



ATFE

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**CONTEXTUAL EDUCATION OF
THE REFLECTIVE
PRACTITIONER
PART I: THE SHIFT TO
CONTEXTUAL EDUCATION**

Bob O'Gorman

Contextual Education of the Reflective Practitioner

Part 1, The Shift to Contextual Education

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“Good News for the Isolated: the role of Theological Field Education in Theological Education.”

It is an honor to be one of the key notes for this 28th Biennial Field Educators Consultation. My concern is to live up to the committee’s faith in their invitation. I applaud the decision to recognize that we field educators ourselves do have the resources to name, analyze and deal with the issues that face us in theological education.

I had the opportunity of a year’s sabbatical in 2003 to act as a field education student. For the first six months I visited six seminaries and spent four or five days at each school where I immersed myself in classes. I interviewed 52 faculty and sat in on their classes. The second semester, I reflected on and wrote about the teaching practices that I had observed.

There are two contributions I want to make today:

The first is to offer theological and historical grounding for why context and reflective practice are central to the curriculum of theological education, and that there is a major shift toward contextual theology on the horizon. I want to reassure you that even though your faculty may not be there yet, there are faculties that are there, and that the ATS is moving in that direction.

Second, I want share with you experiences of the field visits that I made to seminary classrooms. I will take you on one of my visits and let you in on the conversation I had. For the most part these were professors who have taken context very seriously and have a broad notion of context. I want to share these stories with you and so urge you to visit the classrooms of your colleagues and to enter into a conversation with them that evokes your mutual concern for context and for reflective practice. I had very fascinating and fruitful conversations, and much to my surprise for the most part field educators in these schools had not had the richness of these conversations that I had.

Our role in ministerial education

I have been in Theological Field Education since 1975, a field where I found my home. I have been a teacher since 1963, but it was in 1975 that I began to engage the relationship between the context that students are in and the theology that is being taught at the school. It is the intersection of these two – context and content that gives me the energy that enlivens my sense as a teacher. One of the main supports for me in Theological Field Education has been these biennial meetings. My first meeting was in 1979, and I’ve only missed one meeting since that time. I was called to serve in the organization through the steering committee for eight years in the ‘90’s. Much of my research and publication has centered on Theological Field Education. As I have engaged this collegiality of field educators over these many years, one of the key themes that has dominated has been **our role** in ministerial education, our role in the curriculum, our role in the seminary. Dudley Rose in his introduction to this consultation used the image of field education moving from “a sow’s ear to silk purse” in the second half of the 20th century. I joined the ranks when we were seeing the silk purse image emerge. However, one of the key

observations that can be made about field education is that still today, it is not universally recognized as having a central place in the seminary curriculum.

- Have you been experiencing some concerns about your place in the Theological curriculum?
- Have you perhaps personally felt marginalized, especially in contrast to some of the dreams you get at these gatherings?
- Have you become a bit disillusioned by the fact that although your dean may support what you are doing, what is happening in the curriculum is in the hands of other faculty, and the direction it is going does not respect the concerns you have about reflective practice and the focus on ministry settings?
- Because curriculum conversation is controlled by more classical fields, do you feel a sense of isolation? Do you confront what I've heard theological colleagues say to field educators, "Hey you're doing a great job in field education" but not at all allowing what you represent, namely ministry settings, and students' reflection on ministry to shape the curriculum?

Oftentimes, the field educator is not tenured or a tenure track faculty member. Some, unlike the rest of the seminary faculty are ranked as staff. We know that one of the characteristics in Theological Field Education is our incredible turnover. Probably a third of you in the audience are new to Theological Field Education. That's what we generally find at the biennial session. I am naming my assumption that the clarity and value for Theological Field Education in the seminary curriculum is lacking in a lot of our institutions. Perhaps you are a person sitting in this audience who came to the biennial in Chicago two years ago for the first time, and you went to the new director's clinic, you were filled with enthusiasm and ideals about Theological Field Education, and you became amazed at what a collegiality there is here. You went back and re-designed the manual for field education in your institution based upon what you had learned here. And then as these two years unfolded, a lot of the brightness you had in Chicago began to dim, as you saw that a lot of what you were trying to do in Theological Field Education was not central to the faculty decision-making and discussions around curriculum. Many of the colleagues that you work with and whose voices carried weight in those meetings did not understand or fully honor what you were about. You may have found this task of articulating a contextual vision of the curriculum a very difficult one. This presentation is going to address this concern for what I describe as isolation and to suggest that there are ways of breaking down that isolation. And so I have re-titled the talk: "Good News for the Isolated: the role of Theological Field Education in Theological Education."

Having shared these assumptions I want to move to the two points of my presentation: working toward an understanding of contextual theology and the good news of contextual teaching across the disciplines of theological education.

Contextual Theology

Contextual theology might be best understood as the attempt to take very seriously the setting in which people live out their religious lives; to reflect on the activities in that setting and discern a contemporary presence of God. An example of a setting in which people live their religious discipleship is a congregation's operation of a daycare center. A church commits budget, professional and volunteer staff to minister care for families, God's healing presence. Reflection to discern the presence of God may well be aided by confronting the biblical text: "suffer the little children to come unto me." It may be aided by sociological studies that examine

pressures on family life of contemporary society demanding and desiring dual incomes. It also raises the political question in the form of tax expenditures for faith-based initiatives and thus the deep relationship of church and state, or as H. Richard Niebuhr would call it, Christ and culture.

Theology or “God Talk” concerns what we creatures are able to say about the creator. Contextual theology developed in the mid-twentieth century as a part of breakthrough by the human sciences in epistemology that valued subjective experience as a base of knowing⁷. It grounds theological education in experience thus expanding theology’s classical norms of scripture and tradition. Experience becomes not only the beginning point of reflection but also the point of return for contextual theology, indeed an initial norm for doing its work. Like a font of water coming from the ground, ever new and alive, the practices and concerns of the community (past, present and future) are the source of theology, its very nature.

This issue of contextual theology can be captured in playing with the two words: *text* and *context*. Several years ago James Gustafson suggested that theological education was at a fork in the road, with one force pulling it, to use his words, “toward a faithfulness to the *fathers*,” and another force pulling theological education to what he called a usefulness for religious living. The latter part of the 20th century saw, and we continue to see today this contest between text and context pulling us in one direction or the other.

See if this is reflected in your own schools? Do you have those on the faculty who are very closely associated with their disciplinary guilds, attempting to capture the intellectual imaginations and passions of the students in terms of the incredible advancement in areas such as biblical studies that have uncovered deeper and deeper layers of archaeological meanings in ordinary biblical texts? It is no exaggeration to say that greater advancements in knowledge of biblical texts have happened in the last century than in all the centuries together that preceded it. I would call this, a passion for text.

Then there are those voices, particularly those aligned with the congregations (as well as those aligned with concern for public social transformation) that support and in some cases govern our schools, which cry out for training of ministers who can encounter, and effectively relate to contemporary settings, ministerial or public. In contrast to the academic “guild” knowledge and teaching practices, this counter force (the “pastoral” or ministerial) is pulling theological education to the “context.” Here the point of departure for theological education is not the reflections of scholars and their mastery of methods of inquiry but the daily living manifested by people negotiating birth & death, hunger & abundance, morality and injustice, in the city, the suburbs and in rural areas, in situations of poverty and plenty, with the young and the old. “Context” encapsulates these “real-life texts” that challenge our students to explore connections between life and faith.

The church and the public square demand accountability from the theology school for **both** an authentic but also a “usable” knowledge to help people understand and respond to their spiritual experiences.

In its first Biennial Convention of our new century (here in Toronto in June 2000) the Association of Theological Schools (ATS), the accrediting agency for some 300 theology schools in the U.S. and Canada approved a new mission statement. It reads:

The mission of The Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada (ATS) is to promote the improvement and enhancement of theological schools to the benefit of communities of faith and the broader public.

⁷ cf. Polkinghorne, Donald. E., Methodology for the Human Sciences: Systems of Inquiry. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1983

The new phrase in this statement is the focus on “communities of faith” or the contexts of ministry. This change resets the aim by which schools determine their curriculum and teaching, putting the faith communities they serve and the public communities of society at the hub of their teaching. The kinds of students enrolled (men and women, older and younger, new to church life and those who grew up breathing “church air”), the view of religious leader (“Pastor,” “Priest,” “Preacher,” “Minister”), and the theological viewpoints of the faculty (conservative or liberal) or the disciplines (bible, ethics, theology, history) become the spokes in the teaching that relate to this context, communities of faith and the broader public. In this statement, the member schools of the ATS made a radical shift of focus in theological education. They made a shift to context from text.

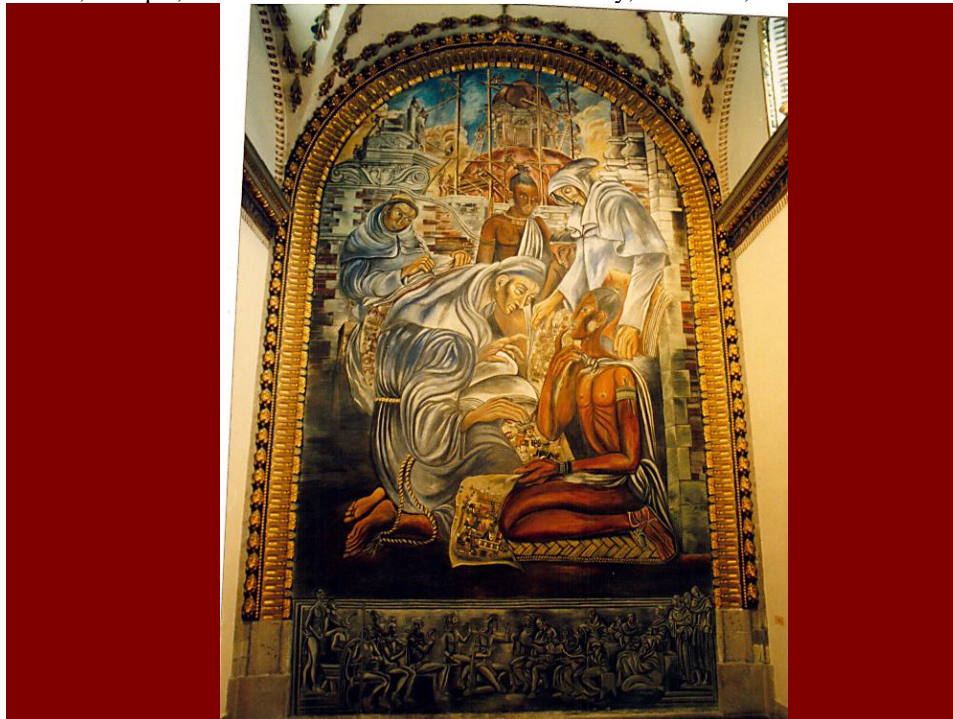
In standing at this fork in the road between text and context I have sought to two sources of wisdom: David Tracy and Yogi Berra. David Tracy calls for – “A mutual critical correlation between an **interpretation** of the religious [historic] fact and [an **interpretation** of] the contemporary situation⁸.” Yogi is more succinct. He says “When you come to a fork in the road, take it⁹.” But both Yogi and Tracy, however, refuse to allow an either/or choice.

Let me try to illustrate Tracy’s *mutual critical correlation* with the image of a dramatic story told by an historian of Mexican religion, Enrique Dussel¹⁰ and captured in a fresco on the wall in the Chapel of the Virgin, Pinacoteca, in Mexico City, by Frederico Cantu¹¹. Dussel tells us that after Cortez conquered the Aztec leader Montezuma, but before he destroyed the Aztec

⁸ Browning, Don S. Practical Theology: The Emerging Field in Theology, Church, and World (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1983), p. 61.

⁹ Berra, Yogi and Dave Kaplan When You Come to a Fork in the Road, Take It!: Inspiration and Wisdom from One of Baseball's Greatest Heroes New York: Hyperion 2002

¹⁰ Dussel, Enrique, 1985 Cole Lecture Vanderbilt University, Nashville, TN



¹¹ *Frailes e Indigenas* by Frederico Cantu (1959) in La Capilla de la Virgin, Pinacoteca, Virreinal, Mexico City

temples, he ordered Montezuma to gather his holy men. Cortez summoned his Franciscan monks. He then sat the two groups down in a room and asked the monks to determine if there were any religious truths in the Aztec tradition. Cantu illustrates this scene with six figures, three monks and three Aztec holy men. In the mural the monks hold a Christian Bible and the Aztecs unfold their sacred codex. Each of the three pairs of monks and Aztec holy man are on equal levels with each comparing and contrasting the two sets of text. The monks have their fingers on pages of the bible and the Aztec holy men trace theirs over sections of the codex.

Dussel tell us that Cortez only allowed an hour for this “correlation”. At the end of the hour the Franciscans gave a “thumbs down” and Cortez went on to destroy the Aztec temple and use its materials to erect the Cathedral of St. Francis.

Committed to what he calls a trust in the worth-while-ness of creation, Tracy maintains that the principle sources for theology are both common human experience and the texts, symbols, stories, and rituals of religious tradition. The task of theology is to set our interpretation of these sources in mutual critical correlation, that is, allow each to speak equally to the other. Had Tracy’s views been operative in 1521 in Franciscan theology, Cortez’s attempt to correlate the truth or “worth-while-ness” of God’s creation of both Spaniards and Aztecs may have given us a different history of the Americas.

Many people approach theology with an assumption, if not a belief that knowledge of God is contained in Holy Scripture, **period** (or in scripture as authoritatively interpreted by the church hierarchy). Tracy claims that God is alive in the **present** experiences of life. With this understanding of the relationship of tradition and present experience, Tracy articulates his method of theology in this single phrase: to do theology is to activate a mutual *critical correlation between an interpretation of the religious fact (teaching, texts, symbols, stories, and rituals) and an interpretation of the contemporary situation.*

In the classroom this correlation or synthesis happens when the professor and students creatively represent and engage the noticeable contrasting pictures of what is present in scripture (for example, the injunction “to choose life”) and what is present in contemporary experience (for example, a woman’s lack of power to exercise choice over her body) and they do not leave the table until a mutual critical correlation between an **interpretation** of the religious fact (teaching, texts, symbols, stories, and rituals) and an **interpretation** of the contemporary situation has been achieved; that is until our interpretation of scripture is revised and/or our interpretation of our present experience is revised.

The crucial word here is **interpretation**. Our interpretation flows from our perception. The problem in correlation is our ability to perceive. Yet the very act of perception, what our eyes see, shapes what we are taught to perceive. There is no such thing as an "immaculate perception." The biblical text is permeated by mythical language based on the knowledge that flows from a limited perception. All reality (that is, what we seem to be looking at) is shaped by culture.

Let me try to illustrate. When Captain Cook landed in the Hawaiian Islands he was recognized as the god Lono who had returned. What was going on here is not merely perception but judgment; not alone the eyes’ sensory perception but the meaningful interpretation of what the eyes are relating to the brain. The Hawaiians did not see Cook’s vessels as we would see them. They had never seen such tall ships before and thus could not imagine them, and thus did not actually see them. What the Hawaiians saw in looking at Cook was how they interpreted Cook and his ships in the light of their total cultural cosmology. H. Richard Niebuhr told us this

60 years ago when he said, “All knowledge is conditioned by the standpoint of the knower¹².” All cultures are settings within which their members, individually and collectively, engage in reasoning and face the common human predicament of getting the world right -- understanding, predicting and controlling their environment, natural and social¹³. That is, what education and faith are all about.

Thus we can conclude that not only is content shaped by context but context as well is shaped by content. And so theological education needs to embrace the wisdom of Yogi Berra, *When you come to a fork in the road take it*. Theological educators cannot get off the hook by choosing to side with text or with context, but must teach their students to engage both in a mutual critique. With this view of the mutual relation of text and context we can see where the student, who has a privileged relation to the context (as the teacher has a privileged relation to the text), makes a genuine contribution at the learning table. And this is the privileged place of field education in the curriculum. It brings forward the student and his or her ministry context. Christian tradition assigns favored status to the doctrine of the incarnation. That Christ became human means that context matters.

Stories of Mutual Correlation of Text and Context

I now want to share some stories of mutual correlation of text and context from my visits. I visited six schools recommended to me as ones that take context seriously in their curriculum. At each seminary I sat in on a bible class, a history class, a theology class, and a class in practical ministry (generally the preaching class). In several seminaries I also sat in on ethics classes. I was looking for how the professor relates context to her or his teaching of seminary students and what role the field educator played here.

An assumption that I had in my visits to these seminaries, was that the field educator is the one who really knows most about context. After all, we were the ones who either directly through field visits, or vicariously, through our immersion into the students’ case studies of contemporary ministry settings, we are the ones who were most aware of the context. We see ourselves having two expertise: one, is a high awareness of the contemporary practices of ministry and discipleship, and two, the skills to have students relate the practices in that context to the texts they are engaging in the seminary. This assumption, however, proved false.

What I found out much to my surprise was that the professors that I visited in their various disciplines had a high awareness of context, and that in fact their teaching methodologies were real examples of what Tracey would call this mutual critical correlation of text and context. But, for the most part, the field educators were not aware of this.

One of my visits was at an African-American school and the class was that of a distinguished professor of Hebrew Scripture. This man, originally from southern Africa did his schooling in Oxford and Harvard. In my interview I asked him, if after his many years at this school, his teaching had changed. He assured me it had – with a dramatic story. After teaching at

¹² H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1960), p. 5.

¹³ Lukes, Stephen Different Cultures, Different Rationalities? [www:
http://64.233.179.104/search?q=cache:OeIdruGLbgMJ:sociology.fas.nyu.edu/docs/IO/244/cook.pdf+Captain+Cook+ships+and+perception&hl=en](http://64.233.179.104/search?q=cache:OeIdruGLbgMJ:sociology.fas.nyu.edu/docs/IO/244/cook.pdf+Captain+Cook+ships+and+perception&hl=en)

this seminary for a few years – in the manner of the sophisticated textual criticism he had endured at Oxford and Harvard – and seeming rather content that he was able to move his students from a more literal to a contextual understanding of the Hebrew texts; the school began to receive complaints from the churches it served. The churches claimed that its recent graduates were not preaching the Hebrew Scriptures.

This professor was shocked and inquired from his former students concerning this accusation. They told him that indeed in his classes they had come to see the Scriptures in a whole new light, but there was no way they could share that light with their church members (it would blind them) and so they simply avoided preaching these texts. This professor then asked the pastor of the African-American church he attended if he might offer a Wednesday evening bible study. The pastor agreed and soon these Wednesday night sessions were packed with church members who became enthralled with his unfolding of the Hebrew texts. The professor then invited his students to attend these sessions. In light of this experience he completely revamped his teaching and assignments for this course to simultaneously involve the students with both the content – Hebrew Scriptures and context – their local congregations.

This professor went on to tell me an additional story. As he became more involved in his local church he noticed a Sunday morning practice at the collection time. Persons who tithed stood in one line with their blue tithing envelopes held high. And those who didn't stand in another as both lines proceeded up the aisle to the collection baskets. This discrimination affected the professor at two levels, one was the humiliation he felt for a group of church members and the other was the misinterpretation of Biblical tithing. This experience in the context of the local church and its religious practices has redirected this man's research. He has now done primary investigation on the tithing practices of Abraham and Moses and challenged our popular understanding of tithing as demanding like amounts from the wealthy and the poor.

The first story demonstrates a call to authentic contextual pedagogy. Initially this professor had the issue of "context" as his content – the contextual formation of the Hebrew Scriptures. Yet he failed to teach contextually until the present local context demanded it. Thereupon he personally engaged the present context – the local congregation and structured his teaching so that it could teach his students as well.

The professor's second story illustrates the mutual critical power context has with text. Contextual theology is reflection upon an identifiable area of religious practice, in this case tithing, drawing upon a range of disciplines, in this case Hebrew scripture, cultural sociology, ethics. In this mutual correlation both context and text were transformed.

Teaching the context in theological education cultivates students' capacities to be present to the community's situation and environments, develops learning skills to hear and describe the people's experience, and hones students' ability to interpret the community's circumstances in relation to scripture, tradition, and ministry. It opens the student to new, previously disenfranchised voices (especially people of color and women) that may not be represented in the reflections of the classical texts. The context is thus an essential locus for exercising and gaining the knowledge for theological education.

Assignment

In drawing my talk to a close, I want to go back to the assumptions that I brought. My initial assumptions were somewhat pessimistic about our plight, but I have positive assumptions as well. And those assumptions are, number one, we have a high awareness of context. We have a particular skill of helping students relate text and context. This thrust toward contextual

education is where we stand to enhance the mission of ATS, of theological education, to a superior degree. And what is lacking is the mutual critical correlation between the field educator and her or his seminary colleagues. I want to suggest two tasks to you. I want to give them as homework assignments to bring back to our next biennial, in Dallas, January 2007.

1. First, I want you to cross the line into the classroom of your colleagues and as a good field ed student, observe what they are teaching, how they are teaching, and do your own analysis of this in terms of text and context. And after each of those encounters, find \$15 some place in your budget, take that colleague to lunch, and begin to talk to that colleague about text and context in your experience of those realities in her or his classroom. In other words, begin a dialog.
2. The second thing I'd like you to do is to produce a publication. I envision this as a tract that you give to the dean as material to include in your faculty retreat in Sept 2006. Make as an aim of your research, a way in which the faculty could share in their understandings of text and context in its mutual critical correlation.