Teaching Critical Thinking and Praxis

Lawrence Golemon, The Alban Institute

Editor

From the Editor’s Desk

I used to teach a course in critical thinking at Dominican University in northern California, where my students were introduced to the basic tenets of logic and rhetoric. I assumed that learning to map various truth claims, identify false arguments, and marshal persuasive ones would apply to any field of study or profession these students entered. While I continue to believe that, in time I realized that most fields of study follow their own disciplinary logic of what constitutes “critical thinking.” Literary critics in the English department had their own criteria, religious studies professors in the humanities had another, and practice-oriented fields like nursing had still another. While many of these definitions converge around developing what Stephen Brookfield (1987) calls “reflective skepticism” about inherited knowledge, how a discipline uses the critical—reflective moment varies widely. Is critique the scalpel for a thorough deconstruction of inherited texts? Is it the prerequisite for a fresh reinterpretation and engagement with a tradition? Or, is it the basis of an informed intervention around an ethical or practice situation?

In the Carnegie Foundation study Educating Clergy (2006), we identified several marks of critical thinking in theological education. First, critical thinking is done in relation to a horizon of interpretation (religious tradition, sacred canon, or practice—context) that remains porous, changing, and adaptable. Second, critical thinking reframes linear views of time to bring past, present, and future into new patterns of creativity. Third, critical skepticism is accompanied by passionate engagement with a tradition. In other words, critical thinking is an essential component of a broader interpretive and ethical agenda in theological education. No longer the "queen" of the sciences, theology has adapted to various roles in the academy: from that of handmaiden to the transformative potential in other disciplines, to that of a leader in the formation of personal and professional identity and ethics, to that of a source who helps others discover toward their inherent crisis, in the hope of metamorphosis.

In this second issue of Spotlight on Theological Education, scholars from a range of institutions and traditions share their own frameworks and teaching strategies for fostering critical thinking. The authors represent Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish traditions, and they teach in free-standing seminaries, rabbinical schools, university divinity schools, and undergraduate departments. Because theology is an advocacy-based, practice-oriented discipline — much like gender or cultural studies — and because it is often taught in professional contexts of forming religious leaders, we have invited these authors to reflect on the use of critical thinking and praxis in their own teaching.

The first four essays explore critical thinking as an interpretive practice aimed at reconstraining existing theological traditions. Each author argues that existing traditions must be analyzed and reconstructed against a horizon of interpretation that is both vertical and integrative. Capetz discusses the importance of subjecting one’s own beliefs to a Socratic examination in relation to the long history of theological interpretation. Lehman examines how Talmudic dialectics generate a dialogical pedagogy around the social construction of knowledge. Ross relates how womanist and feminist critique helps deconstruct, broaden, and reterritorize existing theological practices and assumptions. And Coote employs communication theory to describe “biblical criticism” as a public argument about its ambiguities and provisional meanings.

The final four essays explore how critical thinking issues form and helps fund religious and professional practice. Morrill addresses the normative, pastoral, and ethical implications of a performative approach to teaching liturgical theology. Sanders talks about congregational life as a resource for ministers to learn ethical reflection and discernment. Click discusses how theory and practice enter a mutually critical and reconstructive relationship through effective field education. Finally, Cohen explains how sacred texts must be engaged critically around their original context and their history of interpretation in order to be “recontextualized” for one’s spiritual and professional life.

I hope theological educators will find new conversation partners here around the shape and importance of critical thinking in their scholarship of teaching, and I hope others in the academy will come to appreciate the diverse and complex role that critical thinking takes on in theological studies.

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Theology as Critical Inquiry

Paul E. Capetz, United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities

A STUDENT OF Friedrich Schleiermacher, the pivotal figure in the development of liberal Protestantism in the nineteenth century, once characterized his teacher’s pedagogical style by invoking the memory of the great dialectician who gave to the Western tradition of philosophy its decisive impetus: “Schleiermacher taught theology the way Socrates would have done it had he been a Christian.” This sentence captures what is involved in both good teaching and good theology. Like philosophy, theology is a critical inquiry that demands of students conceptual precision in the formulation of questions and answers, as well as the willingness to have one’s questions and answers challenged by the rigors of conversation and debate. Not all seminarians are pleased to learn about this theology upon entering my classroom. For some of them, theology is solely an exercise in what one already believes to be true. “Faith,” according to this view, precludes the possibility of genuine critical questioning since such challenges to the church’s doctrines signal a lack of faith and, hence, are detractive of faith. I remember one angry student upbraiding me, “This is supposed to be a theology course, not a philosophy course.” For others, religious commitments cannot be intellectually debated since they express the subjective “spiritual journey” of individuals. Respect for persons in their individuality requires tolerance, not debate. Another student once sincerely told me, “You are trying to teach us how to argue, but I’m a peacemaker, not a fighter.” The two postures I’ve identified come from opposite ends of the theological spectrum, but they share a common anti-intellectualism that has to be overcome if students are really to learn what theology is.

To be sure, there are some differences between theology and philosophy that cannot be overlooked. Theology’s starting point lies in the interpretation of a received tradition, not in purely rational effort to understand the nature of being. Theologians thus spend a great deal of their energies in the exegesis of and commentary upon classical texts, beginning with the Bible and moving from there to the theological schools of lineages that constitute the theological traditions of the church. In one sense, then, introducing students to the study of theology requires that they learn not only the tools of proper exegesis but also how to reflect self-critically upon what is involved in the interpretation of any text (hermeneutics). Consequently, there is a body of historical knowledge that has to be mastered before one can truly be a theologian. For students to immerse themselves in this history means that they must be willing to enter into the debates about crucial issues of Christian faith that are represented by major figures such as Athanasius and Arius, Cyril and Nestorius, Augustine and Pelagius, Thomas Aquinas and Bonaven-
ture, Luther and Erasmus, Calvin and Servetus, as well as others who could be named. Many of these debates had to do with alternative ways to understand the Bible. Gerhard Ebeling was surely right to observe that “the history of the church is the history of its interpretation of scripture.” But it is also true that the history of the interpretation of scripture has been the major source of conflict in Christian theology.

In order for students to appreciate the full range of these conflicts of interpretation, they have to be willing to set aside their own preconceived notions for the sake of trying to understand how persons who lived in very different times and places formulated and answered the major questions of theology. To facilitate such learning I, too, have to be willing to teach whatever texts and figures we are studying with as much impartiality and objectivity as possi-
ble. I do my best, therefore, to treat each figure or idea with as much enthusiasm and passion as I can, which can initially give rise to some misleading impressions that I agree with the viewpoint I happen to be interpreting on that occasion. At the end of a two-semester introduction to the entire history of Christian theology, one student came up to me and explained, “During the first semester I thought you were teaching us the theology you person-
ally believe in because you presented each theologian’s ideas with such enthusiasm and respect, but as the year progressed I realized that you can’t possibly agree with everyone we read since they disagree with one another.” In response to her comment, I said, “You correctly understood the pur-
pose of the course.” Critical thinking requires the ability to see things from another’s perspective and a willingness to entertain all the possible sides of an argument. For this reason, I only rarely dismiss my own theological commitments when presenting theology so as not to make disciples of students. I want to teach stu-
dents how to think theologically, not what to think.

Understanding texts and figures from the past, however, is just the beginning of the theological enterprise. Theology is more than exegesis of texts and the endeavor to appreciate multiple perspectives. Students also have to learn how to analyze the cogency of theological arguments. Some of these arguments, of course, are strictly exegetical. If a theologian has defended an argument by appealing to a particular ex-
ample of a biblical text, to what extent does this argument stand or fall upon the correctness of that exegesis? But there are other arguments that are not so directly tied to exegesis. If a given theologian makes a philosophical argument for the existence of God (e.g., Anselm, Aquinas, Hartshorne), how strong is this argument when mea-
sured according to its own stated criteria of reason and human experience? The fact that theologians have made claims about all sorts of matters that can in principle be tested by those who do not share the Christian faith is an important thing to learn about theology.

Augustine’s interpretations of human nature, for example, including his insist-
ence that both reason and will are deter-
mind by what the heart loves, are subject to testing by other disciplines such as biol-
ogy and psychology. The fact that Augustine can appeal to some relatively common observations about human behavior indicates that theology is about more than simply exegesis and hermeneutics. It also brings into play convictions about the nature of the human person as well as the nature of the world in which human persons exercise their capacities and confront their limitations. This becomes even more apparent when theologians address ethical questions.

Students are sometimes intimidated, initial-
ly at least, by the technical vocabulary of theology, including the many terms and phrases that come from foreign languages. I am of the opinion that theology is not an arcane discipline, requiring highly specialized expertise such as one would need in order to study physics. This is because the subject matter of theology concerns ordi-

nary human life and experience in the world, including how persons evaluate and make sense of their lives.

What encourages me the most in my teaching is to observe students as they begin to realize not only how brilliant the great theol-

o
gians of the past were but also how pro-
found and illuminating their ideas remain for interpreting human life. Some key students in this progressive seminary come to study their theology with a bias against the traditions of the church on account of their patriarchal and homopho-

nic character. This is understandable, but it is important to get students to see past these blind spots in the theological tradi-

ons for the sake of grasping what makes them worth studying even today. Two quo-
tations are given at the top of my syllabus for the introductory course I teach in the history of theology. The first is from Jaroslav Pelikan: “Tradition is the living faith of the dead, traditionalism is the dead faith of the living.” This apt characterization indicates that I don’t consider the tradi-

tion to be the property of traditionalists whom only desire is a reappropriation of the past. The other quotation, from my favorite theologian John Calvin, clearly points to the revisionary nature of a serious theological grappling with the past: “Our constant endeavor, day and night, is not just to transplant the tradition faithfully, but also to put it in the form we think will prove best.” In every generation, responsi-

ble theology is engaged in a critical sift-

ing of what has been received from the past for the sake of the present and the future. I love teaching. I love theology. I love teaching theology because it is important and, believe it or not, it is also fun.
A FIRST-YEAR rabbinical student at the Jewish Theological Seminary once approached me in order to critique my teaching methods. He wanted to know why I was teaching the Talmud in a way that he found confusing, and wanted to know why I encouraged my students to ask questions and to challenge their teacher. He claimed that his Talmud class was a dull and repetitive experience, and that he found it difficult to follow the discussions. He felt that the Talmud was a difficult and abstract text, and that he did not understand the ongoing debates and arguments that took place in class.

I explained to him that I believe in the power of the Talmud to engage and challenge students. I argued that the Talmud is a complex and multifaceted text, and that it requires a creative and critical approach to fully understand its contents. I told him that I encourage my students to ask questions and to challenge their teacher, because I believe that this is the only way to truly understand and engage with the text.

He was skeptical at first, but over time he began to appreciate the value of this approach. He found that asking questions and challenging his teacher led him to think more deeply about the text, and that it helped him to better understand the complexities of the Talmud. He also found that the debates and arguments that took place in class were more engaging and thought-provoking than he had previously experienced.

In conclusion, I believe that teaching the Talmud in a way that encourages questioning and critical thinking is essential for fully understanding its contents. It is only through active engagement with the text that students can truly grasp its complexities and nuances. I encourage all teachers who teach the Talmud to adopt this approach, and to encourage their students to ask questions and to challenge their teacher. Only in this way can we fully appreciate the richness and depth of the Talmud.
The languages of critical thinking and religious imagination appear most frequently within the disciplines associated with practical theology. The experiential orientation of coursework in homiletics, pastoral care, religious education, and liturgical studies often encourages creativity, intuitive connections, and effective engagement in the practice of ministry. We believe that these tasks require an unbridled mind that bypasses analytic categories in order to attune the heart to the needs of those one serves. The fruits of religious imagination are expressed in worship, in prayer, and in the imaginative experiments that one might tempt, based on colloquial definitions, to equate work in an academic program almost exclusively with critical thinking and personal spirituality. For some students, the idea and practice of interweaving critical thinking and religious imagination offer an opportunity to pull disparate aspects of their lives together more effectively than they have in the past. They begin to dwell in seminar classrooms with their eyes and ears more open to the interplay between analytic theological exercises and playful theological experimentation. If they find few opportunities in their formal coursework for such dialogue, often they develop study and prayer habits that compensate for the missing elements. They may institute a regular practice of lectio with texts assigned for biblical exegesis or sing and pray their way through elements of a liturgy as they deliberate within worship service. They may wrestle cognitively with a class lecture on the doctrine of revelation and then sit in silence before God with mind empty and open to revelation. Each of these approaches cultivates a critical imagination through temporal attention to critical thinking and religious imagination.

For other students, the disparity they perceive between the affective and intellectual aspects of academic study and of spiritual experience is so great that the idea of theological education as a spiritual discipline is at best an unattractive ideal and at worst an attempt to hoodwink them into appreciating the very activities that threaten their faith. As one student remarked, “It sounds good in theory, but that’s not my experience of seminary.” Some skeptics can imagine limited interplay between critical thinking and religious imagination in ministry classes, but they would prefer that instructors spend more time on spiritual formation and ministry skills, less time on analysis of arguments and ideas. These are the students who most need environments with strong orientations toward forming a critical imagination, for they cannot create such spaces alone. As theological educators rethink traditional divisions of pedagogy and academic identity, we redefine theological education for students stumped by critical thinking and reinforce the efforts of students engaged in theological education as a spiritual discipline, cultivating both hearts and minds for religious leadership.

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In addition to listening for the text that questions its imagination in the first movement of lectio, students reflect communally and individually on their readings in relation to the reflective text that chose them and some other members of the class: 1) What does prayer have to do with our intellectual life? 2) How might critical thinking by strategies that integrate critical thinking skills and imaginative exercises still leave the matter of students’ openness to this approach undetermined. Seminarians frequently struggle to discern a meaningful connection between their theological studies and their spiritual lives precisely because they equate work in an academic program almost exclusively with critical thinking and personal spirituality with religious imagination. Even those practical theology courses that the academy equates more closely with religious imagination may appear to students as primarily theological disciplines when contrasted with the presumed freedom and creativity of personal prayer.

In my own teaching, I have decided to address this false division directly as a subject for student exploration. A required course in Christian spirituality challenges students to explore the idea and experience of theological education as a spiritual practice, rather than as the antithesis of spirituality. Students read an essay on Reformed spirituality, which highly commends the spiritual practice of study. They also read two essays related to the practice of hospitality, in which themes of ‘preparation’ and ‘openness to the stranger’ are prominent. Throughout the week of our exploration, they engage in intentional acts of hospitality to a variety of ‘others’, including the strangers who author their textbooks and whose ideas they may fear. During a plenary session, students, both those with a biblical exegesis assignment and those with scholarly exercises for cultivating attentiveness in prayer, an observation by Douglas Steere on the significance of sustained attention; and a well-known excerpt from Karl Barth’s Ecclesiastical Theology (1938), in which he declares, “Prayer without study would be empty. Study without prayer would be blind” (171).

What does it mean to speak of theological education as a spiritual discipline? They conclude their discussion and the lectio process with prayer for one another as they seek to live hospitably in a period of life dedicated to study and preparation for religious leadership.

I wish I could report that every student who spends the time pondering this question concludes that theological education as a spiritual discipline becomes easier to continue the process of forming a critical imagination, but the fruits of this work are mixed. For some students, the idea and practice of interweaving critical thinking and religious imagination offer an opportunity to pull disparate aspects of their lives together more effectively than they have in the past.
In my course on Dietrich Bonhoeffer's theological ethics, we contrast Martin Doblmeier's film, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, with "Theologians under Hitler," (available from Steven D. Martin at maurer@princeton.edu). Then students perform a reader's theater, and after I wrote, asking "Why did Bonhoeffer stand up, when others ducked their responsibility?"

The Incarnation Concretely Interpreted: Bonhoeffer had strong and specific norms from the incarnate Jesus in the early days when he made the crucial decision to oppose Hitler. He said the Sermon on the Mount converted him from being merely a theologian to being a Christian, and it is the only ground strong enough to stand on against Hitler. In Discipleship, he interprets the Sermon on the Mount with a concrete hermeneutics yielding a thick ethic with specific guidance. As John Howard Yoder has written, the Incarnation teaches that the real God is revealed concretely in the way of the incarnate Jesus (2002). Barth, Bonhoeffer, Tüsczy, Leder, Leder, and Sider all have a concrete hermeneutics of Jesus (Gushue and Stassen).

The Holy Spirit and Continuous Repentance: Bonhoeffer involved himself in an African-American Baptist church in Harlem, in dialogue with French pacifist Jean Lassere, and in the world church. He learned to distinguish Christian loyalty sharply from nationalism, as does the Barman Confession. All the "saints of the faith" who came through are clear that God is independent from, and calls us to repentance for, our captivity to the assumptions of our society and the powers and authorities of our nation.

The Barman Confession connects God's call for repentance with the Holy Spirit. Similarly, at Pentecost, Peter called on people to "repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit: The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord will call." The Book of Acts is the narrative of the Holy Spirit's calling the early church to repent for a narrow and nationalistic faith and to recognize the Spirit's presence to all who are far off—Samaritans, Ethiopian eunuch, and even Gentiles ignorant of the faith of Israel, so the gospel would be unhindered by narrow loyalty.

The Sovereignty of God or Lordship of Christ through All of Life: Bonhoeffer worked out a new political ethic. Christ is Lord over public life as well as over private life. The powers and authorities were created in and through Christ (Colossians 1:15) and have their mandate to rule under Christ. As the Barman Confession says: "We reject the false doctrine, as though there were areas of our life in which we would not belong to Jesus Christ, but to other Lords..." By contrast, the German church that succumbed to Hitler's pressure and previously rejected human rights and the democracies of the Weimar Republic as in a sphere outside Christian concern, and had adopted a pseudo-Lutheran two-realm dualism. Similarly, during slavery times many of my fellow Baptists, whose tradition had been Calvinism with Arminian influence, with the sovereignty of God over all of life, adopted a pseudo-Lutheran dualism, declaring that Galatians 3:28 ("There is no longer slave or free, but all are one in Christ") deals only with spiritual issues, and does not apply to slavery.

The emphasis on a holistic ethic in which the Lordship of Christ applies to all of life runs through those who studied the historical test. For example, Martin Luther King's faith grew from a perception of a passive, individualistic Jesus to Jesus's way in nonviolent direct action, as can be seen with King's stance on economic justice, and illustrated in his Riverside Church sermon opposing the Vietnam War.

Jeff Stout and Cornell West accept the argument of Stanley Hauerwas and Alasdair MacIntyre that we need to work in a tradition, but argue for a democratic tradition—with contributions from philosophical pragmatism or Socratic self-questioning. I stand with West as he affirms African-American tradition and the contribution of the Free-church Puritans to democratic tradition. These fit the Barmen-like tradition that has proved itself in the laboratory of history. In my courses, I diagram incarnational trinitarianism (not all of which I can explain in this short space).


Bibliography


Ethnography as Critical Theological Resource

Mary McClintock Fulkerson, Duke Divinity School

The common structure of theological education implies that one learns “real theology” by studying classics—something that figures out how to “apply these truths” in some practical course. Theology becomes a kind of language with an inherently corner grammar. Like linguistic structuralism, which presumes social conditions of language formation, such a view implies that theology’s purpose is the regulation of faithful living (speaking) by reproducing a prescriptive doctrinal (linguistic) system. I think here of a recent divinity student who, when asked to interpret her field education assignment theologically, complained that the Christology of this local church was “inadequately Chalcedonian.” That many churches would be “heretical” by such a litmus test is one indication of the limitations of theology so understood; never mind the question about why repeating the past is a good way to respond to the contemporary situation.

There are alternatives to such a “structuralist” view of theology. Liberation theologies, for example, pay attention to the oppressive and potentially liberating function of Christian tradition within specific social contexts. They explore the ways “the tradition” is plural, inflected with power, and marked by social location. However, even liberationist theologians are capable of offering theologically rich accounts of the functions of tradition. Even as liberation theologies correctsystematics by making “contextual” a feature of theological discourse, only the occasional liberationist has attended to the complexities and actual shape of context by offering a thick description of popular religion.

Thus the need to better understand how Christian traditions are actually performed in the lives of different populations has gone beyond the usual tools of theology. More than systematics and liberation analysis are needed if we are to perceive how discourses are “received” as well as produced. And it is in this “more” that has directed me to the rich research strategies of ethnography.

Primarily associated with cultural and social anthropology, ethnography has been appropriat ed by a number of other disciplines as well, e.g., sociology, cultural studies, and psychology; to name a few. With roots in nineteenth-century “armchair” anthropologists’ use of missionary and travel documentation to create comparative accounts of human society, twentieth-century ethnographic approaches came to require participatory research and first-hand observation. In order to identify the distinguishing characteristics of a culture, one must spend considerable time engaging its people. Methodological approaches came to include involvement in the activities and practices of a community, interviewing of individuals and groups, along with study of documents and material resources. At least since the 1980s, issues of the authority and constructed character of the ethnographer’s account of a culture have been topics of ongoing and fascinating debate.

The interpretive categories provided by ethnography do not, of course, allow for causal or explanatory claims, such as those sought by quantitative procedures. Indeed, one of its limitations from a social science perspective is that the learnings from an ethnographically designed case study are not generalizable in the way quantitative procedures might provide. However, ethnography is appropriate to theological concerns precisely because qualitative research provides access to the self-understandings and worldviews of living subjects. I hope a group shaped by so-called “normative” teachings about Christology, for example, might reframe such themes in tandem with other cultural, gender, and racialized discourses in an exploration made possible by ethnographic work. Ethnography provides an important contextualization of...
Contextualizing Womanist/Feminist Critical Thought and Praxis

Rosetta E. Ross, Spelman College

Over the 126 years since Spelman’s founding, its curriculum has developed into a diversified liberal studies program. In most respects the curricular changes at Spelman are similar to curricular evolutions of other private, once-Christian denominationally affiliated colleges and universities. However, in view of the legacy of Christian colonialism at Spelman,2 this vehicle for Christianizing blacks for acceptance and citizenship, contextualizing curricular changes related to the study of religions also meant engaging Christianity’s colonial legacy.

Women’s Studies, Global Diversity, and Religious Studies

Notwithstanding its colonial heritage, Spelman College also has a legacy that intersects with the global women’s movement. Spelman helped birth twentieth-century movements that effected academic diversity through faculty and student leadership, in as well as support of, the U.S. Civil Rights Movement, through the 1981 establishment of a women’s center and comparative women’s studies program, and through faculty and student activism for its first black woman president, Johnnetta B. Cole, appointed in 1987. The emergence of a global women’s movement and critical inquiry into the reality of women’s lower social status precipitated increased awareness of the ways traditions of scholarship help maintain women’s subordination. Womanist and feminist scholars have the challenging creative task of discerning how to engage, translate, retrieve, and disseminate knowledge about women while determining new academic practices that help overcome exclusionary epistemologies, scholarship, and pedagogies. By deconstructing, reinterpreting, and sometimes radically departing from cultural, religious, and other social movements that broaden the range of scholarship through the embrace of, inclusive scholarly practices.

On the one hand, emphasizes on diversity emerging from women’s studies — with which womanist and feminist scholarship intersects — relates directly to the legacy of excluding women’s thought and experiences from academic discourse. Women of color scholar, lesbian, and scholars from non-Western traditions, while at Spelman, have the additional baggage of questioning black women’s “decent”4 within a larger discourse labeling African Americans as lascivious. Notwithstanding the benefit black women derived from “home” missionary efforts, scholars on late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century “fied” people in the United States delineates the ideology that, in a context of doubts about the capacity of formerly enslaved persons to become citizens, Christianizing blacks also meant interweave with a deeply racialized discourse about black acceptability and respectability. Many European Americans as well as African Americans persevered this view through educational institutions established during this era.

By deconstructing, reinterpreting, and sometimes radically departing from conventional scholarly traditions, womanist and feminist scholars develop new pedagogies and epistemologies through which formerly marginalized persons become noncommodified subjects of mainstream knowledge production. These changes require students to analyze the meanings of materials in which black Christian identity is represented. Students sometimes are given an assignment to identify and analyze apparent contradictions evident in stories of persons such as churchwoman and civil rights activist Septima Clark who said of her once-enslaved father, “they had Christianized him.” While reading texts like Albert Raboteau’s Slave Religion and Eugene Genovese’s Roll, Jordan, Roll, students pinpoint connections of colonial practices like “subordination” and “humiliation” to activities of persons related to Christianity, or explain the sometimes ambiguous agency of persons presented in the text. The study of womanist and feminist “theology” integrates the challenge through interdisciplinary, cross-cultural, and religiously diverse readings. In this course, students write an ethnographic narrative about women in their lives, they connect theoretical dimensions of reading materials to their prior knowledge and experiences, and they engage in the critical analysis of women’s lives and the diversifying task of validating women’s lives and the ways in which they are important to womanist and feminist scholars. Students also begin to deconstruct Christian hegemony as they read about women’s activities in diverse social and religious contexts.

Conclusion

Contributions of womanist and feminist scholarship and pedagogies to the wider academy and to the study of religions are unfolding still. As women’s studies and related scholarly discourse continue to permeate the academy, the cycle of knowledge production known as praxis may be more fully realized. Ideally, this can help bridge the gap between the academic and social life in ways that increasingly connect changes in the scholarly community to changes in the broader society and vice versa.

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peasants might manage, and for this reason social theory is sometimes employed strategically in order to, in more obvious contexts, raise awareness of the shape and strength of alienating social forces. The hope is, of course, that this knowledge is then transferable to the subject’s own much more subtly constructed social relations. When we study structural oppression among obviously and cruelly disadvantaged groups, women in general, racial minorities, and gays and lesbians in our classroom mostly get the point. So do those with some environmental concerns, and which young person doesn’t at least have some anxieties about the future of our world? Straight white males on a fast career track are the hardest sell, but metaethics is expressly on the table. The laughter is always tinged with just a little nervousness when I tell them that if they don’t make the preferential option for the poor, they are all going to Hell.

The reference to Hell is just a joke, of course. But the nervousness is critically important as a catalyst for looking at the world with fresh eyes. To try to make all this a little more concrete, let me say that teaching theology is teaching the art of reflecting theologically, not teaching about theology. In other words it is true for the student, and the less likely it is that the student will go further in theological studies, the more important it is to do theological reflection than to learn about its history or to explore the questiones disputatae. Once again, liberation methodology lights the way. Theological reflection is a process of thinking about the relationship between faith and freedom. There are three critical reflections. The first is that the texts of the tradition make upon us, and the action that must follow if human flourishing in the world we call our home is to be achieved in the voice of God when the world in all its complexity, rather than some simplistic version of it, is the place in which we hear it. Good preaching depends upon this truth. Working with undergraduates, I use far more words of Latin than I do theological writings, even those books on religion I have penned myself. I do this in the conviction that good teaching needs to unlock the capacity to think differently about the world in which our students will have to live, and the literary imagination is a fine way to help this to happen. But by the same token, critical awareness of society is equally indispensable, and employing sophisticated social theory is the way toward it. In my own school we like to talk about the two fundamental aims of undergraduate education as leading the student into the most critically sophisticated possible understanding of the complex world in which she lives, and bringing the student to the point where she will continue her career free from the voice of God.

The clearest demand of biblical study upon character comes from its uncertainty. Unless students encounter uncertainty, they have no reason to reason.

At the same time I was exasperated, the Hebrew text of Third Isaiah is often impossible to understand. I had been reading the Bible for 36 years in Hebrew, including all of Isaiah several times. I was nevertheless remedially uncertain about the Bible is so many of its parts. Time and again I was faced with uncertainties of text, vocabulary, and idioms, poetic form, pronoun references, and more. Much is known, and perhaps our understanding grows by increments, but much is still inconclusive, uncertain, or obscure. Intense study of the biblical text leaves one frustrated by its indeterminacy, and at the same time by the glimmers of the church’s everyday use of the Bible, where there is not too much critical thought but too little. For years, I regarded the purpose of my teaching as that of modeling critical reasoning as a way to add to our understanding of the Bible in the face of our inevitable ignorance. I still try to do that. But I have backed up a step. My syllabus now states that the main purpose of an introduction to the Old Testament is to foster inquisitiveness. To study the Bible critically does require knowing things as much as acknowledging there is always something more to know, and our further answers are never any better than our further questions. What students take away from my course is not so much the content, or even particular methods, but a style, a manner of exploration that can assess the critical value of innumerable questions that arise while reading the Bible.

Criticism involves not just the intellect, but also character. I begin my introductory class with a prayer for virtues, or qualities of character, that contribute to critical learning. These include openness, honesty, courage, patience, humility, and sense of humor. I endeavor both to model these qualities and to encourage them in students.

The clearest demand of biblical study upon character comes from its uncertainty. Unless students encounter uncertainty, they have no reason to reason.
Liturical Theology as Critical Practice

Bruce T. Morrill, Boston College

WITH THE PRACTICE of religious rites as its primary subject matter, liturgical theology has long been on a methodological quest to do theology as an argument not only concerning ideas but also drawn from the historically situated praxis of Christian faith. This places liturgical theology in the age-old problem of the relationship between theory and practice.

Given the faith perspective within which liturgical theology operates, theory has a normative dimension and practice, a pastoral character, and an ecclesial nature. This, at times, makes for a volatile mix of ingredients. In attempting to move beyond the study of texts to the actual performance of rites in contexts, the liturgical theologian does not approach the ritual practices of the faithful as an external observer—analyst but, rather, as very much a member—participant. The liturgical theologian’s scholarly work includes a faith commitment to the observed tradition being analyzed, a vocation to promoting the tradition of the church’s sacramental worship.

To teach and write in this way in the contemporary academy poses unavoidable questions. What are the ethical boundaries of this type of academic endeavor, given the practical situation of the actual subject matter? What responsibilities does the theologian have to perform, given the normative dimension of the theoretical pursuit? How can and does the liturgical theologian’s work include a constructive dimension, an effort to make the tradition a living reality by drawing on resources from history to meet the pastoral needs of today? No mere quest for relevance, the liturgical theologian’s passion and sionate desire, as a scholar and believer, to study and theorize about actual practice has required methodological experimentation. Here I shall briefly describe two approaches I have taken as a professor, one with undergraduates and the other in pastoral ministry courses.

For “Exploring Catholicism,” a two-semester course meeting a core requirement for undergraduates at Boston College (a Jesuit—sponsored, Catholic university), I have always structured the second semester in terms of liturgy and ethics. Starting from a study of the Catholic notion of sacramentality, human experience interpreted in terms of the incarnation and mission of Jesus the Christ, we turn to a close examination of the Mass—its current ritual texts, cultural contexts, and historical tradition—as the paradigmatic practice framing such a Roman Catholic interpretation of life. This opens into a sizable term paper project, in which I assign groups of students to attend Sunday liturgies at various parishes of churches (one Roman Catholic, one another Christian denomination) whose specific practices of liturgy, social, ethnic, and economic contexts, and architectural spaces promise plenty for comparison and contrast. I contact staff at all the churches, informing them that some of my students plan on joining their services on certain dates. All have consistently responded warmly. Staff members or greeters are often watching out for the students to welcome them on those mornings, and in some places congregants take the students right into their pew with them.

The overarching theological principle governing the fieldwork and subsequent term paper is that the Second Vatican Council’s teaching in the liturgy Christ is present in the assembled people.

The Parish Context: A Critical Horizon for Teaching and Learning Ethics

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BECAUSE I AM an ethics professor who pastors a church, I do not subscribe to the strict pecking order of theological inquiry and curricula where the “practical” and “applied” things that happen in churches are deemed to have less significance than biblical studies, history, and theology. Instead, it is my view that the parish is the premier social context for moral formation and ethical reflection. I find that key questions and issues that arise in the day-to-day lives of parishioners generate the topics which are of greatest interest to students who are being equipped for leadership and participation in faith communities.

In other words, the parish is not only the arena of applying ethical ideas; it is also a vital source of these ideas. Frequently, I report to my parishioners something my students have said in class, and I readily use examples from my church as illustrations in the classroom. Since the days when I was a pastor in Boston and a doctoral student at Harvard Divinity School, I have viewed the parish as a laboratory for testing ideas first conceived in the library and the classroom. But for me it works both ways: the classroom functions as a gauge for detecting the vitality and the value of the life of the churches, most notably, the commitment to care enough to discern right from wrong. The specific challenge I face as an ethicist, then, is to introduce my students to a moral language for evaluating the ethical perspectives of communities and individuals who bring the basic convictions of Christian faith to bear upon their moral existence.

At the Howard University School of Divinity, where I have been teaching full-time since 1984, we proclaim our key mission by saying Sunday School class. Yet her teacher came prepared every week to teach the lesson, and gave my child her undivided attention without ever complaining that it was a waste of her time to make all that effort for just one kid. Consequently, that one kid learned a lot about caring, commitment, and faithfulness week after week from a teacher whose actions underscored these and other moral lessons illustrated in the Bible.

The ethical practices of Christian churches can be observed in a host of activities beyond teaching and writing, pastoral counseling, for example, is enriched by thoughtful attentiveness to its moral context, especially if the goal of counseling includes empowering the parishioner to make critical decisions and not just to receive and implement the pastor’s good advice. The role of the pastor in conducting weddings and funerals invokes serious testing of the ethics of truth telling. Does the pastor disclose or conceal misgivings concerning the potential incompatibility of a couple presenting themselves for premariual counseling? Regarding funerals, to be sure, one ought never to speak ill of the dead. But when we preach at funeral services, must our obligation to tell the truth divest our eulogies of charity and exegesis?

In the social context of church and community, our mission activities most readily reveal our ethics. Do we really have to love the poor in order to serve them well? Is the intention of our outreach ministries to invite others to reflect ethically upon their own life, or is it rather to make ourselves feel good about the good we have done whether or not it actually...
FIELD EDUCATION prepares ministerial leaders by blending actual ministerial experiences with more traditional academic and theoretical disciplines. This model seeks to develop field education as the administrative work of placing students in situations to develop practical ministry skills. However, new developments in education point to the ways that professionals need to learn a particular type of reasoning in the field. This calls for pedagogical strategies for connecting the development of skills for practice with reasoning about theory.

In a recent New York Times article about changes in law school curricula, for example, William Sullivan, a senior scholar with the Carnegie Foundation, is quoted as saying, "There is a mode of practical reasoning, of reasoning in situations, that requires that knowledge be constructed and reconstructed to deal with the situation at hand." He adds, "And that's the kind of reasoning that good practitioners do." It's something that we know can be taught, but we know it's not taught very much."

Field education leads theological education in developing strategies to do just that: teach the habits of reasoning in situations that prepare ministerial leaders.

In other words, field education is an ideal location for praxis, the dynamic combination of theory and practice brought into educational consciousness by the writings of Paulo Freire. The praxis model sets up multiple occasions in which a student can be mentored for critical thinking. Mentoring in the field is usually regarded as just one piece of teaching reflective practice. Students also need coaching in a classroom setting by a teacher skilled in engaging ministerial practices with critical theories. Field education model embodies the impulse of praxis. We alternate lectures by one of us on key theological doctrines with class discussions of cases. Recently, for example, we had a class lecture on the doctrines of sin. The next class session, we examined the case of a woman locked in a lifetime marriage characterized by physical abuse. The ministry interns we discussed was the occasion of the pastor’s visit to the widow on the death of the abusing husband, and his subsequent missing over what to say at the memorial about the untill-invisible abuse. This enabled us to explore the ways various doctrines of sin helped illuminate the tragic dimensions of the woman’s situation.

Students also explored the ways they might actually talk with the woman about her situation. We are learning that teaching with a praxis model is messy. Students find their own life stories engaged by discussing a class of sixty students from multiple faith traditions, no one perspective is necessarily upheld as the right doctrine or even one approach as correct. But we are convinced that such pedagogy is more likely to produce reflective practitioners, and will also be more likely to lead to the construction of better theologies.

Field education is often named as the crucial tool for accomplishing a wider goal of integrating the curriculum. Another evolving strategy is to engage students in ministerial practice earlier in their studies. At Harvard Divinity School, students are encouraged to enter into field education during their first semester. This is our concrete way of declaring that learning in the ministry situation is an integrated piece of the overall program — the impulse of connecting real-life ministry experiences with classroom learning begins at the initiation of the MDiv and potentially continues throughout the full three-year program. Students at Harvard Divinity School are enrolled concurrently in a Theological Education Program to Rwanda, Kashmir, Guatemala, and Costa Rica. They engaged in ministry in those diverse locations. However, we saw the learning value enhanced by the ways we also took care to build in multiple opportunities for them to reflect on their experiences. For example, I went and visited three of the students in Guatemala, and engaged in critically reflective conversations in the field. Next summer I plan to visit at least two different settings with two other faculty persons. We recognize that we, as faculty persons, will teach crucial reflective skills to students by engaging in such visits. However, we also will find our own teaching styles and assumptions challenged by these visits. The goal of these international placements is not just for students to do ministry, but also for them to learn better ways to engage in caring relationships that are not as bound-ed by cultural assumptions and experiences. We hope that students will be changed and challenged by such opportunities, and also that Harvard Divinity School will grow responsive to these wider engagements in the world.

In conclusion, exciting things are happening within theological education generally, and also within theological field education. We are learning how to build more effectively integrated learning experiences. We are developing new ways to construct theory that take actual ministry situations into account. And we are educating leaders who will be reflective practitioners in emerging ministerial realities.
New Wine in Old Vessels: Enabling Students to Enter an Age-Old Conversation

Norman J. Cohen, Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion

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SPOTLIGHT ON THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION

T HE CORE RABBINIC curriculum of the Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion embodies a holistic approach that integrates text study with professional development and personal spiritual growth. Our role is to ensure that each student has a critical understanding of the texts of our tradition and has the skills to apply them to the challenges of life in a spiritual/religious context. However, the challenge in our seminaries to create a learning environment that achieves the integration of academic rigor, the honing of professional skills, and the cultivation of personal spiritual meaning is huge.

Many of us, even the most committed, view the reading of our traditional texts, including the Bible in particular, as a dispensable, objective exercise. Our sole intent is to use our ana-

lytic skills — linguistic, literary, source-critical, historical — to understand what the biblical writers meant in their day by any particular verse or passage. However, it seems to us that original meaning is not the end-all and be-all of our immersion into the sacred stories of our past, and the dominant reading is not the only possible interpretation of any given piece of text. Even the rabbis of old recognized that there were “70 faces to the Torah,” only the first of which was the original.

Although the biblical text may be finite, its recreation, mediated by the process of interpretation, is infinite. Multiple meanings may be heard resonating within each word when the reader opens himself/herself to a significant way. The text comes alive and operates when the reader and the text become one. The process of recreating the text through interpretation has been compared to the birthing of a child — once the umbilical cord that ties biblical text to a particular time, place, and set of meanings is severed and the text’s existence becomes a fact, it has a life of its own. It grows, expands, and changes due to the interaction with it by readers in every generation. A Midrashim scholar describes this process as the “recontextualizing of the text.”

Yet the attempt to find contemporary meaning in the tradition, if it is to have any authenticity, must be grounded in the tradition itself, in this case the Bible. The starting point, then, in the search for personal meaning is a close critical study. By using all the knowledge we possess of the biblical text (philological, literary, historical, archaological, theological), we can approximate what the writers intended in any given passage. Our task at the outset is to utilize critical scholarship to open up the meaning and power of the text, which only enhances our appreciation of its beauty and applicability.

Since each generation and each reader can draw different meanings from the text, the second task is to filter our sacred stories through the prisms of millennia of interpreters so that we might benefit from their readings. In the course of the past viewed our traditional texts through the lens of the political, religious, and sociocultural conditions under which they lived. Their interpretations, which are contained in our sacred scriptures, are a reflection of their own life situations, many of which inform our current struggles.

The third ultimate challenge is to find the missing story in the text. Reading a sacred text self-involvement and self-reflection, and it is through our own immersion into the text that new meaning sur-

faces. Thus, for example, with every biblical narrative we study, we can learn not only about the text, the characters, and the narrative line, but also about ourselves. In our own interpretations, we respond to our own ques-
tions and dilemmas, and we bring to the fore elements of our own being of which we may not always be conscious.

Entering this age-old conversation is complex. After reading and studying the biblical text closely, paying attention to every lexical element, choice of syntax, narrative structure, theological tradition, and so forth, as well as grammatical, textual, and semantic lacunae, and then seeing how the cumu-

lative tradition interprets any given text, we must wrestle with the sacred stories of Torah. If we are anchored in the traditions of the past, then our modern readings will be built upon a firm foundation, enabling them to be a new link in a chain of interpretation extend-
ing back to Sinai.

There is no more challenging story in the entire Bible than the binding of Isaac (Genesis 22). For each of us, whether we are blessed to be parents or as children of parents, this story poses the most difficult theological questions of our lives. Unfortunately, narrative is so intense that it provides little informa-
tion to help us in our struggle. From the very outset of the story we would like to know more. We are only told that, after receiving God’s command to bring Isaac to one of the mountains in the land of Moriah, Abraham rose early the next morning, saddled his ass, took his two servants, and started out on the road (Genesis 22:3). We know little of their departure, and we are especially aware of Sarah’s silence. Abraham never speaks to her, and we have no idea whether she is aware of what is about to take place. But how can Abraham take the son of her old age away from her, the child she had struggled to con-

ceive and birth, without a word? Is this poignant human question that the rabbis respond in a number of powerful interpretations.

In an eighth-century Midrashic text we read of Abraham’s realization that he has to tell Sarah something, but we have no idea what he is going to say to her. Over a meal that Sarah had prepared to enable them to rejoice in finally having Isaac in their lives, Abraham says that Isaac should already be receiving a religious education (the rabbis impose their model of Torah study on the biblical text). He then mentions a place to which he would like to take him. With her agreement, Abraham arose very early the next morning and set out on the road before Sarah could change her mind.

In a later Midrashic work, the rabbit extends the earlier Midrashic material in a very florid man-

ner. Abraham addresses to Sarah: He who has come for them to provide Isaac with a thor-
ough religious education and suggests that he take him to the Yeshiva of Shem and Ever. Sarah agrees, but in the process she has taken too long, since her soul is bound up with his. Isaac then stays with his mother a long time that night and she holds him and embraces him all day. In the morning, Sarah dresses Isaac, placing a turban on his head, and accom-
panies Abraham and Isaac to the road to see them off. At the moment of separation, amidst many tears, Sarah grabs hold of Isaac and says to him, “Who knows if I will ever see you after this day, my son.”

These biblical extensions, written between approximately 700 and 1,200 years ago, speak directly to each and every one of us. We know this difficult moment of separation of parents from their children. As parents or as children, we have lived through similar scenes in our own families. We can easily recreate this biblical moment by drawing not only upon the earlier Rabbincic texts, but also upon our own life experi-

ences.

When I shared an extension of the Isaac story in an adult education class some years ago, a woman raised her hand and said, “My son is 5 years old and he started school this year. On the first day of class in September, I walked him down to the corner to catch the school bus. We walked slowly and I could not help but squeeze his small hand and hold him close. Then the bus pulled up, the doors opened and he climbed the third stairs with difficulty; walked down the middle aisle and found a seat. I saw him press his face against the windowpane, and tears formed at the corner of his eyes. I started to cry and thought to myself, ‘He’s never com-
ing home.’”

When we confront and immerse ourselves in the texts of the past, we not only learn about the text itself and ourselves, we are often able to come in touch with who we are and who we can become. What we discover is that the text is a mirror onto the world of our own time and place. By entering this age-old conversation we are transformed.

When I first offered my pastoral ethics course at Howard University several years ago, only one student signed up for it. Thankfully, that student was the pastor of one of the largest and most influential Pentecostal congregations in the city and a leading bishop in his denomination, so I learned as much from our directed study as he did. Because this course is not required, however, the class size remains relatively small, which is a blessing and a challenge. In preparing for the mid-year exams, each student must submit one major paper. In addition, all of my rabbis students have already constructed to address the difficult moral dilemmas of our times. I simply want to challenge them to hear and to formulate compelling ethical questions as they cultivate the grace of listening deeply to points of view divergent from their own. In my courses I want them to learn how to read intel-

ligently about moral issues, to engage others through research and dialogue, to make use of information, and experiences, and to broaden their awareness of the social context of ethical analy-

sis and action.

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doing anybody else any good? Through hard ques-
tions like these, pastors must negotiate through murky waters of self-scrutiny and doubt on the journey toward moral clarity in liturgical and social practice.

I am impressed by the fact that ethics curricula abound in almost every profession except the min-

istry. Much of this interest in ethics is moti-

vated by the proliferation of ethical abuses that bring forth not public outcry, and lawsuits, to the point that schools and corporations are protect-

ing themselves by orienting students to ethical standards of professional practice and account-

ability. By contrast, it puzzles me to observe that divinity schools appear not to be nearly as consci-

entious about these matters as medical or busi-

ness schools, notwithstanding the horrific scar-

dals involving clerical sexual abuse in recent years.

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The students know from the outset of the project that students possess a range of levels of religious faith as a lived subject matter. Engaging in two–one–half years of participant observation in this small church, I conducted interviews, collected documents, and took part in worship and other church activities to get a sense of how members understand their call to divinity.

The self-understandings that emerged from my study connected languages pertaining to racism with the language of religious faith, as they intersected with the other social worlds of participants. While biblical and classical theological themes were often invoked to authorize the church’s divinity, they were rarely used without interlinking to racialized subjectivities and color-blindness. Combinations of these, for example, had very different outcomes, depending upon whether employed by African–American members or those designating themselves white. This is because such discourses were linked with other associations that override or shift their original function. I stress terms like “linked” and “shifted” to indicate that the circulating connotations in more complex ways than suggested by the hackneyed image of a unidirectional theology that, as “theory,” causes practice. In relation to racialized cultures of “black” and “white” there seems to be a neutral theological language that did not do racialized work, even when only implicit.

Ethnographic attention to the densities of faith involves potential challenges for normative theology. First is the obvious challenge that theology grants an authoritarian stance to religious discourse; so the language used by believers only when they refer to God. Constructively this poses the problem, already made by congregational studies scholars, e.g., whether marked as such or not, much of the activity of Christians is “theological.” In my study not only was the “secular” language of color–blindness important to trace, but many of the nonreligious practices of the community became more important than explicitly religious activities for bridging racial differences.

Ethnographic research surfaces to transgress the paradox of language and the cultural theological function of many behaviors that are not marked as ecclesial. A second challenge to the so-called “black” emerged as revived forms of discomfort and visection that did not completely surface in their narratives, e.g., white members’ complaints that the church was “too black.” Such research implies that bodily enucleations and interactions matter as much as discourse. This raises the question of how a notion of “tradition” might recognize deeply embedded bodily practices that are constitutive of a society’s identity. If we are shaped by markers of cultural “othering” as by inscribed memory, constructs of tradition repay attention to their bodily and affective dimensions.

To teach theology in a way that takes lived faith more seriously is quite a challenge. I teach a course on prophetic ministry that tries to do this. Subtitled “Creating Communities of Justice” the course requires students to participate in a setting that can be characterized as a site for prophetic ministry. Although minimal training is provided in ethnographic method, the assignment requires students to interview participants in these settings with the aim of discerning the community’s self-understanding and its implicit “moral languages.” Any and all practices are to be considered pertinent to such ministry. Since some of the settings are not explicitly religious, this forces students to hear ordinary languages in a new way and take them seriously. They also begin to understand that “theological” and “church” refer to much broader and messier social realities than the familiar “church vs. world” paradigm would suggest.

I include a more complex assignment in a course on practical theology, a field with considerable support for ethnographic work. Here the aim is to enhance students’ understanding of the interplay of theology and practice along several dimensions: the generation of the propositional discourse, the social location of the interpreter and the situation under scrutiny, and how such realities matter for theology’s strategic response to a situation. The students are to take an issue of vital importance, articulate their own understandings of it, and theselves interpret it in one of the chapels on the campus. The rest of the class members take the role of the worshiping assembly. All enter into the event as if it were an actual pastoral occurrence. Indeed, students often report that in the enactment they have what they refer to as genuine faith experiences, moments of deepened awareness of the importance of scriptures and tradition in relation to situations that are difficult for them. In this performative work in class, I believe, makes all the difference between students struggling to grasp the histories, theologies, and ritual forms presented to them through books and lectures, and their being grasped by the power and pastoral promise of the rites in action.

Such a performative approach to the academic study of liturgy is not unlike the classroom work of the late Victor Turner, who had graduate students in his courses at the University of Chicago and the University of Virginia assume roles in rituals so that the class members might acquire a certain type of knowledge of the rituals — their cognitive and affective impact on the participants and on the social group as a whole; the personal influence of ritual performance and its wider environment; the ritual experience of time and memory; the necessity of narrative in the doing and recounting of ritual, etc. — that could not be obtained by means of words about them. Turner laid out a methodological rationale for such performance–active work on anthropological courses, arriving at a theory of concentric frames delineating the social field of the performance practiced, one of which articulates the function being undertaken as play. The latter, far from being a pejorative term indicating a lack of seriousness or academic rigor, establishes the agreed upon boundaries in which the exercise takes place, affording the opportunity for insight into the ritual to emerge freely. I consider my own goals for performing rites within my liturgical theology courses to be similar.

In a course on preaching from the Bible that I have taught for many years, together with a church pastor and a homiletics professor, the first exercise requires students to choose a brief passage from a gospel and, after studying it for a few minutes, to stand before the class, read it out loud, and complete the sentence “What this passage makes me wonder is . . . .” That is all. Students are not expected to provide an answer or solution or resolution for their query, but to value the discovery of what is not known. When preaching from the Bible, there is no reason to pretend to greater certainty than when studying the Bible, the body can probably answer questions; but certainty is not what criticism is about.

Critical study assumes the ability to reason, which cannot be taken for granted in theological education today. It is not a skill that is different for biblical studies than for other theological disciplines.

Criticism starts by doubting that I understand. Students may find such doubt regarding the Bible uncomfortable for their faith, or even immoral. I don’t deny the perceived dilemma. To suggest otherwise, then, I quote Anne Lamott: “The opposite of faith is not doubt. It is certainty of misbelief.”