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For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



## Reflections on the Purpose of Theological Education

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In the last several years, I have been pondering the purpose of our work as theological educators. This seems especially pertinent because many mainline churches which both send and receive our students are dying, theological education institutions have found it difficult to attract new students, most of these institutions are in budgetary crisis, and more schools are closing every year. I have wondered what is important about theological education, what value it adds, and what about it lasts.

In the process, I have considered my own experience in seminary and graduate school. It has been 29 and 26 years, respectively, since I entered those programs and I have been reflecting on what has stuck, and what made the time, money, and effort worth it. I admit that I don't remember many specifics unless I scan my shelves for the books that I read in those programs; they are old friends and evoke a difficult season when I was undergoing a major gestalt shift—a time when old paradigms were losing their power for me. These books remind me of a time when I began to understand more deeply something I had been struggling to clarify. They are old friends who introduced me to new horizons and opened new possibilities in my thinking and doing and being. I have kept these books not because I ever imagine using them in a classroom myself or because I need them for a writing project (they are too outdated for either of those): I keep them because they represent significant—even lifechanging—moments of my life. I remember my professors, my classmates, our discussions, the papers I wrote, the meetings in faculty offices where I engaged the ideas in these books. I think about the

arguments I wrestled with, developed, let go of. I remember wrestling with my own understandings, and with teachers and peers, as I felt myself changing, growing, emerging. I don't value these books and the memories of my time in seminary and a doctoral program so much because of the career they have afforded me; I value them for who they helped me become.

I have been playing with the idea that perhaps the benefit of theological education is less in the information we educators impart or the professional training we provide, and more about the kind of learning and experiential communities we build together. Perhaps our value in the world as theological educators is less about the preparation for a particular ministry, the ordination process, or further schooling, and more about the kinds of opportunities we afford students to be *formed*, to be changed, to grow as people, no matter where they end up or what they do in their professional lives. Students will be formed by all the new information they are exposed to, of course, but also—and maybe more importantly—students are formed by the relationships with people and ideas they develop while in our programs, by the ethos of curiosity and the room to ask gnarly existential questions, by the freedom to interrogate life and the world and themselves and God. The goal of formation emphasizes who people are *becoming*: how they think, how they behave, how they treat others, what they value, their level of emotional intelligence, the ways they respond to God in and for the world. What if theological education institutions had as their mission to be sites of exploration toward the formation of people so that they—and those they engage—can flourish?

Willie Jennings' book *After Whiteness* (Eerdmans, 2020) is one of the most important books on teaching, learning, and organizational leadership I have read in recent years, and I want to be a part of what he is imagining. I want to see what could happen if theological education institutions come to be seen as places to belong, to grow, to change, to be creative, to think hard, to come alive in one's own faith, hope, and love. What would it take for them to become places that explore formation as good people rather than primarily to impart knowledge or deconstruct embedded theologies? Jennings assumes—and I agree—that all human beings yearn for a place to belong and a place to learn how to flourish, and to have that modeled for them. What if theological education institutions became those places? What if they were places people came to first to explore rather than pursue?

In the process of this work, of course, we must name what is going on in the world, what is wrong, what impedes flourishing. As Jennings notes, this requires the difficult and painful work of understanding our current condition(s), exposing and decentering and deconstructing the dominant (white, often male) view. This is something divinity schools like mine excel in.

But people yearning for flourishing need to understand something else, too. We need to lean into hope, love, faith, grace; to understand all people as beloved, as having the imprimatur of God, as having voices that need to be heard, that deserve to be heard; to have the tools to enact justice. Theological educators in this model would need to have an explicit vision of flourishing, a sense of what could be, of what surely the Divine Urging is calling all of us toward. Those of us teaching theology and religion have an opportunity and, I think, an

invitation to hold out such a vision, a creative imagining of who and what God is, and for what that God longs, for her creation.

So many of our students live fragmented, trauma-filled lives. They come to our programs from homes, schools, communities, and jobs that are toxic, stressed, and struggling and, often, oppressive. What if we invited them to join us in seeking something more grounded, more life-giving, more whole, and helped them, for example, resist the neoliberal impulse for mastery, control, organization, ownership, separation, and possession (even of ideas)? What if we not only taught such a way but modeled it ourselves as well? Would that change our focus and our practices in the classroom? Would that shift our criteria of “success”?

In this playful imaginary, theological educators and the administrators of our institutions would be normative, prescriptive, and committed to their own formation and growth as well as that of students, and of the communities of which we are a part. We could do this while also being critically analytical of the ideas we promote. We might ask explicitly, for example, what the sacred texts tell us about flourishing. We might examine what various religious/faith/philosophical traditions have to say about the good life. We might wonder aloud what is the story of the Good as witnessed in the sacred texts. We might inquire how to sift through all the broken humanness in the sacred texts to get to a message of hope, love, grace, redemption, care. If a deep understanding of flourishing and formation toward such a life and world became the goal, I wonder how that would change how we teach our students to read sacred texts, and whether it would influence how we teach the histories of Christianity. Would such a goal change how we teach pastoral care in our complex world? Would the flourishing of ourselves and our students as the goal influence how we teach ritual and religious practice? Would it change how we teach theology? Would it change how presidents and deans lead the institutions of which we are a part? Would it change whether and how we create community together? I am not suggesting we become proselytizers: I want to retain and exercise my critical thinking, even in relation to the commitments I hold dear, but I sense that a shift in our mission and focus might change some of the ways we do things, moving the emphasis from production to exploration.

I yearn for more conversations among ourselves as theological educators and with our students about what we might do differently that might help heal ourselves, each other, our institutions, and maybe even our particular corners of the world. These kinds of conversations take work and intentionality, to be sure, and it would take effort to alter our emphasis from education as information to education as *formation toward flourishing*. For starters, we would want to develop some shared understandings of what flourishing looks like, what it requires, and how theological education could contribute to it.

And, of course, formation and information are not so distinct; it is more a matter of alterations to emphases and processes and outcomes I am pondering. How/would an emphasis on *formation to enable flourishing* reconfigure our curricula, our faculty, our teaching practices, and the students who might be interested in joining us in that exploration? We might continue to attract fewer and fewer students seeking ordination credentials, it is true, but it is also true

that we may spark the desire to join us in people who don't know exactly what they will do with their time with us, people with tangled existential questions who are looking for a place to belong and explore and grow. And if they joined us in these efforts, who knows what old friends they might take with them?

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