

Christopher Codrington's Will: A Personal Reflection on Anglican Theological Education in the Caribbean

Abstract:

In this paper I wish to comment on Anglican Theological Education at Codrington College, the Anglican regional seminary for the Province of the West Indies. The death of ex-colonial governor, ex-captain general and commander-in-chief, and plantation owner Christopher Codrington in 1710 meant the bequeathing of his Barbadian estates to the ownership of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts (SPG) with an odd condition: that it always hold three hundred negroes on the plantation. This was clearly mixed with a desire for the estate to become a college, training in both medicine and divinity. Through the years it became the regional seminary. Even now in the 21st Century much of the colonial mentality from the 17th and 18th century hinders the advancement of holistic mission in the Caribbean. The ambiguity in Codrington's will – of both advancement and enslavement – persists in theological education. Clearing up this ambiguity is vital to effective theological education and effective ministry within the Caribbean context

Introduction

I find the juxtaposition of the imageries of 'Ivory Towers' and 'Muddy Grounds' fascinating as they convey an inherent conflict within Caribbean society and indeed the theological education that I received having studied at Codrington College, Barbados. Having undergone training in the Caribbean context and now furthering my training in the area of contextual theology here at the Queens Foundation, University of Birmingham, I wish to bring my own 'personal' reflection taking into account my journey in theological education and my view point as to where it needs to go if it is to be relevant and effective for the context in which I live and minister.

Two things will stand out in this paper: firstly, theological education in my context contends with the reality of colonialism. In many respects, etched into the Caribbean mindset is the notion that what is legitimate and sound is that which is Eurocentric and 'Ivory Tower'. 'Muddy Grounds' encompass all the other voices within the Caribbean mix of cultures. Secondly, there is an urgent need for a more inclusive approach to theological education both in content and in methodology, where all voices within the Caribbean milieu interface in the training process. To effectively do this, this paper will be divided into three sections:

- My Training within the Caribbean Context
- Codrington College: An Ambiguous History of Theological Education
- Suggestions Towards a More Relevant Approach to Theological Education

My Training within the Caribbean Context

I completed seminary in 2005 graduating from the University of the West Indies with a BA in Theology through Codrington College, the Anglican Seminary within the Province of the West Indies. With the exception of Jamaica which has its own ecumenical seminary attached to the University of the West Indies' Mona campus, it provides theological training for all the other remaining seven dioceses within the province. The formulation of the Province across the Anglophone Caribbean was inarguably due to the expansion of the British Empire to the New World. Historical events such as slavery and indentured labour meant that the Province would have to contend with multiple identities, ethnicities, cosmologies and worldviews. This was the reality of the seminary since in any given year there could be Afro-Caribbeans like myself; Guyanese of Indian or African descent – or of Hindu backgrounds; Trinidadians of Indian, African or Chinese descent; Belizeans of African, or Carib (Amerindian), or Latin American (Mexican, Guatemalan or Honduran) descent; Caribbean persons of direct European descent; or persons with all the aforementioned backgrounds put together. In short, the cultural and ethnic context of the Caribbean is far from monolithic and students entering Codrington College often come from radically diverse backgrounds, eventually graduating to minister in home contexts which may hold an equal or more amount of diversity.

I realized that during seminary my training was somehow unilateral. I was trained in historical criticism and biblical criticism, systematic theology, and philosophy as a foundation for my theological engagement. These were quintessential skills but they were not the only ones. Apart from courses in Caribbean Church history, little was done to ground such skills within the Caribbean context. Where was the anthropological training necessary to understand and appreciate indigenous mindsets and world views? Where was the appreciation of the African, the Indian, or the Carib cultures and histories? Where was the understanding that theology is not a set of universal concepts and skills that lived immortally within the heavens, but that theology is lived reality, embracing of all cultures and backgrounds, and much more nuanced than one can ever comprehend? To advance one part of the Caribbean identity, the Eurocentric part, and suppress the others is none other than another form of colonialism; a history of both advancement and enslavement that still plays out in the present but should be seriously avoided in theological education.

For my BA thesis entitled “Partnership in Mission: An Examination of the Relationship Between Codrington College and the Diocese of the Bahamas and the Turks and Caicos Islands”¹ I wrote on theological education being reformed to reflect mission as its foundation. At that point I saw a disconnect where the Church's call for mission was not reflected in the content and shape of theological training. Having entered the Queen's Foundation I realise now that there is a more fundamental issue to consider – that of context. Theological training at Codrington College did not adequately deal with context. It did not take into account the multiple ethnicities, worldviews, and experiences within the classroom, let alone the diversities within me – the seminarian.

Nonetheless, in order to better explain the issue of theological education within the Anglo-Caribbean context (Codrington College), we must go back in history to Christopher Codrington III. In him I've found a striking analogy, of the coexistence of advancement and enslavement, to describe the unilateral approach to theological education that I experienced.

¹ Turner, C. “Partnership in Mission: An Examination of the Relationship Between Codrington College and the Diocese of the Bahamas and the Turks and Caicos Islands”. Unpublished BA Thesis. University of the West Indies. 2005.

Codrington College: An Ambiguous History of Theological Education

The notion of 'Ivory Tower' and 'Muddy Grounds' is seen in the history of Codrington College. We will begin here by looking at the interesting history of Christopher Codrington III who left his Barbadian plantations to the then Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts (SPG). It is important to note here that Codrington's will is used analogously as we compare it to theological education within today's Caribbean context. Secondly, we will look at the legacy of Codrington College and how it served the Caribbean context throughout the centuries.

Christopher Codrington's Will

The death of ex-colonial governor, ex-captain general and commander-in-chief, and plantation owner Christopher Codrington in 1710 meant the bequeathing of his Barbadian estates to the ownership of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts (SPG) with one very odd condition: that it always hold three hundred negroes on the plantation. A fuller citation of this will might clear up this very strange statement since Codrington was leaving his plantation for the work of furthering the gospel and developing life within the colonies:

Give and Bequeath my two Plantations in the Island of Barbados to the Society for propagation of the Christian Religion in Forreighn parts, Erected and Established by my Late good master, King William the Third, and my desire is to have the Plantations Continued Intire and three hundred negroes at Least Kept always thereon, and A Convenient number of Professors and Scholars Maintained there, all of them to be under the vows of Chastity and obedience, who shall be obliged to Studdy and Practice Physick and Chyrurgery as well as divinity, that by the apparent usefulness of the former to all mankind, they may Both indear themselves to the People and have better oppertunitys of doeing good To mens Souls whilst Takeing Care of their Bodys.²

Codrington's desire was very clear. He wanted a school established for missionary work to the peoples of the colonies. The newly instituted SPG (1701) had found favour with Codrington's benevolence. They were to be the vehicles of his vision of a better society. It was a vision of a society, unfortunately, where the place for the negroe was still working the plantation. The cry of the slave was not to be heard; his/her contribution to social development was to work the field and to keep the plantation going.

Was Codrington a man of vision? Yes! Writing about the history of Codrington College, John Holder, Barbadian bishop and theologian, spoke of Christopher Codrington as carrying out his post as governor of the Leeward Islands with vigour and integrity:

"The new governor began to lay down some high standards for those in public office in his own islands and the wider West Indies. He attacked the practice of bribery which was to be found among the governors of the colonies, and argued strongly that no governor should be allowed to accept money from his Assembly.

² Citation taken from Codrington's College's website article. "An Historical Overview of Codrington College".

Instead, the salaries of the governors should be raised as part of the effort to eradicate bribery and make them independent of their assemblies.”³

Was Codrington a man of heart and compassion? Yes! Codrington did have a particular leaning towards the slaves. In fact Holder explains that this gained him enemies among the plantocracy.⁴ Not only did he desire to ameliorate the poor whites along with the slaves but he expressed desire to Christianise them and teach them to read and write. The then newly formed SPG was an excellent opportunity to have these desires realised.

Nonetheless, though Codrington gave benefaction to the reform that the SPG was bringing about at the time, he was still colonial. All the good that he had done, all the innovations and the groundwork laid for a better West Indian society did not take into account the reality that an entire group of people were being subjected to the plantation and their voices were insignificant in the fight for reform. His preference for enlightenment education and the formal study of theology and medicine undoubtedly would bring much good to the region. However, such good would be insufficient if it led to the suppression and denial of the other within the same context.

Codrington College

The same dynamic still exists in the realised dream – Codrington College. Through the work of the U/SPG⁵ Codrington’s will for founding a school for training and development within the West Indies was eventually realised. The society had to struggle with the burden of running the plantation while building the educational institution. The College was finally opened in 1745 as a grammar school teaching the basics of education, reading, writing, Latin and accountancy. “In 1748 it began lectures in advanced studies following the appointment of professors of philosophy and mathematics, and of surgery, though Codrington College never produced medical doctors nor surgeons.”⁶ During this period it catered to the sons of local gentry in preparing them for entrance into Oxford and Cambridge. In 1875 the college became affiliated with Durham University where it formally began tertiary education, keeping that relationship until 1958. It began training persons for ordination from 1830 where it outdates both Chichester (1839) and Wells (1840) and has the distinction of being the Anglican Communion’s first theological college.⁷

In the end Codrington College stands out with an impressive history of service to the English speaking Caribbean. Not only has it trained the local clergy persons for generations, but it has at various points offered quality education in other disciplines such as law, education, medicine and civil service. However, just as with the founder, there remains the critique that much of the

³ Holder, John. Codrington College: A Brief History. Bridgetown: Barbados, 1988. pg 2.

⁴ Holder, pg. 2.

⁵ The SPG that was formed in 1701 and inherited the Codrington plantation upon his death in 1710 became the USPG in 1965 when it merged with Universities' Mission to Central Africa (UMCA).

⁶ All Information on Codrington College’s history taken from *A Historical view of Codrington College* on the official website of the Institution: <<http://www.codrington.org/cms/>>.

⁷ Codrington College’s Website.

Caribbean way of life is not taken into account within the process or content of theological training. Theology as a discipline is presented as rational and scientific and preserved within the University. Studies in anthropology, culture, and even biblical studies and hermeneutics from a *distinctly Caribbean multi-layered context are not a part of the training process*. The Theological education presented is unilateral and Eurocentric and far from adequately addressing the Caribbean context.

Towards a Relevant Approach to Theological Education

It is not easy, if at all possible, to articulate the exact content and shape of theological education in a context such as the Caribbean and I am certain that there are more factors to consider such as economics and policies. However, being apophatic could make things much clearer by establishing what theological education should 'not' be within such a context. If the following can be agreed upon then theological education in any context would be more effective:

Theological Education is not:

1. Mono-Spherical

Theologians such as Hood⁸, Erskine⁹, and Reid-Simon¹⁰ – all of whom have Caribbean roots – make the point that the Euro-American rationalistic approach to theology with its concentration on the platonic Graeco-Roman intellectual tradition of separating life into the world of forms and the world of ideas, has followed the post-enlightenment, rationalistic, and scientific approach to theology, making it academic and discursive. The need for precision in 'God-Talk' is not a feature of the other identity impulses such as the African, the Indian, or the Carib. For such worldviews life is not a separation between spirit and matter, but a harmonious coexistence of the two. Caribbean history has shown that there is strong link between separating life into the world of forms and the world of ideas and the missionary rationale that slavery could and should continue because the pain and strain of the body, and the agony of the lived material world were unimportant compared to the perfect rest of heaven. The Ivory towers of such a classical theology do not take into account the reality of the Muddy grounds of the Caribbean. In this 21st century the dichotomy and all its dangerous implications must be done away with. The treasures of ivory tower theology must meet with the rich, life-giving muddy ground of Caribbean thinking and being in order to write a new history for the region.

2. Mono-Rhythmic

If we accept that theological education is not exclusivistic, neither in philosophy nor cosmology nor culture, then we must concede that it is not exclusivistic in methodology either. Within the Caribbean region there are a number of different cultures that have different ways of understanding life and living it. Theology is not monopolised by the intellect, nor is it the domain of the academy.

⁸ Hood, Robert E. Must God Remain Greek? Afro cultures and God-Talk. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990.

⁹ Erskine, Noel L. Decolonizing Theology: A Caribbean Perspective. New Jersey: Africa World Press, 1998.

¹⁰ Reid-Salmon, Delroy A. Home Away from Home: The Caribbean Diasporan Church in the Black Atlantic Tradition. London: Equinox, 2008.

Systematic theology and biblical criticism, for example, are methods to understand and articulate how the divine and the human interface. This is only one of many methods. On the other hand, The Afro-Caribbean, for example, does not approach life from such a starting point. The interface between the divine and the human is not a matter of logic but a matter of experience. The handing down of tradition is largely oral and may appear in the forms of stories and adages from the factual to the fantastic; in riddle and in rhyme. Movement and rhythm are not simply ways of expression for people of the Caribbean but they are ways of being. If we are to ever think of a method to theological education within the Caribbean context then we must dismiss the idea that theology or theologising is restricted to the classical university preoccupation with science and the intellect.

This leads us to an important question: Can theological education within the Anglophone Caribbean reflect a healthy interface between both the intellectual and the experiential? At this juncture we can accept guidance from the work of Roman Catholic African theologian Francois Kabasele Lumbala in suggesting that the colonialist and the classical theologian on the African continent approached life with the intention of 'ordering'. In commenting on Kabasele's work, Mario Aguilar *makes this comment: "I suggest that colonialists and theologians shared a common purpose, of ordering. As a result, theology and colonialism developed related methodologies of ordering knowledge. During colonialism, a complex science of ordering territories and peoples was developed. Such ordering included Western education as a system of ordering minds, bodies, and souls according to the models used in Europe."*¹¹ On the other hand, the African theological response to this is that of 'disordering'. Within African cultures 'disorder' is order. The mysterious and the unknown, the chaotic and the uncharted regulate life. Hence, the colonial methodology of neatly compartmentalising life must be critiqued by an emphasis on complexity and diversity within African cosmology. In such a tradition gnosis, mystery and a non-linear historiography is placed in dialectical relationship to the process of ordering. Thus theological education within the Anglophone Caribbean would seem to benefit if the curriculum reflects this ongoing process of order-disorder-order so that both the Ivory Tower and the Muddy Grounds are used creatively for transformation within the Caribbean context.

A more concrete example of this relationship, to use a personal example, is Junkanoo. As a Bahamian theological student studying in Barbados I was introduced to excellent training in Ivory Tower theology. Such training respected logic and the intellect but had very little care for experience. But, I am a man of Junkanoo. I am polyrhythmic. Junkanoo is the cultural festival that characterises the soul of the Bahamas. It is a diversity of rhythm and colour. It is a way of thinking. It is emotion. It is community living. It is a link between the ancestral past and the imagined future. It is socio-political critique; every 'rushing' group has a particular theme or commentary on social realities. One knows what is happening within Bahamian society by watching the parades at Junkanoo. And even more striking, it is a way of theologising. Bahamian historians and anthropologists such as Nicolette Bethel make the point that during slavery Junkanoo parades were allocated to Boxing Day and New Years Day to act as alternatives, respectively, to the European celebrations of the Feast of the Nativity (Christmas Eve) and the Feast of the Holy Name of Jesus (New Years Eve). It was social, political and cultural critique and rebellion against 'white' religion:

¹¹ Aguilar, Mario I. "Postcolonial African Theology in Kabasele Lumbala". [Theological Education](#). June, 2002.

“Owing largely to its association with Christmas, Junkanoo is placed in opposition both to the culture of the masters and to the practice of Carnival elsewhere in the Caribbean. Carnival is viewed by Bahamians as a sort of accommodation between master and slave in the areas where it exists; as it fits appropriately into the Catholic calendar, Bahamians consider it to be an indigenization of an (imposed) European festival. Junkanoo, on the other hand, because placed in direct opposition to European religious festivities, is seen as resistance to domination. Christmas is theoretically a time of peace, both physical and aural; Junkanoo, a celebration of sound (those who oppose it denounce it, even today, as “noise”), is also a time of disorder, of fights. Carnival ends as Lent begins; traditional Junkanoo, however, held on Christmas Day itself, challenged Christmas, providing a counterpoint for church services, giving the working classes a chance to counter the status quo.”¹²

Junkanoo, “The essential expression of Bahamian Identity”¹³ for me gives perfect expression to Kabasele’s ‘disordering’ and is a powerful tool for theological education for the Bahamian context.

3. Mono-functional

Finally, we must deal with the question of purpose. A strictly classical and scientific approach to theological education would be simply ‘descriptive’. An emphasis on ordering and philosophy and a preoccupation with the intellect leaves theology stifled in a prison of analysis without the tools for action. If theological education is to be effective for the Caribbean region it must be ‘prescriptive’. There must be some ‘telos’ for islands which seem to move according to the wild winds of globalisation. The Caribbean is one of the most vulnerable regions of the world both geographically with natural disasters, and socio-economically with economies dependent on Western countries. There is much that theological education can do in healing and strengthening such societies but such aims must be explicit.

Conclusion

In the end Christopher Codrington’s will serves as a model that theological education, both within the context of the Caribbean and globally, should avoid. Theological education is a tool Caribbean history has shown can aid progress and also hinder it. If progress means the quieting of other voices then theological education ultimately fails. If it means the inclusion of all voices, thoughts, rhythms, worldviews, colours, languages and flavours, in equal and dialogic manner, then it has begun to bridge the unfortunate gap between the Ivory tower and the muddy ground.

¹² Bethel, Nicolette. “Junkanoo in the Bahamas: A Tale of Identity”. Adapted from [Navigations: the Fluidity of National Identity in the Post-Colonial Bahamas](http://www.nicobethel.net/nico-at-home/academia/junkident.html), PhD dissertation, 2000. <<http://www.nicobethel.net/nico-at-home/academia/junkident.html>>

¹³ Craton, Michael and Gail Saunders. [Islanders in the Stream: A History of the Bahamian People: From the Ending of Slavery to the Twenty-First Century](#). Vol. 2. Athens: University of Georgia Press. 1998.

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