

## Conjectures about the Future of Theological Education

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A pastor friend shared a letter he had written to the dean of one of the theological schools he had attended. He is a very effective pastor at a multiracial, community-engaged, social justice-oriented, faith-affirming congregation. With degrees from two excellent schools, decades of pastoral work, and gratitude for his theological education, he wrote: “Even with my two inspiring settings, I would have to say there was no direct intention of instructing me on how to be a deeply centered spiritual person. How can I lead a congregation without learning the deep, spiritual practices?”

A conference call meeting of persons who had been identified by a seminary’s leadership was convened to discuss with consultants the future focus of theological education. The conversation went in many directions, but one theme was constant: graduates need to be able to exercise pastoral leadership, administer an organization, raise and manage a budget, and work with people in order that congregations can/may accomplish their missions.

An organization that works with pastors and congregations in conflict convened a group of people with expertise in theological education, pastoral work, and congregational health in response to the increasing incidence of congregational conflict. One theme that emerged from the conversation was the need for pastors to develop the kind of literacy that would enable

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Reflective Practice: Formation and Supervision in Ministry

ISSN 2325-2847 (print)\* ISSN 2325-2855 (online)

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them to “read” congregations and communities. The misreading of either of these contexts can lead to crisis in the relationship between congregations and their leaders.

The letter, the conference call, and the meeting all occurred within six months while I was working on the book manuscript from which this article is adapted.<sup>1</sup> I haven’t heard a conversation in years that insisted theological education should continue as it is. I have heard more than a few laments about the good that used to be but isn’t anymore and others that counter that it was never as good as people remember. While most people are convinced that theological education needs to change, there is little agreement about what the change should be. Some think theological schools should close and training should be done in large, influential congregations. Others argue that what business schools and courses on organizational turnaround offer would be more useful than one more course on theology. Still others contend that theological schools should make more room for new subjects by decreasing the number of more traditional courses.

In the middle of a time that is certainly uncertain, I propose that we need more theological education, not less. What can we conjecture responsibly from the present about the future of theological education? My response to this critical challenge is organized around a series of questions: (1) What variables influence theological education? (2) How did the present form of theological education develop? and (3) What form of theological education is needed in the future, and what educational strategies will it require?

#### WHAT VARIABLES INFLUENCE THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION?

Theological schools do not act purely out of their own design or intention. They have been and still are influenced by many variables, three of which are particularly influential and powerful: culture, religion, and higher education. The influence of these variables on theological schools through history and in the current moment of foment is significant, though not deterministic.

##### *History.*

Theological education in the United States is older than the country. Harvard (est. 1636), founded in part for the education of ministers, was 125 years old when the U.S. Constitution was ratified. The College of William

and Mary (est. 1694) was the second college founded in the colonies and included divinity among its three schools. Yale was founded not long afterward (est. 1701), “wherein Youth may be instructed in the Arts and Sciences (and) through the blessing of Almighty God may be fitted for Publick employment both in Church and Civil State.”<sup>2</sup>

When theological education began, there was a tight, functional connection between higher education, religion, and the culture. The colonies needed training for ministers, and the society needed schools where civic leaders could be educated. Colleges were founded to serve both needs. Theological education influenced the beginnings of higher education in this country and has been influenced by higher education ever since. All of the earliest colleges and universities reflected a religious impulse in their founding, and the culture was friendly to religion. While the new country did not establish a religion—the colonies never could have agreed on which one—it sustained a strong but unofficial establishment of Protestantism. Religious adherence increased in the nineteenth century, beginning with the Second Great Awakening and continuing with the growth of American denominationalism. Despite occasional conflict between theological schools and denominations, virtually all theological schools before the twentieth century were closely aligned with a denomination. Although theological education has changed in many ways over the past three centuries in this country, these three variables (culture, religion, and higher education) have remained influential factors over time, even though the nature of that influence has changed dramatically.

### *Current Moment*

American culture is changing in many ways. Authority that once was vested in institutions and positions of authority is increasingly vested in individuals. What is “right” has become more a matter of personal commitment and opinion than what the government or religious leaders or institutions or the education system says is right. The culture has always been individualistic, but the present era has brought individualism to a new level of privatism. Marilynne Robinson muses in a brilliant essay that politicians now refer to Americans as taxpayers more than citizens. Citizens care for a common good; taxpayers care for their own money.<sup>3</sup> The culture has also secularized, resulting in a decreasing public presence for religion. It still has a very noisy private presence as politicians pander to religious groups for

individual votes, but religion has lost status and privilege as a social institution across the culture.

Religion is changing as well. The fastest growing religious identification in the United States is “no religious affiliation” (more than 20 percent of the U.S. population), and the religious participation of generational cohorts has lessened with each cohort for several generations.<sup>4</sup> Denominations have weakened as ecclesial structures and the loyalty of church attenders to particular denominations have weakened even more. The percentage of Americans attending services of worship continues to decline. Religious practices have morphed, expanded, dwindled, and taken on altogether new forms. Robert Jones has shown that the kind of religion dominant in its public presence in recent elections is beginning to abate and will likely continue to shrink in the coming decades because of demographic changes.<sup>5</sup> Although religious participation in the United States remains higher than in any other liberal democracy, the changes afoot are neither transitory nor ephemeral.

Higher education has also been changing. The social good in past higher education has been reassessed in terms of the economic gain of graduates. The new question is not so much what an educated citizenry needs to know but what economic benefit an individual student can derive. If it does not have economic benefit, higher education is not of much use. Higher education has yielded an amazing array of technological and scientific advances as knowledge expands. However, the richest schools are seen as hoarding money from public interest instead of stewarding money on behalf of a public good. The historical backbone of American higher education, the liberal arts college, is significantly stressed. Public concern about higher education continues even as schools have done more than ever to address the needs of marginalized or minoritized students, first-generation students, and students in need of remedial studies.

This thumbnail sketch reflects my perspective. Other trends could be quoted by others; the current reality in culture, religion, and higher education is full of mixed signals. I am not suggesting that the sky is falling, but I am suggesting that each of the three dominant influences is in a remarkable period of change and that the changes afoot will have an impact on theological schools—both as they are affected by these variables and as the schools seek to respond to them.

## HOW DID THE PRESENT FORM OF THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION DEVELOP?

People reading this article who have attended seminary experienced a professional model of theological education that had been developing for over a century.

### *Development of Professional Theological Education*

Prior to the Civil War, the dominant model was the study of divinity, which intended to cultivate piety as well as provide learning of Scripture and theology. This model began to change as theological education moved from colleges and universities to freestanding theological schools in the first half of the nineteenth century and as specific (or particular) disciplines developed in the latter half of the century. These disciplines developed their own scholarly approaches to the study of Bible or theology and professional societies or guilds to support that scholarship. For example, the Society of Biblical Literature, the oldest of these professional societies, was founded in the 1880s. Disciplines, and their societies, related to the practice of ministry were added in the twentieth century. As urban congregations grew larger and more complex, theological schools added subjects like church efficiency (church administration) and religious education. By mid-century, courses in pastoral care or psychology of religion had been added, as well as field or contextual education. The last half of the twentieth century saw the emergence of sociologically informed studies in church and society and congregational studies. By the 1970s, after almost a century of development, a mature and comprehensive professional model of theological education was in place.

### *Current Professional Model*

The professional model of theological education as it exists among schools that are members of the Association of Theological Schools is defined in this way: (1) post-baccalaureate education for religious leaders and others pursuing theological studies that (2) offers a theological curriculum including a range of theological disciplines, (3) is oriented to educational goals of knowledge and competence, and (4) is characterized by educational practices of degree-granting schools and accountable to standards of quality in higher education. This kind of theological education has been the dominant form for many decades. When I graduated with an MDiv in the early

1970s, none of the categories of this definition was contested. Now all of them, in one way or another, are being challenged or changed.

The challenges to any kind of theological education that embodies the current professional model are expressed in several ways.

1. Congregations are not doing particularly well at the present time, and, in the opinion of some, the current form of theological education does not give religious leaders the tools that they need to change the situation. Is there something fundamentally wrong with the way clergy are being educated?

2. Some of the most successful clergy in the country, at some of the largest Protestant churches, don't have any formal theological education. Is that evidence that seminary—at least the kind that we have now—is not really needed?

3. Is the current level of theological education appropriate? Does theological education need to be conducted at the post-baccalaureate level? Someone once asked me, "What is the difference between a baccalaureate and graduate level funeral?" Can what needs to be known to minister well be learned at the college level—or even at a ministry workshop level?

4. The costs of graduate level education are high and the average debt of graduates has grown a great deal in the last two decades. Is graduate professional education viable in a financially stressed time for the church and future leaders?

5. There is also substantial debate over the subjects being taught and which subjects should be given priority. The curriculum is already crowded, and new areas of needed study compete with subjects already in the curriculum and require more space as they develop and expand. Since neither time nor money is abundant, everything that should be taught cannot be taught. What theological curriculum would best serve the present needs of communities of faith?

The professional model is distinguished by educational goals that focus on knowledge and skill. These are the hallmarks of any form of professional education, and professional competence has been the basis of professional authority in the culture. Cultural confidence in the professions, however, is contested. Finally, the venerable institution of a school itself is contested. A person once posed an opinion in a meeting of the Association of Theological Schools that, at some point in the future, the association would need to consider changing its focus and renaming itself the Associa-

tion for Theological Education. Clinical pastoral education is an example of sophisticated theological education that is not school based. Are there other ways that non-school settings could provide more effective theological education than schools can?

WHAT FORM OF THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION IS NEEDED IN THE FUTURE, AND  
WHAT EDUCATIONAL STRATEGIES WILL IT REQUIRE?

In the context of the indirection and multidirectionality of the current culture, religious moment, and higher education, what model of theological education might be as effective in the twenty-first century as the professional model was in the twentieth century? I propose that future theological education will need to be a model that is formational in its educational goal and strategies. I am using the term “formational” to refer to the combination of an educational goal and the pedagogical processes that goal requires.

*Formational*

The accrediting standards of the Commission on Accrediting of the Association of Theological Schools from 1996–2020 mention the words “formation” and “formative” in two instances. The standard on curriculum states that “a theological school is a community of faith and learning that cultivates habits of theological reflection, nurtures wise and skilled ministerial practice, and contributes to the formation of spiritual awareness and moral sensitivity.”<sup>6</sup> It continues, “The curriculum should be seen as a set of practices with a formative aim—the development of intellectual, spiritual, moral, and vocational or professional capacities—and careful attention must be given to the coherence and mutual enhancement of its various elements.” In the first instance, formation is limited to spiritual awareness and moral maturity; the second presents a more comprehensive context for the term.

Whereas Roman Catholic schools use formation as the primary name for education that prepares candidates for the sacrament of ordination, Protestant schools, especially mainline Protestant schools, have been reluctant to use formation language. Nonetheless, formation is present in the current professional model. William Sullivan noted in his introduction to a study of clergy education that “learning in the formative sense is a process by which the student becomes a certain kind of thinking, feeling, and acting being.” He continues, “Although seminaries have not escaped the power of

the technical model of professionalism, the intellectual core of their teaching has been a concern with the significance and practical implications of the interpretation of texts, customary practices, and experience. The focus of which has kept the idea of formative education alive . . .”<sup>7</sup> I use the term “formational” differently than it was used in these standards. By formation, I mean a combination of a particular educational goal and the pedagogical processes that goal requires.

### *Educational Goal*

The goal of formational education, as I construe it, is *the development of a wisdom of God and the ways of God fashioned from intellectual, affective, and behavioral understanding and evidenced by spiritual and moral maturity, relational integrity, knowledge of the Scripture and tradition, and the capacity to exercise religious leadership*. This definition includes some of what is already part of professional theological education, reframes another part, and adds still another. Each of the phrases in the definition deserves a brief comment.

The wisdom of God and the ways of God entails knowledge, of course, but it is not so much the accumulation of information as it is a longing for or love of God. The past decades of theological education have rightly made the point that a minister is not necessarily someone who is more spiritual than other Christians and certainly cannot be “more” Christian on behalf of people who are “less” Christian. While this emphasis has humanized religious leadership, it may have done so at the cost of undervaluing how important ministers’ love for God is—both for their own spiritual lives and for their authenticity as religious leaders. Loving and longing are about aspiration more than achievement, about maturing more than maturity.

This wisdom of God and the ways of God are learned from intellectual, affective, and behavioral patterns of knowing. While each is different, each informs and contributes to the others. Intellectual understanding is ubiquitous in present-day theological education, and how the character and ways of God are understood influences how the Christian faith is constructed and perpetuated. Ideas matter. Intellectual understanding is at the heart of Christian faith, but there is also an understanding of the heart—an affective understanding. Longing for God requires affective knowing. I may know a text well, for example, but then hear it set to music and be moved in a way that the text did not move me by itself. Learning the ways of God also engages human behavior. When an organist plays a Widor toccata and

fugue, the memory seems to be in the muscles—a behavioral knowing. Behavior provides its own form of understanding.

Social psychologists studying human beliefs have asked whether people behave what they believe or believe what they behave. Intellectual, affective, and behavioral understanding are very different ways of comprehending and learning, and they come together uniquely in relationships. Wisdom in the ways of God comes through relational learning *and* relational learning, for faith and ministry are intrinsically communal. An individual's perception is inadequate, even vacuous, absent the wisdom of the community, and the wisdom of the community accrues as people of different generations and cultures reflect on and record what they have learned as they have related to God.

Spiritual and moral maturity are crucial in Christian ministry. Spiritual maturity emerges from a three-way intersection where the human longing for God meets the mystery of God and the work of God in human lives. Spirituality is not one thing for all people; it is traditioned through participation in the things of God in particular communities of faith. Moral maturity includes a theologically informed understanding of right and wrong, the intellectual capacity to discern moral issues in human and community contexts, and the ability to behave in ways that are consistent with the determination of what is right and what is wrong. None of these is easy. It is an ancient problem—in Pauline language, “I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do” (Romans 7:15 NRSV). In this cultural moment, moral and spiritual maturity are at the heart of the public credibility that makes religious witness possible and undergirds the authority of religious leadership.

A religious leader can be spiritual and moral and still be relationally immature or inappropriate. Relational integrity includes taking others seriously and attending to them, treating people with kindness and patience, cultivating the capacity to empathize, attending to how others see the world and interpret its meaning, and exercising relational flexibility. The God of Christians is a relational God, and communities of faith are intrinsically relational. Relational integrity is not about being a nice or likeable person, as good as those qualities might be; it is about embodying and enacting a faithful way of being human. Characteristics associated with relational integrity are some of the oldest qualifications for ministers in the Christian tradition. The writer of Titus says that, among other things, a bishop, “as God's stew-

ard, . . . must not be arrogant or quick-tempered or addicted to wine or violent or greedy for gain; but he must be hospitable, a lover of goodness, prudent, upright, devout, and self-controlled (Titus 1:7 NRSV).

Knowing the text and tradition is still important. Christianity is a content-rich tradition. One cannot be a leader of communities of faith without knowing the content of faith. It is incumbent on persons who would lead these communities or represent themselves as Christian leaders to know this tradition that has been loved and debated, defined and redefined, interpreted and re-interpreted across cultures and centuries.

Finally, of course, ministry requires the capacity for religious leadership. The skills that provide the capacity for leadership are not content neutral. Good preaching is not just about oratorical elegance; it is an act of communicating the Christian story. Good teaching is not merely about pedagogical excellence; it is about learning a tradition that can be life changing. In the present time, the issue of cultural and congregational literacy—being able to read a community and congregation or parish—is becoming crucial to effective leadership. Like teaching and preaching, this has a theological core and comprises something different from the mere borrowing of knowledge from other disciplinary domains.

### *Educational Strategies*

Strategies that contribute to spiritual maturity, moral maturity, and relational integrity are crucial to the educational goal but have had lower priority in the professional model.

*Spiritual maturity* is a difficult area for theological schools because it is not readily the outcome of an educational process. It has a mystery to it, and educational efforts are seldom comfortable with mystery. Nonetheless, spiritual maturity is an important aspect of ministerial or priestly service. In Protestant theological education, efforts related to spiritual growth have often been relegated to covenant or peer groups, chapel worship, or what students discover about themselves in ministry contexts. These activities are necessary, but they are not enough. Roman Catholic theological education has nurtured spiritual maturity by providing a spiritual director for all the years of education. Spiritual maturity can be nurtured in other ways. The subjects that theological schools teach, for example, have an intrinsic formative power, but the way they are taught can fail to exploit that power. Consider Scripture. Almost a third of the typical theological curriculum is

devoted to the study of Scripture, but that study is typically focused on content and critical methods. The academic study of Scripture could be expanded to invite students to let the text stir their souls and form them as religious persons.

*Cultivating moral maturity* in theological students requires helping them understand the morally right thing in a range of situations, which theological schools are rather good at doing, and providing the setting and contexts in which they engage in right action, which schools are less good at doing. If theological schools hope to contribute to moral maturity, then they would do well to consider activities and structures that make it possible for students to engage in moral acts. These educational practices can take many forms. Some may take advantage of morally pregnant events in their local community or in the nation not identified in the curriculum but nonetheless requiring a moral response. Educational practices may also include planned curricular opportunities that focus on community analysis, social justice, and action. Still other practices occur alongside the formal curriculum and invite students to work on issues of social justice that contribute to the formation of moral maturity.

*Relational integrity in ministry* is learned in a wide range of situations with others. Field or contextual education and clinical pastoral education provide the best opportunities in current theological education to address relational integrity. In addition to providing a context in which students can learn ministry skills, field education provides a real-life arena for relating to people in ministry contexts. Clinical pastoral education provides relationally intense experiences, and for many students its combination of a demanding ministerial setting, intense small groups, and skilled supervisors offers the most powerful formational experience for relational integrity.

Relational integrity requires experiential learning, and that kind of learning has traditionally been undervalued in theological education. For example, an eighty-credit-hour MDiv can be completed in many schools with what amounts to 600 hours of supervised work in some ministry context. A master of social work degree, by contrast, involves fewer overall credit hours but 1,800 hours of supervised work in social work contexts. Formational theological education will require increased attention to the behavioral and affective learning that occurs in experiential contexts. It also will require a different kind of partnership between theological schools, ministry contexts, and the mentors or supervisors who work with students. Part-

nerships will need to be multiplied in number and strengthened in depth. Supervisors should have a more substantial role in evaluation of students.

HOW MIGHT FORMATIONAL THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION RELATE TO CULTURE, RELIGION, AND HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE CURRENT CONTEXT?

Theological schools have succeeded in earlier historical moments because they found a way to fit with the cultural and religious realities present in each time. The prevailing expressions of theological education during each of these eras was “right” for the cultural moment, the state of religion, and the practices of higher education as they existed in these different moments. The schools cannot change the cultural moment or higher education practices and have less power to change religious practices than they would like to think, but they can change their educational designs and practices to fit with the times. As this century moves forward, I think a formational model will constitute an effective response to the current realities in the three variables of particular influence.

*Religious practices are changing.* A recent National Opinion Research Center/Associated Press poll shows that trust in clergy has continued to decline and that people, even some churchgoers, are not likely to consult clergy for a large number of important life issues such as sexuality, finance, family planning, and medical or career decisions.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, the number of persons who affiliate with religion in the United States continues to decline. The church has been one of the victims of the worst of priestly and ministerial behavior. As already noted, the fastest-growing religious affiliation is “none.” Few denominations have escaped the pressures of decline in membership and capacity. Two houses of worship within two miles of where I live have “for sale” signs in front of them. Religious practices have changed a great deal. *A formational model of theological education fits a religious world full of stress and in need of care in a culture that has privatized religion. Its emphases on spiritual, moral, and relational maturity will be crucial to religious leaders, all of whom need a substantive spiritual and moral center.*

The character of higher education is changing. The sciences and technology have gained more academic prestige while liberal arts and humanities have lost much of the prestige they once enjoyed. As admission rates at the most prestigious institutions continue to decline, other institutions are finding it increasingly difficult to enroll enough students to keep going. Ed-

ucational debt is rising. Multiple public indicators suggest that higher education has lost its cultural luster, and suspicions abound that its value may not be worth its cost. The proposed formational model assumes that degree-based theological education will continue to be housed in schools but that those schools will need to change some of the ways they teach and structure their work. They will also need to tolerate more distance from some of the ethos of the most prestigious higher education institutions.

The culture as a whole is becoming more secular and more polarized. Individuals are less influenced by traditional sources of authority, less likely to participate in social service organizations, including church, and more likely to mediate social interactions through the internet. When I began in ministry, the culture still extended a privilege to religion. This may have been undeserved, but it was present in sometimes subtle and other times obvious ways. Religion is still important in American life, but the social location of religion has changed and the privilege it once had has dissipated. The professional model fit a culture that respected religion and the professions in a way the current cultural moment does not. Formational theological education fits a culture where the authority of religious leaders will depend more on the kind of Christian human beings they are than the professional competencies they possess. Professional capacities will be needed, of course, but they will not provide the authority for leadership they have provided in the past.

## CONCLUSION

The future needs more theological education, not less. It needs all the study of text and tradition that the professional model has provided, and it needs even more skills than are currently being taught—but it also needs more. It needs practices that orient a minister or priest to God—cultivating a love for God and spiritual maturity—and it needs practices that incarnate that love and spirituality in the people with whom the minister or priest serves as well as moral maturity and relational integrity. It needs what my pastor friend was asking for in his letter. He knows the text and tradition and knows how to do everything that a complex ministry context requires, but he needs resources that keep him near the Source, a way of being faithful. I think the next theological education model should be one that cultivates the development of a wisdom of God and the ways of God that is fashioned

from intellectual, affective, and behavioral understanding and evidenced by spiritual and moral maturity, relational integrity, knowledge of the Scripture and tradition, and the capacity to exercise religious leadership.

## NOTES

- 1 The book is in publication and will be released as *The Next Theological Education* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, forthcoming). It is part of the Theological Education between the Times project directed by Ted Smith and administered through the Candler School of Theology of Emory University. Senior fellows in addition to myself include Elizabeth Conde-Frazier, Asociación para la Educación Teológica Hispana; Keri Day, Princeton Theological Seminary; Willie Jennings, Yale Divinity School; Mark Jordan, Harvard Divinity School; Colleen Mallon, Aquinas Institute of Theology; Hoffman Ospino, Boston College School of Theology and Ministry; Chloe Sun, Logos Evangelical Seminary; Maria Liu Wong, City Seminary of New York; Amos Yong, Fuller Theological Seminary; and Mark Young, Denver Seminary.
- 2 Yale University, "Traditions and History," Yale, <https://www.yale.edu/about-yale/traditions-history>.
- 3 Marilynne Robinson, *What Are We Doing Here? Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018).
- 4 Pew Research Center, "About the Religious Landscape Study," Pew Research Center, <https://www.pewforum.org/about-the-religious-landscape-study/>.
- 5 Robert Jones, *The End of White Christian America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2016).
- 6 Association of Theological Schools Commission on Accrediting, *General Institutional Standards* (approved June 2010), [www.ats.edu/uploads/accrediting/documents/general-institutional-standards.pdf](http://www.ats.edu/uploads/accrediting/documents/general-institutional-standards.pdf). The commission's member schools will consider revised the accrediting standards in 2020 so that they will be ordered in a different way and will not include these phrases, but the phrases are historically instructive and of continuing value.
- 7 Charles Foster, Lisa Dahill, Lawrence Goleman, and Barbara Wang Tolentino, *Educating Clergy: Teaching Practices and Pastoral Imagination* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006), 10. This study, and studies of several other professions, were conducted by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. William Sullivan was the overall principal investigator for these significant studies.
- 8 "New Poll Shows Growing View That Clergy Are Irrelevant," July 16, 2019, *Religion News Service*, <https://religionnews.com/2019/07/16/new-poll-shows-growing-view-that-clergy-are-irrelevant/>.