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Nurturing students' spiritual development in secular contexts: a case study of Evangelical theological education in Australia

ABSTRACT

The awareness of secularisation may not have served as a focus for curricula development in theological education, yet it critically shapes the entire educational process influencing values and practices. Australian theological colleges need to be aware of, and alert to their secular, westernised culture that places a high premium on individual rights, personal liberty, and freedom. This article reports on an Australian study discussing the nature of secularised contexts and the relevance of evangelical theological education to these contexts, especially the role of spiritual formation as a key component to better equip theological students to deal with their secular context. The article argues for stronger awareness of, and preparedness for robust engagement with secularised contexts. It highlights the importance of engaging the influence of secularisation values in theological education.

1. INTRODUCTION

The subject of secularisation may not have served as a core focus for curricula development in theological education. However, secularisation is becoming too critical to ignore, as it shapes the entire educational process. Secularisation is commonly understood as a progressive, cultural process in westernised societies whereby religion,

its values, and spiritual practices decline in both personal and institutional contexts (Taylor 2007; Habermas 2008). Secularisation theorists no longer consider the current era to be characterised by “the emptying of religion from autonomous social spheres” (Taylor 2007:2). Nor is it only about the breakdown of those values and practices that held the Christian community of faith together, as with “the phenomenon of *believing without belonging* as coined by Grace Davie in the more secular countries of Europe” (Boeve 2005:102). Rather, it is about the breakdown of those values and practices *and* a plurality of religion and its variant spiritualities springing forth and taking centre stage of public discourse (Boeve 2005). It is reflective of cultural responses such as individualism, consumerism, and commercialisation that occur through a process of individualisation (Boeve 2010). Western societies such as Australia place a high premium on democracy and freedom (Cusack 2005), the craving for individual liberty and the pursuit of personal choices as an unending human search (Rossiter 2011).

In global contexts, there has been the awareness that theological colleges have not adequately attended to their secularised contexts (Boeve 2010; Rossiter 2011; Teo 2017). According to Houston (2017:3480),

the decline of the sacred even among evangelical Christians and secularism’s deep penetration into every aspect of life are causing alarm, and the need to reconsider devotion to Christ is being taken much more seriously.

Spiritual programmes in theological colleges are not helpful enough in the face of the transient values of society. Not enough attention is paid to transformation within the learning process. Equipping young people with the appropriate spiritual tools would help them resolve their individualised challenges (Rossiter 2011). The social pressures related to social media and peer pressures influence their perception and attention to spiritual practices. As future leaders, they need to be assisted in forming Christian ideas in a religious pluralistic and diverse culture. They could wonder if the Christian faith does have something to say in the public space. Young people need a much deeper Christian identity formation as a “child of God” (Hockridge 2015:6). Many young people hope for a secure grounding in life, vocation, and ministry in theological college, away from isolation and the identity dilemmas typical of university education. Instead, they are overloaded with learning and have hardly any time for reflection and spirituality. The millennialist’s unsatisfied yet increasing hunger and thirst for deeper spirituality accelerates the growing concerns. The individual’s search for identity construction is a clarion call that speaks to the values and practices of the Christian faith (Boeve 2012).

There has been growing scholarship towards holistic and transformational learning (Cronshaw & Menzies 2014), depending on whether the curriculum or training programme is adjusted to take the context of secularisation seriously. Spiritual practices are major constituents of spiritual formation, described as the activities and processes that form the character and personality of the individual believer towards becoming Christ-like (Holmes 1987:45-60; Naidoo 2008). Theological education is about the qualities we are trying to develop in the ministers and systematically do so for the person as a whole (Hockridge 2018:414-416). These practices occur in personal and communal contexts and are always accomplished within a community of faith. According to Hockridge (2015:6), theological education is “to be formative of character, life and practice, as well as transformative of understanding and knowledge”. However,

regardless of the progress made in bridging the gap between theological knowledge, experiential and skills learning, there still exists a disparity between learned theology and lived experience (Ball 2018:218).

With theological education, more attention needs to be paid to engaging the values of secularisation with the formation process, so that holistic education is provided to appropriately deal with the challenges of young people living in a secular context.

2. THE RESEARCH PROJECT

This study wants to understand how evangelical theological colleges spiritually prepare students to thrive in secularised contexts and students' perception of the helpfulness and support received from the spiritual practices in the face of their challenges.

In the Evangelical context, spirituality refers to “devotion to Christ” and is used in conjunction with spiritual practices and formation. Spiritual practice may be used interchangeably with spiritual discipline, which is defined as

Christian practices or exercises that guide an individual or group to become more responsive to the Holy Spirit's movement. Theologically, spiritual disciplines are framed by the larger doctrines of sanctification and grace ... can assist growth and holiness. Though a means of grace, they require effort; hence 'discipline' (Schwanda 2017:3466).

Evangelical spirituality is distinguishable from all other spiritualities in the following six ways: the biblical doctrine of Creation; biblical revelation; Christocentric life in God as Trinity; outward working of inward grace; fellowship, and communion (Houston 2017:3483-3485).

The research was based on assumptions that spiritual practices are part of spiritual formation, which is part of the overall formation task that is intentional, holistic, and integrative (Ward 1995; Naidoo 2011; Lowe 2012). Although theological education was traditionally recognised as a cognitive task with content-focused curricula, it has recently been widely understood as a formational enterprise. Theological education has a transformational goal (Loder 1981; Mezirow 1997), involving transformative learning that is student focused. It requires that curricula be borne out of engagement with the students (Harding 2018:568-569). In fact, the learners' needs and the context in which a curriculum is taught, including its cultural diversity, become central to content creation. All theological education must be relevant to the context in which it is engaged (Boeve 2010). Australian theological colleges need to be aware of, and alert to the westernised culture in which they are located, as a high premium is placed on individual rights, democracy, personal liberty, and freedom.

The theoretical framework for this study was based on Boeve's (2010; 2020) ideas on the long history of secularisation in Western Europe and Western democracies. Boeve (2010; 2020) identifies, analyses, and describes the cultural process of the post-modern, post-secular state. Boeve (2010) describes the term "detraditionalisation", whereby traditions, including religious traditions, can no longer be passed on effortlessly across generations. It no longer serves to guide the identity-forming process. Rossiter (2011) describes how the ideological strategy of individualism (as linked to relativism, nihilism, aestheticism, and existentialism) equips the individual to cope with the culture's challenges.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative methodology using a practical theological methodology of Osmer's (2011:2) "descriptive-empirical task" of the praxis cycle. Cross-sectional research was used in three case studies of three accredited evangelical colleges located across the East, South, and West of Australia (names were protected under ethical regulations) with a spiritual formation programme. The rationale for the three cases was to engage a sample of established institutions located in highly populated states across Australia. Data was collected via interviews from fifteen participants made up of teaching staff, responsible for formation, and final year students from the contact programme. Contact learning attracts fewer students, due to growing student numbers in online learning. Hence, the sample size was small, five participants for each case study. However, the focus was on those fully exposed to formational learning. Participants had the opportunity to reflect on their lived experiences and provide information on how secularisation

tendencies shaped students' learning and lives and how the staff guided them in spiritual practices. Data was then collected through a triangulated method: face-to-face interviews, document study, and observational research in the three research sites. Content analysis was used in analysing the data.

4. FINDINGS

Findings revealed two broad categories of themes, namely internal and external influences. The themes referring to internal influences included the *programme of spiritual practice* at institutions, which varied, revealing learning involving devotional components, reading and journal writing, supplemented by weekly chapel meetings and formation/mentoring group meetings. There was support from faculty's oversight as mentors, as well as one-on-one mentoring opportunities with academic staff. The second theme in this group was the *influence of the institutional culture* in formational activities involving the college's values, beliefs, and faith tradition that shaped the nature of spiritual practices. It also demonstrates what those values in the institutional documents mean in practical terms. Secularisation values such as individualism, success, consumerism, and other values were most evident in the socialising function of the institutional culture.

The themes that emerged from external influences included *accreditation requirements* affecting the formational programme that distracted away from the design and implementation of spiritual practices. This was an obstacle in terms of aligning spirituality with other aspects of the curriculum. The second major theme was the *influence of the broader culture*, which is the cultural context and community in which the college is located. The college's awareness of secularisation's influence was indicated in the diminishing spirituality of incoming students. Terms such as "self-worth" and "the individual living for the self" were significant aspects of current trends in the Australian culture.

Besides these broad themes of the study, some direct issues relating to the link of spiritual practices to secularisation need focused mention.

4.1 Engaging the balance of the academic and the spiritual

Spiritual practices were evident in all case studies. However, it was drowned out by the academic offerings. The spiritual focus of the curriculum was viewed as being inadequate to support the students in engaging their secularised challenges or to equip these future ministers to serve their contexts fruitfully.

Students had a contrary view to the claim of the priority focus of spiritual formation in the institutional documents:

I don't think there's a very strong focus on spiritual formation across the subjects ... There's one subject ... which is optional. People are encouraged to do it, but most people know they don't have to do it as part of the bachelor's requirements. Okay, so that's taught over four semesters instead of one semester. So, that workload is very low relative to other subjects ... (Student response, East case study).

In the first year ... just the workload of academic study was quite confronting. Coupled with that, you could feel like I'm reading the Bible anyway, during my Old Testament and New Testament classes. So, why bother to do some other devotions; I cannot spend any more time with God reading the Bible and still having devotional each day or spend more time praying ... (Student response, South case study).

Students felt that this resulted in little time for personal reflection and prayer to support them spiritually. Furthermore, students were of the common view that the high academic pressure exerted by the accredited courses only served to diminish the impact and helpfulness of the spiritual programme. Academic staff members verified this:

But coming back to the teaching side: I think because we have to get that accreditation, it simply made them downplay the spiritual practice of some subjects. I also think that, as I understand it, most colleges or Christian institutions in general, do this (Staff response, East case study).

I think it does remain academic for the sake of it being an academic institution, and it has to sit with those requirements, which, you know, may be an element of secularisation (Staff response, South case study).

In this instance, knowledge became relegated to scholarly research, propositional knowledge, and school curricula, while the holism of spiritual knowledge, reflective human thought, and responsible service become sidelined.

4.2 Tensions between individualism and building community

Incoming theological students are young people who thrive in the broader culture and are generally aware of its all-pervasive individualism and isolation. These young people are a "generation of young consumers ... ever more knowledgeable and selective about what they do and don't want" (Barna Group 2015:1). This comes from the influence of globalisation and the

product of the Western culture of consumerism. Various religious options on offer contribute to “the commodification of religion in an increasingly competitive and aggressive marketplace” (Naidoo 2017:4). The complexity of secularisation is driven by the process of individualisation, which embeds the cultural strategies of individualism, consumerism, and commercialisation. These movements also result in a privatised form of spirituality, which creates a sense of independence and self-sufficiency, drawing students away from the whole-hearted commitment required for the spiritual practices to become transformational. Yet it is to be noted that the colleges' institutional documents indicated the need for a community whose unity and success are pivotal to their formational practices. Across case studies, theological institutions made concerted efforts to encourage attendance at community activities:

You know, I mean, the chapel services are great, but those of themselves would be almost meaningless without the community also reflecting the values that are espoused within. So, I found students wanting to engage and support each other and to spend time together ... The staff are accessible to be able to have conversations about whatever you would like to know (Staff response, East case study).

In terms of the community, which serves as the platform and support system for the spiritual practices, small groups of the community were most successful in nurturing spirituality. At the same time, efforts to grow a strong community were being hampered and mostly overwhelmed by the study workload and by students' preferences, resulting in a lack of priority attention to community interactions. The make-up of the community also impacted on the cohesiveness of its community. For example, in West case study, differences in views on gender among students and staff created tensions. In South case study, the gap in cohesiveness was due to its non-denominational diversity reflecting a variety of theological views.

4.3 Spiritual formation programmes were not intentional

It is important to note that, if spiritual formation programmes were intentional, they would align with the institution's vision and mission and engage the context to appropriately form students. Intentionality speaks to how the programme is accorded priority or purposeful action. Intentionality exists when spiritual formation is “carefully thought out, understood, and deliberate strategies” are mapped out to promote it (Naidoo 2011:122). In relation to the accredited courses, spirituality was marginalised, as students suggested that, even though both chapel and the formation course were encouraged, the course and practice workload were low:

In terms of ... like this specific course, it's not much time, and then I guess, is it a theology degree? It's not a lot of time that we spend on this course, but then we're encouraged to go to the chapel (Student response, East case study).

Although there was an indication of the institution's encouragement for students to engage in activities of spiritual formation, the degree of emphasis did not translate into a strong, focused programme, given that it was not credit bearing. Hence, the students responded that they knew that they did not have to attend the spiritual formation course, neither did they have to be in the chapel to satisfy any accreditation requirement. In addition, the shift to online study continued to disrupt the work of the formational community:

Yeah, so even in college, we've got part-time students here running from wanting to study full time as students. Yeah, when I was at theological college, we all had to learn in the community ... that sort of community structure makes it a lot easier to be able to develop habits. That's a big change. How do you develop spiritual habits when people are not living with each other? (Staff response, South case study).

Institutions are challenged to sustain formation practices, given the move towards online study since the COVID-19 pandemic, with students preferring this mode of learning due to its expedient way of learning.

The theological colleges' awareness of secularising tendencies was evident, but formational activities did not provide a counterculture of Christian practice, as an academic staff member states:

I think we are moderately successful in equipping students for a secularised society. Institutions like Churches and Bible colleges are sometimes slow to adapt to a different world. And I think ... I think we have been slow to adapt (East case study).

The lack of intentionality may be indicated in the students' claim that the training programme did not help shape them significantly. Students could have been helped to understand the forces of individualism at work, even the values that are lived out that focus on success and expediency rather than the value of relationships and community.

5. DISCUSSION

This study highlighted the need for evangelical training institutions to use their spiritual formation processes to help students deal with the challenges of living in a secular context. A true commitment to transformative learning entails a praxis approach involving reflection, engagement, and further

reflection towards better engagement or practice. According to Cronshaw and Menzies (2014:2):

New paradigms in student learning that focus on transformative learning to transform people and their inner lives and equip them to transform the world around them. This is the terrain of our formational and transformational agenda in theological education.

Ball (2014) suggests that theological education in Australia plays a significant role in the tertiary education sector, as more denominations and churches develop and expand their educational enterprises. Theological institutions need to be alert and open to dealing with the society at the centre of their secularised contexts. Institutions need to understand the trends in the culture and formulate the required counterculture, examine its institutional culture as a socialising force, and embed a public theology in their training programme to appropriately respond to the ever-changing world views and paradigm shifts of their secularised contexts.

It is important to locate Evangelicals in the secularisation discourse. In the Australian context, Evangelicalism is understood to be the most visible, recognisable, and dynamic face of Protestantism in Australia (Piggin 2012:110). Ward (2003) states that Protestantism's role in Western countries' progress and advancement was a turning point for individualism. He argues that it facilitated and advanced structures that championed and paved the way for personal liberty, freedom, and individual choices, as well as the development of modernity (Ward 1995). Ward substantiates his position from the premise that Protestantism and modernism followed the same agenda. Grenz (1993:16) states that, even though the preaching of the Gospel to individuals is central to Evangelicalism, the modern, individualistic world view has its origin in the "myth of the autonomous self". Grenz (1993) further argues that the Western culture, in which Evangelicalism was planted, exerted its influence of individualism on the faith beyond what was biblically commanded or promoted by the Reformers. In other words, the Christian faith has been influenced by the individualism of the Western culture, and not vice versa. Other scholars such as Willard (2016) also suggest that Western culture's individualism has influenced the Christian faith of westernised countries such as Australia.

In addition, how Evangelicals interact with the broader society poses a significant concern. This drawback could be aggravated by sustaining a secular-sacred divide that places a distinction between sacred and secular modes of existence. Evangelicalism has had a long history of debate on the secular-sacred divide. Several scriptures such as John 17:16, 1 John 2:15, and Romans 12:2 are at the centre of these conversations; perhaps, not read

in context and either misunderstood or misapplied. Kim *et al.* (2012) argue that the secular-sacred divide has its origin in modernism or the post-modern viewpoint of human reason and empiricism. It is commonly held that the modernist world view is opposed to God or any idea of the supernatural or the Christian faith. Shepherd (2004) speaks of Christian dualism and describes it as a “split vision” of life that separates faith from reality and suggests wrongly that an engagement with the world is “unspiritual” and irreconcilable with living for God. In such scenarios, the public perception of evangelical colleges is that of communities of faith that are disconnected from the realities of their world, and hence, somewhat irrelevant to their contexts. On the other hand, colleges have been found to validate such perceptions by having no public theology in place (Cronshaw & Menzies 2014). Evangelicals are commonly known to separate their mission from the secularised world, yet, doing so without the much-needed faithfulness in doctrinal stewardship nor, as further suggested, the appropriate character formation (The 2018). Knoll (1994; 2003) alludes to evangelical practice as an over-emphasis of preaching the Gospel at the expense of adequate preparation, the understanding that comes through reflection, the wisdom of reflection that leads to long-term planning, and the long-term social engagements that create sustainable relevance to contexts.

For Evangelicals, spirituality is defined as “a state of deep relationship with God” (Houston 2017:3480), although, as Houston (2017:3480) notes,

for some Christians, there has been reluctance to speak of spirituality, lest we isolate expressions such as ‘spiritual formation’ from other aspects of life.

The trend of downplaying the term “spirituality” has persisted in the past, given the more biblically appropriate terms such as “discipleship” and “holiness”. A lack of emphasis on spiritual formation rests largely on its various notions and distortions of the doctrine of sanctification. According to Porter (2008:130), inherent in those notions is the perception that spiritual formation is none other than “the nature and dynamics of growth in Christian holiness”. Furthermore, in the recent history of Evangelicals (Parker 1991), there has generally been opposition to spiritual practices. It was largely so on the ground that there were no adequate materials for spiritual practices based on evangelical values and that practices such as meditation and silence were too closely associated with Catholicism. Parker (1991) argues that opposing certain practices found useful in other traditions or being uncritically open to practices not in agreement with Evangelicalism may be tantamount to letting the pendulum swing in the opposite direction. This study found that the vast majority of faculty members responsible for spiritual practices have not been trained in the developmental task of spiritual formation. They have had to rely on their theological education, research interests, and personal efforts in spirituality.

6. IMPLICATIONS FOR THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION PRACTICE

Although theological colleges in westernised societies are aware that they live and function in secularised contexts, they may not have considered how the values of the secular age impact on theological education and the formative task. Overt and covert threats shape and undercut formational outcomes and the relevance of the theological colleges to their contexts. As this study showed, evangelical colleges do not have a comprehensive grasp of the holistic task of formation, yet they are somehow required to develop the individual in a balanced way. To overcome this, Ball (2014) argues for an approach to curricula development that aims at transformative learning that will make the personal desires of students more achievable. It calls for a balancing act between those competing curriculum requirements, not least the graduate attributes that are a guide for the process, and the use of learning outcomes. This approach requires a review of the curriculum involving collaboration between the faculty and other relevant stakeholders. Colleges should emphasise the spiritual requirements and formational values that are usually well-articulated in their institutional documents and seek to align those values within both the programme and the institution. Accreditation requirements for academic courses can wipe out interest and attention to spiritual practices. Weighting instruments with a developmental agenda need to place equal value to spiritual practices, so that it is equally valued in the learning environment. Moving forward, more attention is needed on ministerial identity formation, so that millennialist students can integrate learning into their lives and develop as individuals with secure inner worlds, knowing who they are.

With the decline in the campus community and a diminishing return on their spiritual practices, developing an authentic community must be considered, using the formational building blocks of relationships and community; in the image of the personal relationship in the three persons is one God (1 John 5:7), as understood in Trinitarian theology. Cannel (2008) argues that the context of theological education is the community of faith, where it is understood as a shared journey and a lifelong experience. Theological education may, therefore, be described as embodying both spiritual and academic components that aim towards developing the key competencies required by the leaders or ministers of the community of faith. Community is nurtured within an institutional culture, which can become a hindrance. Research by Carroll, Wheeler, Aleshire and Marler (1997) suggests that many institutions have critical issues – such as the issue of oppression, where men are over women, or the issue of not engaging cultural diversity within the community – underpinned by their institutional culture. This indicates that elements of such culture include the institution's values, world view and beliefs, and the various

forms and processes of everyday interactions between the community. Due to the lack of regular reviews through reflection and action, the institutional culture can become so settled and structured to hardly yield to the need for change with changing times. Some reflection is needed on the institutional culture and its ability to be adaptable.

7. CONCLUSION

An attempt to understand the culture and the extent to which a high-pressured socio-economic environment impacts on the individual's attention to spiritual practice may be achieved by making spiritual formation more relevant to the context. Secularisation requires an engagement from the vantage point of the values and practices of the Christian faith (Boeve 2010). This article highlighted a study that sought to establish an awareness of secularisation tendencies and then an appropriate attention to spiritual development to prepare students for the secular context. It revealed various challenges in making that a reality, so that there is more reflection for more nuanced theological praxis. This challenge is an invitation for theological education to continue engaging in the cultural process, so that institutions can prepare students by living out a counter-cultural learning environment that alerts and prepares the student for ministry in a secularised society.

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Teologiese opleiding

Australië

Sekularisasie

Spirituele vorming