

Semper Informanda: *Prolegomenon*

Comfort and Seminary



Watching the news about the political turmoil in Tunisia and Egypt, I thought of some of my friends who live and minister to the church in North Africa. It is always good to remember and pray for the minority Christian communities that are caught in the middle of this unrest.

Working at a seminary in the Mediterranean Basin, I have had the incredible privilege to get to know and teach pastors and lay leaders from the North African church. The students were men and women who invariably risked their own lives, reputations, and those of their families to pursue training for Christian ministry at offshore sites where religious opposition was not as cruelly oppressive as in their home towns.

All were converts from Islam which made them an object of scorn, and that scorn was intensified due their positions of church leadership. I was humbled to hear stories of what they had risked to get the opportunity to sit in class and learn how to interpret and preach the Scriptures. One young man joined us two months late, because he was denied permission to leave his country. He finally secured passage through a port in a country adjacent to his own.

When I was a seminary student, I remember how some of my friends and I would at times comment that seminary could feel like an irrelevant, vacuous, or perhaps even unfaithful exercise. Of course, it's not hard to imagine how theological study might become exclusively cerebral and alienated from personal spiritual growth, and perhaps some of us were falling into that error.

I also suspect that anyone with experience in the global church would realize that this opinion of seminary might be borne out of a unique position of Western luxury. After all we live in a society in which human survival is a game (no really, it's called *Survivor*) and people are paid piles of money to survive in environments that real human populations already call home. To the Christian for whom survival is a presupposition and religious oppression something like a fantasy, it is not hard to see how the knowledge of God and the systems of belief revealed in the Scriptures could be perceived as ancillary or derived.

But this is not the opinion of many of the Christians I have met from societies in which persecution is common. For many of them, formal theological training is a dream worth fighting for, worth risking comfort and convenience and social standing to attain.

I remember my friend Ali who had become fed up with his inability to preach adequately to his small congregation. His fear of speaking heresy led him to risk much to seek out formal theological education. He was later arrested in a Moroccan airport with a suitcase full of recorded seminary classes that he had tried to "pray through" the customs office. He was imprisoned for several weeks. No regrets, he later told a friend, totally worth it. Now he had to think of another way to get these materials to his church leaders.

All of us have been blessed with this opportunity to commit extended periods of time studying the word of God because he has been pleased to bless us mightily with affordable and accessible education. It is a precious commodity that we have here at seminary, and we should be encouraged to value it as much as our brothers and sisters around the world do.

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