

# **Challenges and Opportunities for Theological Education in Pakistan**

**Miss Lubna Younas Dewan**

**Principal, St. Thomas' Theological College, Karachi, Pakistan**

The Islamic Republic of Pakistan (*Pak* means holy or pure; and *Istan* means land) came into being on 14 August 1947, when the British left India and it was divided into Pakistan and India. At the point of its formation, Pakistan consisted of two sections, East and West Pakistan, divided by a thousand miles of Indian territory (Nazir 2014).

Pakistan is the first modern nation-state created for a religious minority and its ambitions for freedom (namely, Muslim minority residence in the overwhelming Hindu context of India). That foundation has, however, undergone serious variations over the last 75 years since its creation (Amjad-Ali 2015, 4).

The total population of Pakistan is approximately 208.57 million, Pakistan ranks fifth in the list of countries (and dependencies) by population,<sup>1</sup> with a total of 512 people groups. Pakistan's largest religion is Islam (98.6%), 0.9% are Christians.

According to custom, St. Thomas the Apostle came to the Taxila area of Pakistan in his mission journey through the subcontinent in the second half of the first century. An ancient stone cross found in Taxila is taken as a mark of first century Christian presence in the area (Phan 2010, 50).<sup>2</sup>

The first modern mission was begun in Pakistan when it was part of India during the British Raj period in the 19th century. Military chaplaincies started in 1843 in the Sindh province and 1849 in the Punjab province. Around 95 percent of Pakistan's Christians are Punjabi Christians. Punjabi Christians are mainly converted from the Dalit - they are descendants of lower-caste/untouchable

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<sup>1</sup>"Pakistan Population (2021) - Worldometer." Accessed January 24, 2022.

<https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/pakistan-population/>.

<sup>2</sup>"The first Church in the country was built on September 27, 1597, near the Lahore fort. Mughal emperor Jehangir, Akbar's son, ordered its closure in 1614. Ten years later the church was re-opened but demolished in 1632, on the orders of emperor Shah Jehan, Jehangir's son." "Catholic Dioceses in Pakistan | churches in Pakistan | uca News." Accessed January 24, 2022. <https://www.ucanews.com/directory/country/pakistan/24>.

Hindus who converted from being Dalit during the colonial era in India (Amjad-Ali:2015, 5). They still face religious discrimination because of their background (although the majority of Muslims deny this discrimination). For example, it is assessed that Christians fill about 80% of the manual sewer cleaning jobs in the entirety of Pakistan (which means 80% of Pakistani church members are living in poverty) (Oddie: 2001).

Christians are the poorest of the poor. Financially they are weak and large numbers are illiterate. Besides this structural situation, there are other threats to the lives and well being of Christians, who in all make up just over 1% of the population in the overwhelmingly Muslim Republic of Pakistan.<sup>3</sup>

Protestant churches in Pakistan began in the early 19th century following the arrival of the British. ‘Anglicans in Pakistan were part of the Anglican diocese of Calcutta until 1877 when the diocese of Lahore was created for them. The three churches, Methodists, Lutherans, and Scottish Presbyterians, together with the Anglicans, formed a union in 1970 calling themselves the Church of Pakistan (CoP), (Pinto 2017).

The CoP is the second largest denomination of Pakistan with approximately 500,000 members and has eight dioceses.<sup>4</sup> It is an episcopal church. It is the only united church in South Asia which includes Lutherans. The church has one theological seminary, St. Thomas' Theological College in Karachi. Although the CoP is united, it is mainly Anglican in theology and practice.

Theological education is like a backbone of the church. It develops church leadership. A sound theological education system enables the church to achieve its goals. Pakistan as a developing country has faced critical problems of education and theological education since its beginning and, therefore, the system of education has failed on many levels to develop biblical scholars and theologians in the country. There are various factors responsible for this situation. This paper explores some of the critical challenges that have so far troubled the theological education system of Pakistan. When assessing the state of theological education in Pakistan, we can easily list five major challenges:

### 1. Lack of Sufficient Resources

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<sup>3</sup>Exaudi. “Christians in Pakistan Are ‘Poorest of the Poor,’” November 23, 2021. <https://www.exaudi.org/christians-in-pakistan-are-poorest-of-the-poor-2/>.

<sup>4</sup> Episcopal Church. “The Church of Pakistan (United),” April 30, 2012. Accessed January 24, 2022. <https://episcopalchurch.org/anglican-province/church-pakistan-united>.

2. Qualified and Competent Faculty
3. Research and Development
4. Woman in Theology
5. Contextualization

Education creates a sense of responsibility among the people. Theological education enables men and women to know and serve God. It has the potential to strengthen churches, their mission and ministries to change the world.

### **Qualified and Competent Faculty**

A qualified and competent faculty is more important than other resources. Capable and skillful people bring a transformation and make a difference. A devoted, dedicated and skillful faculty and staff is the only way for better-quality and value-added reader services. There is a serious shortage of biblical scholars and theologians in Pakistani theological institutes. The prominent theologians and scholars of Pakistan left the country for a bigger scenario. Most of the top-level administrative positions are either vacant or being run by non-professionals and retired persons.

While seminaries exist to impart dogma, it is also a reality that theological institutions have become dogmatic in their approach, especially classroom learning. It is a paradox, but one that needs to be highlighted.

Some teachers, especially from the an older generation, seem to display an attitude that what they have learned is sufficient for all times and they proudly pass it onto students without updating their teaching style, curriculum, or the books they use.

It is not uncommon for a theological teacher in Pakistan to speak from his own authority! It may be true in some traditional sense, for instance, that while students may be learning about Augustine, they are nevertheless learning from a teacher. Strictly speaking, they may never learn what Augustine said, but only what their teacher told them what Augustine said.

This part is fine, but what if a teacher takes credit for something that Augustine said? The students either take this attitude negatively, or adopt the same pattern in their own ministry, creating a vicious cycle.

It should be noted that this attitude to pedagogy isn't unique to seminaries. Even the most prestigious institutions of higher learning in Pakistan have at least one professor who follows this model, something that was starkly exposed during online and hybrid academic sessions during the pandemic.

Lack of perspective also means that most seminaries are still failing to incorporate Asian and modern theologies in their curriculum. Thus, local scholarship takes place in a vacuum.

Another alarming challenge of theological institutes is the low wages. Pakistan has among the lowest paid professionals. It is a socioeconomic problem that impacts not only the teachers but also the students and the community. The average salary given in theological institute (for teachers) is around 30000 Rs (127 GBP) – it is under the third phase of the Salary Standardization Law.

The low salaries for theological teachers in the seminaries indicates the lack of value given to this profession and it affects the quality of the teachers as well. Low wages create different obstacles, most competent teachers choosing to work abroad. It leads to 'brain drain problem'. In fact, when they go abroad some professionals chose to serve in other professions that do not match their qualifications. This is because they received very low salaries in Pakistan as compared to the benefits that they get abroad. Low wages are the main hindrance for teachers to improve their teaching skills and carry out advanced education as well (Sanchez 2015).

### **Lack of sufficient resources**

Lack of sufficient resources in the library is also a major challenge for theological institutes in Pakistan. The main obstacles in the progress of the library are lack of finances, poor collection of the resources, deficiency of internet technology (IT), skills in the library and of the librarian. Little availability of professional literature, low interest of library education or non-professionalism and a high level of dissatisfaction of libraries with their present state of funding effects the overall progress of the seminary. The funds allocated to libraries is very low or nil.

Theological libraries in Pakistan face a lot of problems regarding collection development. The decisions regarding purchase of resources seems to be not well thought out (mostly we have the books which are gifted to us and not according to what exactly a seminary needs). Online resources and connection with international libraries are not available due to lack of finance. (It is difficult to pay high fees for those libraries). Further, our library has not tried developing a mix of traditional

and electronic mediums. Most of the print resources in libraries are outdated. The standard ratio of books per student is far less than it should be and students can hardly afford to purchase books of their own. The high rate of currency exchange is also a challenge regarding the buying of international books and journals (Rehman 2007).

Regarding information technology, our theological library situation exhibits a gloomy picture. The major problem is the lack of computer literacy among the librarian and students, especially the senior ones. Our library is not computerized. We do not have a computerized catalogue. Foreign made software is not affordable for us because of the high price and the annual support service fees. Library computerization in Pakistan is in its infancy stage. We do not have computers in the library for teachers and students and we do not have a single complete set of any commentary or dictionary.

### **Research and Development**

Presently there is not a single professional journal issued by any seminary of Pakistan, although there is an integral need of resources in the local language and contextual writing. The expertise available for research guidance is too little. Most teachers and students have insufficient research knowledge. There is not a single theological college in Pakistan that offers a research degree.

### **Research Degree Programs**

The regular M.A., M.Th. and M.Phil. in theology are available in Punjab in just two institutions. Zarephath Bible Seminary started a M.Th. degree on a trial basis two years ago and they are still working with a limited number of students. They have not announced admission for new students yet. Forman Christian College (FC) has started their M.Phil. program under the instruction/supervision of Higher Education of Pakistan (HEC). But HEC does not accept seminary students with B.Th. or M.Div. degrees because our degree programs are not affiliated with HEC. To be enrolled in FC college, M.Phil. program students need to have an HEC recognized degree.

Most Pakistani theological education institutions are not registered with the government of Pakistan or with other recognized Christian associations such as the Asian Theological Association (ATA). Most seminaries (including St. Thomas' Theological College) do not fulfill the criteria of ATA (e.g. faculty, staff, library, curriculum, classrooms, co-curricular activities).

Not a single theological institute in Pakistan offers a Ph.D. degree. We can count Ph.D. holders from theological institutes on our fingers. There is not a single person in Pakistan who is holding a Ph.D. degree in New Testament, church history, systematic theology, etc. Those who earned Ph.D. degrees are mostly settled in foreign countries. Only a few are serving in Pakistan.

We don't have any foreign scholarships for M.A, M.Th., M.Phil., and Ph.D. for the faculty and recent graduates of the seminary (though we do have some competent teachers and students who can pursue further study). Some of our teachers need to go for further study. If theological institutes will provide scholarships for higher study, it will be beneficial for the institutes to have a bond/obligation with their scholars so that they will come back to Pakistan after the completion of their study.

### **Women in Theology**

The Pakistani minority is oppressed by the majority. The influence of the majority has made the Pakistani church a male dominated church. The Church of Pakistan is also a male dominated denomination. In the CoP, a woman cannot be ordained as a priest and she cannot be a signatory as a witness of matrimony. In the diocesan councils and in the synod of the CoP, a large number of participants are male. According to Amissah, 'Gender becomes a social justice issue when there is evidence that people are being denied their basic needs, rights, and freedoms based on their gender.' (Amissah 2008 223)

In Pakistan females have little or no access to education (special higher education). When it comes to theological education in Pakistan, fewer than 5% are involved in theological study, teaching and preaching. Gender bias and gender-based aggression is very common in Pakistan and in the Pakistani church. Gender-based preference and poverty and are two of the main challenges which impact female education and theological education.

Most of parents and churches do not want to invest in female theological education. The common argument is that after theological education a female cannot be ordained and the church does not have such opportunities for them to serve. Most females after seminary graduation serve as Sunday school teachers as volunteers.

In Pakistani seminaries we do not have an M.A. in Christian education, Christian counselling, spiritual formation, missions, evangelism (though it is much needed in Pakistan) or any bible

related bachelors or master courses apart from B.Th. and M.Div. degrees. In the seminaries females also need to go for M.Div and B.Th. degrees. The focus of these programmes is to train students for ordained ministry. This can only give knowledge about the ministry because in the future they cannot practice it. However, we had and we have brilliant females in the seminary. The last two years, the best preacher award at St. Thomas' theological college has gone to females because of their outstanding performance.

Besides ordination, female students can be writers. Contextual writing is much needed in Pakistan. We still depend on Western theology, biblical commentaries, dictionaries and such. Christian counselors, Christian educators and evangelists are much in need in Pakistan. Unfortunately, such an umbrella is not provided by any church or parachurch platform to use the skills of these gifted females.

### **Lack of engagement**

Another major challenge to theological education in Pakistan is the lack of engagement with the church, the wider culture and secular academy. As mentioned above, most theological education is conducted in a vacuum, with little or no regard to what happens outside the tranquil walls of the seminary.

One will also be hard-pressed to find theological teachers who also teach at the graduate level in secular universities as well. Pakistani seminaries still have to work on creating alliances or affiliations with state universities. The greatest challenge is that seminaries also lack engagement with the church which, for a lack of a better word, is the seminary's sole 'client' or 'customer'. What are these students being trained for, if not for work in the church?

Yet scathing criticisms of local churches, pastors, and bishops abound in the classroom, not just from students but also teachers (many of whom are pastors themselves). In fact, it is not uncommon to hear comments where sharp distinctions are drawn between what the Bible or theology says and what the church is doing. Students, instead of learning the Christian virtues of obedience, patience, and humility, end up becoming more arrogant because they know better after three or four years of seminary training, as compared to 30 years of ministry experience of their pastors!

There should be a shift in thinking, with a shift in vocabulary as well. Instead of telling students to 'change the church', why not train them to 'build' it instead? (John 20.22)

## **Contextualization**

Finally, theological education in Pakistan also faces the challenge of context, or a lack thereof. Our context is the context of Asia, poverty, syncretism, superstition, honour, shame and violence. And yet one cannot find extensive publications, seminars and courses that directly address these topics from a Biblical, theological and local context.

Even our study of Islam and Hinduism relies on books written by 18th to 20th European authors instead of engagement with local Muslims and Hindus. Local Christians still take cues from the West on what constitutes essentials of faith and contemporary issues. Our contemporary issues are the lynching of religious minorities not homosexuality and liberal theology. As a result, even the most brilliant student will always struggle to associate himself with the local historic and theological roots of Christianity.

## **Solutions**

There are more challenges than opportunities.

Seminaries need trained librarians, computers and updated resources for the library.

Salaries of faculty and staff need to be revised seriously.

Pakistani theological institutes need firm determination from the global partners and professionals to promote/strengthen theological education in Pakistan.

Scholarship for higher study for faculty, students (special for female) is the uttermost need.

Female leadership in the church and in theological institutions needs to be promoted.

Newsletters and journals (in Urdu and English) need to be published on monthly or quarterly basis.

There is an integral need of a contextually based theological research institute in Pakistan to produce Urdu and English contextual literature (according to the context rather than translating Western literature).

## **Resources**

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