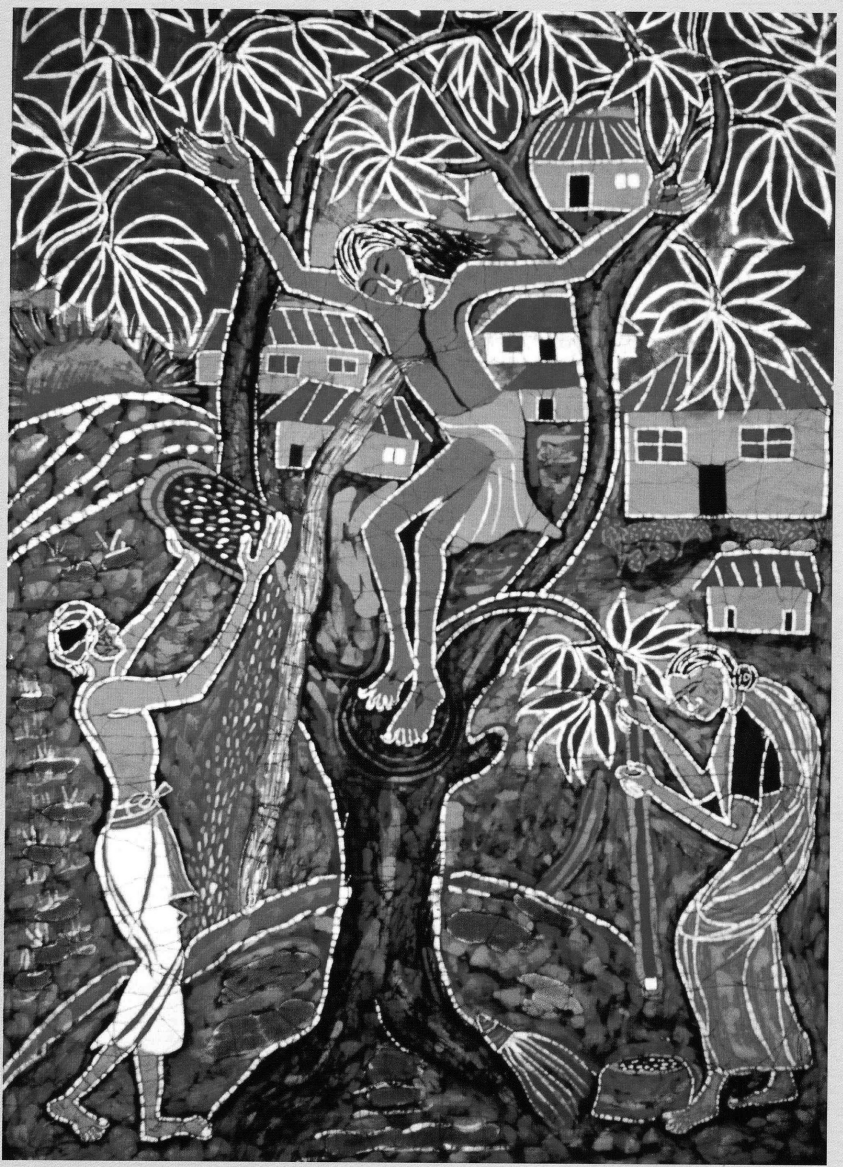
The tree exists to serve.

This should be true of theological education—that it exists to serve. The Cape Town Commitment (CTC) formulates the goal of theological education thus:

The mission of the Church on earth is to serve the mission of God, and the mission of theological education is to strengthen and accompany the

mission of the Church. Theological education serves *first* to **train** those who lead the Church as pastor-teachers, equipping them to teach the truth of God's Word with faithfulness, relevance and clarity; and *second*, to **equip** all God's people for the missional task of understanding and relevantly communicating God's truth in every cultural context.

The instrument by which this desired training and equipping occurs is the curriculum. 'The theological curriculum, comprehensively understood, embraces all those activities and experiences provided by the school to enable students to achieve the intended goals. More narrowly understood, the curriculum is the array of specific activities (e.g., courses, practical supervised ministry, spiritual formation experiences, theses).' When the comprehensive and the narrow senses are taken together, 'the entire curriculum should be seen as a set of practices with a formative aim.'[1]

From the CTC, our 'formative aim' is to train and equip towards 'the missional task of understanding and relevantly communicating God's truth in every cultural context.' *Relevantly…in every context*. If we were asked whether we were doing this in our institutions, we would probably answer largely in the affirmative. Of course we are turning out graduates who are relevant to the church specifically, and to society at large. That is *what we like to think we are teaching*: contextually engaged pedagogies. Let us take stock using two well-known categories. We will use the category of the *null curriculum*

to critique our respective institutions' curriculum in the narrow sense, and the category of *hidden curriculum* to appraise it in the comprehensive sense.

## II The Null Curriculum: What We Don't Teach

Contextually engaged pedagogies, we understand, are marked by the classroom interacting with the 'real world.' Let us approach this idea through the painting.

The artists freeze the two figures in postures that communicate energy. The man braces himself with his back foot; his arms are held high to let the wind catch the seed he winnows. The woman leans into her task of pounding the seed. Her knees flex in synchrony with the up-and-down movement of her arms. Even without looking down at the mortar, she can aim the pestle accurately.

It does remind us of ourselves in class, does it not? The energy flows effortlessly when we communicate. If it is familiar material, we can keep at it with scarcely a glance at our teaching notes. Powerpoints glide down the screen in synch with the words rolling off our tongues. It's all solid scholarship—informative, instructive and sometimes, even entertaining.

The place where the gap shows is the *null curriculum: what we don't teach*. Let me explain with an example. Our one-year pre-MTh programme in Old Testament ends with Hebrew exegesis of the book of Ruth. When a colleague taught it, he did a great job with the standard narrative critical tools. The students learned to critique the book as pro-Davidic propaganda; they examined how differently the book functions

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[1] ATS Commission Standard 4, section 4.1.2.

in the Christian canon (after Judges) as compared to the Jewish canon (sometimes after Proverbs). They appreciated the whole slew of narrative devices that make the book the literary gem it is.

Later, when another colleague and I co-taught it, we intentionally curried up the flavour. We opened with a viewing of Deepa Mehta's critically acclaimed movie *Water.* The story is set in the sacred city of Varanasi on the banks of the Ganges. The belief is that Hindus who die there are released from the karmic cycles of reincarnation into eternal bliss. This is enough reason for families from across the country to offload their widows onto its streets, families that consider widows an economic liability. The plot follows the events in a home for widows, taking head-on the oppressive structures of patriarchy that force young widows into prostitution, questions Hindu hermeneutics of scriptures that condemns child widows to these hell holes, and peels back the layers of so-called Indian tradition to expose the hypocrisy and exploitation that underlies them.

Into this scandalous account of the 21st century Indian Hindu widow, we located the text of the book of Ruth. At once, the episodes of the story shook themselves, like pieces of glass in a kaleidoscope, into a whole new pattern immediately recognizable to the Indian eye. It didn't take much explanation to understand why three widows 'lifted up their voices and wept' on that road to Bethlehem; why Naomi should be so embittered against Yahweh as to spitefully rechristen herself Mara; why Boaz repeats his instructions to his workers to leave Ruth alone; why Naomi and Ruth should attempt a night-time trick on the unsuspecting Boaz; why the womenfolk celebrate Naomi bouncing the boy baby Obed on her knee.

After we had studied the book of Ruth, we discussed its use in popular preaching and teaching. Again, we approached this task with a contextual circumlocution. We first read together the story of *Savithri* embedded in the Indian 4th century AD Sanskrit epic called the *Mahabharata*.[2] Savithri is the proverbial model wife, a household name. Like a female Orpheus, she breaches the boundary between the over and underworlds. With silvertongued argumentation she traps the god of Death into releasing life back into her dead husband. Young Indian women are exhorted to be wives like Savithri—humble, obedient, self-effacing, devoted. We then noted how the character Ruth is often contoured similarly in India, whether by male preachers or by women leading small study groups.

So, we re-evaluated Savithri and Ruth to generate a second list of their virtues. We could list that these women were determined, hard-working, resourceful, articulate; they were survivors. Given this, it was remarkable that Indian Christian readers of Ruth routinely selected as praise-worthy and prescriptive the first list rather than the second. Was their reading of Ruth socio-culturally conditioned by the traditional reading of another feisty protagonist, Savithri?

With the aid of Bollywood advocacy and a time-honoured tale, we contextualized our exegesis and reading of the

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**2** With over 200,000 verse lines, it is roughly ten times the length of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* combined.

book of Ruth. Borrowing from the theological educator Brent Strawn, I point out that, the direction of contextualization was the reverse of the usual, at least, to begin with.[3] The students did not leave the classroom for the 'real world.' The 'real world' entered the classroom in the form of artefacts relevant to the topic under study.

Initially, some of the students in that class were rather taken aback at these artefacts. What has a bible school to do with popular culture or worse, with the sacred texts of Hinduism? Perhaps even a small minority of my colleagues would ask that question. However, the students quickly saw the value. The artefacts served as a matching sample of our 'real world' that we could lay alongside our sample of biblical text. As we expected, the two samples vigorously quarrelled with each other in places. But, they agreed with each other at other places—sometimes directly, sometimes through layers of nuances—reinforcing each other's voices in harmonies that surprised and delighted.

Before long, student voices worked their way in. Significantly, this took the conversation out of the classroom into the 'real world,' or more properly, 'real worlds.' The flow of contextualization was now outward. Students located themselves in their specific circumstances as they contributed to the conversation on wives and widows.

One spoke from a small town in a developing state, where even Christian communities regarded widows as inauspicious and restricted their presence at auspicious ceremonies such as weddings; one spoke from his own middle-class family situation, admitting that he had relegated his intelligent and capable wife to the traditional tasks of rearing children and keeping house; one spoke from his large, prosperous Methodist church confessing that the care of widows in the congregation was rather non-existent; two spoke from the largely Christian north-east India to say how sensitive and supportive their communities were with widows, perhaps more because of their traditional tribal sensibilities that were now undergirded with biblical prescription; and so on.

Before the class ended, contextualization had happened through a series of dialectics. The artefacts that brought the real world into the classroom became the vehicles by which the class moved into parallel Indian realities. The happy dividend was that these realities robustly engaged with each other as students commented on and learned from each other's experiences. The even happier dividend was that students learned that theology 'encompass[es] entities far beyond actual speech about God'[4] and can segue with surprising ease between the questionable dichotomies we create of sacred and secular.

Yet, contextualization could not be complete if it had stopped there; if it stopped with students who had only cognitively engaged the classroom

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**3** See Brent A. Strawn, 'Contemporary (Pop-) Cultural Contexts and the Old Testament Classroom,' in Theodore Brelsford and P. Alice Rogers (eds), *Contextualizing Theological Education* (Cleveland, Ohio: The Pilgrim Press, 2008), 146-47.

**4** Strawn, 'Contemporary (Pop-) Cultural Contexts,' 146.

with the real world. Several months after those students graduated, two of them told us that they were teaching the book of Ruth in small group bible studies in their churches, as an exercise in Christian formation. Another was making plans for his wife to pursue a career.

The module had (in one manner or another) relocated from the seminary into the constituency it was meant to serve, completing the interlocking process of contextualization. The classroom had engaged the 'real world'; the 'real world' was now engaging classroom learning. The process had been launched by two artefacts we decided to incorporate into the course: a Hindi movie and a piece of Hindu sacred literature.

Our present curricula may demonstrate that we are experts with the winnowing implement, we can employ the mortar and pestle with dexterity, and we know when the broom comes in handy. But surely, there is material we ignore, there are topics we minimize, there are pedagogical practices we wouldn't want to sacrifice lecture time on, there are perspectives we don't even know exist. Our course outlines are the manifesto of what we think is critical to the Christian faith, and its practice and ministry.

So, if we want engaged pedagogies, it helps to consider what we *don't* use when we teach. Or even, what we don't offer on our course listing. Perhaps our MTh students need greater exposure to sociology, psychology and cultural anthropology, irrespective of what their narrow specializations may be. Only experimenting will tell what works best for our specific institution with its particular constituency. And, one successful experiment often leads to another, and can contagiously spread from one department to another.

What is more, our students invariably teach as they have been taught—so our engaged pedagogy will multiply exponentially as graduates take it with them into the 'real world.' Developing such pedagogies is labour-intensive and time-consuming, but it may prove fruitful beyond our expectations.

## III The Hidden Curriculum: What We Don't Realize We're Teaching

The stated purpose of contextually engaged pedagogies is often that students need to learn and practice 'thinking theologically,' or 'as Chris Wright prefers, 'thinking biblically.' The ICETE Manifesto unpacks it like this: to 'inculcate a pattern of holistic thought that is openly and wholesomely centred around biblical truth as the integrating core of reality.'[5]

The Candler School of Theology, Emory University, intentionally overhauled its contextual education programme in 1998, so that its students would be able to do just this: 'think theologically.' One of Candler's faculty, Theodore Brelsford, has useful insights into what such thinking may entail. Here, thinking is not restricted to the standard paradigms of problem-solving and information processing.[6]

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**5** ICETE Manifesto on the Renewal of Evangelical Theological Education, 3rd edn, 2002.
**6** Theodore Brelsford and John Senior, 'Theological Thinking as Contextual Practice,' in Theodore Brelsford and P. Alice Rogers (eds), *Contextualizing Theological Education* (Cleveland, Ohio: The Pilgrim Press, 2008), 42-47.

These are paradigms that often domi-
nate our curricula as much as they do
contemporary educational theory.

Thus, in a typical exegesis course,
the emphasis can fall on solving the
problem of translating this or that
piece of text to the satisfaction of ex-
isting evidence, or exegeting this or
that biblical passage to the satisfaction
of the principles of good hermeneutics.
On the other hand, courses can become
centred around data processing.

A course on Introduction to the Old
Testament may require no more than
that the student absorbs data from the
fields of history and archaeology, reads
some Old Testament text, studies
themes through the Old Testament and
correlates all this information in a re-
searched essay. As an afterthought we
might require that the essay concludes
with a paragraph or a page on 'appli-
cation' of the topic. The proportion
between theory and application imme-
diately signals to the student that pro-
cessing theory is the greater challenge,
application is a natural corollary.

Brelsford urges that theological
thinking must go well beyond these
paradigms of problem-solving and data-
processing. 'Theological thinking,' he
asserts, 'entails uncovering functional
*assumptions* about God in ourselves,
others, and institutions in order to con-
sciously reform those assumptions in
the context of a particular community
of theological reflection.'[7] There are
two key concepts here.

First, the idea of *functional
assumptions:*[8] In our college we have

a recently started programme called
Context Based Learning. In this pro-
gramme, MA students are required to
intern at a ministry placement, which
could be a church, a para-church or-
ganization or an organization serving
social concerns. Students and their
assigned faculty facilitators meet for-
mally once a month.

One student was placed in a church
where he was required to preach
and teach. He was a first-generation
Christian from a Hindu background,
and had been introduced to the faith
in the charismatic tradition. As such,
teaching and preaching on the theme
of prosperity was familiar ground.
However, in the new context of MA in-
tern, where he was required to think
theologically, he said he was catching
himself puzzling over why good believ-
ing Christians in his congregation were
not materially prosperous. I wondered
aloud that he might be attempting to
force-fit one of his assumptions about
God onto a reality that was resisting
that assumption. Functional assump-
tions about God, about God's word and
about God's world—these are what
theological thinking must consciously
reform or reconstruct. How best may
such reconstruction be done?

This brings us to the second key
concept in Brelsford's definition of the-
ological thinking: the idea of a *commu-
nity of theological reflection.* 'Theologi-
cal thinking is necessarily a communal
process,' he says.[9] Here he makes
reference to the work of the anthro-
pologist Gregory Bateson who applied
the terms 'mind' and 'intelligence' to
as unusual an entity as an ecological

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**7** Brelsford, 'Theological Thinking,' 44-45.

**8** An assumption on which one lays the
weight of practice.

**9** Brelsford, 'Theological Thinking,' p. 46.

system, such as a pond or a forest. A certain kind of intelligence emerges in any given organic system, more so in human social systems.

The idea of ecologies of thinking is readily imported into educational theory and applied to the communities that populate classrooms and institutions.[10]

> Ideas and ways of thinking emerge in a collective that are shaped by the unique persons and relationships within them and the environment around them, similar to the ways that ideas and patterns of thinking emerge in an individual—shaped by the individual's unique genetic composition and experiences and social and environmental location.

This is the ethos in which individuals can best learn to think theologically, it is the ecology within which to repair faulty assumptions. The ICETE Manifesto endorses this thus: 'It is biblically incumbent on us that our programmes function as deliberately nurtured Christian educational communities.'

The monthly Context Based Learning meetings I mentioned are one such sub-community or sub-ecosystem where a mix of students and faculty engage their minds. In several exegesis modules we have used an assignment that requires each student to do a Bible study. The student must convert a biblical text we have exegeted in class into a bible study for a small group of student wives. Our college is a residential one, and everybody has at least nodding acquaintance with each other. But, students and student wives rarely group together to discuss anything that happens in the classroom. So, this assignment intentionally creates opportunity for an ecology of thinking that doesn't naturally exist on our campus.

The brief is that the students must transfer classroom learning into this lay audience as smoothly as possible—the presentation must lose none of the theological depth plumbed in class, but must be clean of technical jargon, and must use Hebrew only if it adds specific value. Half the time is for the presentation, and the other half is reserved for discussion. It is interesting how challenging this exercise is to some students.

Just as interesting is the discussion generated by the group of student spouses. Their questions are often bouncers (to use terminology from cricket), their direction catching the student by surprise; their insights into the text are sometimes more acute and accurate than the student's; and they might raise brilliantly pertinent issues that did not even occur to us in the classroom. Later, when we debrief with the class on this experience, they ruefully admit that some of their assumptions have been damaged, and they have some ideas now for how to reconstruct those assumptions. Theological thinking is happening here.

Another example of an ecology we intentionally created is a non-graded course requirement in which the class periodically met in a place other than the classroom. To use an ecological analogy, this would be akin to moving all the residents of a pond into a run-

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**10** C.A. Bowers and David J. Flinders, *Responsive Teaching: An Ecological Approach to Classroom Patterns of Language, Culture and Thought,* Advances in Contemporary Educational Thought Series 4 (New York: Teachers College Press, 1990), 199.

ning stream and observe what changes happen. Daily in the classroom, we studied Genesis 1-11—mostly a cognitive exercise. Privately, every day, the class used a series of devotions on Genesis 1-11 that a student from an earlier batch had written up. This served as gateway into the affective and behavioural dimensions of engagement with the text.

On Fridays, we met in the chapel meant for small groups, a round room up under the dome. It has no furniture other than a few options for seating— low chairs, cushions on the floor—and on one wall, a rough wooden cross. In this environment, so different from the classroom, the 'mind' that emerged had both continuity and discontinuity with the 'mind' that had dominated the classroom. We picked up themes that we had scarcely noticed in the classroom—the theme of death, for example, that sits coiled at the base of so exuberant an account of the creation of life. We shared thoughts about the loss of loved ones, some very recent.

It was theological thinking that could not have happened in the classroom. Similar stimulative assembling of sub-ecosystems can happen when faculty team-teach a course, or when interdisciplinary courses bring students from different departments together.

To return to the picture: The two workers in the picture, we know, represent a larger community. Harvesting is in part an individual endeavour, but more a communal activity. Men and women work in tandem from dawn to dusk to get this seasonal task completed. It is an analogy for what we have been speaking about—thinking theologically in a community. We note in the

picture that the artists have clearly differentiated male activities from female activities. Winnowing, they explain, is traditionally man's work. The woman has swept up the seed with her broom, which we see resting at the base of the tree. She is now pounding the seed into meal. 'This is woman's work,' says one of the artists. 'She is making the seed into food.'

That brings us to what is called the *hidden curriculum: what we don't realize we're teaching*. It is in community learning that the hidden curriculum becomes more manifest, than in, say, online learning. To quote Brelsford again: 'Ways of thinking emerge in a collective that are shaped by the unique persons and relationships within them and the environment around them.'

Let me give examples of hidden curriculum that might catch your notice in my institution. At lunchtime every day, a meal is served for the community at the dining room. You may find yourself sitting between a gardener and a student with the principal across the table from you. Everyone eats together—the service staff, students, administrative staff and faculty. This is unusual in a country in which caste still determines who may eat with whom. We have heard from alumni who have carried this practice back into their institutions as a statement of equality in Christ.

Then, you might notice that the all the manual labour is done by the hired hands. The students devote themselves to academics, as distinct from some other seminaries in India, where the students might also tend the gardens, clean the common areas, and assist in running the kitchen. Might you gather from this that SAIACS does not promote the dignity of labour? And, in

a culture where caste used to determine who did what for a living, might SAIACS be sending mixed signals: yes, we eschew caste by eating together; and yes, we endorse caste by demarcation of labour.

There is a whole range of environmental factors that affects the theological thinking that emerges in a collective. The tone the head of the institution uses with the security man at the gate; the time the course instructor takes to return assignments, and whether the assignments are annotated sufficiently; the tenor of debate in a forum where papers are presented; whether anyone bothers about students attending chapel; how much chapel uses, say, Hillsong, compared to ethnic traditions of praise and worship.

Suppose we had our graduating students writing up a list of ideas and assumptions formed while at our institution which they were not formally taught. We might be both pleasantly surprised and taken aback to discover what we—as an institution—contributed to their theological thinking, and thus, to their character formation, without intending to.

## IV To Sum Up: We Reap What We Sow

To sum up: We have considered what an engaged pedagogy entails at two levels—the levels of the narrower and wider senses of the term curriculum. The narrow sense concerns the defined practices the institution provides. Since the classroom is the chief locus of these practices, we have looked at how the classroom may engage with context, paying attention to *what it does not teach*. The comprehensive sense of the term curriculum takes into its ambit the environment and ethos of the institution—what is sometimes called 'the spirit of the place.' We have observed that this constitutes an ecology of learning. The institution must check *what it is teaching below the level of intentionality*, and carefully recalibrate and reconstitute this ecology.

In colder climate zones, most trees are deciduous—that is, they shed their leaves in winter. They do this to survive the hostile environment. The branches are bare and gaunt, seemingly as dead as driftwood. Only the tree knows it is not dead. It has powered down into compatibility mode, keeping to bare minimum activity till it can tide over the winter. Sap still flows but is now restricted to channels around the core. Growth still happens, but only in adding a dense narrow ring to the girth. The tree would insist that it is alive and growing. We would concede that it is just about alive and just about growing.

I wonder if our seminaries are similarly deciduous trees in compatibility mode. Maybe we have surrendered engagement with the world. The world is bewilderingly chaotic—it whips the leaves off our branches. It is frighteningly hostile—it freezes the sap in our twigs. So in defence, we retreat into ourselves. As this generation heads into an increasingly cold and seemingly endless winter we seminaries congratulate ourselves that we are survivors; still pumping sap, still throwing a ring or two of growth. Engagement with the world is too much of a risk, and even if not so, far too much trouble. We are a tree that survives and that's what matters; never mind if we are not a tree of life.

Think about it. A leafless tree is not without beauty. But how much more attractive a tree which brings forth its fruit in its season, whose leaves also do not wither! How much more attractive, how much more *complete*, how much more *alive*, how much more engaged in service. What are our seminaries going to be, deciduous or evergreen? We harvest from what we sow.