

Mar Ivanios: A Pedagogue of the Disenfranchised

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Presented at AERA Conference

Published by

Public School Monitor

(Associates for Research on Private Education)

Vol. 31, No.2, Spring 2010

Entitled:

“Educating the Disenfranchised of India:

The Story of Mar Ivanios and His Community”

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Abstract

Archbishop Mar Ivanios (1882-1953) was a visionary and his educational vision has relevance for today. He emancipated the socially marginalized and disenfranchised people of his time through his educational vision and practice. This article is the story of a small community of Christians and their leader who made a difference in their society. Hence, this paper examines, at first, the educational vision of Mar Ivanios in the context of Malankara Catholic Church in Kerala, India; second, it situates his vision in the context of the social ecology of the community in which Ivanios' educational vision took flesh; third, it looks at the education of women in his community and the disenfranchised segment of the society; finally, it delineates the realization of his vision and ends with some concluding remarks.

Introduction

The caste system in India has a profound influence on the people of India. The low caste, the poor, the marginalized, and the disenfranchised were systematically denied access to education. Traditionally, education was reserved for the upper class, especially to the priestly class, the Brahmins (Murthy, 1999).

Christianity brought the ideal of casteless society to India. But because of the social and political situations, the impact of the early Christians on the nation was very limited. It is with the coming of European colonizers, especially the British, some of the

discriminations were mitigated by law. However, the British could not find a lasting solution since they considered themselves as the ruling class (Murthy, 1999). After the independence, Indian government constitutionally and legally put an end to the caste system and discrimination of the marginalized, the disenfranchised, and women; yet these issues of discrimination still persist in practice.

It is against this background, the story of Mar Ivanios and his vision unfold. He emancipated the socially marginalized and disenfranchised people of his community through his educational vision and practice. It is the story of a small community of Christians and their leader who made a difference in their society. Hence, the paper examines the educational vision of Mar Ivanios in the context of Malankara Catholic Church in Kerala, India, his achievements, and the relevance of his ideas for today.

The Educational Vision of Mar Ivanios

The educational vision of Mar Ivanios was grounded on the Biblical teaching and the Christian tradition.

Jesus is the eternal word, the light, and the life (Jn. 1: 1-5). He was anointed to bring the Good News to the oppressed in society: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord” (Lk. 4: 18-19). Hence, Jesus went around teaching and serving people. Mathew recorded: “He went around all of Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the Gospel of the kingdom and curing every disease and illness among the people” (Mt. 4: 18). He wanted his followers to do the same. “Before

ascending to His Father, Jesus commanded his followers to go and share the Good News with all nations” (Mt. 28: 19). Therefore, for the last two thousand years the Church has been sharing the Good News and giving effective leadership in the realm of education.

Jesus’ concern for the poor, disenfranchised, and vulnerable has been central to the Gospel message (Mt. 25: 31-46). The Beatitude reinforces this message (Mt. 5: 3-12). Thus, Jesus identifies himself with the poor, the persecuted, the oppressed, and the marginalized in society (Mt. 25: 45).

According to Christian understanding and tradition, individuals are endowed with different talents and they have to realize their potential to the optimum level. Education should help the individuals to grow into the mature measure of Christ (Eph. 4: 11-13). It “promotes humanization and thereby the Christocentric transformation of the world into the kingdom of God. Mar Ivanios, a good educationist, was conscious of the importance of education in the progress of the church and the society at large” (Illickal, 2004, pp. 284-285).

The Second Vatican Council articulated the necessity of adapting education to the contemporary needs; it also spoke about the necessity of refocusing on the goals of education. Its declaration on education *Gravissimum Educationis* affirmed the rights of all individuals to an education to prepare them for a life in this world and the world to come; it addressed the social goal of education to work towards the welfare of the society and the whole world. The Council also advised the hierarchy to care for the needs of those who are poor and those strangers to the gift of faith. The “option for the poor” and “the preferential treatment” of the disenfranchised became a major concern for the church in the post-conciliar educational realm (Elias, 2002, pp. 206-207; Lauder, 2006, p. 17).

In brief, the Biblical and Christian tradition laid the foundation for an educational vision that transcends one's myopic view of education. Education is for growth; it is for realizing one's full potential. One has to grow in the image and likeness of God; to be the light and the life to the world. It is for *being-in-the-world-with-others* and for becoming a *being-for-others*, thus, building the kingdom of God (Hornedo, 1995). Hence, an educated Christian is one who has taken to heart the Gospel teaching that the final destiny of a human being is founded on Jesus' teaching: "whatever you have done to the least of My brothers, you have done for Me" (Matt. [sic] 25: 31-45) where the 'Me' refers to Him Who was preeminently the Man-for-others" (Hornedo, 1995, pp. 32-33). In other words, Christian education is bringing forth into this world another Christ--as the classical expression would put it "*Alter Christus*" (p. 33).

The Biblical and the ecclesial view of education was the foundation of Mar Ivanios' educational vision. Ivanios, the founder of Malankara Catholic Church, was deeply aware of the importance of education and its transformative power. He himself was the beneficiary of advanced education. He was the first priest to have a Master's degree in his community. He understood what it could do to his community, especially the poor, the marginalized, and the women of his community and society at large.

Situating His Educational Vision in the Socio-Cultural Context

In this juncture, it is relevant to look at the social and cultural context of the society during the time of Mar Ivanios. As a social reformer, he wanted to transform his community as well as his nation which was under the grip of caste, class, and gender discrimination. He understood that the prevalent discriminatory practice would destroy

the ecology of the community and it was against the Biblical teaching and Jesus' mandate (Mt. 28:19; Mt. 25: 31-46).

Ivanios was very cognizant of the discrimination in the society, especially how the outcasts and the untouchables were treated in other communities and religions; and he understood that it was against the will of God. Illickal observed:

Mar Ivanios was aware of the various unjust social practices prevalent among the people of other religions, like the caste system and its consequences such as untouchability, segregation, discrimination, suppression and oppression. Among the people of other religion, some people were considered outcastes and they were not allowed to enter temples; they were considered as untouchables. He was against all these unjust practices of caste and division that existed in society. He was convinced that all human beings are created in the true image and likeness of God, and are children of God; so these unjust practices are against the will of God. (Illickal, 2004, pp. 288-189)

Mar Ivanios wanted a community that was based on Jesus' vision of the kingdom of God where all are treated as the children of God. He worked tirelessly towards this vision and succeeded. Illickal (2004) remarked "Mar Ivanios, a social reformer, transformed the society with his shrewd foresight and charismatic personality and tried to establish the kingdom of God on earth by giving greater opportunities to the marginalized, destitute, lower castes, women and the poor" (p. 283). Thus, the vision of Mar Ivanios, transcended a myopic understanding of the kingdom of God and embraced a Christian humanism and the universal concept that all human beings are the children of God.

Ivanios viewed evangelization in the larger context of realizing the kingdom of God that would bring about justice and equity: “Evangelization today would also mean working for the human communities beyond all religious barriers and living the new outlook that Jesus brought. This mission is nothing but a call to be concerned about and to work for Jesus’ dream of a new society characterized by freedom, equity, justice , fellowship and community” (Illickal, 2004, p. 281).

St. Thomas Christians, however, considered themselves as belonging to the upper class--descendent of Brahmin families who were converted to Christianity by St. Thomas (Jacob, 2009). Mar Ivanios refused to keep Christian preaching and education to his own community and opened missions and educational institutions to lower caste and the marginalized of the society. He wanted justice and equity and a bright future for all. “The presence of the 90,000 Nadar Christians and many other backward castes in the Malankara Catholic Church point to the colossal role of Mar Ivanios had in bringing the downtrodden, outcaste folk into the Church” (Jacob, 2009, p.1). Ivanios believed that the best way to emancipate the socio-economic injustice prevalent in his society was to provide people an excellent education. Education was the important instrument he used to bring women and the marginalized in the main stream of society (Illickal, 2004, p. 283).

The Education of Women and the Marginalized

In ancient India, education was used as a tool to control. The high caste, the aristocrats, and the rich used it to keep others to be subservient to them. The lower caste, the socially and culturally disadvantaged, and also women from all strata of life were denied the

benefits of education. This predicament of society was destructive to the individual and community. Even in the beginning of the twentieth century, women were not allowed to have social or educational equality in the community (Illickal, 2004, p. 1). Mar Ivanios understood this would affect the ecology of the community.

According to the Hindu tradition and the dictum of Manu, a woman must live under the protection of her father during her childhood, of the husband during her middle age, and of the son during her old age. The Malankara Christians adopted some of this tradition and followed a patriarchal system in their families in which women held an inferior status to men (Illickal, 2004).

Influenced by the Hindu tradition, Malankara Christians followed a patriarchal system in the family. Women were expected to be very submissive to their husbands. Wives were not allowed to call their husbands by their first name nor eat with them; they would eat only after their husbands were served. Women did not have the freedom to choose their husbands. They were delegated to the rear part of the church for worship while men were given the front part of the nave of the church. Women seldom got chances to go shopping outside their villages or freedom to socialize with other people (Thengazhikathu, 2004).

Mar Ivanios challenged this social and gender discrimination and opened the door for women; and he gave them equal rights to worship, educate, and socialize (Jacob, 2009, p. 1). Illickal (2004) observed: “Mar Ivanios, with his profound foresight and pastoral vision, wanted to change this prevailing system. He realized that in Christ there is no difference between Jew or Greek and freeman and slave, man and woman (see Gal 3:28)” (p. 286).

Ivanios understood the crucial role of women in transforming society. In addition to the fact that they constitute the half of the population, he realized that women have profound influence on raising and socializing their children. He, therefore, selected women from the community to be educated and, then, in turn, serve the community and assume leadership positions in society.

An excellent example of Ivanios' visionary leadership in educating women can be seen in his decision in founding religious congregations for women. "So he sent some girls to Barisole for higher education under the supervision of the Oxford Missionary Epiphany Sisters, and they became the first members of the Bethany *Madham* [convent] he founded. These educated and totally dedicated nuns worked for the liberation of women through education" (Illickal, 2004, p. 286).

Women not only benefited from Ivanios' vision of education and also became catalysts for emancipation of other women and transformation of society. Thus, Ivanios had a profound impact on the society as a pioneer of liberation and education of women of his community.

Later in his life, Mar Ivanios was instrumental in founding another religious Congregation for women called Daughters of Mary. They worked among the poor and illiterate people of lower caste who were excluded from the privileged upper class. They established schools to educate these disenfranchised people, established hospitals to treat the sick, and provided social services to empower the marginalized. Illickal (2004) remarked on this issue in the context of the service rendered by Daughters of Mary and extolled their contribution to the liberation and emancipation of the outcasts and the untouchables in the community.

Ivanios paid much attention to the marginalized and unwanted members of the community, especially the orphaned and disabled people. He built orphanages for the children who were abandoned by their parents; some of them were children of poor parents who could not take care of them. Another segment of the community that needed attention and care was the disabled--physically, emotionally, and psychologically. In all of these people, Mar Ivanios saw Jesus marginalized. He also heard the words of Jesus: "Amen, I say to you whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me" (Mt. 26: 41).

Mar Ivanios, therefore, developed a policy to serve all God's children and provide quality education for all, irrespective of their caste, religion or gender; whether they were orphaned, abled or disabled. His policy was put into practice by building schools in every community, especially in the remote areas where the poor and the marginalized lived. He believed that education could bring about the social ecology and harmony in society.

Realizing His Vision

Mar Ivanios not only envisioned an educational vision but did yeoman service and made great strides in accomplishing his vision. During his lifetime he established many institutions with an eye on education and social and economic uplift of the marginalized people of his community. Before his death, he wrote about the educational institutions he founded in his community. He established 78 primary schools, 18 middle schools, 15 high schools, 2 training schools, and 1 college (Kahalam, 2009, p. 26).

All these institutions were situated in rural areas where people did not have access to education. He purposely located them in underdeveloped areas so that the poor and marginalized people would benefit. For example, Ivanios established a school and a college on Bethany Hills to help the marginalized people of the society (Thomas, 2010).

The educational vision of Mar Ivanios continues to be realized today. Anchored on Mar Ivanios' vision, the Malankara Catholic Church built schools and colleges, and other professional educational institutions to provide an excellent education not only for the Malankara Catholic community but all the children of God. The educational contribution of the Malankara Catholic Church to the community and Indian nation at large is exemplary.

Today Kerala, one of the southern states of India, is cited in many literary circles as a paradigm for attainable total literacy (Franke, 1999; Joseph, 1996; Samuel, 2007). The contribution of Mar Ivanios and his Church towards this goal is commendable. Considering its small demography (600,000), the impact of his community and its institutions on society and the nation is outstanding. Malankara Catholic educational institutions are deemed to be some of the best in South India.

At present, the community has an excellent network of educational institutions that caters to the need of the whole population. It manages a large number of nursery schools (136), lower and upper primary schools (249), secondary and higher secondary educational institutions (78). It has 20 teacher training schools, 8 technical institutes, and 12 colleges (Malankara Catholic Directory, 2004). These institutions serve all segments of the society the rich and the poor, the disenfranchised and the marginalized. They are the fruition and continued realization of the educational vision of Mar Ivanios.

Relevance in a Changing World

John Naisbitt (1984) and Alvin Toffler (1980) spoke of the paradigm shift in the modern age. In this fast-paced world, we are moving from an industrial society to an information society. Thomas Friedman (2005) observed that the world is flat and the technological advances have flattened it. As the information is exponentially growing and the world is globally wired, people have to navigate the digital world; and they have to adapt to the information society to become more efficacious human beings. In this hyper-paced world, acquiring some ready-made knowledge or skills are not enough; instead, “learning to learn” and becoming life-long learners are imperative (Rogers, 1983).

Today, the knowledge-base and resources are greatly transforming. “Ubiquitous technologies empower and encourage all forms of communication and movement within and across all kinds of borders” and transnational border crossing has become so common in thought, technology, culture, and people (AERA, 2010). The new generation is inundated with information that is confusing and confounding. They confuse information with true knowledge and excellent education.

The Indian tradition speaks about what is true education. Tagore quotes the Vedic verses that summarizes the purpose of true education: “From unreality to lead me to real, from darkness to the light, from death to immortality” (Tagore, 1983, p. 32). In modern times, Martin Buber (1958) spoke of education as an encounter between I and Thou. Paulo Freire (1992), basing his concept on the Biblical tradition, speaks of education as liberation from oppression--it brings about redemption of the oppressor and the oppressed. In this twenty-first century, the world needs such an education--an education

that is more democratic, just, relevant, and socially sustainable and morally responsible in this changing world.

According to Mar Ivanios, education is the best investment in human potential which brings about high dividends. Ivanios and those who followed him understood the importance of this high dividend-investment and used it to uplift the community in a changing world.

Ultimately, education is only a tool; it is only a means to an end. It has to create a good, compassionate, and equitable society, where preferential treatment of the weak and the poor is the paradigm. Our society is a community of pilgrims who nurture each other to be the best they can be in anticipation of the “kingdom come.” This is what Mar Ivanios tried to accomplish during his sojourn here as a pilgrim in progress.

Ivanios founded his vision and practice based on the Scriptural and Christian tradition that transcend parochialism, and religious and social barriers. For he believed in the fundamental concept of Jesus’ teaching, that is, ultimately all are children of God; and we have to help each other to realize everyone’s potential to the maximum in the pattern and the image of God. His ideas and vision will inspire all those who believe in equality and justice, peace and prosperity for all.

Thus, the educational vision of Mar Ivanios has relevance for today. It is not only relevant for India, but also for people everywhere. The disenfranchised and the marginalized people are found in every community and society. As long as there are social, cultural, class, and gender discrimination in this world, his vision will always remain relevant.

Conclusion

In short, Mar Ivanios understood the Christian paradigm of the kingdom of God where everybody is welcome and has the right to be a child of God. He opened the door for innumerable people who were denied the basic tools of knowledge and access to a bright future. To them, Mar Ivanios gave an educational, social, and religious anchor; he empowered their disenfranchised and marginalized lives in a changing world to become socially ecological and morally sustainable. He welcomed them unconditionally to the kingdom that is *already and not yet*. During our temporary sojourn, Mar Ivanios maintained, we have to build the kingdom of God on earth to realize our potential and journey towards the final fulfillment. That is a vision relevant for today and every day.

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