

# SEMINAR ON PHILOSOPHICAL EDUCATION IN SEMINARIES: PROSPECTS AND PERSPECTIVES

Stanislaus Swamikannu\*

## Just to Conclude

Socrates was a threat! He chose to stand by his convictions and was willing to die for them! This simple historical fact, reflected in its depth, can guide our discussions for the coming days. Why was he a threat? There is no easy answer to this question. Our only guess is that he was a person context-sensitive and close to his people and history. Unfortunately he was made into a Shaman and his thoughts were canonized. The person and his thoughts were removed from their context and fossilized! This was the beginning of an empty repetition! Plato, his illustrious student, was the first to take distance from him and thus becoming a counter-culture to his own mentor! Plato was soon transformed into a symbolic figure of Greek wisdom. Very soon, the same Plato would be canonized. The sorry result of this has been beautifully summarized by Alfred North Whitehead, saying that, "The whole of Western Philosophy can be seen as a footnote to Plato."

Repetition marks the beginning of robbing an idea of its explosive and counter-cultural potentiality. It marks the beginning of an idea being converted into an opinion. This has been the fate shared by Socrates and Plato. It has also been the plight of every philosopher and every philosophy. Our teaching of philosophy in the seminaries is a faded version of this drama.

In the introductory note to the brochure of the seminar, we read, "There are, however, persistent complaints about the study-programme of philosophy in seminaries, and it definitely stands in need of revision both in content and method of teaching." The problem presented is very clear, but is not anything new. It is as old as philosophy itself. However, dissatisfaction or a discontent of this sort is healthy indeed.

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\*Dr. Stanislaus Swamikannu, sdb is Vice-Provincial, SDB Chennai Province and Professor of philosophy at SH Seminary, Poonamallee.

We can approach this discontent in an academic fashion! We can propose equally valid academic solutions like: we must re-write the history of philosophy from a global and intercultural perspective; we should give due importance to Asian philosophies; we should integrate some relevant themes like Hindutva, IT supremacy, globalization, gender justice, dalits and ecological awareness; reduce the importance of western philosophy; make philosophy context-sensitive, etc. I am afraid that it will turn out to be another document that can be quoted (repeated?). We can publish another book and get it easily sponsored by some foreign agency.

There is another response possible. An existential one! We need to allow philosophy to emerge from our sincere commitment to the target group. Such a philosophy will not just be abstract and neutral, instead it will be context-sensitive or concrete. It would be the conscience and voice of the deepest aspirations of the people. Producing a document in this response will be difficult. It will be hardly quoted! But it will become a threat! It would lead to more commitment. It would help us continuously reorient ourselves.

I intend to direct my reflections, for whatever they are worth, to the latter response to the discontent we all feel regarding the teaching and study of philosophy in the seminaries.

### **1. Let us go back to the People (the Reality)**

We do not accuse the past for what they did. In all wisdom, they established our study centers far removed from the people to give the candidates the needed quiet and leisure to do philosophy. We have been insisting on the need to spend uninterrupted quality time for research. The seminaries have apportioned their time in such a way that the pastoral engagements would not tamper with the curriculum. We encouraged reading and writing.

We, as professors of philosophy, have spent long years either abroad or in India in the libraries. We have managed to challenge our western counterparts learning and using their own methodology, either using it against them or defending their positions better than they can. Thousands of scientific papers and books have seen the light of day. We can take legitimate pride in our achievements. Our seminaries are better equipped

by way of infrastructure and personnel than many of the ancient and famous university departments of philosophy. The content of our programme of philosophy is far superior to the programmes offered by the secular institutes of philosophy.

Has such a study and teaching of philosophy formed our personalities? Has it given us a vision of life and engagements? The discontent seems to imply that it has not. The first and the most fundamental corrective we need in our education of philosophy in the seminaries are to go back to the people. Their anxieties and worries, their joys and sorrows and in short, their life struggles should become to base and the matter for philosophizing. We need to convince ourselves, that we have to spend twice as much time, if not more, with the people as we have spent in the libraries with books. What will emerge as a result of this engagement is yet to be awaited. It will not be a scientific work. It will certainly be an expression of the life of the people.

## **2. More passion and less Scientific Tone in our Research**

An overemphasis on rules and regulations can kill the spirit. That a methodology is a must is granted. However, our insistence of methodology has made our seminarians produce methodologically perfect papers with hardly any contribution of their own. We have killed the spirit for the sake of a methodology. There is no passion and commitment. They are mostly repletion of the ideas of the authors with some useful conjunctions and interpretations. A layman will find it very difficult to understand this strange exercise in learning!

Unless and until I get passionately involved in the subject and the lives of the people, there will not be any passion in my study and research. I will make a thorough study of the subject. But there will be very little of my involvement. Passion is the result of that which becomes part of us, for which we will be ready to give even our lives. Will a scientific paper on the misery of the poor change my life style? But an involvement in the struggle of the people certainly will. A well-organized seminar on globalization and its evil effects conclude in a sumptuous meal at a five-star hotel! Another seminar on tribal welfare was organized at an ultra-modern setting! It is a real parody!

### 3. **A Move from Contextualization Study to Becoming Context-sensitive Persons**

Contextualization of any problem turns out to be an intellectual enterprise. I can delineate the context using certain parameters or grids worked out by some experts. I can apply them and make my study appear very concrete and contextualized. Let me take the example of the teaching of Indian philosophy in our seminaries. Allow me to make this generalization. After having looked at some 16 different Handbooks of seminaries and going through their syllabi, I was pleasantly surprised about the importance given to the teaching of Indian philosophy. However, when we look into the situation closely, what one recognizes is, that Aristotle and Plato have without much difficulty been replaced by Sankara and Ramanuja, without any of them affecting our understanding of God, man, life and the world. The Western history of philosophy is replaced by the Indian history of philosophy. The change is welcome. But having no relevance to the life and problems of the people.

Instead, we need to become context-sensitive in our study of problems. We have to identify ourselves with the situation. One has to allow himself/herself to be touched by the culture and life of the people. Getting rooted in one's own culture and language of the people will equip the person to speak a language that is context-sensitive. The language of 'they' and 'them' will have to give way to 'we' and 'ours'. Only a context-sensitive Contextualization can make our studies meaningful and enriching.

### 4. **From Thinking about Problems to Allowing Problems to Change our Thinking.**

It has become customary to speak about a philosophy of power, philosophy of sports, philosophy of God. Philosophy of Nature, philosophy of Marx, philosophy of ethics, philosophy of economics, etc. The term philosophy in these phrases has given us a clear but reductive meaning of what philosophy is, i.e., 'thinking' or 'reasoning' or 'a discourse'. While this meaning is not completely wrong, it has to a great extent restricted the role of philosophy to just thinking. Because of this reduction, a philosopher can look at a problem with coldness and distance.

It is time that we allow problems to affect our thinking. At the face of glaring injustice, inhuman acts of violence, untold misery, etc., I cannot afford to think comfortably. It is even inhuman to think about them that way. Instead, it requires an involved response, which blends the heart and the head. Some of these problems, which can and should become 'contrast experience' demand a response, which need not be absolute and universal. However, they need to affect my thinking in some way. For a moment, I should only stand in silence, without words to express my feelings. I may not have anything to say. I might, with faltering steps, attempt a response. They are more philosophical than to put on them some readymade conceptual framework, which would do violence to their seriousness. In other words, let the problems speak and transform your thinking. We need only to be open and sensitive.

##### **5. Philosophy does not Mirror Reality; it Critically Responds**

One of the most disturbing realities of today's Indian scenario is the all too human phenomenon of divisions on the basis of caste, religion, rites, language, place of origin, etc. The church, in its human form, has too easily succumbed to this reality. This has assumed alarming proportions at all levels. The formators cannot take disciplinary actions against seminaries, lest, they be criticized by their respective linguistic and communal support groups consisting mainly of priest. There are dioceses and religious congregation that select vocations only from a particular area or a caste.

One is reminded of Freud's *Civilization and its Discontents*. In this work, he rightly points out the most disquieting paradox of Modern age/civilization as 'the narcissism of minor differences.' The idea of narcissism of minor differences refers to the ways in which insignificant difference among people, who are otherwise alike, form the basis of 'feelings of strangeness and hostility between them.' Freud's concept is primarily useful to explain why in modern civilization violent and genocidal struggles have take place among peoples in our own country, who are distinguished more by what they share than their radical differences. It is rightly expressed by Michael Igantieff that 'in many contemporary nationalist genocides, when 'real differences between groups diminished, symbolic and imagined differences become more salient.' In this context.

## 6. Philosophy Integrates but Avoids Policing

Traditionally the study of philosophy was encouraged, because philosophy was considered as the handmaid of theology. The church documents, both past and present, have constantly been reiterating this view. While we don't deny this role to philosophy, the entire study of philosophy cannot be reduced to that! It provides the student with a comprehensive worldview, which directs his course of action in the ethical, social and religious fields.

We need to repeatedly emphasize the importance of philosophy for the integral growth of a person! The role of philosophy in integrating fragmented spheres knowledge must be brought into clear focus. Modern age ushered in a need for delving deep into certain aspects of reality that needed attention. While this has been a boon for many areas otherwise neglected, it has equally been proved to be a bane for an integrated view on reality as a whole. This has led to enormous consequences: a certain ethical neutrality in doing research in the field of medicine; the materialistic understanding of the human person, thus reducing him to being one dimensional man; scientism; naturalism; traditionalist, secularism, etc. We need to recapture the original intention of this fragmentation of knowledge: for a better and deeper understanding of a particular aspect of reality in order to enhance our grasp of reality as a whole.

However, the role of integrating and synthesizing does not guarantee philosophy a role of policing in the field of research. It is true that every attempt at synthesis involves an implicit interpretation and checking; but philosophy need not entertain the desire for totality and absolute truth. It is beyond the reach of any one science.

## 7. Crossing the Boundaries

Human as we are, we feel safe when we know what our boundaries are. It gives us the feeling of being at home. We rarely experiment with food and other habits. Even in a far away place, we feel comfortable with some Indian food. The same holds for our style of dressing, language and custom. This is not totally different in the area of our thinking. We feel at ease with certain ways of thinking and reasoning. How difficult it is to

wish goodbye to the dualism of Plato. We have come to think that it is impossible to do otherwise. Such an attitude can lead us unconsciously to a ghetto or a closed mentality. Our involvement and our being part of a situation of not make us context-bound but context-sensitive. Context-sensitive people have no fear of crossing the boundaries. Their being rooted in their own culture and people makes them universal. This has been the experience of every philosopher. Any philosophical tradition is just an ensemble. It does not have a pure and virginal beginning. It is a hybrid sedimentation, where numerous traditions and sub-traditions crisscross, where the boundaries overflow. We cannot think of any tradition as a unified and monolithic phenomenon. Such a realization makes us broadminded people, who are willing to learn, dialogue and share. Fundamentalism is the outcome of an opposite attitude. In a multicultural country like India, it is imperative that we avoid straightjacket thinking which would make us less sensitive to the feelings of others.

#### **8. From conceptual Perspectives to a Single Lived Option**

It is self-evident that one has as many perspectives as the standpoint from which he/she approaches an issue. One can have thousands of such perspectives at the theoretical level without violating the rules of logic. However, it is nearly impossible to have many perspectives when it is a question of living and option.

There is a powerful example in the life of Jesus. His thinking can be interpreted to suit any one's need and convenience. But, his life thinking and activities reveal a perspective, which is clear. His single-minded commitment to the poor and the oppressed, the marginalized and the outcasts, summarized his life and activities. Christians can have different perspectives at the conceptual level to clarify ideas. But when it comes to a lived option, their conceptual perspectives are synthesized or focused. The different perspectives are not denied, but elevated to a synthesis, which only lived experience can give. It is also only in the lived option for a particular cause that a person can transcend boundaries set by the cultures. In the life of Jesus, we have such an example. In the healing of Simon's mother-in-law on the Sabbath, in healing the leper, in calling a tax collector as his disciple, in eating with sinners, one sees Jesus crossing the boundaries set by the Jewish law. But, in his lived option for the socially,

culturally and religiously marginalized, Jesus sees the boundaries vanish. He could even re-define the boundaries from the perspective of his liberating experience of God as abba. This has been the experience of great thinkers.

### **9. The Subaltern Perspective as the Christian Lived Option**

It is true that we live in a multicultural society. We have a plethora of views based on religion and culture. There is ambiguity all around. There is even the possibility of indecision and delay in our response to situations, which are complex. This in no way deters us from choosing a perspective for doing philosophy. The ambiguity and plurality that characterize our society does not lead us to inaction, but it is a fresh opportunity for doing philosophy in a more meaningful way. They question the familiar, and challenge us to take the road less traveled.

There is a clarion call re-define our priorities in doing philosophy. We are given unambiguous signals to take the side of the poor and the marginalized. We cannot pretend not to understand this call within a call to be philosophers. The cry of the poor and the consciousness of the subaltern groups should direct our syllabi, our method of teaching, in short, our world view. Are we arbitrary in our choice of the perspective? so be it! what is otherwise the purpose of constructing the most sophisticated libraries, spending a lifetime in research, learning and teaching philosophy? Is the goal of teaching philosophy in our seminaries meant to produce scholars whose works can compete with those our counterparts in other part of the globe? Let us not forget that scholars are only admired!

Let me start my keynote address afresh...

Philosophy is not 'love of wisdom,' as the literal meaning would have us believe! That is too cozy a definition! It is sincere involvement motivated by love for the less fortunate! Thus, you are bound to become a threat!