



Theological Education between the Times

Spotlight on Theological Education

Antonio Eduardo Alonso, Guest Editor

Spotlight on Theological Education is a major initiative of the AAR Theological Education Committee and is an important venue for exploring opportunities and challenges in theological education. Each issue focuses on a particular theme, setting, or concern to theological education. *Spotlight* appears as a special supplement to *Religious Studies News* in the spring of each year.

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Image: Mary Magdalene announcing the Resurrection to the Apostles, St. Albans Psalter, 12th century

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Theological Education between the Times: Reflections on the Telos of Theological Education

Antonio Eduardo Alonso, Emory University

The articles that form this issue of *Spotlight on Theological Education* emerged out of the work of Theological Education Between the Times, a project funded by a grant from the Lilly Endowment to the Candler School of Theology. This project seeks to renew and resource conversations on the purposes of theological education in a season of profound change. The empirical origins of this project are the kinds of dramatic shifts that most of us committed to the work of theological education can easily narrate even as the degree to which each of us feels those shifts on a day-to-day basis varies widely with our institutional contexts. The changes are substantial. Some schools are closing, merging, or changing their fundamental missions. Many schools face declining enrollments. New degrees are displacing the MDiv for many students. Student debt is rising. New kinds of institutions are emerging. Distance learning is expanding. And these deep changes only begin the list.

For many institutions, these and other fundamental shifts in theological education raise practical questions. How do we reach our enrollment quotas for next year? Should we invest in infrastructure or new faculty when the future seems uncertain? Or, perhaps more immediately, how do we keep the doors open another day, another week, another year?

In the daily stress of finding ways to answer these urgent questions, we can often settle into a managerial mindset in which the larger question of the purpose of theological education is subordinated or even lost. Practical questions are of course crucial. Changing institutional configurations demand our very best management. But these new shifts make old questions about purpose even more vital. Why are we doing this in the first place? What is all of this for? To what end is theological education oriented?

Rooted in an awareness of clear cracks in previous forms of theological education and attentive to the kinds of larger questions that managing such fissures often obscures, two central commitments have guided the work of the grant and give rise to this collection of essays. First, the project centers on a clear conviction that what is needed in the present moment is a renewed focus on the telos of theological education. If empirical shifts raise urgent practical questions that rightly consume much of our energy, the work of this project is focused on slower, deeper discernment of the meaning of our work. The work of the project, then, is about more than the goal—more even than the mission—of theological education. This project focuses on the *end* of theological education. This requires thinking theologically about its meanings and purposes. It requires reading the signs of the times. And, as the title of the grant suggests, we think it requires an eschatological cast of mind. For Christians, the present is not only *between the times* of institutional configurations, but also *between the times* of the resurrection and the fullness of redemption yet to come.

A second conviction is that no single testimony will be fully truthful or comprehensive to the work of answering these questions. Anything like an adequate understanding will require knowledge from multiple perspectives. The pluralism essential to our discernment requires diversities of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, faith, region, discipline, and vocation. It also requires diversity in the kinds of institutions represented. And so this work demands we think within and beyond the limits of the Association of Theological Schools, as generous and expansive as those limits have become. For part of the work before us involves rethinking exactly those boundaries.

These commitments are reflected in the work of the first phase of the project, which we completed last year. The first phase convened five different consultations—involving nearly sixty participants from four different countries—that sought to cultivate public deliberation among diverse groups of people about the telos of theological education. The pluralism on which this work depends was present not only in the diversity of its participants—including twelve from non-ATS institutions—but also the diversity of institutions in which the consultations took place: Saddleback Church in Orange County, CA; Howard University Divinity School in Washington, DC; Candler School of Theology in Atlanta; Esperanza College in Philadelphia; and Mundelein Seminary in suburban Chicago.

The conversations of diverse groups of people in these very different locations resist reduction to a summary or a set of bullet points. They also challenge the easy narratives of decline or progress that so often shape discourse about theological education. For example, a conversation on the campus of Saddleback, an evangelical Christian megachurch affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention, brought together a Catholic professor of theology at a university in rural Minnesota that is steeped in the Benedictine tradition and a Pentecostal president of a well-established Bible institute in Los Angeles that serves primarily Latino/a communities. The professor described a number of changes that often get read as a kind of decline. The president described the problems that arise from not having enough leaders to respond to the exploding demand for his school's weekly gatherings. Their exchange reveals just one glimpse of the kind of deep plurality that complicates any flat story we might be tempted to tell about theological education in the United States.

The second phase of the grant, which began recently and stretches into 2019, sustains and deepens the work of the first. It will involve sharing of some of the fruits of the first phase through panels, lectures, and collections of essays like those presented here. It will also try to add to the literature produced by the first phase. Shaped by the wisdom of the first round of consultations, a group of twelve people will meet together over the next three years to write a series of short, smart, accessible books that are grounded in and conscious of particular social locations even as they continue to think about the telos of theological education.

Our conviction that any singular story would flatten out the pluralism that has been a hallmark of the project informs the decision to present a range of contributions in this issue of *Spotlight*. Each of the authors shared in a consultation in the first phase and offered thoughtful and profound insights in the course of the consultation. Each wrote important pieces before and after the consultation. These essays share some of the ideas that came out of that process. Each one offers distinct insights grounded in the life of some living, breathing community. They are rich individually. They are richer still as a conversation.

The essays are rooted not just in particular communities, but in a particular time. The first public life of these essays was in a panel presented at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion in San Antonio in November of 2016, just two weeks after the US presidential election. Many of the essays reflect anxieties, hopes, and commitments that have become even more urgent for those who articulate

them in the months since the election. These months have underscored the need to think again about the telos of theological education in a time between the times.

An Invitation to a Road Less Traveled: Theological Faculty and the Future of Theological Education

Fernando A. Cascante-Gómez, Association for Hispanic Theological Education

Theological education, as it has been conceived and implemented in the North Atlantic (i.e., Europe and United States), is undergoing a series of crises that calls for urgent and radical changes. These are changes necessary not merely to secure the permanence of institutions but, more importantly, to ensure that theological education will be pertinent to the church and society in the 21st century.

My own sense is that the road *most* traveled by faculty in the midst of so many changes has been found in looking primarily *outside* themselves for the causes of the crises as well as their possible solutions. Thus, the solutions they find look a lot like these external models. They seem concerned only with controlled budgets, more efficient recruitment methods, a smarter use of facilities, the incorporation of new communication technologies, more creative fundraising campaigns, reduction of staff and faculty, or a few curricular revisions and adaptations to make programs look a little more relevant to some ecclesial and societal models. As valid and necessary as many of these proposals may be, finding solutions to the crises in theological education must extend beyond a survival mentality animated by the structures of the world.

Rooted in the conviction that more is needed in the present moment than practical tweaks to existing structures, I propose a road *less* traveled—one that theological faculty might take to discern and implement solutions that ensure a vital future for theological education. The changes needed in theological education demand a revision of how we conceive the nature, purpose, content, and method of theological education. And theological faculties are crucial to this work. Institutions don't really change until those who lead them or have power within them are willing to change. Therefore, traveling this road requires faculty to identify the role they play—whether as catalyzers or deterrents—to moving forward in a direction in which fundamental changes will be necessary.

To assume our role as agents of change and to acknowledge the need to change ourselves, those of us who are faculty and policymakers in theological education need to do something alien to academic culture. In the words of Parker Palmer, “we must talk to each other about our inner lives—risky stuff in a profession that fears the personal and seeks safety in the technical, the distant, the abstract.”¹ This requires consciously reflecting on our own personal journeys into the profession of theological education, the sources of our own theological formation, and the visions and commitments that have resulted from them. For in remembering anew our own theological journeys, we can rediscover insights that might help us reimagine the purpose and nature of theological education. And in light of present

¹ Parker J. Palmer, 1998. *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers), 12.

trials, we may discover that some of our visions and commitments need to be revisited, renewed, or even transformed.

In what follows, I attempt to model what taking this road less traveled looks like by narrating my own personal journey into the profession of theological education, reflecting on the sources of my theological formation, and by summarizing the visions and commitments that have resulted from them in the form of a personal creed about the nature and purpose of theological education.

My Journey as a Theological Educator

On January 3, 2000, I moved from my native country of Costa Rica to the United States to take the position of assistant professor of Christian education in one of the oldest mainline theological seminaries in this country. For most of the first decade of the 21st century, I had the unique opportunity to work as a full-time theological educator in the North American socio-cultural-ecclesial context as the only Hispanic and one of only a few racial/ethnic minority faculty members. For ten years, I was part of regular faculty meetings and served on a variety of faculty committees. I participated in multiple seminars and consultations: for new faculty, for racial/ethnic minority faculty, for Hispanic/Latino/a faculty, and for faculty within my discipline. These gatherings gave me a larger picture of the different traits, realities, expectations, commitments and, yes, concerns and frustrations of theological faculty and students from seminaries of various denominations across the country. I regularly participated in my seminary's community events throughout the academic year, including chapel services. I also accepted invitations to serve the church at large and became involved in meaningful activities to serve the community where I lived. I organized these countless events and experiences in printed form to apply for tenure. I eventually applied for tenure. But I did not receive it.

I believe I did not receive tenure due to a combination of at least three factors. First, a personal factor: I did not accomplish everything stipulated in the faculty manual to be granted tenure. Second, an institutional factor: the seminary's unspoken culture of white privilege and its lack of awareness of the social and cultural realities affecting the broader church and society impeded my ability to advance within it. And third, a societal-economic factor: the gloomy financial reality that the seminary—like many theological institutions at the time—was forced to face as a result of the downturn of the economy in 2008; the years that followed resulted in less tenured faculty. Thus, my career as a theological educator at the seminary level ended in June 2009.

From the start of the second decade of the new century until today, I have served a non-seminary organization (Association for Hispanic Theological Education, AETH), which has as its mission *promoting pertinent and excellent theological formation of Hispanic leaders in their service to the church and society*. My role and vocation as a theological educator did not end. It just shifted.

The Sources of My Theological Formation

My formation as a theological educator has had three main sources: home, church, and seminary. I was almost born in a pew. The earliest bible stories, bible verses, and Christian songs I remember are ones I learned from my parents during meals, at bedtime, and at church. I saw my father, a baker by trade, move from the position of part-time janitor of the only Protestant church in my neighborhood to becoming its full-time pastor immediately following his ordination by our small denomination. While he never finished high school, he did complete a Bible Institute Diploma. Following in the footsteps of my parents, I took on every possible ministry within the church: Sunday school teacher, youth leader, deacon, and elder. The opportunity to attend seminary eventually came while I was still finishing my first university degree in science and education and working part-time as a physics teacher at a high school.

And through it all, I remained heavily committed to ministry in my home church.

Three things prompted me to go to seminary. First, I began to share with other pastors and leaders a growing dissatisfaction with the limited way in which our denomination understood the mission of the church in the world, especially in light of the harsh socioeconomic and political realities people were facing in my country and in neighboring countries. Our community became increasingly aware of the need for a kind of theological education that could help us answer urgent questions without uprooting us from our ecclesial contexts and personal family and job situations. Thus, like many other church leaders of my generation, I went to seminary not to become an ordained minister, but to find ways to become a more faithful and relevant church leader for the community in which I was living.

Second, the ability to attend a seminary in my own city, intentionally committed to dealing with the kinds of urgent questions we were raising, was critical in shaping my choice to pursue a seminary education. This commitment was made visible in the curriculum, in chapel services, in the active participation of faculty in local congregations and community projects, and in the problem-posing and dialogical nature of the teaching-learning process for which most professors advocated. All core foundational courses in theology, bible, and practical theology were offered in the evenings so that bivocational pastors and church leaders like me could study with the same professors as residential students. In a time when computers were unknown to most faculty and students alike, and the Internet was not even conceived as a possibility in our minds, the seminary implemented a modular theological program that could reach out to people who could not come to the classes at the seminary.

Finally, the fact that there were substantial scholarships available to individuals already involved in pastoral ministry made it financially feasible for me to go to seminary. Tuition costs and funds for books were all I needed to start and eventually complete my formal theological studies. My local congregation provided some additional help with transportation costs. And I covered the expenses related to food and school supplies out of my own pocket. This ecology of financial support was critical for me to complete my first theology degree.

The seminary was truly *there* for me: to help me answer theological questions evoked by my service to the church; to help me connect the life of the church with its mission in the midst of the social and economic realities in which we were living; and to help me complete my studies in the midst of my personal economic and bi-vocational circumstances. I can honestly say that my seminary saved me from leaving the church altogether or from reducing my Christian faith to personal piety or to church-centered activities.

The Nature and Purpose of Theological Education: A Personal Creed

This “creed” emerges out of my experience as a theological educator and out of my understanding of the collective realities and changing times we as theological educators are facing. It aims at being illustrative of the kind of reflection I believe we all need to do. Ultimately, it is my way of inviting colleagues to a critically personal reflection and a much-required collective conversation.

I believe that...

- *The ultimate purpose of theological education (whether at home, church, bible institute, or seminary) is to promote transformative acts of love for God, for neighbor, and for all creation.*
- *The primary work of theological schools is teaching, learning, and research for the sake of*

the church and the transformation of the world according to Jesus's greatest commandment and the values of God's reign he preached in deeds and words.

- *The most critical role of the theological educator is that of being an "organic intellectual," one who keeps a productive tension between theory and practice, and between the commitment to advance his/her theological academic discipline and the work of advancing the values of God's reign.*
- *The most urgent programmatic and pedagogical strategies for theological schools today require finding creative, collaborative, and effective ways to extend and expand meaningful theological education to individuals and groups wanting and needing theological education where they live and serve.*

A Call to Conversion

The different crises theological institutions now face represent concrete opportunities to bring about the changes for which the signs of the times call. If theological institutions are truly going to thrive in the new millennium as a means of transforming church and society for the sake of God's reign in the world, the *why, what, and how* of theological education in North America need to be reconstructed.

Nevertheless, radical changes in theological education result not so much from changes in institutional administrative and programmatic structures but rather from changes in the individual and collective visions and commitments of those who teach in them. I argue for a road less traveled to review our visions and commitments as theological educators and to think about how they affect the ways in which we understand and implement the nature and purpose of teaching, learning, and research in theological schools.

Do we dare reconstruct theological education centered on the values of God's reign for the 21st century? My prayer is that we will. Even if that reconstruction means reviewing our personal theological journeys and taking the risk to share our stories with others; even if that reconstruction means acknowledging the cultural and institutional captivity under which we may have fallen; even if that reconstruction means confessing that we have been seduced and dominated by the social status and financial perks that come with a profession that, in most cases, sets us apart from the majority of people in church and society. But all of this will require more than an exercise of the mind. It will require a conversion of the heart.

Academic Heresy

Kathryn Lofton, Yale University

What is the purpose of theological education? Reflecting on the archives of religion in the United States, my answer is this: the purpose of theological education is the production of heresy. Heresy is the accusation that comprises the dramatic exhale between theological education and the world. I intentionally here oppose the production of heresy to the production of ministry. While the latter may be central of every seminary mission statement, the former is integral to its lifeblood. There is no theological education without an enemy against which this theology is imagined to be articulated.

Heretical Matters

In her 1992 book, *The Origenist Controversy*, Elizabeth A. Clark concludes that the condemnation of Origenism, along with that of Pelagianism shortly thereafter (a result she claims to be related), “made effective in the West the flourishing of a Christian theology whose central concerns were human sinfulness, not human potentiality; divine determination, not human freedom and responsibility; God’s mystery, not God’s justice.” I pause here in the commitments lost: commitments to human potentiality; to human freedom and responsibility; to God’s justice. As Clark writes, “Christianity now clung more snugly to assertions of human sinfulness, ecclesiastical unity, and obedience to episcopal authority.” Origenism lost, then. And I want to think about where heresy went from there, from that place of “rigid doctrinal dogmatism” that allured a thousand dissenting voices over the subsequent centuries of Christian history.¹

I want to observe, then, that the fading obviousness of theological education is in direct proportion to the fading power of heresy. If you want theological education to matter, heresy must again be possible. I hope also to remind us of a powerful subtext to Clark’s (2001) more recent book *Founding the Fathers*, namely that in the modern West heresy has had but one fertile home: the academy. Do you remember when the idea of the modern university was *itself* a rebellion? When we thought just being a university was a certain kind of dissent to the world we occupied?

Of course you do. It still is now. Even as we feel embattled—*especially* as we feel embattled—we must remember that embattlement was our origin. It was never easy to defend the meaning of the work of universities, of seminaries, of schools. The question for our conversations now is: Are we meeting the standard that these frames allow? Or put more simply: Are we all we can heretically be?

Heresy in the History of Religions

In the history of religions, it seems safe to summarize the opinion about heresies, which is that they are, by and large, *good* for the very organizations they critique. John Gager wrote of the positive functions of

¹ Elizabeth A. Clark, 1992. *The Origenist Controversy: The Cultural Construction of an Early Christian Debate* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press) 245–46.

heresy, emphasizing the establishment of social power through its rejection. “The tradition of the heretics offers one of the finest opportunities of renewal that the churches have,” wrote George H. Shriver in 1997.²

Renewal, yes. But such renewal can only exist in reply to a present frame. And what makes the United States an appealing testing ground for heresy is that this frame was spectral at best. As one observer has written, the significance of religious disestablishment is that it “destroyed heresy in the United States, for where no system of belief has precedence over any other, there is no legal or recognized orthodoxy and therefore no heterodoxy.”³ Of course such a description might be posed in its extreme opposite, as every practitioner might be seen as complicit in a national heresy. The democracy of America produced a kind of obsessive denominationalism in which splinter group after splinter group cracked off from their parent communions. It has been estimated that the Protestant sects in American alone number over six hundred.

In the United States, then, heresy is the new orthodoxy. This is not a unique observation. Peter Berger suggested in 1979 that we understand the modern world as the universalization of heresy. But what I want to highlight is the increasing authoritarian flaccidity component to this universalization. As Carl F. H. Henry has said: “Heresy trials became an oddity in contemporary church history, not because of an absence of heresy, but because of the lack of zeal to prosecute heretics.”⁴ The choice of the believer is now more important to protect than the maintenance of right belief. Heresies (in their original meaning of *choices*) now multiply, to the point where now the greatest heresy seems to be the existence of any dogma at all.⁵

Heresy as an Academic Practice

Heresy as a formal designation has, in the United States, been the practice of people working in seminaries or universities that propagate theological education. Let me remind you of the stories. In 1891, the Presbytery of New York appointed a committee that accused Charles Augustus Briggs, Edward Robinson Chair of Biblical Theology at Union Theological Seminary, of speaking counter the confession of faith. In 1893, Luther Gotwalk of Wittenberg College was accused of false teaching. In 1899, trustees of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary accepted the resignation of William Heth Whitsitt, professor of ecclesiastical history and president of the institution, after he was accused also of false teaching. In 1900, formal charges of heresy were brought by the New York Presbytery against Union Theological Seminary professor Arthur Cushman McGiffert. In 1904, the Methodist Episcopal Church levied charges of heresy against Boston University professor Borden Parker Bowne; in 1905, the same church authorities held an ecclesiastical trial for Boston University professor Hinckley Gilbert Thomas Mitchell under charges of “misteaching.”

What I mean to emphasize through this incomplete listing of heresy trials from the late 19th century is the role academic institutions have played in the perpetuation of heresy as a possibility in this, a nation of free-market heretics. Much ink has been spilled on the subject of modernist-fundamentalist thought, the swirling fact of which produced much of the foregoing accusatory energies. What is less often explored is how clear-eyed the parties were about the consequences of their interpretations. When theologian George Burman Foster of the University of Chicago published *The Finality of the Christian*

² George H. Shriver, 1997. *Dictionary of Heresy Trials in American Christianity* (Westport, CT: Greenwood), 487.

³ David Christie-Murray, 1976. *A History of Heresy* (London: New English Library), 192.

⁴ Shriver, xiv.

⁵ Christie-Murray, 226.

Religion in 1906, he was absolutely clear that there could be no religion, and therefore no legitimate heresy, in the new world.

I want to underline the self-conscious production of *the end of Christianity* by Christian modernists. By this reading, the vocabulary of modernism is not so distinct from that of Origenism. And this is not because of the content of their call, but because of the inversion of their results. Just as “Origen” served as a code word for various theological concerns problematic to Christians at the turn of the fifth century, so do I want to write about how “modernist” served as a code word for various theological concerns problematic to Christians at the turn of the 20th century. But this is no mere admiring glance. I would argue that the inversion of the story transpires in the epoch of my attention. Elizabeth Clark watches as Christianity in the ancient world goes in a certain direction—deciding, therefore, what will be orthodox. And I observe that the ecclesiastical combat of this much later *fin de siècle* moment was the bookend of a long arc of Christendom. Not where it began to go another way, but where the very frames of a certain theological conversation concluded.

Here I seek to invoke the social history of the Christian twentieth century: the decline of denominations, the ecumenical movement, the diluted value of systematic theology, the growth of toleration. It does not now seem to most believers (those that remain) inconsistent for a person to stoutly maintain the doctrines of his own communion while not regarding as heretics those who hold different views. Authentic identity matters more than an authenticating tradition. This is, we all must agree, a relatively recent epistemological revolution, and I would locate its formation in this cluster of American heresy trials situated in academic institutions.

Heretical Futures

In her 2006 presidential address to the North American Patristics Society, Maureen A. Tilley investigates the possibility that we have collapsed the relationship between schism and history. We like to think of heresy as being about doctrine whereas schism is about practice. Pointing to contemporary examples, however, she writes:

The distinction between heresy and schism, at least in these cases, seems clear to participants: heresy has to do with creedal matters, with believing wrongly, and schism has to do with church organization and membership. But perhaps it is not as clear as it seems. The issue of the ordination or non-ordination of women may be a point of ecclesiastical polity and bring the danger of schism, but at root, it also involves multiple doctrines such as theological anthropology, the interpretation of Scripture and the extent to which Scripture is a norm of Christian life, and thus it flirts with our earlier definition of heresy. So too the ordination of homosexuals in long term committed relationships may seem to involve only discipline, but at heart concerns the same issues as the ordination of women.⁶

Tilley here raises the specter of those subjects which remain topics of heresy claims and excommunication trials. Over the past thirty years, across the Christian spectrum (Protestant, Catholic, and Mormon), the question of gay rights and women rights have pressed some denominations to familiar postures of nervous orthodoxy. Some churches (like the United Presbyterian Church) would bar from ordination those who did not agree with the ordination of women; others (like the Episcopal Church) struggled over the naming of gay men as deacons and priests. The LDS Church excommunicated women for their support of the ERA, and Catholic and Baptists wondered about the relationship

⁶ Maureen A. Tilley, 2007. “When Schism Becomes Heresy in Late Antiquity: Developing Doctrinal Deviance in the Wounded Body of Christ,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 15 (1), 3.

between reproductive rights and Christian teachings. These are the subjects, now, that take us to the limits of orthodoxy.

Within religious history, proper adherence to creeds has been referred to as orthodoxy, whereas dissenting interpretations have been understood as heterodoxy. Heterodoxy might propound schismatic movements. It might lead to accusations of heresy; or it might lead to an individual's apostasy. The modern assertion of sexual identities has indeed become the new form of confessional dissent. Although in the history of American religions, such heterodoxy has often been articulated as an outright apostasy (the gay youth abandons their childhood religion upon the realization of their sexual identity), such an abandonment narrative fails to capture how co-constitutive these concepts have been. That is to say that our very ideas about sexuality and its expression are deeply tied to the history of heresy and the orthodoxies it rebuts.

The question for us, now, as scholars and educators and theologians of the present, is not where did the orthodoxy go, but what are the social premises of heresy now? The modern university framed and determined the end of orthodox Christianity. It did not, however, conclude the end of social structures for Christianity. To understand where we might go next—into what new religious freedom, into what new religious limit—we would do well to remember that our stories here have profound power to shape the terms of survival and change for people and places beyond such rooms. We may not intend it, but there it is: the power of these heretical practices to change our stammering worlds.

Theological Education at a Crossroads: Wrestling with Emerging Cultural Paradigms

Hosffman Ospino, Boston College School of Theology and Ministry

Every now and then we need to ask again what it means to educate theologically. It is an opportunity to assess what we are doing while envisioning fresh approaches to advance this noble task creatively and effectively. How we answer this question has profound implications for faith communities, theological institutions, and even the field of theology itself. Theological educators must rise to the occasion to imagine what it means to form an emerging generation of theological scholars, pastoral leaders, and educated Christians in light of the various transitions—cultural, social, and ecclesial—that shape the current religious landscape in the United States of America.

In this article, I offer a reflection on what it means to educate theologically by drawing on my own experience and interest in how the relationship between theology and culture shapes educational processes. I join this conversation as a theologian, deeply rooted in the Roman Catholic tradition and the US Hispanic cultural experience, intentionally teaching theology in an institution that trains women and men for ministerial service and academic life.

Theological Education: A Noble Task

I understand Christian theological education to be *the art of facilitating, within the horizon of the Christian tradition, the process of dynamically discerning what it means to be human and a believer in history as well as the practical implications of such discernment for the person, society, and the church.* As such, theological education is a noble task. Its nobility is rooted not only in the ultimate subject of theological reflection (i.e., the mystery of God discerned in the here and now of our shared historical existence), but also in the people who are involved in it: flesh-and-blood women and men with real questions, hopes, and concerns, searching for meaning in the everyday, working to build a better society.

When intentionally done by a community of believers in the context of the university or the seminary, in the congregation or in non-ecclesial spaces, theological education is ultimately an exercise of a ministry: the ministry of the Word. Theological education does not occur in a vacuum, nor is it isolated from the sociohistorical forces that shape everyday life. To educate theologically, therefore, has clear spiritual, social, ethical, and even political implications that we cannot ignore or escape. Structures come and go, as do theologians, administrators, ministers, and even congregations. Nonetheless, there will always be a need to imagine how to best educate theologically a new generation of believers.

Between the Old and the New

Transitions are not easy. It is natural to hold on to what we know and to become suspect of anything that challenges our status quo. When individuals or groups have worked hard to achieve certain goals,

they will rightly share a strong sense of ownership that deserves affirmation. However, even as we honor the good work that has been done, it is imperative that we listen to new voices: those who have recently arrived to our country, our schools, and our churches, as well as those here for a long time who have been muted by a variety of forces, but who are increasingly claiming their right to have their voice heard and taken seriously. Christian theological education in the United States is in many ways at a crossroads between *what has been* and *what can be*. These realities are not mutually exclusive. In fact, what can be builds upon what has been, and what has been encounters a new chance to be—in distinct ways—in what is new.

Christian churches and institutions in our country are undergoing significant transformations in terms of demographics, culture, and even practical commitments. In response, the educational bodies in charge of preparing the agents to lead them and the scholars dedicated to study their traditions are exploring fresher ways of doing theology and new ways of theologically educating emerging generations. Our society is changing significantly. We can no longer take religion for granted, particularly as the intensifying forces of pluralism and secularization challenge us to prepare our students for new conversations.

If they are to be faithful to the communities and institutions with which they claim to be in close relationship, institutions dedicated to theological education must develop curricula that empowers Christians to engage the vital questions and concerns of our day. The diversity of our communities raises important questions that have received little attention in many of our institutions. Now is the time to be honest with ourselves as theological educators and with our students, and to take seriously issues of race, culture, violence, *machismo*, eurocentrism, inequality, clericalism, polarization, and more.

To address the urgent questions of our day, we need pedagogies that go beyond traditional lectures and class conversations that often seem distant from the concerns and hopes of people at the grassroots. How we educate ministers and scholars shapes the way they exercise their ministry and engage their scholarship. New technology, social media, sophisticated means of communication, and access to digital platforms that provide almost unlimited resources for the study of theology and religion invite us to ask urgent questions: Is this a time to reimagine the traditional seminary and theologate? If so, what would be appropriate and effective models to achieve our aims? Is it a time to reimagine the role of the theological educator? Is it a time to reimagine how we credential the new generations of pastoral leaders and academics? No question should be off the table.

Modes of Theological Reflection and Theological Education in a Diverse Church

For more than half a century, the field of Christian theology has witnessed the emergence of multiple discourses building on the particularity of experience and context. These discourses continue to address the perennial questions of theology: theodicy, salvation, revelation, cosmology, etc. They do this acknowledging that ultimately *all* theology begins as an exercise of local reflection—including those discourses that do not name their particularity and often pass as normative theology. It is by affirming their particularity that these contextual discourses can claim a universal voice. Contextual discourses have benefitted significantly from the development of new methods as well as the engagement of a wide range of fields of knowledge beyond philosophy and Scripture studies. And many of these discourses intentionally engage the particular communities out of which their best insights emerge. This work is not centered merely on studying the texts of these communities or by talking *about* them, but by living with them and listening to their voices.

The question then emerges: has theological education kept up with these developments? I am afraid that the honest answer is, *not always*. If adding an article or a chapter written by a “contextual theologian” or a “feminist thinker” to the syllabus is meant to engage the rich diversity of theological reflection in our day, then the answer is *no*. If hiring a Black or Latino/a or Asian or Native American scholar and expecting that one person to address all matters related to contextuality, race, culture, ministry to the people she/he supposedly represents, and the particular histories of all minoritized groups, then the answer is *no*. If accepting only a small group of “minority” students into a graduate program to fulfill an established quota, particularly knowing that those students come from large populations that give life to a given denomination, then the answer is *no*. If our theological formation programs conclude that they need to close or become something else because the traditional students are not there anymore while simultaneously ignoring alternative models that may work better for new populations, then the answer is *no*.

Theological education must incorporate the methods, sources, conversations, and results emerging from contextual theological discourses into the pedagogies used in our educational settings. At the same time, it should challenge theologians and educators who belong to any dominant group to acknowledge their own particularity. This requires theological educators to intentionally draw from contemporary theories of education and related fields that take key categories such as culture, race, anti-bias curriculum, interculturality, etc., into consideration to educate theologically in new ways—ways that will take theological education in the 21st century a step forward toward a more robust response to rapidly changing times and institutional configurations. I believe that exposing our theology students, congregations, and believers who participate in any form of theological education to pedagogies, methods, and resources that acknowledge the value of diversity, context, culture, and experience, will change the ways in which we do theology in the United States.

Dynamic Tensions that Need to Be Engaged

As we reflect on theological education in a time of emerging cultural paradigms, I find it helpful to think in terms of *dynamic tensions*. I use this term intentionally, aware that as we educate theologically, we encounter realities that escape homogenization or standardization. These dialectics are not necessarily opposite. And by the nature of what they signify, each resists being collapsed into the other. Dynamic tensions elude simplistic solutions. The existence of a dynamic tension is in itself a source of energy, life, and creativity. They do not necessarily demand synthesis. Distinct realities in any relationship of dynamic tensions should be affirmed in their particularity while imagining how theological education can better respond to them. Taking seriously these tensions requires substantial work and investment. It is work that can be exhausting. It may even demand a new kind of leader able to wrestle with ambiguity, sometimes even to dwell in it.

In the present moment, I note four dominant dynamic tensions informed by my own survey of the current terrain:

First, there is a dynamic tension between what might be called a *dominant establishment* and an emerging force of minoritized voices, usually people of color and other underrepresented groups within churches and society. Even as Christian congregations throughout the country continue to go through profound transformations in terms of race, ethnicity, and culture, the work of formal theological education continues to be done primarily by scholars of one race. During the academic year 2015–16, 77% of all full-time faculty, male and female, in schools that are part of the Association of Theological Schools (ATS) were reported to be non-Hispanic White. The gender gap is also appalling: during the same academic year, in the same schools, 75.8% of all full-time faculty were reported to be male.

Second, there is an emerging dynamic tension between a generation of faculty and administrators who remain in our schools and those who are newly arriving. Put plainly: as faculty and administrators of color gradually assume responsibility for theological schools and seminaries, they usually succeed White male predecessors. The work of those who arrive is often met with a hermeneutic of suspicion that questions their viability, identity, and even the worth of the credentials by those who remain. In the process of these kinds of transitions, deep differences in the definitions of theological education often emerge without explicit acknowledgment.

Third, the classic dynamic tension between “theory” and “praxis” takes on new forms from the perspective of theological education. One manifestation of this tension is a growing gap between research schools and institutions that train pastoral leaders for ministry. This gap significantly influences not only the student recruitment process, but also the kind of curricula designed to train them, ultimately affecting how we prepare them to meet the needs of a society and a church in flux. Sometimes this tension is present even within a single institution.

Fourth, a fast-growing dynamic tension is one between previous ways of delivering theological education and emerging models. Should theological education continue to be delivered in traditional institutions with traditional faculty on site and traditional curricula? Should it embrace online and other forms of (nontraditional) education that drive learning patterns and educational needs among new generations of Christians? A both/and approach often seems reasonable to theological educators; but are we having the kind of deep conversations to which this tension invites us? This dynamic tension calls for serious reflection on matters of accessibility, technological literacy, sociocultural disparities associated with the use of technology and social media, and more. It also invites reflection on the danger of the ongoing potential for neocolonialist practices as wealthier institutions, churches, and nations (like ours) own and control the means of delivery and thus become the de facto arbiters of content and method.

The ultimate goal, I think, is not to invert orders or to subsume the elements within each set of tensions, but to imagine how, through theological education, we can contribute to building stronger faith communities, a more relevant academy, and a more just society where everyone can live with dignity.

Realities of Teaching in a Neo-Lynching Culture in 21st Century America

Angela D. Sims, Saint Paul School of Theology

My research on lynching and a culture of lynching in the United States is a painful reminder that theological education is always a negotiation of multiple lived realities. As a black US-born woman serving as academic dean and faculty member at a free-standing United Methodist seminary, with one campus location in Kansas at the largest United Methodist Church in the United States and the other at a United Methodist university in Oklahoma City, 11/9 offered a clarifying moment that there is arguably no static point that defines theological education at any given moment. However, a review of practices—such as qualifying exams, hiring decisions, curriculum revisions—might indicate an unawareness of the manner in which a growing percentage of persons navigate theological education between the times. As a point of clarification, I do not view “times” as a chronological reference point. Instead, I consider how the Association of Theological Schools and the Commission on Accrediting’s shared mission “to promote the improvement and enhancement of theological schools to the benefit of communities of faith and the broader public” influences professional and institutional self-identity and purpose.

Theological Education in a Post-11/9 Era

Prior to 11/9, I did not accept invitations from “well-meaning” Euro-American students to address historical-contemporary manifestations of racism as this country’s original sin. Instead, these student encounters presented as teachable moments to encourage them to name their discomfort and/or disease and to engage in dialogue with my Euro-American “liberal” faculty colleagues about social-historical accounts that are antithetical to the colorless accounts they often so readily accept without question. In this post-11/9 season, I realize that as an administrator and theological faculty member, I do have a responsibility to create space where students can reflect on ways in which they are both compelled to appeal to the moral conscience of the nation and to articulate an ethics of ecclesiology that demonstrates their understanding of the nature, purpose, and function of church and its relationship to Christ and white supremacy.

When I gathered with colleagues in April of 2015 for a consultation on theological education at Mundelein Seminary at University of St. Mary of the Lake, the relevance of black lives was a pressing concern. And it remains one now. It is a moral dilemma that sparked debate about the significance of activism in response to a growing public recognition of the death of unarmed black persons at the hands of persons whose profession is traditionally understood to reflect a mandate to *protect and serve*.

As I reflect on the results of the 2016 presidential election in the United States, I am reminded that:

- Lynching still occurs, but in different forms.
- Today, the Klan bivouacs without robes and hoods.

- Slavery still exists but under the auspices of a prison industrial complex.
- Discrimination thrives, with no intent or program for relief.
- As was true in the 1960s, it is time for citizens of good conscience to rise up and rally to the cry for freedom and justice for all.
- We must think seriously about how some may view our service to the academy as a transgression, the time we invest to maintaining the status quo for the sin of our soul.
- From a manger in Bethlehem to a Bantustan in Soweto, a bus in Montgomery, a freedom summer in Mississippi, a bridge in Selma, a street in Ferguson, a doorway and shots fired in Detroit, a Moral Monday in Raleigh, an assault in an elevator in Atlantic City, an office building in Colorado Springs, a market in Paris, a wall in Palestine, a restoration of ties between Cuba and the United States, the kidnapping and assault of young school-aged girls and the reported killing of 2,000 women, children, and men in Nigeria, a new generation of dream defenders, a transgender teen's suicide note, our abuse of the environment—the racial climate in the United States, and the respect for our common humanity everywhere, is clearly in decline.
- Theological educators cannot acquiesce, remain silent, or be passive and neutral as people come to terms with an 11/9 presidential election poised to usher in an era of human rights violations from which only a select few will be exempt.
- We cannot continue with business as usual in our educational institutions in the midst of so many egregious injustices.

(Adapted from “An Open Letter to Presidents and Deans of Theological Schools in the United States”)¹

While there are graduate departments of religion that are not accredited by ATS, association membership is “open to schools located in the United States and Canada that offer graduate theological degrees, are demonstrably engaged in educating professional leadership for communities of the Christian and Jewish faiths, and meet the standards and criteria for membership established by the Association.” A post 11/9 society suggests that “theological education is in a season of profound change.” Informed by institutional identity and purpose, a presenting question is who and what will define that change.

Deepening Conversations toward the Common Good

The American Academy of Religion and Society of Biblical Literature’s Program Planning Committee selects host cities for annual meetings years in advance. It is impossible for even the most seasoned event planner to neither anticipate the significance of San Antonio for 2016’s gathering nor fully account for the dynamics of the 2016 election, including political rhetoric that intentionally maligned and placed at risk a majority of persons who reside in Texas as well as a significant percentage of AAR/SBL members. Although professional meeting planners cannot account for political issues that may influence an event’s ultimate outcome, theological educators will have to determine which motivating factors are of most importance while contending with compliance issues dictated by the Department of Education,

¹ Alton B. Pollard III, January 17, 2015. “An Open Letter to Presidents and Deans of Theological Schools in the United States,” *The Blog, The Huffington Post*. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/alton-b-pollard-iii-phd/an-open-letter-to-preside_19_b_6492328.html

ATS, regional accrediting bodies, and other agencies.

As I review the landscape from my own particularities, ATS's four core values serve as a point of reference by which to understand how theological education remains unchanged while simultaneously adapting to new ways of self-understanding. As global citizens in a post-11/9 era, how we respond to access to health care, building of walls, female reproductive health, immigration, natural resources, quality public education, refugees, religious diversity, and a plethora of other moral problems will convey our core values and beliefs to the world.

In a post-11/9 era in which the only citizens who may be exempt from blatant and potentially harmful acts of bigotry are persons who self-identify as cisgender white heterosexual men, theological education finds itself at a crossroads to think more intentionally about how we prepare persons to engage in conversations that further an understanding of the common good. This emphasis on the collective will require theological educators to redefine, broaden, and nuance our working definitions and approaches to diversity, quality and improvement, collegiality, and leadership. These four key values, as articulated and embraced by ATS, suggest that theological education must be intentional about the ways we view the world and our contribution to the places we inhabit and the people we encounter. For such a time as now, we are presented with a challenge to determine how to negotiate the tension ever mindful of countless examples that conducting business as usual may not serve us, our students, and others well.

Engaging the *Telos* and Sharing Tales of Theological Education

Maria Liu Wong, City Seminary of New York

I share here three tales that shape and express how I have come to make sense of a telos of theological education that forms, informs, and transforms the people of God into faithful embodiments of the peace, grace, and joy of the Gospel. The first is the story of how my parents influenced my own trajectory into theological education. The second describes my work as dean of a grassroots theological learning community seeking the peace and flourishing of the city. And the third story shares lessons learned from my research on racial/ethnic minority women leaders in global theological education. Together, these three experiences have helped me discover a theological education that is responsive, relevant, and practice-based for all of life.

I. My Story

The child of immigrant parents from Hong Kong, I emigrated not from Asia, but from Europe. My father was an electrical engineer in the United Kingdom, but in the early 1980s, an American defense firm sponsored him and our family to come to the United States. My parents were both missionaries impacted by the fervor of student campus movements in Hong Kong in the 1950s and 1960s. They founded a broadcasting ministry to evangelize to Chinese in London, and brought the ministry with them when they made a new home in the suburbs of New York City.

By day, my father worked as an engineer, but by night, he and my mother would be in the basement studio, recording evangelistic and discipleship programs in ten or so Chinese dialects on cassette tapes with pastors, mission workers, and missionaries from all over the world. Created for those who could not attend church on Sundays, the tapes were broadcast over the public-address systems of garment factories, distributed to restaurant workers, and given to grandparents to listen in their native language. Today, my parents continue this ministry in Asia using digital audio players, short-wave radio, and Internet broadcast. Although they have been on the frontlines of ministry, they never had time for a formal theological education. My mother tried twice, but was unable to complete a doctoral program in missiology.

When I attended seminary with my husband Tony during our second year of marriage, I did not go with the intention of seeking ordination, but with the aim of understanding how my faith impacted life in its entirety. I wanted to know how it shaped and expressed who I was vocationally as an educator, leader, mother, and wife. It was a second graduate degree for both of us (my first in education and his in social work), and we did not want to relocate. We found a master of arts in urban mission program at Westminster Theological Seminary that allowed us to remain in the city while attending intensives at its Pennsylvania campus. After three years of part-time study—alongside doing ministry and raising our family—we graduated with renewed vision and a deepened calling to stay in the city.

In my last year of seminary, I joined the staff of City Seminary of New York, a grassroots, intercultural,

theological learning community with a vision of urban theological education grounded in our particular context. I went on to pursue a doctorate in adult learning and leadership at Teachers College, Columbia University. Thirteen years from my first seminary class, I am now the dean of City Seminary. This is not only the fruit of my own labor, but the experiences of faculty, students, and graduates, who are also embedded in faithful ministry in and for the city.

* * *

While this brief biographical sketch frames a nontraditional narrative of theological education, the route I traveled into theological education is increasingly *less uncommon* in light of the greater fluidity of students in theological institutions across North America. While traditional institutions are trying to make sense of how to adapt, newer ones are finding ways to innovate and provide alternatives. Looking toward the future, it is clear that no single paradigm will dominate, but instead an ecology of possibilities that depend on each other in order to serve and form students in greater numbers and varieties will continue to grow. In light of transnational networks, this ecology will necessarily stretch beyond North America. In particular, we have much to learn from the growing Church in the global South as it strengthens its own institutional capacities and formulations of contextual theological education.

In order to envision a fair and just vision of theological education for generations to come, we must be informed by and open to the reality of change. The United States will be a majority-minority country by 2040. This means intentionally drawing on the diverse resources that *already* exist within North American theological education as well as beyond to meet these adaptive challenges. Those in formal leadership need to build bridges and share decision-making with others on the margins. This leads me to a second tale that broadens the scope of *who* is coming to theological education.

II. Family, Faith, and the City

One thing that people may not immediately associate with theological education is family. Yet while it may seem like an odd place from which to start, this is how theological education is most powerfully emerging in our context: couples, siblings, adult children and retired parents, extended family, church members, and colleagues have all come through our non-degree certificate program in urban ministry, seeking to be on the “same page” with regard to faith, ministry, and life. They have deepened and expanded our community of ministry learning and practice across generations, cultures, and traditions. Family is at the heart of our community; it is the relational strength of City Seminary of New York.

Our students come from diverse ecclesial backgrounds, range in affiliation from Pentecostal to Presbyterian, live throughout the boroughs of New York City, and have roots in countries around the world. They are church leaders, missionaries, multivocational pastors, youth workers, and faithful Christians in a variety of occupations. They desire to participate in a larger community of ministry and leadership, to gain tools for effective and fruitful practice, and to have a reflective space to explore vocation and calling. Families—enriched by their experiences in the program and mutuality of our community life—influence leadership and church life in diverse communities throughout the city.

One glimpse of the vocational diversity of our students is found in Miriam, our director of operations. Miriam is a minister at the Damascus Church of Hunts Point in the Bronx, part of an international network of more than 200 Latino churches. She serves as an officer at the council level, and she is married to Peter, an assistant pastor at Damascus (and also a full-time social worker at a Bronx hospital). Her daughter, brother-in-law, sister-in-law, and mother-in-law have all been a part of the Ministry Fellows Program.

Another example of this diversity is found in Ann and Janet, sisters and food entrepreneurs who were part of Ministry Fellows Program, six years apart. They live in Queens in a home with three generations, including their parents, and Ann and her husband's daughter. "We Rub You" is their family business, sharing variations of a Korean-barbecue sauce made from a family recipe. They also partner with a local ministry by supporting survivors of human trafficking.

* * *

In this context, the two opposing models of Athens and Berlin are out of place. The scope of our work is neither individual character formation nor professionalization of ministry and critical research, but rather building a community from a complex mix of ministries grounded in the diverse traditions and expressions of the Church, and living out practices of ministry in the city over time. Students come during different seasons in their lives and for a wide range of reasons. This is how we together embody Christ in the city.

Andrew Walls offers an Ephesian metaphor that expresses our work powerfully:

The Ephesian metaphors of the temple and of the body show each of the culture-specific segments as necessary to the body but as incomplete in itself. Only in Christ does completion, fullness, dwell...None of us can reach Christ's completeness on our own. We need each other's vision to correct, enlarge, and focus our own; only together are we complete in Christ.¹

At City Seminary, we experience an "Ephesian moment" in our own day. Wrestling with Scripture together and engaging in dialogue over the past and the present, formation, information, and transformation equip us to point others to Jesus as a community. Visiting each other's churches, praying together, and sharing meals is part of what we do on a regular basis. And in the process, we become friends. Using the experience of a global city as our point of teaching and learning, we are able to expand beyond our North American context and cross transnational boundaries.

III. Women, Shared Wisdom, and Leadership

Inspired by my experiences at City Seminary, I wanted to better understand the journeys of racial-ethnic minority women leaders in theological education from Africa, Asia, North America, and the West Indies. In the four years of my dissertation research, I had the privilege of getting to know thirteen extraordinary women from these various locations who were or had been faculty and/or administrators in Christian theological institutions. Through a questionnaire, multiple interviews in the participants' local context that formed the basis of written portraits, and a collaborative inquiry with a subset of participants, I had the opportunity to hear and experience the changing transcontinental dynamics in theological education. In an effort to make sense of each woman's story, I interpreted them through the lenses of intersectionality, wisdom, and transformative learning theory.

In this work, I discovered a continuum of expressions in the ways each woman developed, practiced, and expressed leadership in the classroom, in the home, in administration, and elsewhere. Impacted by formative influences such as family, culture, and education, each had a deep sense of vocation and calling as she pressed on along a path that for some was unclear, and for others was aggressively blocked at times. As "tempered radicals," they rocked the boat towards change from within the system, and met the pain of challenges with "resilient resistance." They drew from a critical spirituality that provided each of them the sustenance for creativity, innovation, and self-efficacy as they matured in

¹ Andrew F Walls, 2002. *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History* (Maryknoll: NY), 79.

knowing themselves and integrating the multiple voices and identities they held. They engaged in an array of strategies along their journeys—what I described as dancing into a spiral labyrinth, the multiple centers of theological education. The dance was a “pilgrimage”: slow for some, improvisational for others, in partnership for some, and iterative for all.

* * *

These women’s experiences and stories led me to propose recommendations for revisiting curriculum, pedagogy, and administrative policies that are inextricably linked with the *telos* of theological education itself. If the purpose and meaning of theological education is to shape, equip, and transform God’s people—and in particular, women called to leadership, to become who they were meant to be, made in God’s image and as God’s beloved—then it is for God’s glory, for their blessing, and for the blessing of others. How then might theological education be crafted in ways sensitive to the perspectives, challenges, resources and strategies of racial-ethnic minority women as well as others who might not fit within the confines in which traditional theological education, here or abroad, has been formed? The “spiral labyrinth” metaphor points us towards this ecology of paradigms, located in multiple geographies, incorporating different paths and modalities, inviting a journey into one space and then towards another.

A Season of Hope, A Call to Solidarity

Theological education begins with grounding the present and shaping the future in knowledge of the past. It begins with the people of God coming to know who they are, whose they are, and where they are from, and then moving on to understand, practice, and embody faithful Christian living in the image of God while drawing others into this reality. It begins with embracing a vision of the unity and the diversity of the Church and acknowledging that there may be an entire ecosystem of theological education paradigms that we have not yet begun to imagine. In the context of changing times and politics, this work becomes more and more important to serve those who seek relevant and responsive education for the practice of ministry. The end, or *telos*, of this work is the flourishing of God’s people and God’s world, the reconciliation of brokenness, and glimpses of grace and wholeness in families, churches, and communities across the world.

As we look ahead to possibilities for the new forms theological education might take, are we willing to invite “others” both to the conversation *and* the planning table? The Church and the field of theological education are not complete unless we come into dialogue together to better understand how we can work in solidarity towards fair and just practices for the future. We have an opportunity to discover a rich, nuanced understanding of theological preparation and equipping that comes from mutuality of listening and seeing who the Church is, and who it is becoming. It is a season for hope, of possibilities for building new bridges between women and men, clergy and lay, across cultures, traditions, and geographies. It is time to take up the adaptive challenges of an increasingly complex and urban world, and weave together a tapestry of theological education that forms, informs, and transforms the people of God into faithful embodiments of the Gospel’s peace, grace, and joy.

The Politics of Christian Theological Education

Ted A. Smith, Candler School of Theology

[Author's note: In this piece I write out of a particular set of Christian convictions about the purposes of Christian theological education. Such starting points, and such scope, are of course narrower than the full range of starting points and concerns of members of the Academy. I do not presume to speak for others with other starting points or interests, let alone for the full spectrum of membership. But I do hope the essay might open up some points of conversation across lines of difference.]

Much of my energy for this work comes out of a conviction that we are in the middle of a sea change in theological education, the kind of shift that has happened about once a century in the United States over the last 300 years. If the energy comes from a sense of change, the particular shape of the project comes from the repeated experience of watching people—myself among them—grapple with this change in mostly managerial language. We talk of enrollment numbers and funding models and relative position in various markets of money, students, faculty, and status. These things matter. The work of a good manager is essential and deserving of respect, for truly great managerial work is not just efficient, but also moral. I hope this project will support wise and good managers in their work. But I have also been worried that our focus on the means was keeping us from conversations we needed to have about the *ends* of theological education. And so I have tried to keep questions about the ends of theological education at the center of the project. What is all this for? What is the telos of theological education?

Talk of telos can seem trivial and abstract, like the worst sort of academic navel-gazing. This is especially true when theological schools are closing, students are crushed by debt, and faculty jobs are dissolving into the gruel of adjunct work. And now, when some of our students, staff, and teachers fear being deported; when all of our students, staff, and teachers have greater and lesser reasons to fear a militarized police force that will not be checked by a Department of Justice committed to civil rights; when the president says and does things that grant legitimacy to some of the most hateful currents in our culture; when the habits and institutions of democracy are under threat . . . at a time like this, talk of anything but political action with this-worldly impact can seem not just trivial, but decadent. We know what the purpose of theological education needs to be: we need theological education that empowers action for justice. We need theological education that *is* action for justice. We need to put whatever theorizing, theologizing, or talking about telos we do into the service of a politics of resistance and emancipation.

I feel this demand. Even more, I feel judged by it, convicted by it. And I think we must be willing to take stands that place whatever status we have at risk. We must be willing to give up the rituals of respectability, as many members of the Academy already have. I think the times demand new seriousness from us, new willingness to risk, new faith and energy for bearing witness in a time when the powers and principalities of this age seem to be ascendant.

At the same time, I must confess I worry about the call to put theological education in the service of even the best sort of political action. I worry about it because it invites an instrumentalization of theological education that I think betrays our best hopes for this work. It elevates managerial logic as if by a hidden set of stairs. If the goal of justice is higher than the goal of keeping the institution alive for another year—and it is—orienting theological education to the pursuit of that goal still makes it a means to this-worldly ends. It just asks us to manage theological education in a different direction.

In articulating this worry I do not mean to renounce the political significance of theological education. On the contrary, I name this worry in part *because of* political concerns. For I worry that our political goals are too small, too determined by systemic racism, too attached to knowledge-class vanities. I worry that they are insufficiently radical, insufficiently utopian, insufficiently hopeful, insufficiently infused with the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. And so I worry about making Christian theological reasoning about the purposes of theological education subject to our immediate practical projects.

The Censor's Placet

Theodor Adorno is a mixed-bag of a guide on this question. But I think his analysis of the right relation between theory and practice can be instructive to us now. In his *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno wrote:

The call for unity of theory and practice has irresistibly degraded theory to a servant's role, removing the very traits it should have brought to that unity. The visa stamp of practice which we demand of all theory became a censor's placet. Yet whereas theory succumbed in the vaunted mixture, practice became nonconceptual, a piece of the politics it was supposed to lead out of; it became the prey of power.¹

Theory, theology, and talk of telos can become, in Adorno's words, "degraded ... to a servant's role." This is not just bad for theory. It leaves practice to become "a piece of the politics it [is] supposed to lead out of ..." even "the prey of power." We need tactics to make it through the night. But because the ends those tactics seek are embedded in an unjust order, we also need hopes that go beyond a better president, and the reform of police practice, and the guarantee of Constitutional rights for all people, whatever their gender, sexuality, race, religion, or country of origin. We need to work for these things. But we need to pursue them by the light of hopes that exceed all that we can ask or imagine.

We need dreams of a heavenly city whose gates are always open. We need beatific visions of a God who calls us to arise and come, for winter is past. We need parables of a Reign of God in which all the laborers are paid the same wage, regardless of when they arrived in the vineyard. We need songs of a time when the wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them. Theological education can nurture such visions. And so I think we need theological education that seeks a telos that is not just a better goal, but a hope of another order.

Whose Hopes? Which Rationality?

Saying that theological education should nurture such hopes should provoke an immediate challenge: Whose hopes are you talking about? Who gets to specify the content of these beatific visions? From what social location are these hopes formed? These are the signature questions of our age. For we live in a time when we know there is no view from nowhere. Every view is a view from somewhere. That somewhere is shot through with interests of race, class, gender, and more. The promise of the academy

¹ Theodor Adorno, 2003 (1966). *Negative Dialectics* (London: Routledge), 143.

is that it offers a little break from the pressing demands of economy and politics. It creates an institutional space for thought to break free from material concerns. But if the academy shelters us from some sets of demands, it depends for its existence on the fulfillment of other demands that are no less political and no less material. The theological academy is on the grid of power. Why, then, should we expect visions formed in the theological academy to transcend their material origins when others do not? If it's all already political, shouldn't we just bring the politics to the surface so that we can deliberate with clearer vision and hold one another accountable for our choices?

These questions grow out of a truthful recognition of the significance of social location. But it is also true that they can play—and, I would argue, they have played—right into the hands of a prevailing order in which neoliberal incrementalism, technocratic managerialism, and nihilistic careerism collude to divide the world between them. When we use the knowledge that every view is a view from some very implicated somewhere to sweep the legs out from under prophets who would sing to us of other worlds, we end up saying “Amen” to Margaret Thatcher's declaration that there is no alternative.

The recognition of the social location of all knowledge makes any talk of a transcendent hope problematic. At the same time, the loss of such visions consigns us to a world that has given up hope for deep change. This dilemma has dogged me since I first started thinking about theological education more than a decade ago. The institutional crises within schools and the wider political crises that rage in, through, and around schools only make it more urgent.

Yearning

The key, I think, is not to evade the dilemma, but to live into it, even to intensify it. Intensifying the dilemma means accenting both poles of it at once. We must be reminded constantly, forcefully, of the social location of our visions. At the same time, we must be reminded constantly, forcefully, of how much we need a vision that transcends all of our social locations. If we forget social location, we slip into one or another ideology, old or new. And if we forget our need for a transcendent hope, we slip into the ideology of Third-Way realism that is—still, even after a string of defeats in these last twelve months—one of the signs of our times. If we forget the first pole, we can confuse our hopes with God's hopes. And if we forget the second, we can confuse the limits of what we can do with the depths of what the world needs. Remembering both at once puts us in an impossible situation—which is, I think, exactly where we need to learn how to live.

Learning to live in this space should be central to the formation offered by theological education. It would involve learning in conversation with people different from ourselves, and in critical reflection on our own positions, the particularities and limits of our hopes. And it would mean learning in conversation with scripture, and with wise teachers and faithful witnesses of every era and continent, the need for good news that outruns our ability to proclaim it. It would mean nurturing in students and faculty a desire for a transcendent hope and a recognition that even our best efforts do not offer the hope we need. It would mean cultivating a *yearning* for justice.

Some might argue that such yearning is itself the favored posture of privileged, tenured, white, male academics, for it allows us to wring our hands and furrow our brows and express sincere concern . . . and do nothing to change the structures that benefit us so much. But the yearning I am describing still takes action, even bold action. It just refuses satisfaction.

Others might argue that such yearning is just nihilism in fancy dress. That might be true, if I thought that all of this was up to us. But I don't. If Christian theological education has any value at all, it depends on knowledge of a God who is more than just our thoughts about God and whose work for the redemption

of the world is more than just the sum total of our actions. Christian theological education presumes such trust is meaningful. More specifically, it presumes trust in one whose power is made perfect in weakness. In light of that trust, we understand our limits differently. In our yearning we are not bereft. Instead I dare to hope that in our yearning our sighs are joined to those of the Spirit who groans with all creation with sighs too deep for words. And in that joining is the substance of theological knowing. Having a right knowledge of our limits does not put an end to wisdom. On the contrary: the fear of the Lord is the *beginning* of wisdom. And it is the beginning of any Christian theological education worthy of that name.

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