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[\[page 125\]](#)

Reimagining the Study and Teaching of Philosophy for Our Time

Joseph Kaipayil

Introduction

The importance and relevance of philosophy has come to be recognized more today than ever before in recent history. In many colleges and universities philosophy is now an essential component of interdisciplinary studies. The public interest in philosophy is increasing. UNESCO's initiatives to promote philosophy are laudable. All these call for reimagining the study and teaching of philosophy for our contemporary time – a task worthwhile for philosophy studies in ecclesiastical institutes as well.

1. Philosophy and its ageless exigency to remain relevant

Humans are cognitive beings by nature. As cognitive beings we seek to know the world we experience – the world which we ourselves are a part of. It is this capacity for intellectual activity that distinguishes us as *Homo sapiens*.¹ Aristotle said it aptly: "All men by nature desire to know."² This epistemic quest is the basis of all knowledge domains, not to mention philosophy.

[\[page 126\]](#) Philosophy, with its insistent noetic and methodological commitment to critical thinking and its reasoned positions on our life and the world we experience, has been with humanity for the last two and a half millennia.³ And it will remain with us as long as human beings are able to think. The usefulness of philosophy, both as an answer to our epistemic quest to know and as a guide to an examined life, is a proven fact by its long history and universal presence.

In the wake of positivism and technological innovations, philosophy was kind of dethroned from its high pedestal during the major part of the last century. Of late, however, philosophy made its comeback. Philosophy is now an essential interdisciplinary component in arts and science departments of many colleges and universities.⁴ Interest in philosophy is also growing outside academic circles. The most remarkable impetus for philosophy's revival came from UNESCO's initiative though.

In Catholic higher education, philosophy was always considered a respected academic subject. In ecclesiastical institutes of clerical training, philosophy is a prerequisite for theological studies. That said, it does not mean philosophy is always pursued with enthusiasm at these places. As often as not, philosophy study and teaching is faced with disinterest. There could be various reasons for it.⁵ Nonetheless, we cannot afford to ignore the importance and significance of philosophy at a time when the international community recognizes philosophy as a reasoned necessity, when secular academia is convinced of

philosophy's bearing on academics and careers, and when the public readership and interest in philosophy is on the increase. This calls for reimagining the study and teaching of philosophy for our time – a challenging job that is worth the effort.⁶

2. UNESCO's clarion call to reinvent philosophy

UNESCO has been actively promoting philosophy as a catalyst for social transformation since late 1990s.⁷ The UN agency is strongly of the opinion that people should be trained in the art of philosophical thinking, so they may sustain and

[page 127] promote democracy, world peace, and tolerance. For UNESCO, philosophy is not so much about philosophers and philosophical systems as about method of rational independent thinking. And UNESCO sees philosophy as a school of freedom. Akin to a school, philosophy educates human beings to achieve enlightened intellectual and ethical freedom, by helping them to develop their capacities for critical thinking, independent judgment, and sound reasoning. The UNESCO handbook, *Philosophy: A School of Freedom*, calls people of all ages to engage in philosophical reflection for the sake of democratic peaceful society and an examined (reasoned) meaningful life for individuals.⁸

The UNESCO handbook charts out four levels at which philosophy learning and practice can be done, namely philosophy at preschool and primary school levels, philosophy in secondary education, philosophy in colleges and universities, and philosophy outside academia. Paying heed to UNESCO's suggestions to involve people of all ages and of all walks of life in philosophy is surely one way to reimagine philosophy for our time:

- (1) Children, with their sense of wonder and intellectual curiosity to know, are very philosophical. They continually question the world around them and ask existential questions about life. The role of the teacher is to support children in their thinking about their questions. This will help them develop their thinking skills and ability to understand and relate with themselves, other people, and the world.
- (2) Philosophy in secondary school is more challenging, because adolescents are argumentative and questioning. They seek to clarify to themselves their self-identity and their relationship with others; they seek to affirm and reassure themselves as individuals with freedom of thought. Hence the essential function of philosophy at secondary level lies less in learning to reason, but more in learning to have a critical approach to knowledge and value systems.

[page 128]

- (3) Coming to philosophy at college/university level, teaching is secondary to research and personal learning. Even as keeping traditional course structures, more practical and seminar-style courses with increased student participation should be introduced. It may be noted that sufficient academic freedom is a necessary precondition for any genuine philosophical research in colleges and universities, [including ecclesiastical institutes].
- (4) The place and role of philosophy outside academia is being increasingly recognized these days. In the context of the wider civil society, the need to philosophize – to think critically and creatively – arises from people's need to formulate for themselves or for their communities the values and existential purposes that give meaning to

their personal and social lives. In the face of personal and societal problems and difficulties, people still have faith in the ability of reason to stand back a little and find a reasoned solution.

3. Philosophy in ecclesiastical institutes: certain concerns

Now I will briefly consider certain questions which I think are important, in regard to the study and teaching of philosophy in Catholic ecclesiastical institutions in general and in India specifically. To address them, or to at least acknowledge them, is another way of reimagining philosophy for our time, I suppose.

(1) Methodological independence:

Regardless of where it is practiced, whether it is in church circles or otherwise, philosophy is a non-theological (secular) subject and it should be treated as such. The validity and rationality of any philosophy is to be determined by appeal to human reason and our empirical experience. If we take a faith-based yardstick to philosophy, we would be reducing/elevating philosophy to theology and harming the good of both disciplines. Even as theology can draw from philosophy concepts and arguments to [\[page 129\]](#) understand and articulate faith and philosophy can make use of insights from theology, both disciplines should maintain their reciprocal autonomy.

There was a time when philosophy was misjudged as “*ancilla theologiae*” (servant of theology). Though the expression, “*philosophia ancilla theologiae*,” can be interpreted to mean philosophy’s usefulness for theology, the original intent was to censure philosophy’s independence.⁹ But the Church’s official position is that philosophy should be given autonomy of thought to investigate philosophical problems according to the methodology proper to it.¹⁰ Furthermore, the Church puts confidence in the ability of natural reason to demonstrate the rationality of the Christian view of the world, the human person, and God, placing in a proper light the relationship between philosophy and theology.¹¹ To be sure, treating philosophy as mere handmaid of theology can still be seen in some places.

(2) Identification of Christian philosophy with Thomism:

Thomas Aquinas is surely one of the very fine thinkers the Church has ever seen, and he has inspired a host of philosophers and theologians to this day. But oftentimes his philosophy, or the philosophy shaped by his thought, and “Christian philosophy” get identified with each other en bloc. Thomism’s ascendancy was thanks to Leo XIII’s encyclical, *Aeterni Patris*, in 1879 and subsequent establishment of the Pontifical Academy of St. Thomas Aquinas the very same year.¹² Thomism soon became the dominant philosophical system of the Catholic Church and was to be normative in the training of priests at church seminaries until Vatican II. In the neo-scholastic circles, Thomism was considered the “*philosophia perennis*” (perennial philosophy).¹³

But as John Paul II made clear in his encyclical, *Fides et Ratio*, in 1998, there is no official philosophy of the Church, since the faith as such is not a philosophy.¹⁴ At the same time, there is a Christian way of philosophizing – a philosophical speculation conceived in dynamic union with faith.¹⁵ And the [\[page 130\]](#) Church acclaims Aquinas and his thought as an authentic model for such a philosophizing.¹⁶ Thus the Church accords to Aquinas a special place in the perennially

(enduringly) valid philosophical tradition, without, however, taking any position on properly philosophical questions or demanding adherence to particular theses.¹⁷

(3) Natural theology and classical theism:

Natural theology's focal point has always been the God of classical theism. The classical notion of God as articulated by Aristotelian-Thomism put overly emphasis on God's transcendence and simplicity. This created a deep-seated divide between God and the world, which both philosophy and theology found hard to explain.

The classical God which is unqualifiedly transcendent, absolutely simple, and characteristically disjointed from the world is almost incompatible with the biblical God who is thoroughly personal, relational, and involved in the world.¹⁸ Besides, in place of classical mechanistic world view, modern science presents a more inclusive, holistic, and organic view of the world. In recent times, neo-classical theism, also called panentheism, revisited the God-question from an inclusive point of view. I think the neo-classical solution is not adequate either.¹⁹ Instead, what I would propose is a relationalist model.²⁰ The relationalist view of God, which I may propose for natural theology, not only suits the Trinitarian concept of God but also derives insights from it. The Incarnational and Eucharistic model also goes well with relationalism.

(4) Political philosophy:

Ever since the publication of John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* in 1971, political philosophy is prominent in contemporary philosophical and political discourse. Political philosophy is indispensable for the survival of a genuine democracy. When religious, ethical, and social ideologies divide people

[page 131] in a democracy, the only way forward is an informed political discourse and political consensus. This is very true of India, which is not only the largest democracy in the world but also a very unique democracy with its vast cultural, linguistic, and religious pluralism. India is in great need of a political philosophy tailored for its needs – secularism, respect for human rights, inclusive economic growth, and check on populist nationalism.²¹ A political philosophy for India should incorporate the Constitutional values such as liberal democracy, federalism, and social inclusiveness.

The importance of political philosophy is now recognized by the Church in the revised philosophy curriculum for ecclesiastical institutes.²² Since political philosophy is relatively a new entrant to Catholic academics, the discipline is still in the making as regards its content and method. However, one should keep in mind two things. First, political philosophy is to be exercised in wider context of defending human rights and basic freedoms that are essential for the common good of constitutional democracy.²³ Second, political philosophy must incorporate the cherished values of Catholic social doctrine: grounding of basic freedoms in human dignity, promotion of the common good, principle of subsidiarity, preferential option for the poor, and stewardship of creation.

(5) Indian and Chinese philosophies:

Certainly, Indian philosophy is very much present in our philosophy departments, both secular and ecclesiastical. Thanks to the cultural openness of Vatican II, Indian philosophy was received with grater warmth in Catholic institutes of India. The need for the study of Indian philosophy is acknowledged by the official teaching authority of the Church too.²⁴ In most places, Indian philosophy is taught as part of history of philosophy. This is not enough,

I suppose. Ideas and concepts from Indian philosophy need to be assimilated into systematic courses as well. But my great concern is whether we are approaching Indian philosophy critically and with sufficient philosophical rigor or we are still in the traditionalist framework of interpretation, namely

[page 132] Indian philosophy is spiritual in contrast to Western philosophy which is rational. Another vestige from the past is the faith-based division of classical schools into orthodox (astika) and heterodox (nastika). What is required is to approach and critique Indian philosophy as philosophy as such and not as religious thought.²⁵ Another concern we need to address, I believe, is the overly emphasis on Shankara's Advaita and the consequent neglect of other classical systems.²⁶

The Indian, the Chinese, and the Western philosophies are the world's three major traditions of philosophy, because of their long history, rich literature, and wide range of ideas. But there is only a very meager presence of Chinese philosophy in India. This lacuna needs to be filled. Owing to their common Indo-European heritage, the classical Indian and Western philosophies have a shared worldview that tends to spirit-matter (mind-body) dualism of a sort. On the other hand, the classical Chinese worldview is more holistic and integrated. Heaven, earth, and the human being form a triad. This cosmic, ecologically sensitive outlook is remedial to any one-sidedly anthropocentric and theocentric thinking.

(6) Refocusing the objective of philosophy study and teaching:

Philosophy is not basically about thinkers, systems, and doctrines. Philosophy is more about method and perspective; philosophy is more like a way of thinking and a way of life. If our only insistence is on learning and teaching some ideas, a good many of our young graduates are likely to pass out of our philosophy institutes disenchanted with philosophy and not seeing any use for what they have studied. At the end of the day, what matters is the way of philosophizing the students learn. The study of philosophy should increase in them a capability for critical thinking and independent judgment and an ability to articulate and communicate ideas. So the focus of philosophy study and teaching needs to be on forming a philosophical mind in the student. Philosophy is not a way of thinking alone, but

[page 133] it is a way of life as well. The study of philosophy should be a transformative and enlightening experience for students. Philosophy should make one more humane and compassionate, socially and ecologically more relational, and less dogmatic and more tolerant toward differences.

For all these to happen, the style of teaching also needs to change. The beaten path of lecturing and passing exams has to give way to a more participatory model. A philosophy student is not a learner alone; in the first place, she is a teacher to herself. Hence what is conducive for philosophy is a dialogical model. Philosophy in all three major traditions – Indian, Western, and Chinese – started as dialogues. A student who has learned to philosophize through a dialogical way will be able to help others to find for themselves reasoned solutions to their problems.²⁷

Conclusion

To conclude, reimagining philosophy for our time, or for any time, is transforming philosophy into philosophizing and philosopher from being a sheer seeker to a reasoned guide (to themselves and others).

Notes

¹ The species name *Homo sapiens* (Latin: wise man) was applied to modern humans by the Swedish biologist Carl Linnaeus in 1758.

² *Metaphysics*, 980a21.

³ The three major philosophical traditions of the world – the Indian, the Chinese, and the Western – emerged and took distinctive characteristics during what is commonly called “axial age” (roughly 800 BCE to 200 BCE).

⁴ In certain western universities there is even an increase in the number of students majoring in philosophy, before they fan out into careers ranging from law and business to medicine, technology, and education. For example, the number of philosophy majors at the University of California, Berkeley, grew 74 percent in the last decade (Berkeley News, May 10, 2011).

⁵ I think the main reasons why philosophy is looked upon with disfavor are the following: (1) in many, if not most, instances philosophy is not a student’s choice but something they are asked to do; (2) philosophy is a conceptual discipline that requires a certain amount of intellectual inclination for it, which some students may lack; (3) sometimes philosophy is

[page 134] taught in a manner which makes the subject look like something that is over one’s head and without any reference to and relevance for life; (4) in some faith circles there may also be a misconception that philosophy is antithetical to faith.

⁶ By reimagining philosophy I do not mean to propose any new philosophy or even reinterpreting what philosophy is for our time. After all there is not much of an old and new distinction in philosophy. Unlike in natural and social sciences and even theology, there is no linear development of ideas in philosophy. There is only a recycling and reinterpretation of ideas and concepts. The history of philosophy mostly means how different ideas and concepts came to be focused (highlighted and emphasized) at different periods. So the task at hand is to make philosophy relevant and meaningful for us – to relate philosophy to contemporary needs.

⁷ In 1995, UNESCO adopted the “Paris Declaration for Philosophy,” which stated that philosophy contributes to the training of citizens by exercising their capacity for judgment, which is fundamental in any democracy. In 2002/05, UNESCO instituted World Philosophy Day, with the objective of promoting an international culture of philosophical debate that respects human dignity and diversity, democracy, and world peace. In 2007, UNESCO published a groundbreaking book on the status and prospects of teaching and learning philosophy, called *Philosophy: A School of Freedom*.

⁸ UNESCO, *Philosophy: A School of Freedom* (Paris: UNESCO, 2007).

⁹ (1) The expression “*philosophia ancilla theologiae*” (philosophy is the handmaid of theology) is attributed to the eleventh-century churchman Peter Damian who had a negative view of philosophy. (2) Cf. John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio* (1998), 77.

¹⁰ See *Fides et Ratio* (1998), 75, 106; Congregation for Catholic Education, *Decree on the Reform of Ecclesiastical Studies of Philosophy* (2011), 7, 15.b; Pope Francis, *Veritatis Gaudium* (2017), 81.1.

¹¹ *Veritatis Gaudium*, 81.1; *Fides et Ratio*, 77. As Karl Rahner sees it, theology’s need for philosophy cannot be undervalued, because theology of its very nature presupposes philosophy as a condition of its own possibility. See Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, vol. 6 (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1969), 71-72.

¹² Leo XIII had been introduced to the writings of Thomas Aquinas by his older brother and Jesuit theologian Giuseppe Pecci.

¹³ The term “*philosophia perennis*” was originally used by Augustinus Steuchus in 1540 to show that there is a long and continuous philosophical tradition since classical antiquity that is in essential harmony with Christian faith.

¹⁴ *Fides et Ratio*, 76. Incidentally, John Paul II’s own philosophical and theological thinking was influenced not only by Thomism but personalist-phenomenological tradition as well. See for his philosophical personalism, Avery Dulles, “John Paul II and the Mystery of the Human Person,”

[page 135] *America Magazine*, February 02, 2004; Fergus Kerr, *Twentieth-Century Catholic Theologians* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 165-70, cf. 187.

¹⁵ *Fides et Ratio*, 76.

¹⁶ *Fides et Ratio*, 78.

¹⁷ *Fides et Ratio*, 43, 60, 78, 106; *Veritatis Gaudium*, norms 64.1.

¹⁸ A biblically based theology might look less like defending dogmas and more like paying attention to how God was already at work in the world, particularly in the lives of his people.

¹⁹ While classical theism’s was an extrinsicist understanding of the relationship between the natural and supernatural orders, neo-classical theism’s is an intrinsicist one. The neo-classical proposal of radical reciprocity between God and nature leads to their mutual enrichment and consequently compromises the former’s autonomy.

²⁰ The limited scope of this paper does not permit me to go into any details of relationalism, let alone the version of philosophical relationalism I pursue, namely ontological relationalism.

²¹ What the Washington Post columnist E. J. Dionne Jr. said is applicable to any democracy, but all the more true for India: “If liberal democracy does not survive and thrive, every other problem we face becomes much more difficult.” See E.J. Dionne Jr., “The most consequential question facing the world,” *The Washington Post*, August 23, 2017.

²² *Veritatis Gaudium*, norms 55.1.a, 66.1.a.

²³ One’s primary attention should not be on the defense of religious freedom, and here we may heed to what the Jesuit theologian John Courtney Murray said long ago: the freedom of religion stands or falls with the freedom of the people. See John Courtney Murray, “The Schema on Religious Freedom: Critical Comments,” (1964), Murray Archives, Georgetown University.

²⁴ Cf. *Fides et Ratio*, 72; *Veritatis Gaudium*, norms 66.1.a.

²⁵ Long ago, the great Indologist Max Mueller had warned the native scholars of the danger of mixing up the philosophical with the religious in the Indian culture. See F. Max Mueller, *The Six Systems of Indian Philosophy* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1928), xix.

²⁶ The ascendancy of the Shankara Vedanta was more due to historical factors than philosophical reasons. During the British period, German idealism was the prominent European philosophy in India. Both European and Indian thinkers found in Shankara’s Advaita a philosophical counterpart to Western idealism, especially the Hegelian idealism. Moreover, the early orientalists like Paul Deussen and Max Mueller considered Vedanta, particularly the Shankara’s version of Vedanta, as the culmination of Indian thought. Following the lead of the orientalists, Swami Vivekananda and other Neo-Vedantins propagated Shankara’s philosophy at home and abroad. Cf. Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial theory, India and ‘the mystic East’* (London: Routledge, 1999), 93, 128.

[\[page 136\]](#)

²⁷ One recent and successful example of using philosophy to help others is philosophical counseling. The German philosopher Gerd B. Achenbach initiated philosophy counseling in the early 1980s, and from Germany it spread to other parts the world, especially North America. Philosophical counseling consists in helping individuals or groups critically examine the ideas and perceptions associated with their specific problems and come to terms with more realistic and meaningful beliefs and perspectives.