

TRANSFORMATIVE THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION AND *MISSIO DEI*: CONTEXTUAL PROPOSITIONS

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Introduction

This article proposes to articulate transformative theological education and *missio Dei* through a theoretical-practical path that integrates Freirean pedagogy, contemporary missiological reflection, and contextual propositions. We start from the assumption that all formative practice, especially in the field of theology, is historical, situated, and axiologically committed, and can serve both the maintenance of structures of domination and the irruption of processes of personal and community liberation. In dialogue with Paulo Freire, we understand transformative education as an ethical and political practice oriented towards the humanization of subjects and the overcoming of systems that dehumanize the individual, valuing, on the other hand, dialogicity, criticality and praxis as structuring categories.

At the same time, we place theological formation under the horizon of *the missio Dei*, understanding the mission as an initiative of God himself in favor of life in its entirety, in which the church and its formative bodies are called to participate in a humble and contextual way. From these foundations, the text develops, first of all, the central elements of transformative theological education; second, it correlates this paradigm with the missional understanding of the church, broadening to the discussion around the *missio Dei*; and, finally, it presents contextual propositions inspired by the issues of Middleton, Walsh, and N. T. Wright, with a view to contributing to the construction of a truly transformative education, as well as to a missional theology that responds with lucidity and hope to the challenges of our time.

1. Transformative Theological Education

Transformative education comes from the foundations of Paulo Freire's educational philosophy (2022). We can define it as a pedagogical paradigm that understands the educational act as a historical, ethical, and political practice oriented towards the humanization of subjects and the transformation of unjust structures of society. In direct opposition to what he calls the "banking" model—in which the teacher deposits ready-made content in passive students—transformative education recognizes educators and students as subjects of the same process, summoned to critically read the world and not just to decode words.

In this horizon, educating is not adapting people to the given reality, but awakening in them the ability to denounce forms of oppression and announce unprecedented possibilities of a dignified life, built in communion with others. It is an emancipatory project that articulates awareness, ethical commitment, and historical action, with the horizon of overcoming the multiple forms of dehumanization produced by capitalist, colonial, and patriarchal systems. We can illustrate this through the etymology of the word "transform," which comes from the

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Latin, *transformare*, whose meaning is **to give shape, format, mold (*formare*) through (*trans*) action (*actio*)**.

However, Saviani (2011, p. 12), a historian of education with a historical-critical line, reminds us that “[...] if all transformation is change, not all change is transformation.” It is possible to verify reality in several instances, such as politics, for example. Every four or eight years we go through presidential changes. However, many times, without effective social transformation. Education that transforms is one that promotes agency, emancipation, criticality, autonomy, protagonism of one’s own life, social changes, etc. (Freire, 2022). A transformative theological education aims at the transformation of the student so that he can be an agent of transformation.

The see-judge-act method, assumed and re-elaborated by Latin American liberation theology and widely convergent with Freire’s pedagogy, expresses in an operative way the dynamism of this transformative education. The moment of *seeing* is not reduced to a naïve observation of reality, but implies an analytical look, attentive to the historical, economic, cultural, racial and gender mediations that configure the daily life of the subjects. *Seeing*, in this sense, means unveiling the “limit situations” that imprison individuals and collectivities—structural poverty, religious racism, sexism, necropolitics, environmental devastation—and perceiving how such situations are produced by concrete power relations, and not by inevitable fatalities.

Without this rigorous reading of the context, any educational practice runs the risk of becoming moralistic or voluntarist, as it intervenes without really knowing what it is intervening in. *Seeing* is the axiom that deals with the reading of reality. In Freire’s perspective (2021a, p. 36), “the reading of the world precedes the reading of the word,” so that “language and reality are dynamically linked.” In the process of adult literacy, he was convinced that, before learning to read the words of a text, it was important to read the environment in which they live. No text is neutral. The author has his convictions, values, and ideologies. Knowing the reality of the context in which one lives is an opportunity to connect *the status quo* and the text, culminating in a transformational process. In this sense, Freire (2021a, p. 51) adds: “In some way, however, we can go further and say that the reading of the word is not only preceded by the reading of the world, but by a certain way of ‘writing’ or ‘rewriting’ it, that is, of transforming it through our conscious practice.”

This points to a teleological perspective. To read the world not only to see problems, challenges, inequalities and the like. Just knowing what is bad about the world is not enough. There must be a *telos*, that is, a goal, a purpose, in critically reading the world, namely, to change it for the better. Reading reality cannot, therefore, be done in a *merely passive modus operandi*, of a spectator, but active, of a protagonist. The person who reads the world may wish to see that world changed. The opposite of this is accommodation, conformism, and only contributes to the maintenance of evil, misery, inequalities, injustices.

The moment of *judging* corresponds to the critical exercise by which the reality thus perceived is confronted with ethical-utopian references—in the case of Freire’s pedagogy, an anthropology of humanist and Christian inspiration, the notion of the inalienable dignity of the oppressed and a horizon of social justice. To judge is to interpret the situation in the light of values, narratives, and traditions that feed hope and resistance, avoiding both dogmatism and relativism. In the educational field, this implies analyzing hegemonic discourses—for example, the neoliberal one, which naturalizes the competitiveness and commodification of life—and unmasking their ideological functions in legitimizing exclusion.

Critical judgment does not end in mere indignation; it requires discernment of the structural causes of oppression and identification of historical gaps where another social configuration becomes thinkable and practicable. Critical reflection begins with the individual being made aware. Once he or she is able to read his or her reality and problematize it, it will be easier for him or her to interfere in the world. Without such an understanding, he or she will be subject to the interpretations of others, led by perspectives that may not be realistic. For this reason, Freire (2022, p. 118) proposed “an education that would enable man to courageously discuss his problem”, but not only that, but “his insertion in this problem.” Awareness enables this person to understand himself or herself together with/in the transformational process. Thus, the idea is of a model “that would warn him of the dangers of his time, so that, aware of them, he would gain the strength and courage to fight, instead of being led and dragged to the perdition of his own ‘self’, submitted to the prescriptions of others” (Freire, 2022, p. 118-119).

From this perspective, Freire (2021b, p. 146) adds: “It should also be emphasized that the intelligence of history as a possibility implies recognizing or verifying the importance of consciousness in the process of knowing, of intervening in the world.” The student needs to be aware that he is not only in history, but also on a passive and fatalistic path; rather, he is someone involved in the transformation of history. That is why Freire (2022, p. 123) criticizes naïve education, stating that “There is nothing that more contradicts and compromises popular emergence than an education that does not throw the student into the experiences of debate and analysis of problems and that does not provide him with conditions for true participation.” In other words, naïve education intends to keep the student immersed in alienation, preventing emergence, or emancipation.

The third moment, *acting*, is the concrete expression of transformative praxis, understood by Freire as a dialectical unity between reflection and action. It is not about impulsive activism or the mechanical application of prefabricated theories, but about a historical intervention that is born from the critical reading of the context and the ethical confrontation with oppressive structures. Transformative education guides subjects to perceive themselves as historical agents, capable of intervening—albeit in a limited and procedural way—in the power relations that affect them.

For the action to be carried out, it is necessary that awareness has been effectively provided, because the naïve conscience opposes changes, since it tends to be a denialist of problems or conformed to reality. Transformations seem to be utopian, far from what students and teachers do. However, critical consciousness does not ignore the world, but reads it, seeing injustices and judging it with perspicacity. In this sense, it is integrated with reality, envisioning how it can contribute to change, to action. Seeing and judging, without acting, would be an incomplete cycle, merely idealistic, but without practical and transformational action.

However, this action is directly linked to the level of critical awareness and understanding of reality. According to Freire (2022, p. 139), “The nature of action corresponds to the nature of understanding. If understanding is critical or predominantly critical, action will also be critical.” Following this reasoning, if the consciousness is naïve, then obviously the actions will go in the same direction. How can the level of consciousness interfere in this practical relationship? When someone becomes aware that he is not only a passive subject of reality, but also an active one, he acts with such impetus.

“But how to carry out this [practical] education? How to provide man with the means to overcome his attitudes, magical or naïve, in the face of his reality?” asks Freire (2022, p. 140). For him, the answer seemed to lie in at least three elements: “a. in an active, dialogical, critical and critical method; b. in the modification of the syllabus of education; [and] c. in the use of techniques such as reduction and codification” (Freire, 2022, p. 140-141).

The first point, therefore, consists of truly active methodologies, which make the students participants in the process as thinkers, reflective, creative, and bringing ideas, solutions. Instead of the passive banking method, the student needs to have a voice, awareness and understanding. You cannot be alienated from your reality and the realities of other people who surround your life and culture. Certain challenges and injustices may not make up a student's life specifically, but they are directly linked to someone else's. Most do not always reflect justice.

Dialogicity is one of the structuring traits of transformative education and crosses the three moments of the method. For Freire, dialogue is not a mere didactic technique, but an ontological requirement of beings called to communication and communion; without dialogue, the educational process inevitably slides into authoritarian verticality. In a dialogical practice, the word is not a monopoly of the teacher, nor is knowledge reduced to what is in the manuals. The world lived by the students becomes a legitimate text, from which experiences are problematized and new meanings are collectively constructed. Dialogicity presupposes epistemological humility, active listening, recognition of the historicity of all discourses, and willingness to learn from popular, Afro-indigenous, feminine, and other knowledge. By breaking the silence imposed on the oppressed, dialogue becomes a political act of recovery of voice and authorship.

In this context, we think of a theology invited to abandon the "banking" model, which privileges the memorization of contents, evaluative meritocracy, and the uncritical reproduction of confessional traditions. Transformative theological education assumes dialogicity as an organizing principle: teachers and students recognize themselves as co-interpreters of Scripture and tradition, mediated by concrete historical reality.

A theological education configured in this perspective aims to produce ministers who are agents of transformation in their communities and in the public sphere. This implies empowering them to exercise a pastoral praxis that goes beyond the internal management of cults and programs, involving a critical reading of public policies, discernment of the neoliberal and colonial logics that permeate people's lives, engagement in social and ecological justice initiatives, and building more inclusive and participatory faith communities. Theology, in this horizon, becomes a place of resistance and hope: resistance to theologies of domination that legitimize oppression, and active hope in *untested feasibility*² historical events that anticipate, even if fragily, signs of the Kingdom of God.

2. *Transformative Theological Education and Missio Dei*

The notion of *missio Dei* emerges in the twentieth century as a decisive shift in the understanding of the Christian mission: it is not primarily a question of the mission of the church, but of God's mission in the world, of which the church is a sign, servant, and collaborator. God is understood as an active being who, in His Trinitarian and perichoretic freedom, engages in history to reconcile, restore, and renew *all creation*—and not merely to save souls in an individualistic key. In this horizon, mission is not an extension of a religious power, but participation in God's movement towards the poor, the victims of history and wounded territories; it is the very dynamic of the Kingdom of God bursting forth in the midst of the structures of sin, calling for personal and structural conversion.

² In Paulo Freire's (1987) view, the untested feasibility refers to that which does not yet exist but can be constructed through critical praxis: a possible dream born from the reading of reality and the overcoming of "limit-situations." It is the passage from hope to transformative action, uniting utopia, reflection, and collective commitment to change.

The *missio Dei*, understood in this way, breaks with colonial and expansionist models of mission, which often acted in a Eurocentric way, imposing cultural values on colonized peoples, confusing practices and moralities with the gospel, and coercing the consciences of subservient natives; on the contrary, the expectation of God's mission recovers its integral, holistic dimension, so that evangelization, justice, peace, care for creation, and the building of communion become inseparable faces of the same divine action. It becomes, in practice, the concern to bring the *whole gospel* to the *whole human being*.

In light of this understanding, theological education cannot remain neutral or self-referential, for it is called to serve the *missio Dei* directly and not just institutional maintenance or the *social status quo*. If God is on mission in the world—in concrete history, in the struggles of peoples, in the cries of the earth and the poor—theological formation needs to train subjects to discern these movements and engage in them in a critical and responsible way. Here, Paulo Freire's transformative pedagogy offers a privileged framework, which in dialogue with the see-judge-act method coincides, in practical terms, with the process of reading the "signs of the times" (seeing), discernment in the light of the Gospel and tradition (judging), and active participation in God's reconciling mission (acting). Transformative theological education is, by nature, missional at its root, because it forms people to cooperate with the divine initiative that already precedes them in reality.

Dialogicity, a central category in Freire, gains missiological density when placed in relation to the *missio Dei*. If God is the first to address the world in dialogue – creating through the Word, calling Abraham, freeing Israel, becoming incarnate in Jesus, pouring out the Spirit on all flesh – then mission cannot be monologue and imposed, but a place of encounter, listening, hospitality and recognition of the other as a subject and not as a individual-other, without identity, erased, invisible, discarded, ignored (Foucault, 1996). It is in this dynamic of erasure that the Cameroonian philosopher Achille Mbembe (2003) discussed the idea of necropolitics. It is necessary to be careful not to impose physical deaths on the mission (which have already occurred many times in the past by imposing the acceptance of a religious denomination in spite of Jesus, such as the Jesuits in colonial Brazil and the Reformed in what is now South Africa) or symbolic deaths; otherwise, we will incur in what we can call necromission.

However, if the mission is from God, it must be one of life, hope, and grace. A transformative theological education, in a missional key, forms ministers and communities to "go," not as bearers of ready-made answers, but as learners who allow themselves to be challenged by the cultures, and the knowledge and pains with which they meet. In this process, the generative themes that emerge from reality—religious racism, gender violence, environmental devastation, necropolitics in the peripheries, and epistemicide of native peoples—become privileged places where the Mission of God that calls the church to a pastoral, ecological, and decolonial conversion is discerned.

Criticality is equally indispensable so that participation in the *missio Dei* is not captured by projects of religious, political, or economic domination. Without critical awareness, theological education runs the risk of reproducing colonial missionary models, in which the Bible and doctrine are used to legitimize the exploitation of bodies, lands, and cultures, as historically occurred with readings of Genesis 1:26 that justified the domination of the land and of African and indigenous peoples (see Couto; Pereira, 2025). Transformative theological education, on the contrary, seeks to unmask such legacies, showing how certain theologies have been co-opted by neoliberal, racist, ethnocentric, and patriarchal logics, proposing biblical rereadings centered on care, solidarity, and justice, i.e., on the values of the kingdom of God. To participate in the *missio Dei* means, then, to critically submit one's own ecclesial traditions

and practices to the sieve of the God who reveals himself in Jesus as the one who came “that all may have life, and have it abundantly” (John 10:10).

Praxis, understood as a unity of reflection and action, becomes the concrete place where transformative theological education and the *missio Dei* meet. It should be noted that God’s mission is not an abstract concept, but is embodied in historical practices of reconciliation, service, prophetic denunciation, and hopeful proclamation. Forming theologically in a transformative way entails inserting students in contextualized missional experiences—in vulnerable communities, social movements, environmental pastorals, and restorative justice initiatives—while at the same time offering theoretical tools to critically analyze these experiences. In this way, the *missio Dei* ceases to be a chapter in a work of missiology and becomes a transversal axis that guides the entire formation process.

A theological education that understands itself at the service of the *missio Dei* assumes the integrality of the mission as a formative horizon: evangelization, diakonia, socio-political commitment, interreligious dialogue, and care for creation are inseparable dimensions of a single movement of God in favor of life. This may require the act of rethinking curricula, methods, and educational structures in a transformative key. As an example, we think: biblical and systematic disciplines can and should dialogue with human, social and environmental sciences; the history of the church is also read from the margins, from the vanquished, and no longer with the hegemony of the history of the victors (Benjamin, 1985); pastoral practice is conceived as mediation of the justice of the Kingdom in the *polis*, but also in ecology. In this sense, we can say that transformative theological education does not only prepare preachers or community managers, but critical and hopeful witnesses of God’s mission, capable of articulating, with words and gestures, a faith that refuses to bless structures of death and is committed to the historical construction of signs of the Kingdom “already” present and “not yet” consummated.

3. Contextual Propositions

It would be vain not to think of one more dimension in our treatment of the *missio Dei* in its dialogue with transformative education, namely, contextuality. Understanding mission as God’s mission implies recognizing that God always acts in concrete historical, cultural, social, and ecological contexts, and not in an abstract “vacuum”; for this reason, any missiological reflection that ignores the places, temporalities, and specific wounds of the populations with which the church relates risks becoming colonizing and irrelevant. It may attract proselytes, but it will not necessarily form Christlike disciples, reconciling people with God, with creation, with themselves, and with others.

In the same direction, Freire’s pedagogy insists that there is no neutral or decontextualized education: to educate is to critically read the world, to discern the structures of oppression and the possibilities of the *untested feasibility*, and to articulate formative processes that start from the concrete ground of students’ lives. Integrating *missio Dei* and transformative education, therefore, requires assuming contextuality as a hermeneutical and practical axis, so that both mission and theological formation are conceived as situated responses to God’s action in history, in dialogue with the cries of the vulnerable and of creation itself, which groans awaiting the manifestation of the children of God. In view of this, we take the five contextualizing questions of Richard Middleton and Brian Walsh (1984), plus one more by N. T. Wright (1996) in the subsequent subsections.

3.1 Who are we?

The first question refers to the fundamental anthropological dimension of any contextual proposal. No community lives without a master narrative that answers, even if

implicitly, the question of identity: are we mere individual consumers in a global market or creatures and bearers of the image of God, called to responsibility before our neighbor and creation? We can think of a Christian identity, in which human beings appear as characters called to reflect the character of the Creator in the world, exercising a *diakonia* that is, at the same time, service, care, and representation.

In a critical key, this question also unveils the theological identities of our tradition. We are Christians, but from what branch of Christianity? What are our values and beliefs? What's in our theological DNA? We are Wesleyans, marked by works of piety and mercy; by the biblical holiness of perfect love, i.e., of a complete love, directed vertically (to God) and horizontally (to one's neighbor and to creation); by the axial theme of the restoration of the image of God; by relational holiness, since there are no solitary saints, as Wesley (1984, p. 533) pointed out; for its transformative theological relevance, reaching the poor and marginalized.

We are Nazarenes, a nomenclature that gave rise to our denomination of the Holiness Movement because J. P. Widney suggests that this is Jesus' most humble title (Ingersol, 2014, p. 10, 11), since he and Bresee worked with the marginalized of Los Angeles; we are a "simple, primitive church, a church of the people and for the people," which does not need "new doctrines, only the old, old Bible truths," which "seeks to discard all superfluous forms and ecclesiasticism and go back to the plain simple words of Christ." We are not "a mission, but a church with a mission," a united group "of hearts that have found peace with God and which now in their gladness, go out to carry the message of the unsearchable riches of the Gospel of Christ to other suffering, discouraged, sin-sick souls" (Smith, 1962, p. 111).

3.2 *Where are we?*

The second question shifts the focus from identity to the context, understood not only as a neutral scenario, but as a fabric of historical, social, political, economic, cultural, and ecological relations. We are Wesleyans, indeed. But are we in John Wesley's England? Most of us Nazarenes are in Africa, Latin America, Asia, North America, and other countries in Europe. This leads us to rethink our specificities and needs. Wesley dealt with the catastrophic effects of the Industrial Revolution, unemployment, the increase in crime, dualistic and elitist education, slavery, the monopolies of large farmers, the social injustices of the British crown, etc. But what about in our context? What are the challenges?

We can go further. When we speak of "heaven and earth," we remember that the place we are in is not a provisional stage to be abandoned, but God's creation, still good and, at the same time, deeply wounded. In our Latin American context, this "where" includes expropriated indigenous territories, urban peripheries crossed by necropolitics, biomes destroyed in the name of agribusiness and mining, as well as faith communities tensioned between religious market projects, and experiences of resistance. Wesley criticized the merchants of faith in his space-time. Currently, we are dealing with neo-Pentecostals and their false prosperity theology. Recognizing where we are is, therefore, a hermeneutical and political act: it implies naming the forces that structure the space in which we live and perceiving how this space is crossed by the *missio Dei* and the multiple forces of death.

3.3 *What time is it?*

The third question is an eschatological and historical question: in what moment of the drama do we find ourselves, what station of the road are we living? We live neither in "paradise lost" nor in "paradise consummated," but in the time between Christ's resurrection and the full renewal of creation, when the Kingdom of God has already broken out but has not yet been consummated. We can read this "now" as a time of civilizational crisis, in which ecological

collapses, social disintegration, and the exhaustion of economic and political models are intertwined, but also as a time of opportunity for the prophetic imagination of alternatives.

We are Wesleyans, but we are no longer in the eighteenth century. What are the ethical dilemmas of our era? From a Latin American decolonial perspective, asking “What time is it?” implies recognizing that we live under the long duration of coloniality, even after the formal end of colonialism, and that our era is marked by the intensification of necropolitics that decide who is “killable” and who is “protectable.” At the same time, it is time for plural resistances—black, indigenous, feminist, ecotheological movements—that embody, in the light of Scripture, hopeful signs of another possible time. Discerning the time is a requirement for a responsible praxis: neither naïve optimism, nor paralyzing cynicism, but critical hope.

3.4 *What are the problems?*

The fourth question invites an honest analysis of the wounds that cross our history. We can point to economic imperialism, the idolatry of the market, the privatization of hope, and the rupture of community bonds as central features of the late-modern condition. We identified as a fundamental problem the distortion of human vocation: instead of reflecting God’s righteous government, humanity has come to worship idols—money, power, nation, race—that disfigure both the worshiper and the creation. In a Latin American key, these problems are concretized in structures of exploitation and in theologies that often legitimize such practices, either by escapist spiritualism or by alliances with authoritarian projects.

The problems are not only “moral” at the individual level, but systemic: they concern modes of production, consumption patterns, religious imaginaries, and political arrangements that produce physical, symbolic, and epistemic death. Naming these problems is an indispensable step for any serious contextual proposition. Freire recalls Old Testament prophetism and explains that the transformative model, “by rethinking the concrete data of reality, being lived, prophetic thinking, which is also utopian, implies the *denunciation* of how we are living” (Freire, 2021b, p. 137). It is, therefore, a matter of critically reading reality and putting one’s finger on the wounds of humanity, pointing out the injustices and sins, whether of rulers, clergy or people, as the biblical prophets did.

3.5 *What are the solutions?*

Consequently, the fifth question cannot be answered with simplistic recipes, but with a combination of personal conversion, structural reform, and reconfiguration of imaginaries. We can think of recovering a holistic biblical vision that inspires alternative lifestyles, covenant communities, and supportive economic practices, as opposed to the logic of unlimited consumption. The solution is not an “escape to heaven,” but the participation, by the Spirit, in the renewal of creation inaugurated in the resurrection of Christ, which is expressed in justice, reconciliation, and care for humanity and the earth.

The solutions are necessarily plural, procedural and local, but they converge in the direction of a conversion of relationships with God, with one’s neighbor, with one’s own interiority and with creation. In this sense, we can dialogue with Freire, who exposes that transformative education implies not only “the *denunciation* of how we are living,” but “the *announcement* of how we could live” (Freire, 2021b, p. 137). In this sense, we denounce points in our society that clash with the values and *ethos* of the kingdom of God with ways to announce a path of transforming hope. As Freire (2021b, p. 137) says, “One of the beauties of prophetic proclamation is that it does not announce what will necessarily come, but what may or may not come”. Announcing transformative education is not an inexorable future, but the relationship of denunciation and proclamation is made with the hope of a better future.

Final Considerations

By way of conclusion, it can be said that the articulation between transformative theological education and *missio Dei*, assumed in a contextual key, offers a fruitful horizon for rethinking theological formation in times of profound social, political, ecological, and ecclesial crises. By recovering Freire's pedagogy as an epistemological and methodological basis, it was evident that training ministers of the Gospel is not equivalent to reproducing a banking model of doctrinal transmission, but to accompanying processes of awareness in which subjects critically read the world, discern the powers that produce death and allow themselves to be summoned to liberating praxis. At the same time, by re-inscribing this formation in the dynamics of *missio Dei*, we believe it has become clear that theology cannot be self-centered, as it is called to serve God's movement toward the poor, the vulnerable, and wounded creation.

The contextual propositions worked on—who we are, where we are, what time it is, what are the problems and what are the solutions—proved useful as a hermeneutic and pedagogical matrix to anchor such a project in concrete realities, avoiding universalist abstractions and escapist spiritualisms. Thus, the transformative theological education outlined in this essay is not intended to be a closed model, but rather an invitation to the continuity of dialogue, experimentation, and institutional conversion, so that the formative spaces of the church become, more and more, places of care and early signaling of the Kingdom of God in the midst of the ambiguities of history and, above all, a place of transformation.

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