

Consensus

Volume 33

Issue 2 *Theology and Context(s)*

Article 5

11-25-2011

Toward an Empire-Resisting Pedagogy for Theological Educators

Alan Ka Lun Lai

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus>

Recommended Citation

Lai, Alan Ka Lun (2011) "Toward an Empire-Resisting Pedagogy for Theological Educators," *Consensus*: Vol. 33 : Iss. 2 , Article 5.
Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol33/iss2/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Commons @ Laurier. It has been accepted for inclusion in Consensus by an authorized editor of Scholars Commons @ Laurier. For more information, please contact scholarscommons@wlu.ca.

Toward an Empire-Resisting Pedagogy for Theological Educators

Alan Ka Lun Lai¹

*Pastor, Mount Olivet Lutheran Church,
North Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada*

It is essential to understand “empire” as the Church seeks to serve in the world. Building on recent theological discourse on empire, this essay discusses the implications for the practice of theological education.

Recent theological scholarship points out that Christianity emerged from first century Palestine under Roman occupation as more than a religious movement. Christianity was also a sociopolitical and economical reform movement that sought to counter the violent presence of Imperial Rome. Joerg Rieger defines empire as a political, social and economic undertaking with “...massive concentration of power that permeates all aspects of life and which cannot be controlled by one factor alone, and it seeks to extend its control as far as possible.”² Building on Rieger’s understanding, my working definition is that empire can be characterized as mechanisms, forces, or intellectualizing of domination because of differing social locations, economic resources, and unequal distributions of power. Within Christianity, “...empire displays strong tendencies to domesticate Christ and anything else that poses a challenge to its powers.”³ These understandings challenge the mission of theological education in the 21st century, exposing Christianity’s past and present alliance with empires, along with the most painful realization that Christianity itself *is* an empire.

In this essay, I demonstrate why theological educators need to respond to empire scholarship critically as we prepare leaders for a world bombarded by various forms of empire ideologies and practices. The central tenet in this paper is that seminaries need to embrace pedagogical innovations in order to educate new generations of leaders to resist empire. Lutheran Church bodies have an excellent tradition of producing theologically educated pastors and leaders. But to resist empire, the church needs more than a vibrant academic Lutheran theology. A vibrant academic Lutheran theology deals with half of this issue; another half needs to be completed by developing critical pedagogies that involve justice seeking as community transformation.

Following the brief review of recent theological discourse on Jesus and empire, it is necessary to consider the topic of globalization. The global North is an empire in the making. This is not a pleasant critique to some, but I point out that European-North American perspectives still dominate discussions concerning what constitutes Lutheranism and the goal of theological education. In addition, the global North enjoys and controls the

majority of world-wide wealth. These factors are the context from which an empire-resisting pedagogy is proposed. In this section, I address theological educators who seriously consider their vocation as one that brings justice and liberation to the world. These theological educators need to critically examine not only the political and economical empires out there, but also the “scholarship empires” they bring to the classrooms and the “academic empires” where they work. Education toward empire resistance cannot bypass examining the inherited theological traditions of the educators, their social locations and assumed teaching practices. To reflect on these challenges, I have set out three questions that form the backbone of this essay:

- How does contemporary scholarship on empire challenge the self-understanding of Christianity?
- In what ways does the church’s renewed interest in countering empire challenge the practices of Lutheran seminaries?
- What kind of pedagogical issues are at stake in order to resist empire?

Writing from my location in North America, “Lutheran seminaries” in this essay refer to those in North America. Although I reside in the global North, as an Asian immigrant to Canada, I represent the voice of a cultural minority. As a postcolonial Asian Lutheran Christian educator, I represent a dim theological voice within the global North where the discipline of Christian education discipline is marginalized in theological circles. However, I do not easily excuse myself from being the voice of the privileged as a heterosexual male living in Canada and an ordained pastor with a doctorate. What I try to say is that social location is very important to me personally and as I write this paper. I believe many ideas presented in this essay have implications in other contexts, and I encourage those who live outside North America to make the necessary discernments.

Jesus, Christianity, and Empire

Recent biblical and theological scholars seriously challenge the long-held perception that the New Testament in general, and Jesus’ teachings in particular, are primarily religious. Building on the atonement theory Anselm developed in the eleventh century, Christianity has inculcated a view of Jesus where Jesus was understood as the “Lamb of God” sent to die on the cross as a sacrifice for human sins. Jesus came to fulfill God’s divine plan of redemption. The simplistic message that Jesus came to save us from our sins is increasingly unacceptable because it discounts political, economical, and social change.⁴ Since the Enlightenment, Christianity has leaned severely toward a religion of propositional truths that have strong references to personal piety. The Christian gospel preached most often is about a depoliticized and divine Jesus who cares only for our spiritual practices and status before God.

A depoliticized Christianity is further solidified by modern individualism. During the height of Christian fundamentalism, evangelistic preachers preached fervently a Christianity fuelled by individualistic morality that sought to revitalize personal commitment to Christ. The beneficiaries of such a faith tradition are no doubt political empires. Western Christianity, for the most part, has provided a great service to empire by focusing primarily on doctrines and religious practices, with minimal participation in social transformation. A misuse of Luther's two-kingdom principle may have also contributed to this divide. This dichotomy promises the church a space to deal with spiritual matters, but leaves the church very little space to address economic, social, and environmental injustice. This dichotomy explains why most Christians today find it difficult to see contemporary issues like global warming as a theological problem.⁵

Led by Richard Horsley and others, biblical scholars inform us that religion in ancient times was seldom separated from politics. Instead, ancient biblical writers had an acute interest in confronting social injustice and economic exploitation. In the ancient Palestinian context, seeking spiritual renewal was never detached from seeking social transformation. Speaking for the weak and the exploited was the essence of what it meant to serve the Lord. This prophetic character as shown in Jeremiah, Micah, and Amos is found clearly in Jesus' ministry where he defended the poor, healed the sick, and welcome strangers. Warren Carter reminds us that "following Jesus is a not a spiritual matter that has no implication for sociopolitical structures."⁶ In the first century, confessing Jesus as Lord was an act of sociopolitical resistance because it defied Caesar's political-religious claim as lord.⁷ Imperial Rome's execution of Jesus on the cross, an instrument to get rid of political dissidents, indicates how well the empire understood the sociopolitical message of Jesus' ministry – the same message that Christianity under Constantine failed to pick up.

This scholarship exposes an inadequate Christian self-identity out of which the church has been educating for almost two thousand years. The church that pays serious attention to this theological scholarship has no interest in diluting the love for the gospel, but precisely the opposite: to be diligent in rediscovering the lost dimensions of what it means to be followers of Jesus who taught us the kingdom of God. Without intentionally investigating the tension between Christianity and empire, the church has lost more than just an understanding of how the forces of empire affected us all, "...but also a sense of how Christianity can never quite be absorbed by empire altogether and which of its resources push beyond empire."⁸ As a way to correct that mistake, seminaries are challenged to re-educate for a different Christian self-identity that goes beyond a narrowly defined version of personal piety and morality.

Globalization: A Context and Pretext for Re-Thinking Theological Education

The contemporary expression of empire is not limited to territory and politics; it includes economics. “Globalization” was a term developed in the mid-1980’s to try to account for the new world global village caused by technological breakthrough. Globalization reminds us of the interdependence of human existence. Increasingly, however, globalization has taken a negative turn and now means a unified economic-social system and transnational infrastructure with strong references to domination by those who are industrialized. Instead of enhancing diversity, globalization advances cultural uniformity, social oppression, and economic depravation. Giant transnational corporations are empires seeking control over water, land, raw resources, and seed stocks. They control and determine the monetary value of the livelihood of people and how they live.⁹ Asian educator Hope Antone says,

Globalization is economic domination because it aims at the integration of the economies of the world to the so-called liberal capitalist market economy which is controlled by the rich countries of the world.... Globalization is cultural aggression because in its attempt to propagate a monoculture, it does not respect the uniqueness of peoples’ cultures, especially the indigenous peoples’ cultures and the natural habitat.¹⁰

There are economic-political as well as socio-religio-cultural dimensions of globalization. The economic-political dimension of globalization points toward the borderless free market approach that makes developing countries less and less able to defend their political sovereignty. The socio-religio-cultural dimension points toward the homogenization of culture and the valorization of indigenous religious roots. Recent critique of the forces of globalization calls the church to take the world, its people, their social conditions, and their religions seriously, and commit to examine the church’s relationship with the people of the world as worthy partners in educating future leaders.

This call to challenge globalization has implications for seminary education. Seminaries are places no longer confined to the study of religious traditions. Seminaries need to take the mechanisms of world economics as material for deep reflection, and conduct advocacy work. Seminaries in the global North must examine ways in which taken-for-granted lifestyles in the global North are sources of injustice. Curricular and extra-curricular teaching/learning cannot avoid helping seminarians gain a greater understanding of the interconnectedness of the social and economic situations of the global North and global South. Economics is not traditionally a subject in seminary classrooms. However, it needs to be seriously considered, because economics is not just about financial institutions doing monetary exchanges. Economics has to do with the distribution of wealth and resources; it is about life and death.¹¹

Globalization presents a challenge to the education of all Lutherans. I am confident that Lutheran academic circles understand the social responsibility of the church. However, I observe a discrepancy between our theological affirmations and faith practices. On the one hand, empowered by the theology of the cross, Lutherans learn to recognize the crucified and the risen Christ through the faces of the oppressed. The cross allows Lutherans to stand in solidarity with human pain in the world. I particularly like Canadian theologian Douglas John Hall's works on Luther's theology of the cross where Hall says, "... the cross assumes a strong world orientation."¹²

On the other hand, the most recognized message in the pulpit and classrooms is still dominated by an individualized understanding of faith. The Lutheran theological tradition might have strong sociological convictions, but such convictions are rarely explicitly "educated" via liturgy, confirmation resources, pulpit, and adult education materials. Quite the contrary, an individualized version of justification by faith has been disproportionately celebrated in hymns and liturgy. Anselm's "redemptive violence" might have been discarded in some scholars' minds, but there are not enough intentional educational endeavors to dispute it and to promote a different theological model in parish settings. As a member of the colloquy examination committee in my Canadian Lutheran Church at the regional level, I observe too often that questions for the candidates are characterized as individualized versions of justification by faith. There are almost no questions at all about social justice or about a candidate's theological approach in teaching against empire. If a random interview were conducted with parishioners, it would not be surprising to find out that most people could not identify seeking economic and social justice as the part of the core teachings of the Christian church.

Lutheranism is far from being an individualized religion and has profound insights on social transformation and justice seeking. In addition to the theology of the cross I mentioned briefly above, let me give one more example. In *Healing a Broken World: Globalization and God*, Cynthia Moe-Lobeda shows us the profound theological voice the Lutheran heritage has for seeking economic justice. Building on Luther's idea of an indwelling Christ that is present in all human beings, Moe-Lobeda helps us to understand Luther's social ethics that call Christians to love and to serve our neighbours. Moe-Lobeda says, "For Luther, Christian neighbor-love and economic norms pertaining to Christians are realizable only in light of the moral identity, purpose, vision, and agency established by the indwelling Christ."¹³ Because this indwelling Christ is presented in all human beings, each human being has an inherited dignity. Based on this conviction, Lutherans should reject any practice that contributes to our neighbours' suffering. A justified life in Christ calls Christians to condemn economic oppression and work toward emancipation.¹⁴ Moe-Lobeda shows us that the theological legacy of Luther provides us a storehouse of materials

to build a social ethics that enable us to resist empire. This social ethics prompts Lutherans to seek justice in the world because seeking justice is justified life in action.

Let me explain further why seminary education is affected by and should respond to the forces of globalization and empire. In an initial response to the recognition of globalization in the mid-1980's, seminaries developed contextualized field trips that sought to help students gain better understanding of world cultures. Most often, students were required to conduct short-term visits to countries foreign to them; usually it meant visiting countries in the "Third World." This began as a well-intended initiative for seminaries in North America aiming to expand students' understanding of non-western cultures. However, this practice is not always completely satisfactory because those visits are so brief that they resemble theological tourism, with minimal transformation happening. In the field of cultural studies, researchers conducting ethnographical study tell us that unless the researchers intend to conduct repeated short visits or stay in the field longer than a couple of months, there is no reason to believe that any significant breakthrough would happen in terms of deeper understanding of that context or changing one's personal theoretical framework.

More problematic is the practice itself. Those students who do the visiting usually come from the economically richer countries in the global North. Their abilities to raise or spend a considerable amount of money in order to visit a country in the global South speaks loud and clear concerning the economic power of the global North. Those who live in the global South have little financial means to do the same. After decades of conducting these brief visitations, it is within the interest of theological educators to examine the ethics of such "theological sightseeing." We must ask: Do theological schools in the global North implicitly honour wealth and power? Has the Lutheran church continued to be a factor in promoting colonialism in the name of education?

Education is important to the Lutheran church. But educational content matters. One of the challenges facing empire of any kind is to educate the subjects to internalize the empire's ideals and assumptions. Empire cannot last long without education. Colonization and education are inseparable twins. To make sure that Europe dominated, colonialists relied on the power of education to control their subjects. The late Brazilian educator Paulo Freire in his well-known classic *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* reminds us that education can be an oppressive vehicle by which social regimes reproduce willing citizens to participate in the problematic social agenda.

In an award-winning book, *Learning to Divide the World*, John Willinsky reminds us that the educational legacy of imperialism influences how we see the world.¹⁵ Willinsky set out to examine imperialism's influence on the educated view of the world that the West manufactured in past centuries and how that world is maintained through education. We

are told how centuries of gathering, categorizing, studying and ordering information as the result of the Enlightenment gave rise to the ideas of race, culture and nation that became the instrumental framework for the West to educate the world. In order to understand our divided world, we need to understand centuries of colonial education that the West has cultivated. Through these educational activities, both Europeans and people throughout the world are taught to discriminate between what is “civilized” and what is “primitive,” between who is “advanced” and who is “elementary.” The divided world is not an accident; education is a crucial tool to reinforce the divide.

Theological educators can learn from Freire and Willinsky and begin to question their assumed practices from the viewpoint of domination. Practices are not neutral but come from a particular vantage point and privilege. For those professors who come from dominant ethnic groups, the “elephant” remains in the room when they ignore the task of examining the privileged social locations from which they come, and intentionally understanding the social locations of their students.¹⁶ For those non-westerners who spent numerous years climbing the ladders of higher education in the West and finally coming to the position of teaching in seminaries, they too need to do critical work concerning their ways of knowing and theological methods. Professors who profess bodies of knowledge in higher education are not immune from soul-searching concerning internal resistance to examining their own social locations and critiquing the processes by which they attain their credentials. Instead, they need to ask in what way have they functioned like border patrol officers and sometimes dictators in the classroom? Have they been co-opted to teach with the assumed adequacy of Western epistemology (even by non-westerners)?

Teaching in major metropolitan cities in North America where people of diverse cultures mingle daily demands teachers’ recognition of the reality of internal colonialism. “Internal colonialism” is a term social scientists use to denote “a form of colonialism in which the dominant and subordinate populations are intermingled, so that there is no geographically distinct ‘metropolis’ separate from the ‘colony.’”¹⁷ Internal colonialism reminds professors to be aware of the false illusion we create for ourselves as we think we have achieved democracy and fair play just because people of diverse cultures are socially integrated, share citizenship, and are able to get access to the same infrastructures within the same national geographical borders. Instead, professors need to recognize that what was formerly an imposed, educated, and institutionalized relationship between the West and the rest of the world continues to have lingering effects in today’s world; and more than that, those who formerly exercised power dynamics continue to serve primarily the interests of the dominant white, English speaking, and possibly Christian populations.¹⁸ What educational institutions such as seminaries need to do is to do what adult educator Stephen Brookfield call “hunting assumptions.”¹⁹

Learning to Resist Empire

If one understands empire not just in terms of territorial occupation, but also in terms of institutionalizing and intellectualizing domination that is operative in the realms of religion and culture because of unequal distributions of power, theological educators must be committed to deconstruct and reconstruct faith and practices. In order to foster a Lutheran presence in the world that reflects Jesus' compassionate ministry of the Gospel from which social justice and economic reform cannot be separated, conducting theological education in our time needs to take teaching for justice and empowerment seriously.

Social justice is not a footnote to Christianity. It should not be seen as an application or consequence of faith. Social justice is part and parcel of what Christianity is about. Recent biblical scholarship informs us that Jesus' ministry was not about how to go to heaven when one dies. Jesus inaugurated a new community where economic and social justice is the core of the realm of God. This realm of God is about defending the poor and defying forces of domination. In this light, seminaries are places where social consciousness and transformative leadership are formed. Lutheran seminaries can play a crucial role in the development of critical pedagogies and social consciousness that help decolonize Christian praxis from ideologies of empire. By "decolonize" I mean the critical reflection and constructive process of theologizing and meaning-making that purge the imperial mindset and practices. Theological educators must finally realize that empire is not merely political and that economic empires do not just exist "out there," but rather that Christianity *was and still is* an empire. Seminaries which are the educational wings of the church must examine their complicity in reinforcing the agenda of empire in the name of education.

Students must be taught to examine critically much of what the church calls "tradition" which has deep European roots and cultural adaptations. Because of its deep European roots and the unequal distribution of power, not everyone, every time, and every culture in the world benefits equally from this "tradition." Seminaries need to empower students who come from cultures of privilege to name and critique their social locations. I recommend a "Social Location Activity" designed by Elizabeth Conde-Frazier and Evelyn L. Parker, adapted by Mai-Anh L. Tran.²⁰ For students who come from the historic colonized countries and cultures, the above social location exercise will also empower them to name the forces that shape them. Seminaries need to be intentional about creating space for these students to re-examine the missionary enterprise and commit to free them from being imprisoned by the colonial past. These students need to know that they are not expected to be guardians of the western theological establishments but must be free to imagine for their contexts.

Resisting empire implies a political undertaking, risk taking, and the exercising of power in life honouring ways. If contemporary recognition of empire is to have real impact

on the future of the church, seminaries need to be places of empowerment and liberation where pastors, teachers, and leaders develop critical consciousness of the social conditions caused by empire. Vietnamese-American theologian Peter Phan says the starting point for doing theology in the multicultural context is the social conditions of the people, not Bible and traditions.²¹ Through the process of socio-analytic mediation, theologians provide room for the forgotten peoples' "dangerous memory" to be heard and reflected upon. It serves as a communal fund of wisdom from which theologians can draw inspiration for critical reflection.²² Making space for forgotten marginal voices through creating forums for these voices to be heard and intentionally inviting the presence of others to be seen on campus is critical.

A key missional action where seminaries can help resist empire is their active involvement in conducting self-critique. For the integrity of the Christian proclamation, theological education cannot shy away from critiquing Christianity's past and present complicit roles in spreading empire. All theological educators regardless of their denomination must realize that Christianity is not always the solution. Christianity can be the source of the problem. Hear the voice of protest from Nancy Cardoso Pereira:

On the periphery of world Christianity there are minorities who stress the need for a theology that liberates: that liberates God, and the earth, and the men and women whose humanity is being denied everyday by capitalism... Men and women who no longer wish to repeat again and again the North American and European theology that ceaselessly pores over itself and its dearly loved theologians, what they have said, what they have written. Throughout the world young theologians are silenced by a dominant North American and European theological model that is weary of becoming good news, that is cozying up to the knowledge industry in the service of an economic model which gives privileged place to its comfortable, stable consumerist societies.²³

These words challenge the mission of theological education in North America in two ways: seminaries must conduct self-critique and possess the courage to learn beyond one's tradition. The ability to critique ourselves matters significantly as to how the church conducts and teaches missions.

The central question for the missional church movement is to ask, "What is God doing in the world?" This has to be a reciprocal question where the church's relationship with the world begins with mutual sharing and learning. The church must resist the temptation to posit itself outside of God's world. Instead, the church must place itself *within* God's world and be part of God's transforming touch. For the church to think of ourselves as God's agents to change the world represents only one side of the equation. As part of the past and

present empires that still dominate, the church must recognize the often forgotten dimension, that is, God's mission could include using the world to change them.

Missional endeavours are reciprocal in nature, and they begin with self-examination. For the mission of seminaries to be faithful in this way, it is crucial for seminaries to examine their own curriculum's possible explicit and implicit complicity with empire and its ideologies. What is at stake is the theological educator's reflection on the politics of teaching and the willingness to critique the school's explicit, implicit and non-stated educational philosophy. It matters to investigate: what is explicitly stated; what is implicated, hinted at; and what is not said? Some more questions that theological educators could ask are: What has our institution done to create spaces for difference? How diverse are our faculty and student body? What textbooks and learning materials are provided? Who are the authors of these books? Are they all Euro-Americans? What perspectives are left out? What questions are not being asked institutionally and what questions do we need to ask? The ability to think theologically, where the Lutheran community shines, is not an excuse for acting indifferently. From this perspective, the heart of the question is: How shall seminary professors teach so that the faces of empire are exposed and critiqued?

Toward an Empire-Resisting Pedagogy

Resisting empire is not just an idea but a way of life. Consequently, social justice is not a topic to be taught but a practice to be experienced in seminary classrooms. Professors of the church need to employ liberating ways of teaching and methods that embody justice. This fundamental concept is so important for the Lutheran church that seminary faculty must conduct collective discernment through retreats, conferences, and meetings, to find ways upon which to act.

Theologians with years of special training are well educated to critique theologies and scholarships of various kinds. Yet, that training apparently does not necessarily enable them to critique practices of their own teachings. Part of this issue is the failure of scholars to critique the pedagogical approach in which they were trained. This task is understandably challenging because it is hard to critique one's respected mentors throughout years of learning. Without thinking of one's pedagogical heritage critically, it is not difficult to buy into the myth that says certain disciplines can only be taught in certain ways. Such a myth is not uncommon in many classrooms in higher education. Although the above statement is not completely false, it often gives professors very little incentive to teach otherwise. The temptation for theological educators is to teach in ways in which they were taught. The problems of such a mindset are many, but one of them is a failure of teachers to critique assumed notions of power dynamics previously practiced and valued

but no longer applicable, especially when the educational goal has everything to do with communal liberation or collective justice seeking.

I suggest that an empire resisting pedagogy has two fundamental components: they may sound basic but it is disastrous for the church when they are being ignored. First is modeling by professors and empowering students to teach others. In Lutheran seminaries and in many theological schools, what needs to be transformed goes beyond the students' theologies to how teaching is being done. If graduates are able to resist empire and possess the ability to help others to do the same, it is not because they produce excellent papers describing the best transformative theologies. It is because they have been liberated, empowered, and strengthened by the practices of empire-resisting pedagogies while they were in training. To deconstruct the "empires" inherited by professors, that is, years of assumed teaching philosophy inherited from learning a particular discipline, is a way to start. Students need to experience liberating practices first-hand from their professors.

Justice is not a product but also a process. Teaching theologies of social transformation with practices that are colonial and oppressive contradicts the intended learning.²⁴ It sends a conflicting message to students. Teaching in a multicultural world is a creative art that combines advocacy and compassion; perceptive attentiveness and self-reflection; critical minds and discerning hearts.²⁵ What concerns theological educators is that it takes more than just agreement on a proposition called justice; we need to commit to demonstrate a liberating learning process that embodies justice.

The commitment to teach with justice cannot be taken lightly. English professor bell hooks challenges teachers to form a community of learners together when they teach. To advance a view that sees teaching as a practice of freedom, hooks says teachers need to create a space in the classroom where students and teachers are empowered; that is, teachers and students are all in power in some ways.²⁶ Instead of behaving like dictators determining how information is shared and evaluated, professors can begin to think about their pedagogical approach creatively with a keen interest in creating space so as to empower students to bring hope and justice to their contexts. Seminary professors need to take a hard look at how power is traditionally orchestrated in the classroom, and to practice an empowering pedagogy to deconstruct it.²⁷ It is crucial for seminary professors to recognize they are "facilitators of a learning process and not the center of attention."²⁸

Teaching to resist empire cannot avoid addressing issues of diversity in the classroom. This begins with a conviction that meanings are never neutral but "they are always situated socially, culturally, and historically, and they operate within the logic of differing ideologies that imply differing sets of social practices."²⁹ Diversity is being human and teaching is political. We have been shaped by differing locations with various kinds of education that form our diverse way of reasoning and knowing; that includes ways to read the Bible, view

tradition, and do theology. With this understanding in mind, teaching for freedom and justice demands sensitivity to the social contexts of students, their differing experiences and the interpretive lenses they bring to the classroom. Since knowledge is not neutral but situated in social and political contexts, good teaching demands more than a superb “showing” of data but the ability to make connection with a wide spectrum of people. Teachers need to ground their teaching with profound self-knowledge and receptive spirits to keep their hearts open for the task of educating. That is the reason why techniques alone are not the trademarks of good teachers.³⁰

When the classroom is diverse, effective teachers need to be aware of the relationships of dominance and subordination and to watch out for the potential development of unjust practices privileging only a few. Paying attention to Howard Gardner’s Theory of Multiple Intelligences is paramount when it comes to teaching in diverse environments. Providing forums for those who have different experiences is a basic necessity in diverse situations. Teaching for freedom and justice requires professors to understand the plurality of people and their experiences. It is a commitment professors need to make as they create “a learning environment in which all students can be taken seriously, understood in their social milieu, and respected in their uniqueness.”³¹ This commitment is a recognition that a true learning community must allow diverse voices to challenge the basic understanding of how the subject matter is to be considered by the educator.³² Building on the premise bell hooks champions that a professor will not ask a student to take any risk that the professor would not take,³³ seminary professors must be the first ones to demonstrate how such an empire-resisting pedagogy is conducted. Seminary professors are given the privilege to model justice in teaching and in action.

Second, traditionally, Lutheran seminaries have done a marvelous job in educating theologically minded pastors and preachers. It is virtually unmistakable that the Lutheran tradition adores theological articulations. Lutherans loves theology and, as a result, Lutheran theologians build a legacy of theological education that is theologically vibrant. But this affirmation presents its challenge: the Lutheran vibrant theologically attentive tradition needs to meet the challenge of educating empire-resisting teachers and skilled educators. The church can not minimize the importance of teaching if resisting empire is taken seriously. Often, the preparations, processes, and actual actions of resisting empires demand a set of leadership skills that acutely understand how people learn, change, and transform; it has to do with helping people unlearn and relearn. None should expect this political undertaking to be a predictable, linear, and straightforward process. The opposite is true. This journey toward seeing a new horizon through revising outdated doctrines and forging new ground is often met with emotional and intellectual resistance. In the seminary classroom, students are willing to struggle with the provocative ideas professors introduce because the bottom line students face is still passing the course. Students who have

committed to learn in seminaries are more willing to face the challenges. In the parish setting, however, nobody pays to come to church and to hear their pastors say that the theology that they have learned throughout the years is outdated. Imagine how people sitting in the pews will respond when they first hear that it was not God's pre-designed plan to have Jesus die on the cross, or that Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgendered people (GLBT) are welcome in God's realm. Educating toward gender equality, inclusivity, and social justice are emotionally charged educational tasks. Brilliant theology of any kind alone would not help people change. Pastors who commit to teaching against empire need to be emotionally well grounded and possess a keen awareness of how people learn and unlearn. To underestimate the educational skills that bring transformation in congregational settings and in the world is fatal.

Lutherans inherit a vibrant theological tradition that is still reforming. Yet, theology that merely talks about transformation, liberation, and empire-resistance meets only half the challenge. Such theologies need to be empowered by critical pedagogies that complete the action of justice. Professors are scholars who are able to help people translate concepts into actions. An integral part of seminary education that seeks to resist empire must include empowering students to teach others to resist empire. Pastors' self-identity as educators is at stake.

This understanding poses a challenge to many Master of Divinity programs in our seminaries that require only one course in Christian education. The science and art of teaching probably are crammed into that course for one or two sessions. This is an unsatisfactory scenario for the future of the church that seeks to be transformative. There is no reason to believe a vibrant Lutheran theology at the expense of pedagogical innovation could serve God, the church and the world well. Lutheran seminaries in North America, as far as I am concerned, put minimal effort into creating space for educating the self-identity of the pastor as educator in addition to that of theologian and pastoral care provider. Often, graduates of seminaries have not included being an educator as part of their self-understanding. Thinking theologically occupies a significant role in Lutheran theological training. The educational assumption is that if one can think theologically, other areas of ministry will come into place. This essay maintains that assumption is false. Theology and pedagogy are inseparable twins. While theology has been identified as a strength of this denomination, pedagogical innovation has not been seriously implemented. Unless seminaries stop treating the science of teaching as a set of techniques, or casting those who teach Christian education as a "supporting cast," Lutheranism continues to be a set of nicely constructed theological ideas, nothing less and nothing more.

Crossing Boundaries

In the previous sections, I have been addressing the *why* and *how* of seminary education. My final thought on this topic has something to do with *what* to teach. Empire-resisting pedagogy challenges Christianity to treat the world's wisdom as a partner in theologizing and to stop the education of a Christianity that proclaims its self-sufficiency. C. S. Song, a Taiwanese-American theologian, shares the disapproval of many non-European theologians toward Western theological traditions as normative for theology. Song says the nature of theology is socio-cultural specific, and it must be appreciated and judged as such.³⁴ Song contends that the Western church has erred by treating traditional doctrines developed by Western Christians as normative for all Christians.

Even today, there are many Lutherans who still treat feminist theology, Asian theology, Black theology, Hispanic theology, queer theology and many others as footnotes. Too many think they could bypass deep reflection with these theologies because they are not women, Asians, Africans, Latinos, or gays, etc. Many Lutheran seminarians (including many non-Europeans) still think that their primary task is to master the theological literature established in Europe. They think only women read or need feminist theology; only Asians read or need Asian theology. This colonial binary mindset is still strong among many scholars and educators (book publishers included). To regard Lutheran theology as a detached and self-contained European theological tradition apart from the need of continuous engagement with the rest of the world's theologies and religious wisdoms is a form of neocolonialism most theologians would dismiss intellectually. However, this remains a concern for the theological education enterprise because western theological establishments and traditions are so powerful, permeating, and taken-for-granted in past and present educational endeavors that theological educators might not be aware that they are reinforcing a colonial assumption.

There is no doubt that teaching justice in our times could mean offering courses to deal with all kinds of diversity issues such as human sexuality, pop-culture, science-and-theology, climate change, and so on. Yet, the challenge is more than offering a course called Asian theology or multiculturalism *per se*, but to see that world theologies, social circumstances, and other religious wisdoms are being incorporated and reflected upon in every aspect of theological learning. Choice of textbooks and teaching materials are at stake. Seminary professors talk at length about theological integration. Maybe the first step is to integrate one's teaching materials and interpretive approach. To live responsibly in this multicultural and pluralistic world, the church needs to ask: *to whom, for whom, and with whom* is the church doing Lutheran theology? Is doing "Lutheran" theology alone enough?

Let me push this idea one step further: How can Christianity in general and Lutheranism in particular be a significant factor that makes the world more hospitable and just for all? Is Lutheranism alone enough to meet the challenge? What can the Lutheran community offer and how shall we proceed? Mindful of the presence of a “null” in the curriculum, theological educators need to be aware of what is offered and what is left out. In the past, world religions were not taught in seminaries. When world religions were finally taught, they were taught as missiological subjects rather than dialogical partners; and most often, those courses were taught by Christians. To undergird these learning activities is the conviction that world religions need to be known, but the church continues to assume its sufficiency and supremacy. In Jewish scholar David Novak’s term, this mindset “poisons the dialogue before it begins.”³⁵

Within Christianity in general, and the Lutheran church in particular, many still display illiteracy about world religions. This scenario is not getting better even in theological schools. On top of the fact that most students lack basic understanding of the historical depth of their Christian faith, many possess poor or no knowledge about world religions and other non-western cultures. Such illiteracy about others sometimes translates into a kind of self-identity that is characteristically exclusivistic. Judith Berling, a well-respected scholar in Asian religious studies who teaches in the theological school circle in Asia and in North America, has written a book entitled *Understanding Other Religious Worlds: A Guide for Interreligious Education*.³⁶ Berling argues that it is impossible to do ministry without actively engaging with the religions of one’s neighbours. It implies that to be religious leaders of our time, students need to deepen not only their own religious traditions but the religious traditions in their neighbours. Religious ignorance about one’s neighbours is unacceptable. Berling makes an observation that a common Protestant approach in studying other world religions is to study the life and teachings of the “founder”, the major sacred texts, and a few doctrines (creeds). In this approach, students often learn a romanticized and essentialized version rather than engaging in living traditions; and most often, the self-understanding of the religion is ignored. Berling says that by intentionally engaging with the living tradition through dialogue with its persons, practices, and texts, students learn to negotiate their way in the pluralistic context where they live, establish appropriate relationships with persons and groups, and develop alliances for pursuit of justice. Students will engage in the give-and-take of a mutually respectful but critical conversation. Misrepresentation and misunderstanding would have a chance to be heard and corrected. This learning approach “entails dialogue within an individual whose identity is significantly interreligious.”³⁷ Could this kind of intentional, face-to-face engagement with the living faiths/cultures of the world in seminaries, or in the religious places of their local contexts, be more powerful, meaningful and economically responsible than the theological sightseeing model I mentioned earlier? When was the last time a rabbi, Buddhist or Muslim practitioner -- scholars and people of diverse cultures -- came to

seminary and engaged the faculty and students in respectful learning? If students have not experienced respectful dialogue while in seminaries, why does the church think these students know how to do those things after graduation?

In the quest for meaning, Christians cannot isolate themselves from the world of religions and wisdoms as if they alone possess all the answers for the world. In fact, scholarship in empire research indicates Christianity has been part of the problem, not the solution. To seek meaning in life and to live responsibly after Christendom and colonialism means that Christians must engage in learning with other people and other faiths. Teachers of the church must “teach in ways that form a religious identity vibrant and learned enough to cross religious borders intelligently and sensitively.”³⁸ Crossing boundaries must not be treated as an “interesting idea”; rather, it is the essence of the practices of theological education that seriously challenge the presence of empire.

Conclusion

In this paper, I reflect upon the purpose of theological education in light of recent theological discourse on empire. The following three points summarize the main categories in this paper, and they include some of the possible answers to the guiding questions that I set out in the opening page:

First, Christianity in general and Lutheranism in particular can no longer afford to be understood as primarily a religion with spiritual beliefs. Separating justice seeking and faith falls short in understanding the nature of Jesus’ ministry. This understanding seriously challenges the content as well as the process of theological education. Second, Lutheran seminaries can be places where emancipation occurs because those places have committed to seek a new kind of Christianity that takes the intertwining and inseparable nature of the religious and the sociopolitical seriously. Anti-empire seminary education is possible when the school takes the world, its people, cultures and theologies as wisdoms to be respected, learned and shared; and they do not shy away from conducting self-critique. Seminaries need to be places where justice is being lived. Third, bringing social justice to the world is not merely a theological idea; it needs to be translated into practices of teaching. Professors of the church need to be conscious about the politics of teaching, their own social locations, and commit to constructing a critical pedagogy. Empire is not just something “out there” but within the church and its schools. It is my sincere hope that Lutheran seminaries are places where justice is being modeled in teaching and in organizing; that theological attentiveness finally find its long-lost twin, pedagogical innovations.

Endnotes

- 1 Alan Ka Lun Lai earned a doctorate from Columbia University, New York, and he taught briefly at Vancouver School of Theology in the area of religion and education. He publishes in the areas of multicultural teaching, Asian cultures and theology, and educational implications of Jewish-Christian relations.
- 2 Joerg Rieger, "Christian Theology and Empires," in Kwok Pui-lan, Don H. Compier, and Joerg Rieger, eds., *Empire and the Christian Tradition: New Readings of Classical Theologians* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), pp. 1-4.
- 3 Joerg Rieger, *Christ and Empire: From Paul to Postcolonial Times* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), p. 3.
- 4 A good resource for this topic is Marit Treistad, ed., *Cross Examinations: Readings on the Meaning of the Cross Today* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006).
- 5 Sallie McFague, *A New Climate for Theology: God, the World, and Global Warming* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), p. 31.
- 6 Warren Carter, "Proclaiming (in/against) Empire Then and Now," in *Word and World* 25, no. 2 (Spring 2005): 154.
- 7 Rieger, *Christ and Empire*, p. 39.
- 8 Rieger, "Christian Theology and Empire," p. 1.
- 9 Nancy Cardoso Pereira, "Empire and Religion: Gospel, Ecumenism and Prophecy for the 21st Century," in *The Ecumenical Review* 58, no. 1 (January/April 2006): 92-98.
- 10 Hope S. Antone, "The Challenges of Globalization to Religious Education: Some Experiences and Reflections from Asia," in *The 2001 Proceedings of the Association of Professors and Researchers in Religious Education Annual Meeting* (Minnesota, 2001), pp. 10-11.
- 11 McFague, p. 82.
- 12 Douglas John Hall, *The Cross in Our Context: Jesus and the Suffering World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), p. 53.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p. 91.
- 14 Cynthia D. Moe-Lobeda, *Healing a Broken World: Globalization and God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), p. 84.
- 15 John Willinsky, *Learning to Divide the World: Education at Empire's End* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1998), pp. 5-20.
- 16 Jack A. Hill, Melanie L. Harris, and Hjamil A. Martínez-Vázquez, "Fighting the Elephant in the Room: Ethical Reflections on White Privilege and Other Systems of Advantage in the Teaching of Religion," in *Teaching Theology and Religion* 12, no. 1 (January 2009): 3-20.
- 17 Carlos Tejeda, Manuel Espinoza, and Kris Gutierrez, "Toward a Decolonizing Pedagogy: Social Justice Reconsidered," in Peter Pericles Trifonas, ed., *Pedagogies of Difference: Rethinking Education for Social Change* (New York and London: RoutledgeFalmer, 2003), p. 14.
- 18 *Ibid.*, p. 16.
- 19 Stephen Brookfield, *Becoming a Critical-Reflective Teacher* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers
- 20 See Appendix B in Hill, Harris, and Martínez-Vázquez, "Fighting the Elephant."

- 21 Peter C. Phan, "A Common Journey, Different Paths, the Same Destination: Method in Liberation Theologies," in Eleazer S. Fernandez and Fernando F. Segovia, eds., *A Dream Unfinished: Theological Reflections on America from the Margins* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2001), pp. 132-136.
- 22 Peter C. Phan, *Christianity with an Asian Face: Asian American Theology in the Making* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2003), pp. 18-19.
- 23 See Pereira, pp. 92-98.
- 24 Kathleen T. Talvacchia, *Critical Minds and Discerning Hearts: A Spirituality of Multicultural Teaching* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2003), p. 33.
- 25 *Ibid.*, pp. 23-27.
- 26 bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York and London: Routledge, 1994), p. 152.
- 27 *Ibid.*, p. 139.
- 28 Mary C. Boys, and Sara S. Lee, *Christians and Jews in Dialogue: Learning in the Presence of Other* (Woodstock: Skylight Paths, 2006), p. 94.
- 29 Tejeda, Espinoza and Gutierrez, "Toward a Decolonizing Pedagogy," p. 11.
- 30 Parker J. Palmer, *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998), pp. 5-10.
- 31 Talvacchia, p. 13.
- 32 *Ibid.*, p. 32.
- 33 hooks, p. 21
- 34 C. S. Song, *Tell Us Our Names: Story Theology From an Asian Perspective* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1984), p. 11.
- 35 David Novak, "What to Seek and What to Avoid in Jewish-Christian Dialogue," in Tikva Frymer-Kensky, et al., *Christianity in Jewish Terms* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2000), p. 5.
- 36 See Judith Berling, *Understanding Other Religious Worlds: A Guide for Interreligious Education* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2004).
- 37 Judith Berling, "Learning Asian Religions and Critical Engagement in the Asian Context," in D. Preman Niles, ed., *Critical Engagement in the Asian Context: Implications for Theological Education and Christian Studies* (Hong Kong: Asian Christian Higher Education Institute of the United Board for Christian Higher Education in Asia, 2005), pp. 109-110.
- 38 Boys, and Lee, *Christians and Jews in Dialogue*, p. 8.