

# FOUNDATIONS FOR AN INTERCULTURAL PHILOSOPHY OF CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

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## ***Abstract***

This essay proposes a number of fundamental principles that seek to establish a solid platform for a philosophy of Christian education that is culturally responsive and responsible. In this theological-practical reflection the author affirms that the context where most processes of Christian Education take place in the United States today is one profoundly marked by cultural diversity. Consequently, the *locus*, the *subject* and the *methodological questions* concerning Christian Education must develop an intercultural character. There is an urgent need for effective intercultural models of Christian Education. This essay provides the horizon to envision and ground such models.

The education of Christians largely relies on the philosophical underpinnings that emerge from time to time to guide the spirit of such an essential task in the Church. Christian education in the United States today is at a crossroads where multiple cultural perspectives coincide with their various interpretations of what it means to be human and Christian. This is not the first time that a similar encounter occurs. Nonetheless, what is different now is that we live in a historical moment when our awareness about the significance of culture for Christian education is most heightened than ever.

In this essay I embark on a reflective exercise that proposes several foundational principles to delineate a philosophy of Christian education that is culturally responsive and responsible. The reader must consider two important notes: one, I devote my attention primarily to the philosophical and methodological questions of what I term an intercultural approach to Christian education; at this point no emphasis is given to content, a concern that deserves more than just a few pages. Two, the principles in this essay were conceived to be implemented initially in Christian educational processes in culturally diverse contexts. This does not preclude their use in monocultural, ecumenical, or non-Christian settings. The essay is divided into four sections: 1) The *locus* of Christian education; 2) the *subject* of Christian education; 3) an intercultural methodology; and 4) pedagogical implications.

## **The *locus* of Christian Education**

The task of educating Christians in the faith is intimately linked to the historical location and the specific circumstances where this process takes place. To presume that all forms of faith education ought to follow a series of fixed, preconceived standards or that all educational practices have one exclusive goal, regardless of how noble or theologically attractive that goal may be, curtails the creative nature of this ministry and thus limit the life-giving action of God's Divine Spirit in the Church. Likewise, all-encompassing models of faith education risk imposing pedagogies of faith formation that may work well for the good of the community in one context, but not in other; give life to many in one context, but not in other; make God's presence possible in one context, not necessarily in other.

While in some contexts Christian education primarily serves to introduce women and men of all ages and backgrounds to the treasures of the faith tradition, in others that same

educational process is crafted to raise consciousness about what it means to be a Christian here and now in conversation with other sources of wisdom. There must be no opposition between these two purposes. *Learning* the faith and *living* the faith are two sides of the same coin. As we attempt to sketch an intercultural philosophy of Christian education, we must acknowledge that learning and living the faith are processes that neither occur in a vacuum nor remain neutral with respect to their context(s). Such philosophy must begin by defining the *locus* where it springs and ultimately hopes to return. Here I have in mind first and foremost the reality of Catholic Christianity in the United States, my own context, welcoming the possibility that my observations also resonate with those of other faith communities in the U.S. and beyond.

Religious educators, theologians and ministers are well aware of the fact that we live in the midst of a multifaceted phenomenon, often difficult to define with clarity, known as globalization. Global consciousness shapes the way we understand not only the world at large, but also the local. In fact, some thinkers speak of a midway point where the global and the local meet: the *glocal* (Schreier 1997, 12). The impact of globalization on the world and local economies, politics, cultures and religions is undeniable and raises an important challenge: how are we to educate Christians in this context? One result of globalization is greater awareness about the culturally diverse nature of the societies where we live. In the United States, as well as in other parts around the globe, Christian communities are undergoing significant transformations due to accelerated migration patterns. Their members are increasingly diverse in terms of ethnicity, culture, language, traditions, ideological convictions, and religious practices. For instance, more than half of Catholics in the United States do not come from a Euro-American cultural and ethnic background. Of course this is no news in a Church that has been primarily constituted by immigrants. What is significant is that against homogenizing forces, the new members are intentionally resisting assimilation into mainstream forms of cultural and religious life. These Christians want to belong to the Church and contribute to society, yet without losing who they are: people who live and celebrate their Christian faith as shaped by their culture(s). Such conviction has also motivated “local” Christians to reclaim their own cultural heritages.

Shaping one’s religious identity and that of the faith community in such a culturally diverse context places Christian education at a crossroads. There is always the temptation of embracing models that ignore differences by focusing on content as an *acultural* reality; or that of resuscitating old practices that responded to past challenges and now shine for their anachronism; or simply that of caving into an indistinct relativism where no sense of common identity would be possible.

I believe that the time is ripe for an intercultural approach to Christian education that builds on centuries of tradition while incorporating the rich cultural embodiments in which Christianity is available to us shaping the life of our communities. At this historical juncture, the *locus* of Christian education in the United States is the culturally diverse context where we live – one highly shaped by the forces of globalization.

### **The *Subject* of Christian Education**

It is not unusual that Christian educators and theologians begin their meditations about the human person by contemplating what the Scriptures and the Tradition say. Such considerations are often enriched by their conversations with the social and human sciences. However, such a way to proceed assumes that there are *given* principles, defined by revelation and/or the sciences that validate procedures to “compare” and “measure” ways of being human,

and thus determine specific correspondences. While such principles are important as reference marks, there is always the danger that they are taken as absolutes and thus ignore, denigrate, or seek to eliminate that which does not correspond to them. History is the best witness to the misuse of such references (e.g. slavery, sexism).

The principles sustaining the philosophy of Christian education that I am delineating in this essay begin by affirming the Judeo-Christian anthropological convictions that promote the full dignity of every human person. While this is a very solid starting point, I believe that Christian educators must also remain open to the possibility of discovering anthropological principles that are *not yet given*, but that may emerge out of the contemplation of two human fundamental dimensions: culture and religion.<sup>1</sup>

Religion and culture coincide with the innermost depths of human existence. Both define the identity of the human person; both deal with the human capacity for transcendence; both facilitate the encounter between the human and the divine in the realm of history (Tillich 1959, 42). An attentive look at culture and religion has the potential to disclose new windows into what it means to be human, individually and communally, in any particular location. In culturally diverse contexts, openness to discovering and embracing other ways of being human requires that we remain attentive to the historical embodiments of our own humanity. All ways of being human are shaped by cultural traditions, histories, artistic expressions, religious beliefs, and philosophical convictions. It is precisely through those particularities that the human universal emerges with more clarity, in the fullness of diversity, yet without being bound by any particular way.

As we focus our attention on the culturally diverse context where we live, the subject of Christian education emerges primarily as a “cultured” subject.<sup>2</sup> We could affirm the same even if the focus were different. It is humanly impossible to step out of the boundaries of our own cultural existence. To assume that a person or a group involved in the process of Christian education, either sharing or learning, can separate themselves from the cultural matrix where they exist would be naïve. To deny the cultural identity of a person or a group by ignoring, denigrating, or seeking to eliminate it is sinful. Why? Because in this anthropological model, rooted in the wealth of Christian tradition, to deny someone’s culture is to deny this person’s humanity; to affirm someone’s culture is to affirm this persons’ humanity –both with its potential and its limitations.

The cultured subject is not alone –it is difficult to imagine a one-person culture. This cultured subject at once acknowledges being in the company of others who share, transmit, and constantly transform the cultural milieu that gives him/her an identity as well as to the group. In a culturally diverse context, that same cultural subject discovers that other persons and other groups are also cultured: the *cultured others*. Thus begins a dance of cultured subjects and cultured groups who first move elegantly at the tune they know, yet clumsily and stumblingly when the familiar tune blends with other unfamiliar songs. Such an encounter demands new music, new steps, new lyrics. As a matter of fact, a new piece was in the works at the time of the initial encounter.

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<sup>1</sup> Religion is understood here as the capacity to transcend and enter into relationship with God –even outside the context of revealed Christianity (Cf. Tracy 1975, 91-118). Let us remember that the grand majority of women and men around the world are not Christian. Also, it is not unusual to encounter millions of Christians who observe religious practices that are not necessarily sanctioned by official Church authorities.

<sup>2</sup> *Cultured* here is understood as someone or something shaped by culture. Notice that at some point the concept *cultured* referred to the possession of some sort of education or specialized knowledge (Tanner 1997, 3-24). In contemporary anthropological theory this last connotation is deemed inaccurate and inappropriate.

An intercultural philosophy of Christian education affirms the “cultured” dimension of the people involved in this ecclesial process. Culture and religion are windows into the mystery of the human and into the mystery of God; both are constitutive to the nature of Christian education.

### **Epistemological Principles**

Christian education facilitates the encounter with the living Christ in the historical here and now of our culturally diverse communities, reminds us about the vast array of stories and practices that constitute the faith tradition locally and globally, and empowers us to live what we believe through an intercultural praxis of authentic human existence. Three epistemological principles emerge from these observations:

First, the culturally diverse context where Christian education takes place today is the matrix that provides the possibilities of knowledge and encounter with God. Just as we affirmed that all human action is “cultured,” analogously we must say that all that God reveals to humanity comes to us through cultural mediation (Gallagher 1998, 105-108). God speaks the language of culture(s); otherwise the human-divine communication would be impossible. Culture is not necessarily an external armor that we put on or take off at will. Culture is who we are: words, concepts, practices, convictions, traditions. In a culturally diverse matrix like the U.S. society, the knowledge of what it means to be a Christian is shaped by the continuous interaction among various cultural perspectives. How Christianity is lived out in such context is no longer defined exclusively by the privileged few whose cultural ways used to be considered normative. Newer and fresher voices are willing to contribute to the definition of what it means to be Christian in a culturally diverse context; all shaped by strong cultural heritages, all invested in their relationship with God here and now; all convinced that faith and culture(s) are not to be separated.

Second, the experience of God is continuously mediated by evolving expressions of culture that have a double function: one, they actualize God’s presence *for us* now; two, they appear as embodiments of meaning that give us glimpses into what is human and that which is divine (Cf. Ospino 2007a). Cultural expressions are fluid realities that are transformed by the historical and social circumstances that shape the community where they subsist (Tillich 1973, 240). Christian education must remain attentive to the process of transformation of cultural expressions that actualize and embody the experience of faith of the people. In culturally diverse contexts, Christian educators and theologians are asked to consider the impact of new cultural forms, concepts and categories that emerge out of the people’s lived experience. On the one hand, such forms, concepts and categories may be updated versions of dying expressions that are losing their power to communicate full meaning. On the other hand, they may be new expressions born at the present encounter of cultures, expressions that could not have existed if such an encounter had never occurred; expressions that may have come to light at other moments in the history of Christianity but were disregarded because the community was not ready for them.

Third, an intercultural epistemology that stresses the noetic potential of all articulations of the Christian faith across cultural boundaries resists assimilation into conceptual systems that deny the value of difference and diversity. Epistemological assumptions sustained in homogenizing postulates and conceptual minimalism risk the exaltation of prevalent interpretations of Christian symbols at the expense of non-prevalent ones. The issue at hand is not whether cultural groups can agree on the interpretation of foundational symbols as common

ground to build the faith community—they do!—but whose interpretations have become canonical, who have achieved the status of official interpreters, and how much open they are to embrace different interpretive models. This is an important concern for Christian education as well as for theological reflection. Furthermore, most interpreters do not operate with the sophistication of hermeneutical elites or always ask the “big” questions. These interpreters live their faith in the everyday, constantly merge cultural and religious worldviews that give meaning to their most immediate experiences, and pass on their faith traditions mediated by means of very particular praxes.

In the culturally diverse context where Christianity unfolds today in the United States, the traditional conceptualism that has characterized Western Christian thought is confronted with articulations of the faith that privilege the aesthetic, the relational, and *lo cotidiano*. They do not necessarily deny the conceptual, but rather affirm it insofar as it enters into a mutually validating relationship with other forms of knowledge. How does this conviction shape the ways in which we educate Christians? This is a question of methodology.

### **An Intercultural Methodology**

In the last decades, Catholic religious educators in the United States have dedicated a significant amount of energy to matters of methodology. Thomas Groome’s *Shared Christian Praxis* approach, undoubtedly the most influential model to date (Groome 1999), has been largely adopted in many Catholic and non-Catholic settings along with faith formation approaches such as the Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults (RCIA), the General Directory for Catechesis (*GDC*, 1997), community catechesis (Huebsch 2002), and adult catechesis (Regan 2002), among others. To some extent Groome’s model provides for a conversation with one’s culture; the *GDC* makes emphasis on the socio-cultural context of faith education. Though these approaches seek to meet the challenges of educating Christians in the complexity of their context, none has explicitly approached cultural diversity as a primary focus. A few and isolated exceptions (United States Catholic Conference 1987; Wilkerson 1997) do not amount to a systematic methodological formulation that meets the urgency of the matter in question. This certainly remains a pending task in our present context.

Instead of proposing at this time a methodology to educate Christians in culturally diverse contexts,<sup>3</sup> I wish to suggest a few foundational insights on which such methodology—or methodologies—can rest. An intercultural methodology of Christian education must 1) affirm the possibility of dialogue between faith and culture(s); 2) acknowledge that *for us* such dialogue takes place and is significantly shaped by the demands of a culturally diverse context; and 3) contemplate the intercultural communicative factors that determine the vibrancy and outcomes of such dialogue (Ospino 2007b, 97).

First, methodological approaches to Christian education that are attentive to cultural diversity must affirm the possibility of creative dialogue between faith and culture. The task of educating Christians is not culturally neutral. Neither must it stand oblivious to the cultured nature of the persons and communities involved in the process. From day one Christianity has been involved in a dynamic dialogue with the cultures where the Gospel message has been accepted (Walls 2002; Kraft 2005). In fact, the language, the rituals, and the symbolism that

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<sup>3</sup> I already began to entertain such possibility in my own doctoral dissertation in which I focused on the urgency of developing culturally responsive and responsible models of theological education. The dissertation’s title is *Teaching Theology in Culturally Diverse Contexts: Foundations for an Intercultural Model of Theological Education*.

allow us to identify something or someone as Christian are themselves rooted in specific cultural traditions. A creative methodology for Christian education affirms that faith and culture are in mutual dialogue and both need one another to express the fullness of their revelatory potential. An honest conversation between faith and culture discloses that there are complementarities and incompatibilities, unequivocal certainties and open-ended questions. Such is the nature of God's interaction with humanity in history as well as that of the many cultures in which the divine presence is actualized every day.

Second, *for us* the dialogue between faith and culture takes place and is significantly shaped by the demands of a culturally diverse context. Christian education should not be reduced to a simplistic transmission of contents deemed to be *acultural* or beyond culture. Instead, faith education instances serve as privileged spaces where the many voices that constitute our communities share their (cultured) identities, continuously raise (cultured) questions, and affirm their (cultured) experiences. These observations lead us to assert that people and communities engaged in processes of faith education are not *tabulae rasae*. Because the rich plurality of our cultural traditions already contain the Seeds of God's Word (*Ad Gentes*, 11), one key aspect of an intercultural methodology for Christian education is to highlight the presence of those Seeds. Not one culture is the exclusive bearer of God's revelation; not one language, conceptual or symbolic, is sufficient to express the fullness of God's mystery.

Third, a methodological approach that claims to be responsive and responsible to culture must contemplate the intercultural communicative factors that determine the vibrancy and outcomes of the dialogue between faith and culture. In culturally diverse contexts, Christians are exposed to multiple languages, symbols and expressions that articulate the human and religious experiences of several communities at once. The convergence of such multiplicity of expressions may seem chaotic for anyone accustomed to the comfort of monolingual and monocultural situations. For those whose lives unfold in culturally diverse worlds the most enriching option consists in participating and learning from the cornucopia of symbols available to them and thus discover new depths into the mystery of God's encounter with humanity. Thus, an intercultural methodology of Christian education must provide insightful directions to develop intercultural communicative skills that allow those involved in this process to appreciate other languages, symbols and expressions while engaging in new forms of conversation.

Compulsory assimilation into one dominant culture, homogenization of communicative expressions and inattention to the creative dynamism present in culturally diverse contexts are practical negations of the possibility of an intercultural methodology. Any reflection about the process of educating Christians in today's context must begin by addressing such negations before considering any further strategies. Failure to do this would limit the potential of the principles delineated above.

### **Pedagogical Implications**

What type of Christian Education would the above principles inspire? I invite the reader to consider his/her own context and contemplate the possibility of bringing to life in their own educational practice the philosophical insights just proposed. I have done this in the two major settings where my professional life unfolds: the university where I teach and my own parish community.

On the one hand, we must recognize that an intercultural model of Christian education requires *conversion* at various levels. Conversion to accept that everyone is bound by her/his own culture and must begin to appreciate that fact in order to engage people with different

cultural heritages. Conversion to value diversity and difference as realities that shape people's lives in every possible context. Conversion to recognize God's presence in history as mediated by culture(s).

On the other hand, an intercultural model of Christian education demands a comprehensive revision of *how* we educate Christians today. It is imperative that we look with renewed attention to our curricula, materials, historical and academic sources, interpretive models, traditions, languages, faculty and pedagogies asking the following question: is my practice of Christian education responsive and responsible to the cultures that coincide in my own context?

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