

Collaboration between Seminaries and Church-based Theological Education: Opportunities and Challenges

Social Location and Theological Education¹

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Introduction

Having lived in different countries for some years because of my academic work, I find that each country has a different perspective concerning, for example, the reporting of a political issue such as Brexit by the media, even within the United Kingdom. Similarly, there are different insights and perspectives on the issue of the National Security Law of Hong Kong as reported by the media. In Taiwan, for example, the pro-China media will report favorably concerning the actions of China but not those whose stance is anti-China. As such, events and issues in the world are evaluated and interpreted by interpreters conditioned by their social location. Likewise, the notion of social location has been and remains an important factor in the development of theological education. Therefore, the opportunities and challenges for church-based theological education must consider the notion of social location in their collaboration.

Social Location

Social location is described as a social position a person holds within their society. And that social position is conditioned by a combination of factors such as class, gender, ethnicity, race, sexual orientation, geographic location, and so on. In other words, the social location of the person includes the personal specific experiences, family, and home and includes the government, public policy, religion of the local community. In other words, a person's social location is not personal but communal as well. Also, some factors do not change such as race and ethnicity but other factors, such as economic status, physical location, and education can change. When these factors change, that person's view of the world would change too.

Social location has ramifications on theological education and vice-versa. To put it differently, the recognition of the relationship between social location and "rhetoric of location" and "rhetoric of space" has consequences for theological education which the following brief discussion seeks to underscore.

"Rhetoric of Space" and "Rhetoric of Location"²

I am using these two terms from Susan Stanford Friedman for the discussion of this paper. Friedman's treatment of these two phrases is found in her discussion of "locational feminism."³

¹ This is an abbreviated version and revision of the article, "Social Location: Dis-ease and/or Dis-cover(y)" in *Transforming Graduate Biblical Education. Ethos and Discipline*, eds. Elisabeth Schuessler Fiorenza and Kent Harold Richards (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2010), 47-58

² *Ibid.*, 52-55. A longer discussion is found on these pages.

³ Susan Stanford Friedman, "Locational Feminism: Gender, Cultural Geographies, and Geopolitical Literacy" in *Feminist Locations: Global and Local, Theory and Practice*, ed. Marianne Dekoven (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2001).

According to Friedman, this outlook acknowledges its definitions have historical and geographical locations but, on the other hand, it also recognizes that these are subject to changes, travels, translations and transplants in different spacio/temporal contexts."⁴ In other words, in the articulation of one's theology, rhetoric is applied but the rhetoric is "simultaneously situated in a specific locale, global in scope, and constantly in motion through time and space."⁵ In short, one's perspective is always "locational."

Moreover, the advance of cyber technology and its related process have contributed to "a shift from temporal to spatial modes of thoughts." For example, one does not need to be present to witness the inauguration of the 46th President of the United States, we could watch the live telecast for those who can view it. The very model of the webinar without the need to meet in person, affirms that space and location are not fixed, but shifting. Since space and locations are no longer fixed, the meanings of events or issues can be constructed across time and space. Meanings are no longer static but have become fluid because of other determining factors, such as the social location of the interpreter. The interpreter, influenced by his or her historical, geographical, and cultural conditions constructs the meaning of the events. The "rhetoric of space" and "rhetoric of location" are related to "rhetoric of text," such as the religious and secular texts.

"Rhetoric of Text"

Rhetoric is no longer seen as a mode of communication that is simply making statements of facts to communicate facts. Rather, rhetoric is understood as "performative language."⁶ Rhetoric is more than just persuasive communication. Rhetoric is always situated within a particular location conditioned by history, culture, and religion.⁷ For example, the narration of the historical account between the clash Indians and the British in 1857 is described differently. From some British historians, the clash is called the Sepoy Rebellion but for an Indian historian, it is described as the British Massacre. The two perspectives show that the rhetoric of historical narrative and other discourses (Christian included) is produced with a pedagogical function in mind. In the words of Schuessler Fiorenza, rhetoric is "best understood as epistemic because it reveals an ethical dimension of knowledge production as a political practice."⁸ To put it briefly, underlying the rhetoric of narratives are ideologically-conditioned presuppositions. Therefore, there is the need to challenge and investigate the underlying presuppositions in narratives as well the interpreters (instructors).

The discussion on the "rhetoric of location," "rhetoric of space," and "rhetoric of text" therefore challenges us to reconsider the practice of theological education concerning the social location of the theological institutions and church.

Conclusion

Social location is important in the collaboration between seminaries and church-based education as it helps us to understand that people have different ideas and different realities. In other

⁴ Ibid., 15.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ See Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 10-104. Eagleton discusses briefly some aspects and criticisms of speech act theory as propounded by J. L. Austin.

⁷ Friedman, "Locational Feminism," 17.

⁸ Elisabeth Schuessler Fiorenza, *Rhetoric and Ethic: The Politics of Biblical Studies* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1999), 57.

words, our pedagogical approach towards theological education must consider the different experiences and perspectives of instructors and students and vice-versa since they will open possibilities and challenges for theological engagement that address the realities of contexts.