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Teaching Critical Thinking and Praxis

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Teaching Critical Thinking and Praxis

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From the Editor's Desk

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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 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 siren who lures other discourses toward their inherent crisis, in the hope of metanoia.

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 culture 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 reconstructing existing theological traditions. Each author argues that existing traditions must be analyzed and reconstructed against a horizon of interpretation that is both vital 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. Yust describes the role of critical thinking in the formation of religious imagination and engagement. And Stassen builds historical and ethical criteria into a theological framework that he calls "incarnational trinitarianism."

The next four essays explore how theological studies adapt discipline–based definitions of critical thinking. Lakeland explains how social and critical theory reshape theology as a reflection on faith praxis in a given context. Fulkerson discusses how the teaching of ethnography reorients theological reflection toward the contextual, local, and practical. Ross relates how womanist and feminist critique helps deconstruct, broaden, and reinterpret existing theological practices and assumptions. And Coote employs communications 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

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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 this about 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 destructive 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 a 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 various kinds of literature 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 Bonaventure, 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 possible. I do my best, therefore, to present each figure or idea with as much enthusiasm and passion as I can, which can initially give students the misleading impression 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 personally 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 disagreed with one another." In response to her comment, I said, "You correctly understood the purpose of the course." Critical thinking requires the ability to see things from another person's perspective and a willingness to entertain all the possible sides of an argument. For this reason, I only rarely disclose my own theological commitments when teaching theology so as not to make disciples of students. I want to teach students 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 exegesis 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 measured 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.

> *"The subject matter of theology concerns ordinary human life and experience in the world, including how persons evaluate and make sense of their lives."*

Augustine's interpretations of human nature, for example, including his insistence that both reason and will are determined by what the heart loves, are subject to testing by other disciplines such as biology 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, initially 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 ordinary human life and experience in the world, including how persons evaluate and make sense of their lives. I try to make as many connections between theological concepts and personal examples from my experience or those of others so as to illuminate what it is that the theologians are talking about in their technical language. As I write these words, the task of next week's lecture is weighing on my mind: how to explain what Thomas Aquinas says about grace and merit. He makes many distinctions that can easily baffle the uninitiated. When, however, the scholastic form of his argument is clarified, and students learn how to read an article of the *Summa Theologiae*, his ideas become really quite simple to comprehend. So a lot of my teaching involves the attempt to show my students that, in the final analysis, they, too, can become good theologians if they are willing to put their minds to the task of thinking deeply about their own experiences with the realities to which the words "grace" and "merit" point.

What encourages me the most in my teaching is to observe students as they begin to realize not only how brilliant the great theologians of the past were but also how profound and illuminating their ideas remain for interpreting human life. Some of my students in this progressive seminary come to their study of theology with a bias against the traditions of the church on account of their patriarchal and homophobic character. This is understandable, but it is important to get students to see past these blind spots in the theological traditions for the sake of grasping what makes them worth studying even today. Two quotations 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 tradition to be the property of traditionalists whose only desire is a repristination 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 transmit the tradition faithfully, but also to put it in the form we think will prove best." In every generation, responsible theology is engaged in a critical sifting 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. RSN

Reenacting Ancient Pedagogy in the Classroom

Marjorie Lehman, Jewish Theological Seminary

Marjorie Lehman is Assistant Professor of Talmud and Rabbinics at the Jewish Theological Seminary. Her scholarly interests are focused on the Ein Yaakov*, an early sixteenth-century collection of Talmudic Aggadah, and she is presently engaged in completing a book about the contributions of its anthologizer, Jacob ibn Habib. Lehman is known for continuous self–reflection and writing about pedagogy. Her article "For the Love of Talmud: Reflections on the Study of* Bava Metzia, Perek 2*" appeared in the* Journal of Jewish Education *(2002). "The Babylonian Talmud in Cognitive Perspective: Reflections on the Nature of the Bavli and Its Pedagogical Implications" appeared in the* Journal of Jewish Education *(2003). Lehman has also done research on the study of women and festival observance in the Babylonian and Palestinian Talmudim. A preliminary article appeared in* Studies in Jewish Civilization 14: Women and Judaism *(Creighton University Press, 2003) and is titled "Women and Passover Observance: Reconsidering Gender in the Study of Rabbinic Texts." A second article, "The Gendered Rhetoric of the Sukkah," appeared in* Jewish Quarterly Review *(Summer 2006). An examination of the use of gender theory as a pedagogical tool in the classroom, titled "Rediscovering 'Women' in the Talmudic Corpus: The Impact of Gender Studies on the Teaching of Talmudic Literature," appeared in the* Journal of Jewish Education *(2006). Contact:* malehman@jtsa.edu.

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 allowed the reactions of the students to predominate in class discussions. He preferred to hear my reactions to the text as the teacher/expert and not those of his amateur classmates. "We could be moving faster through the material," he argued, "if only you lectured more." It became clear to me that listening to his classmates engaged in a debate about a text's meaning thwarted his ability to emerge with the interpretation at the end of a class session and made him struggle too much in his search for clarity. No doubt, our classroom dialogues left him frustrated. In response to his question I asked him to think about the nature of the texts that he was required to prepare each week from the Babylonian Talmud (*Bavli*). I then informed him that I would address his concerns within the classroom as I assumed he was not the only entering student uncomfortable with my pedagogical approach.

When I opened up conversation in class the next day on the character of the *Bavli,* my students articulated their impression of it as a unique document unlike any literary work produced during its time or thereafter. Certainly, there was no document the students could remember studying that was similar to it. They recognized that its unusual character was born from the distinct style of dialogue utilized by its redactors to weave together an array of disparate sources from different time periods. These redactors created a text in which voices of different generations were presented as communicating with one another. The students also acknowledged that in the *Bavli* positions were challenged and undermined on a consistent basis; strings of attacks and counterattacks were the building blocks of each Talmudic passage and they lent a great deal of instability to the individual points of view proposed throughout its pages. Moreover, beyond the sheer dialogical nature of the *Bavli* they also noted how common it was to find within its argumentative framework ambiguous, tangential, and elliptical statements that disrupted the linear development they expected to see. Students then noted how surprising it was for a seminal religious text to exhibit such volatility instead of a well–defined religious vision. Indeed, their frustrations began with the text itself.

What I wanted my students to recognize was that the *Bavli* proposed a type of pedagogy within its passages that demanded analytic thought at a most intense and "laser–sharp" pitch. There was a consistent attempt on the part of the redactors of the *Bavli* not only to model a type of questioning that would consume and deconstruct the objects of its discussions, but that would also provoke continuous questioning amongst those who studied its contents. Just as the *Bavli* continuously talked back to itself, its readers were expected to do the same. They were to be in dialogue with a text that was already in dialogue with itself and engage each other regarding its meaning both inside the classroom as well as outside the classroom walls when they each prepared in a traditional study pair called a *havruta*. I reminded the students that the *Bavli* has set in motion an ideology of hermeneutic debate that has organized and informed the daily life of the Jewish community for centuries (Steiner 1985). Therefore, I asked my students, "Why shouldn't this type of analytical thought, revolving as it does around the model of communal debate, also inform your preparation and our classroom framework? If a dialogic interpretive practice is historically at the heart of Jewish identity, why not swim with the tide rather than against it by adopting pedagogical practices that are consonant with what it represents? Why shouldn't teacher and student enter such a dialogue as participants in a process that is as ancient as the Talmud itself?"

My decision to inscribe Talmudic dialectic into my pedagogic practice has been driven by more than a desire for students to find a way to integrate what they have learned with their own identities as Jews within the framework of their seminary education. To be sure, my own successes in the classroom support the observations of a host of contemporary educational theorists, sociocognitive psychologists, philosophers, and semioticians who have argued that there is a strong relationship between the social aspect of education and the production of knowledge. For example, John Dewey (1971) underscored that what makes education intrinsically moral is its social dimension. For Dewey, the classroom was a community of inquiry; the social interactions that were natural to the school environment were necessary to the educational process. Parker Palmer (2007) has argued that our knowledge of the world requires an interactive community that gathers around a subject in a complex and dialogical manner. Sociocognitive psychologists, including Lev Vygotsky and Irving Sigel, have noted that while knowledge is developed individually, most of what we learn is achieved communally, within patterns of relationships. Knowledge is not merely transmitted from one individual to another, that is, from teacher to student. Rather, it emerges from a shared interpersonal engagement around jointly understood problems. Cognitive development depends upon interactive processes (Hausfather 1996: Kozulin 1998; Sigel 1993; Sigel and Kelly 1988; Wertsch 1985). The semioticians Yu. M. Lotman and Mikhail Bakhtin, who posit that every text possesses a "dialogic function," treat all texts as contributions to a dialogue that continuously invites further response and, therefore, as "members" (so to speak) of the learning community (Lotman 1988; Katz 2006; Kress and Lehman 2003; Wertsch and Smolka 1993). In other words, the text and the individual are seen by them as existing in a relationship with the same cognitive development sequelae as those of relationships among people. No doubt, the observations of these scholars only heighten the significance of the contributions made by the redactors of the Talmud over fifteen hundred years ago to our sense of what qualifies as good teaching and what good teaching accomplishes. Once the attainment of knowledge becomes a social process, as the rabbis initially proposed, it never becomes something absolute or universal (Foster, et. al., 2006, 78). Rather, it evolves over time in a continuous and multidirectional fashion.

It is also the case that a dialogical style of teaching invites diversity, creates conflict, promotes disorder, and embraces ambiguity within the classroom setting. A teacher can be contradicted, multiple interpretations can co–exist, and there can, at times, be more confusion than clarity, just as my student felt during the first few weeks of our class. However, the reality is far different. Students eventually learn that the subject of our discussion is not confined by what the teacher has to say about it (Palmer 2007, 120). Within this context they develop the confidence to assert their own opinions. They learn to listen and to accept the ideas of others because they have watched their teacher reframe her own observations based on their input. The notion of an expert and an amateur sitting across from one another disintegrates.

But more important is the fact that ambiguous texts and diverse interpretations, while disorienting, sharpen the interpretive sensibilities of the students. Elizabeth Shanks Alexander (2002) has argued in her comments on bSuk 51b–52a that the ambiguity characteristic of the literary art of the *Bavli* intentionally creates dramatic tension on the part of its readers heightening their curiosity and prompting them to engage the text more deeply. The same occurs in the classroom when one student's question complicates rather than clarifies an observation made by another. Such discrepancies provoke more questions and more discussion. And whether some conclusion is actually reached or several acceptable answers are put forth by the students the twists and turns in the discussion reflect the difficulty we all face in trying to conceptualize vast ideas that are often at the root of theological study.

Indeed, the *Bavli*'s text is uniquely structured in a way that reflects a commitment to the interpersonal construction of knowledge. Its pedagogy makes me the fortunate recipient of a teaching task where the nature of what I teach coheres with the culture in which I teach it at the Jewish Theological Seminary. But this type of Talmudic pedagogy has also forced me to look beyond the idea that teaching is about the construction of a neat cognitive scaffolding. Without sacrificing rigor in the name of "classroom conversation" I have come to realize that there is a redeeming value in the confusion that ensues when a group of students try to help one another make sense of an idea. The joint effort required transforms them into an active community of learners where I become part of the circle that they helped me to construct. They confirm the benefits of an ancient pedagogy that, because of its interactive nature, has the ability to take me and them by surprise at any moment with an array of existential applications and interpretive illuminations.

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Forming a Critical Imagination

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THE LANGUAGES of critical thinking and religious imagination run through various literatures of theological education. Often, critical thinking is associated with fields traditionally identified with theoretical analysis: biblical studies, systematic theology, ethics, and history. We view the tasks of exegesis, theological debate, cultural critique, values assessment, and historical interpretation as primarily rational operations, a parsing of concepts and their logical implications for religious communities. We presuppose that certain intellectual traits, such as an ability to clearly and precisely define and defend one's position, underlie work in these areas. Critical thinking is a guard against a religious life and leadership based on unfounded, untested, and blatantly biased ideas. It requires seminarians to pause, analyze, and evaluate their tradition and its claims.

The language of religious imagination appears 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 presume 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 "vision" and "inspiration," which serve as guards against a reduction of religious life and leadership to conformity with historic ideals and patterns.

Critical thinking and religious imagination both belong in theological education. Yet our bifurcated assignment of them to particular areas of study deepens the gulf between the so–called systematic and practical fields and exacerbates the gap seminarians experience between their work in the classroom and their ministries in congregations and communities. What theological education needs is a concept and practice of "critical imagination" that draws the primary approaches of the systematic and practical arenas into conversation. Without such conversation, theological educators and students will continue to struggle with the best construction of relationships between biblical exegesis and sermon illustrations, cultural criticism and educational events, eschatology and pastoral visitation, and historic creeds and liturgical practices.

John Eusden and John Westerhoff, in *Sensing Beauty: Aesthetics, the Human Spirit, and the Church* (1998), write:

> All learning depends on the ability to image, to picture both accurately and imaginatively. We can deceive ourselves if we do not image accurately the way things appear, but we also need to be able to perceive what is not visible — to vision, to see, to picture with the imagination. All learning and growth depend on the combination of these abilities. . . . (83)

Obtaining an accurate picture of a tradition and the cultural contexts in which it has been and continues to be lived out is a prime task for critical thinking. Learning to perceive that which is as yet a dim reflection in the mirror of faith is an obvious task for religious imagination. But what if we approached both of these exercises with a pair of theological bifocals on, engaging in a critical reading of both traditional texts and visionary images and also casting our eyes upward to catch a glimpse of the undocumented aspects of history, the passion of a revered theologian, or the ambiguity of a familiar sacred text? That would be the work of critical imagination.

The authors of *Educating Clergy* (Foster, et. al., 2006) took several steps in this direction when they identified four pedagogies (interpretation, formation, contextualization, and performance) involved in the theological education of religious leaders. One might be tempted, based on colloquial definitions, to categorize the pedagogies of interpretation and contextualization as essentially critical thinking approaches and those of formation and performance as prime venues for religious imagination. However, the case studies identified by the authors defy neat categories. The practices of a biblical scholar as well as two practical theologians exemplify pedagogies of formation. A homiletics professor stands beside professors of Talmudic studies and moral theology in the discussion of pedagogies of interpretation. A church historian and a liturgist provide cases for reflection on pedagogies of performance. The examples related to pedagogies of contextualization fall only on one side of the theoretical–practical divide, and two of those three cases come from the field of ethics, which frequently crosses over from theory into practice. The cases explored in *Educating Clergy* (Foster, et. al., 2006), then, strongly suggest the possibility of teaching practices in all theological disciplines that transgress the stereotypical boundaries of critical thinking and religious imagination.

However, an instructor's decision to cultivate critical imagination by strategies that integrate critical thinking skills and imaginative exercises still leaves 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 theoretical 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, we practice *lectio divina* (holy reading) with a set of critical texts: a comment by T. Hartley Hall on learning as a means of responsible discipleship; a reflection by Simone Weil on the usefulness of school 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 *Evangelical Theology* (1983), in which he declares, "Prayer without study would be empty. Study without prayer would be blind" (171).

> *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.*

In addition to listening for the text that piques their imagination in the first movements of *lectio*, students reflect communally on four questions in relation to the particular 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 the character of attention given to studies relate to the character of attention to God in prayer? 3) How might your reading of class texts in theology, Bible, history, and/or ethics invite you to pose new questions to God or move in sympathetic response to God? 4) 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 this time pondering theological education as a spiritual discipline becomes eager 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. They begin to dwell in seminary 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 design an assigned 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 tandem 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 unrealistic 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 nurture and ministry skills and 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 suspicious of 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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Critical Thinking and Prophetic Witness, Historically–Theologically Based

Glen H. Stassen, Fuller Theological Seminary

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IN OUR TIME of pluralistic encounter with multiple ideologies and faiths, people search for what Bonhoeffer called ground to stand on. Fearing we are losing our grounding leads some to reactionary authoritarianism, with its militarism and nationalism, that my ancestors left pre–fascist Germany to get away from, and that we see now in the religious right, and in al Qaeda. We need to help students find ground to stand on with normative richness, but without being authoritarian.

Though I was influenced from the start by H. Richard Niebuhr's wrestle with historical relativism and so was a postmodernist before the term was invented, criticizing the Enlightenment's "universalistic" rationalism from my dissertation on, my identification with Bonhoeffer and the Confessing Church Struggle gives me the willies when I see some doing their ethics in pure reaction against the Enlightenment — as pre–fascist philosophers in Germany did (Stern 1974). In reaction they threw out contributions of free–church Puritanism — the right to religious liberty, human rights, and democracy — because the Enlightenment later affirmed them. They lusted for homogeneous community — which requires authoritarianism to maintain.

Though my loyalties and experiences make me an opponent of authoritarianism and racism deep, deep down, I do not want students to do their ethics so in reaction against authority that they dissolve faith into privatistic normlessness, situationism, freedom as individualistic autonomy, avant–gardism, or inward emigration out of covenant responsibility for the common good. I share with many feminists a criticism of Enlightenment rationalism, but also a need for transcultural norms of justice with which to criticize power structures and status–quo ideologies.

But how shall we ground an ethic that is neither authoritarian nor merely subjective? In our time, when students are aware that we are all shaped by our history, "where we are coming from," validation works best by historical testing. We cannot claim a universal location above history, but we can assess the historical fruits of ethics people have lived by. I adopt H. Richard Niebuhr's advocacy of "history as the laboratory in which our faith is tested." In *Kingdom of God in America*, Niebuhr looked for times of prophetic lava flow when American churches didn't merely accommodate to social forces, but were authentically transformationist: early Puritanism before it cooled into defensiveness, the Great Awakenings, and the social gospel.

We can carry his method further by examining times of testing when most all agree who passed the historical test. The Third Reich is one such time. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Karl Barth, and André Trocmé came through. In *Righteous Gentiles of the Holocaust*, David Gushee studied those who rescued Jews while others were bystanders or Hitler–supporters. Parush Parushev's dissertation studies the faith of those who led Bulgaria to rescue all their Jews (2005).

Another such time of testing is the U.S. civil rights movement. In "Letter from Birmingham Jail," Martin Luther King Jr. challenges those white church leaders who sat on the sidelines. Even some black church leaders had an otherworldly faith, or were too beholden to the power structures to support the movement. In his *Beloved Community: How Faith Shapes Social Justice*, Charles Marsh shows King and others coming through, and also white Southern Baptist Clarence Jordan, and more recently John Perkins (2005).

Johannes Hamel, Albrecht Schönherr, and others came through during the Revolution of the Candles that toppled East German dictator Eric Honecker, and the Wall, completely nonviolently. The leaders of that movement were disciples of Bonhoeffer and Barth. Similarly, Dorothy Day, Muriel Lester, Ronald Sider, and Jim Wallis have passed the test in the face of ideologies that support economic injustice.

I am struck that those who passed these historical tests had the three themes in their faith that I call "incarnational trinitarianism" (Stassen, Yeager, and Yoder 1996).

Three caveats:

1) "Incarnational trinitarianism" is not merely an affirmation of the doctrine of the Trinity. Many affirm that doctrine, but fail the test of history.

2) H. Richard Niebuhr experienced a major problem in his theology in the 1950s; his writing then lacked a crucial dimension of incarnational trinitarianism, and his prophetic edge weakened strikingly — but temporarily (Stassen, Yeager, and Yoder 1996).

3) In *Righteous Gentiles*, Gushee concludes that social influences and personal propensities are not a sufficient explanation; we need attention to the theological-ethical content of their faith to understand how these heroes of the faith came through. My own study of the other test periods leads me to concur.

Incarnational Trinitarianism

In my course on Dietrich Bonhoeffer's theological ethics, we contrast Martin Doblemeier's film, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, with "Theologians under Hitler," (available from Steven D. Martin at *smartin@vitalvisions.org*). Then students perform a readers' theater I wrote, asking "Why did Bonhoeffer stand up, when others ducked their responsibility?"

The Incarnate Jesus 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 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 Trinity teaches that the real God is revealed concretely in the way of the incarnate Jesus (2002). Barth, Bonhoeffer, Trocmé, Day, Lester, Wallis, and Sider all have a concrete hermeneutic of Jesus's way (Gushee and Stassen).

The Holy Spirit and Continuous Repentance: Bonhoeffer involved himself in an African–American Baptist church in Harlem, in dialogues with French pacifist Jean Lassere, and in the world church. He learned to distinguish Christian loyalty sharply from nationalism, as does the Barmen 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 Barmen 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, an Ethiopian eunuch, and even Gentiles ignorant of the faith of Israel, so the gospel would be unhindered by narrow loyalties.

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 Barmen 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 churches that succumbed to Hitler's pressures had previously rejected human rights and the democracy 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 Anabaptist 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 stood 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 Cornel 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 adds 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):

Holistic sovereignty of God throughout all of life, correcting Platonic–idealistic private–public dualisms. Churches as multilingual witness–mission.

Independence of the Holy Spirit, from all powers & authorities. Christlike transforming power. Holistic doctrine of sin; Checks & balances against all concentrated power. Churches regularly repenting from rationalizing ideologies.

God Revealed incarnationally, thickly, historically–realistically, in Jesus of Nazareth. The reign of God fulfills Isaiah's prophecy. Incarnational theory of atonement. Churches with practices faithful to Jesus Christ.

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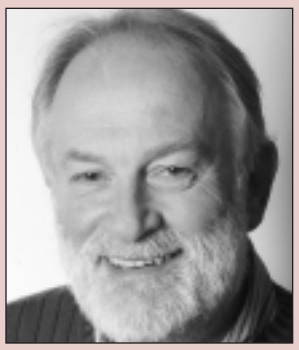
Social Theory as a Critical Resource

Paul Lakeland, Fairfield University



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TEACHING RELIGIOUS studies to undergraduates who are not majors — something I do some of the time — would be unimaginable without the use of social theory. Studying religion as a social force or a cultural movement is all but impossible without some organized critical purchase on what has shaped and is shaping our society and our world. In the end, religious studies is more or less a social science, and naive realism in the social sciences is or should be disappearing over the intellectual horizon. Social theory in my religious studies classroom of 25 or so traditional–age and overwhelmingly Catholic students is not an issue. It's part of any social science discipline.

But theology, with which I spend the other half of my classroom time, is a different animal, maybe even a whole zoo! What can social theory possibly have to do with this presumably intrareligious "discipline," if that's the word, that lives and breathes the heady air of divine revelation? Here lies the initially remedial work of theological education. The undergraduate beginner may know full well that philosophy or astrophysics is a discipline about which s/he knows nothing. The difference with beginning theology is that most everyone thinks s/he knows what religion is, and knows that theology is "thinking about religion." Dispelling these illusions is propaedeutic to theology. In fact, "theology" itself, that which is to be taught, is the skill of reflecting on the life and act of faith. In itself, this does not require any in–depth knowledge of the history or the taxonomy of the academic study of religion. The life of faith and the act of faith, however broadly construed, are the focus of the undergraduate theology classroom. The performance of a life of faith is a mysterious and humbling process to observe, and a challenging and even troubling posture to attempt. It is not in the end clarified either as a social phenomenon or as a personal commitment through knowing the history of theology or being able to read Greek or Hebrew. On the other hand, its curiously "productive noncontemporaneity" (a phrase of J. B. Metz) is put into much sharper relief to the degree that we and our students have exercised the utmost sophistication in the analysis and critique of the society in which we or the object of our inquiry actually live. And here is where a sound grasp of critical social theory is revealed as the postmodern handmaid of theology.

One cannot, of course, just launch into "doing theology." The required obliqueness of good theological reflection in the undergraduate classroom arises from the fact that most if not all the students have no background skills in philosophy and social theory when they come to the study for the first time. In terms of technique this usually means that the instructor must somehow back into the narrowly theological topics. Certainly, this is what I try to do myself, beginning — as they say — where the students are and moving on from there. Nature and grace, justification, predestination, salvation by faith and/or works, all such topics are just a latter–day Slough of Despond when approached directly with the average 19–year old. Inviting them to talk about themselves, their peers, and their world, however, is a far easier task and one that leads directly into social analysis. From this point it is not far to a genuine social theory.

The critical social theories I mostly employ myself are those of Hegel and Marx, with a good dose of the Frankfurt School (especially the later, liberated Habermas), perhaps because much if not all of my teaching is a reflection of my preference for liberation theologies. Even if I were not a fellow–traveler with real liberation theologians, I hope I would have the sense to see that the "hermeneutical circle" approach first employed in the work of the Uruguayan theologian Juan Luis Segundo is a perfect tool for making the link between life, social theory, and theological reflection, particularly when tempered by Gustavo Gutierrez's classic put–down, "theology comes after." For Segundo, the starting point (always merely epistemological in any circular process, of course) is daily life in its unexamined complexity, but nothing of moment happens without the immediate introduction of "critical reflection on praxis" (again, Gutierrez's definition of theology) that requires the adoption of critical social theory. In the base Christian community, this social theory is surely mostly unthematized as the faithful but often unschooled people uncover the depth-structures of Marxist theory in a Freirean awareness of their structural oppression. In other words, though this would certainly be unacceptable to the Vatican and Cardinal Ratzinger in 1984, liberation theology didn't so much teach Marxism as it simply confirmed the truth of Marxist analysis.

The implicit critical social theories of the base Christian communities have to become conscious objects of exploration in the theology classroom. This is obviously easier to do where the subject can uncover oppressive social structures in his or her own community. Affluent young Catholics in the Northeast cannot immediately do this in ways that poor

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Ethnography as Critical Theological Resource

Mary McClintock Fulkerson, Duke Divinity School

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THE COMMON STRUCTURE of theological education implies that one learns "real theology" by studying classic texts, then figures out how to "apply" these truths in some practical course. Theology becomes a kind of language with an inherently correct grammar. Like linguistic structuralism, which ignores the social conditions of language formation, such a view implies that theology's purpose is the regulation of faithful living (speaking) by reproducing a preexistent 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 liberative 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 theologies are capable of offering monolithic accounts of the function of tradition. Even as liberation theologies correct systematics 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 pushed me 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 interest in this "more" that has directed me to the rich research strategies of ethnography.

> *"Ethnographic attention to the densities of faith involves potential challenges for normative theology."*

Primarily associated with cultural and social anthropology, ethnography has been appropriated 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. How 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 is an exploration made possible by ethnographic work. Ethnography provides an important contextualization of

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Contextualizing Womanist/Feminist Critical Thought and Praxis

Rosetta E. Ross, Spelman College

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TEACHING RELIGIOUS studies at historically black Spelman women's college presents an opportunity to interrogate the meaning of theological education from the perspective of womanist and feminist studies. Founded in 1881, Spelman is part of both the Emancipation–Reconstruction narratives of blacks in the United States and North/South colonization projects of the late nineteenth century. Spelman's origin was as one of the institutions founded by "home" missionaries sent to the southern United States to help secure the status of formerly enslaved persons after the Civil War. Originally named Atlanta Baptist Female Seminary, Spelman College began in the basement of Friendship Baptist Church as a school for "freed women."

Unlike practical and classical study prevalent in majority women's institutions of the era, an important element of Spelman's early curriculum and global missionary activities was to Christianize persons missionaries encountered. Spelman founders Sophia B. Packard and Harriet E. Giles wrote in 1883 to the American Baptist Home Mission Society: "It is very essential that these colored people shall be Christianized as well as educated. . . . Hence the importance of schools where the Bible is taught daily, and constant attention is paid to morality, truthfulness, and honesty." The emphasis on morality at a black women's college carried the additional baggage of questioning black women's "decency" within a larger discourse labeling African Americans as lascivious. Notwithstanding the benefit black persons derived from "home" missionary efforts, scholarship on late nineteenth–century "freed" 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 became intertwined with a deeply racialized discourse about black acceptability and respectability. Many European Americans as well as African Americans perpetuated this view through educational institutions established during this era.

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 at Spelman of seeing education as a 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 global 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 challengingly 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 conventional scholarly traditions, womanist and feminist scholars develop new pedagogies and epistemologies through which formerly marginalized persons become noncommodified subjects of mainstream knowledge production. Sometimes this work focuses primarily on the history, roles, and experiences of women; other times it entails diverse research and study that strengthens the broad range of scholarship through the embrace of critical, inclusive scholarly practices.

On the one hand, emphases 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 experience from academic discourse. Women of color scholars, lesbian scholars, and scholars from working–class backgrounds have helped ensure that women's studies itself reflects the diversity of women's thought and experience. On the other hand, the women's movement and other social movements that broaden academic discourse are effecting review of the content and methodologies used across academic disciplines. The once almost–exclusive emphasis on mastery of "classical" texts as the whole meaning of higher education is giving way to broadening the canon of classical texts and to integrating praxis into pedagogical strategies. In the study of religions, the influence of womanist and feminist thought expands traditional perspectives about the academic field of inquiry to include material as well as ideal realms, and to relate both with regard to women's experiences across the broad range of global contexts and religious traditions. Discerning how to meet the challenge of making this global reality meaningful in the local context of local classrooms where religions are studied is the point at which new womanist and feminist pedagogies emerge and is one place where critical thinking and praxis connect in the academy.

> *"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."*

Connecting the Global and the Local in Womanist and Feminist Pedagogies

At the level of the general religious studies curriculum at Spelman, using womanist and feminist pedagogies has meant overcoming the view that the study of Christianity constituted the study of religions and instituting a curriculum that engages the comparative study of religions. This includes the regular study of various religions, including African-derived traditions, Islam, Eastern religious traditions, Christianity, and Judaism, while considering diverse ways globalization brings new challenges to various notions of orthodoxy. In specific courses, students complete the study of a range of religious traditions as well as an examination of diverse historic and contemporary expressions and practices within these traditions. Para–curricular colloquiums and other programs include student engagement with scholars of religion representing Native–American feminist, Latina, Asian, and other cultural and religious contexts.

Perhaps most important in the challenge womanist and feminist pedagogies bring to the study of religions at Spelman College is the necessity to address the colonial legacy of Christianity particularly within African–American communities. This includes interrogating the irony that the religious tradition widely seen in the colonial era as a means of helping to subordinate black persons persists not only as the tradition in which the overwhelming majority of U.S. blacks who identify themselves as religious participate, but also as a principal means of informing black identity. In view of the racialized colonial discourse embedded in narratives of Christianity in the colonial imagination, as Andrea Smith has observed, to be Christian is to be white. Consequently, the study of Christian traditions at Spelman College explores the colonial legacy of Christianity among Africans enslaved in the United States.

In my teaching of Christian studies, the challenging and deconstructionist impulses of womanist and feminist thought inform the content and teaching methodologies of my courses. Critical thinking about Christian traditions is structured through assignments that 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 like churchwoman and civil rights activist Septima Clark who said of her once-enslaved father "they had *Christianized* him." While reading texts such as 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 texts. The study of womanist and feminist "theology" integrates the challenge through interdisciplinary, cross–cultural, and religiously diverse readings. In this course, as 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 experiences, both of which are important to womanist and feminist studies. 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 discourses 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 academy 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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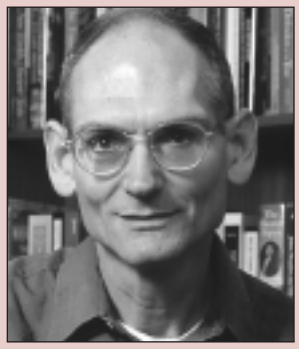
Critical Perspective in Biblical Studies

Robert Coote, San Francisco Theological Seminary and the Graduate Theological Union



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IN NEARLY 40 YEARS of teaching, I have gone through many ways of regarding criticism. Lately I have used communication theorist David Zarefsky's account of argumentation to define it. For Zarefsky, to be critical is to make provisional judgments before an audience about matters that are significant but uncertain, by use of evidence and reasoning, in the common pursuit of truth or good decision, with a willingness to run the risk of being wrong.

Criticism is not all–sufficient, it is not autonomous, and it is not absolute. With reason on the defensive in theological education, these obvious qualifications must be clearly stated at the outset. I have posted the following quote on the corkboard next to my office door for several years: *Qui rationem in omnibus quaerunt rationem subvertunt*, "to seek reason in all things is to subvert reason." The object of reason is limited. The reasoning subject — you and I — is no less limited, by enculturation, experience, and feeling. However criticism is not solipsistic, unlike many of today's "Bible studies." The public and cooperative aspects of argumentation put the limitations of our individual views in perspective. With respect to method, criticism is inherently rhetorical, serving to persuade rather than to prove. And to understand the Bible critically we have to look at not only the Bible's past but also our own present.

In order to take the Bible seriously on its own terms, critical reason is essential because of the nature of the Bible as a vast and composite ancient text. Reading it involves many complexities and ambiguities. Three years ago, when her book, *The Trouble with Islam,* came out in the United States, Muslim author Irshad Manji was asked by detractors how she could understand the Koran since she was expelled from the *madrasa* at age 14. "I got kicked out for asking questions," she replied, "which is a very scholarly thing to do. And I spent the next 20 years studying Islam on my own. I acknowledge that the Koran is difficult and complicated. I celebrate that."

The same is true of any body of scripture, including the Bible. Because most areas of theological inquiry involve complexity, ambiguity, and uncertainty, they must be approached critically. For no theological subject is this truer than for the Bible. Noticing contradictions, for example, is a long–established and effective way to introduce complexity and ambiguity in the Bible. Contradictions are fairly inescapable in the textual evidence, so it is easy to understand that deciding upon the text of a passage or a book — or the biblical canon, for that matter — is a basic critical (and confusing) task. Once presented with what is usually new information, most students begin to grasp the ambiguities entailed by questions like "What exactly is the text of this passage or book?" or "Which books make up the Bible?" Beyond textual and canonical questions, the historical contingencies that produced the Bible may be conceptually more challenging, and certainly less tangible, but again students usually appreciate, more or less, the implications of a question like the perennial and momentous "Who wrote the Bible?"

Such entrees into biblical criticism make educational sense because of the nature of the Bible, with its complexities, ambiguities, and uncertainties. Eventually students come to realize that the Bible itself presents views and positions that appear to — and often do — contradict each other. The Bible is long, not because it is a shaggy–dog story leading up to a simple clear point, but because it is the product of more than a thousand years of polemical faith in the context of ever–changing circumstances.

Because the Bible was written through a process unlike our own and which we do not well understand, and in different times, places, and languages, interpreting the Bible always involves significant uncertainty. Increasingly in my teaching, I have stressed cultural differences between the biblical world and ours, and consequently the sheer uncertainty of understanding the Bible. As the truism has it, the more we know the less we know. The interpreter who gradually understands why this is true of the Bible, and who nevertheless wants to take into account what can be known about the Bible, not only welcomes a critical perspective but insists on it.

During my most recent sabbatical I devoted months to rereading Third Isaiah (Isaiah 56–66). I hoped to reach uncharted waters sooner rather than later, and in this I was not disappointed. I expected to notice things about the text I had not noticed before, but not in such quantity. The journal of observations and insights I kept expanded quickly. My eyes were opened anew to the opulence of verbal and thematic connections within Third Isaiah and between it and the larger book of Isaiah. Commentators frequently mention and make lists of such connections, but these are no substitute for seeing for oneself where they lie and what weight they bear. The richness and complexity of Isaiah were reconfirmed, and the coherence of Third Isaiah again impressed me, and I was exhilarated.

> *"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 reminded how vexingly uncertain our understanding of the Bible is in so many of its parts. Time and again I was faced with uncertainties of text, vocabulary, idiom, poetic form, pronominal 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 glibness 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 or manner of exploration that can assess the critical value of innumerable questions that arise when 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. So I start by encouraging students to ask questions. "While reading the Bible in translation, make a continuous but brief written log of the following: items that seem to be particularly important for the larger story; items that are particularly interesting or intriguing; items that are extraordinarily odd, strange, or surprising; items that I find weird, outrageous, or offensive; and items that I simply don't understand." For the first several weeks of the course, students share their findings with one another. I treat this exercise as a paradigm of discovery and detection not to be left behind with increasing knowledge of the Bible, but to be embraced as a lifelong practice.

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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 metanoia 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. At least this is true for the undergraduate, 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 *quaestiones disputatae*. Once again, liberation methodology lights the way. Theological reflection is a process of thinking about the relationships between faithful conviction, the substantive claims that the texts of the tradition make upon one, and the action that must follow if human flourishing in the world we call our home is to be maintained and enriched. It is all these things because the human person in human society within a world that is a place we share with other created beings is the first object of theological reflection (As a Catholic Christian I suppose I can be both forgiven and pigeon–holed for insisting on the theological priority of the doctrines of creation and incarnation). In the end, because this world is where we begin and end, critical social theory is an indispensable moment in the process of theological reflection. For Segundo and Gutierrez, it is the immediate partner to unthematized awareness of our lives and our world, at least epistemologically preliminary to hearing the word of God and reflecting on praxis. Scripture, after all, is only really freed to speak 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 works of fiction 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 towards 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 s/he lives, and bringing the student to the point where s/he will consciously choose their own most productive place in that world. So long as we live in a sinful world, it is appropriate to talk of "education for social transformation." Theology as a word about God is destined to know that it does not know, which is fine and dandy. But theology as a word about faithful belonging in the world needs all the social theory and all the critical reflection that it can muster. RSN

Liturgical Theology as Critical Practice

Bruce T. Morrill, Boston College

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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 pastoral situation of the actual subject matter? What responsibility does the theologian have to orthodoxy, 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 passionate 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.

> *"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."*

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 person 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 pairs 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 pews with them.

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

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

Cheryl J. Sanders, Howard University School of Divinity

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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 strength and vitality of the lifeblood 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 worldly existence.

At the Howard University School of Divinity, where I have been teaching full-time since 1984, we proclaim our key mission by saying that "we train leaders." For pastors and religious leaders, almost everything we do in the realm of parish ministry has ethical meaning and produces potential learning outcomes. Whether our preaching is based upon scripture, classical or contemporary literature, or everyday experience, some moral insight or burden is manifested in the message. In my own holiness faith tradition, the Church of God (Anderson, Indiana), we preach for decision, and responses to our preaching entail moral deliberation and commitment. In the black church context where the preacher "tells the story," some significant moral lesson is being taught for those in the listening audience who have an ear to hear. This is not to say that preaching has to be preachy or judgmental; rather, it is to suggest that a sermon that requires no moral reflection is not really worth preaching or being heard. Preaching offers a great opportunity to elevate awareness of ethical questions and concerns, and sometimes even to point people toward answers, especially those who are poised to listen for cues to a better existence for themselves and others.

Ethics is also an indispensable element of religious education. The notion of "Sunday School morality" may evoke laughter or contempt in some circles, but there is something to be said for the positive outcomes of children and young adults whose moral and spiritual formation has been influenced by frequent exhortations to live in the light of what they are learning about the Bible. Even if the quality of instruction seems boring or irrelevant, the Sunday School teacher can convey some meaningful moral lessons just by showing up every Sunday to teach the class. I will never forget the years when my daughter was six or seven years old and she was often the only one in her 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 stories.

The ethical practices of Christian churches can be observed in a host of activities beyond preaching and teaching. 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 premarital 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 exaggeration?

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

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Critical Reflection and Praxis in Developing Ministerial Leaders

Emily Click, Harvard Divinity School

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FIELD EDUCATION prepares ministerial leaders by blending actual ministerial experiences with more traditional learning about theoretical concepts. This suggests field educators will have resources and insights about how to develop integrative educational strategies throughout theological education. Many theological schools' curricula are still based on an older model for education that separates the development of ministry skills from the learning of theory. This model sees 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 develop, and it's something that we know can be taught, but we know it's not taught very much" (*New York Times*, October 31, 2007). 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 Friere. 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 educators therefore not only place students as administrators; they train mentors to lead reflection in the field, and they teach critical thinking about experience in the classroom setting.

Theological field educators have led an overall trend within theological education toward more extensive integrations of theory and practice. There has been widespread recognition of the inadequacy of the old pedagogical model which called for building mastery of theoretical concepts prior to and separate from engaging those concepts with real life ministry situations and problems. My recent survey of theological field education in North America showed that field educators lead such changes by employing a range of strategies designed to bridge the stubborn gaps between theories of Christian ethics, theology, and history, and the practical realities of ministerial leadership.

In brief, these changes come in three primary forms. First, there is the shift toward engaging field education experiences throughout the curriculum, in order to integrate the whole curriculum, and also as a way to bring practice into more immediate contact with the dynamics of constructing theory. Second, there is a shift away from the old model, of learning theory for several years before engaging students within ministry settings, toward earlier and more extensive practice that is concurrent with the study of theoretical concepts. Finally, there is a movement toward engaging students in situations that are unlike their familiar settings, so that they can recognize their cultural biases and assumptions in a way that better prepares them for ministry in emerging realities.

The first shift is toward more robust integration throughout the theological school curriculum. In the traditional model, students study highly theoretical expositions of scriptural, historical, theological, and ethical ideas before they try to preach, teach, or counsel parishioners. The old model respected expertise within each realm, so that theological educators did not claim to know how to apply theory, nor did actual practitioners usually build theory. There were notable exceptions to this rule in individual cases, but in general the two realms of theory and practice were held separate so as to uphold the distinctive value of each. Furthermore, each discipline within theological education was taught distinctly from other disciplines, so that theological studies were rarely combined with historical studies or ethics. This atomized model of teaching various aspects of the traditional theological curriculum is widely recognized as outmoded. However, there is no singular, obvious route to integrate studies that have traditionally been kept separate. Field education is often named as the crucial tool for accomplishing a wider goal of integrating the curriculum.

At Harvard Divinity School, we also are developing new ways to engage traditional disciplines in the classroom setting. For example, this year I am co–teaching a required introductory course on the histories, theologies and practices of Christianity with a classical theologian, Francis Shüssler Fiorenza. The simple act of pairing an ordained congregational pastor whose lecturer status is based in ministry studies with a classical, world–renowned theologian is a bold statement in itself. We have also, however, taken care to construct the course in such a way as to embody 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 incident we discussed was the occasion of the pastor's visit to the widow on the death of the abusing husband, and his subsequent musing over what to say at the memorial about the until–then 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 are stirred by disturbing cases. In 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 reflection course that teaches how to engage in critical reflection on actual experience. Additionally at Harvard Divinity School, we regularly offer case study reflection conferences for the entire faculty, field education supervisors, and the student body. These conferences are opportunities to study actual cases that are written and presented by a student, then commented upon by a supervisor, and then by a faculty person. This enhances the visibility to the whole community of what students engaged in ministry settings are actually facing. It also models the ways that theoretical disciplines can shed light upon actual ministry situations.

Finally, at Harvard Divinity School we offer increasing opportunities for students to enter into settings that are vastly different from those with which they are familiar. Last summer, for example, we sent students 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 bounded 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 responsively due 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. RSN

In the Next Issue of

spotlight on
Theological Education

The Transition from Graduate Doctoral Programs to Theological Schools

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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THE 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.

Most Jews (and perhaps most human beings), including theological students and religious leaders, have not internalized that need to integrate the critical analysis of the texts of our traditions with the search for personal meaning. Many of us, even the most committed, view the reading of our traditional texts, including the Bible in particular, as a dispassionate, objective exercise. Our sole intent is to use our analytic skills — linguistic, literary, source–critical, historical — to understand what the biblical writers meant in their day by any particular verse or narrative. However, the search for the 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 way to interpret 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 him/herself to it in a significant way. The text comes alive and operative 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 the biblical text to a particular time, place, and set of redactors 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 age. Postmodern scholars describe 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, archeological, 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 prism of millennia of interpreters so that we might benefit from their readings. The sages of the past viewed our traditional texts through the lens of the political, religious, and sociocultural conditions under which they lived. Their interpretations contained responses to the exigencies of their own life situations, many of which inform our current struggles.

The third and ultimate challenge is to find contemporary meaning in the text. Reading a sacred text forces self–involvement and self–reflection, and it is through our own immersion into the text that new meaning surfaces. 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 creating our own interpretations, we respond to our own questions 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, the repetition of motifs as well as to the obvious lacunae, and then seeing how the cumulative 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 extending 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 and human questions. Unfortunately, the narrative is so terse that it provides little information 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 conceive and birth, without a word? It is to 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 before he can separate Isaac from her. Over a meal that Sarah had prepared to enable them to rejoice in finally having Isaac in their lives, Abraham suggests 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 rabbis extend the earlier Midrashic material in a very florid manner. Abraham stresses to Sarah that the time has come for them to provide Isaac with a thorough religious education and suggests that he take him to the Yeshiva of Shem and Ever. Sarah agrees, but insists that he not remain there 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 till dawn. In the morning, Sarah dresses Isaac, placing a turban on his head, and accompanies 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 Rabbinic texts, but also upon our own life experiences.

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 as we walked together. When the bus pulled up, the doors opened and he climbed the three 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 coming home.'"

When we confront and immerse ourselves in the texts of the past, we not only learn about the text, but about ourselves. It allows us to come in touch with who we are and who we can become. What we discover is that the text is a mirror which reflects back to us the nature of our character and our relationships, and demands we reach for our highest selves. In joining the dialogue about the texts of our past, we channel the voices of our traditions through the fabric of our own lives and, as a result, we are transformed. RSN

SANDERS, from p.ix

does anybody else any good? Through hard questions 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 ministry. Much of this interest in ethics is motivated by the proliferation of ethical abuses that bring forth bad publicity and lawsuits, to the point that schools and corporations are protecting themselves by orienting students to ethical standards of professional practice and accountability. By contrast, it puzzles me to observe that divinity schools appear not to be nearly as conscientious about these matters as medical or business schools, notwithstanding the horrific scandals involving clergy sexual abuse in recent years.

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 good thing for teaching. In lieu of a final research paper, I require students to submit either a case study based upon their own parish experience, or a code of professional ethics applicable to their context of ministry. All of our graduate degree programs at Howard University require at least one basic course in ethics, so not all of my students are practicing or preparing themselves for pastoral ministry. It is my experience, however, that many students have no idea what to expect to learn in an ethics course. My goal is to make it interesting and motivating, especially since, based upon my experience, the study of ethics can be boring. The key is to focus on the quality of the learning experience so that students feel empowered to think more clearly in ethical terms, and to make reasoned decisions about how to act. Virtually all of my midterm and final examinations are clipped from the daily newspapers, from which I take a current news item and frame a question for the students to consider. Included in the examination packet is an article and/or editorial that presents enough information about the case for them to write an essay without having to do further research. There are no right or wrong answers, as I advise my students that their grades are not based upon the extent of their compliance with my point of view. I am testing their ability to use the tools they are acquiring through class readings and lectures to process a "real life" ethical inquiry, supported by thoughtful arguments that are clearly communicated. I encourage them to submit their exam essays to the newspaper to be considered for publication as letters to the editor.

My overall pedagogical objective is neither to give students ethical "answers," nor is it my intent to reinforce or to negate whatever answers they may 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 intelligently about moral issues, to engage others through purposeful exchange of ideas, information, and experiences, and to broaden their awareness of the social context of ethical analysis and action. RSN

FULKERSON, from p.vi

belief. How do different beliefs converge, and in which situations? What resonances do they have for differently classed, racialized, and gendered groups? Such questions inevitably nudge one toward normative issues. Are there better ways to frame the circulation of relevant biblical and theological themes than the unidirectional preaching and teaching that is typical of "normative" theological discourse? What about the powerful function of music for people without symbolizing abilities?

In order to better understand the way Christian faith might intersect with racism in the contemporary South, I did a theological study of an interracial Methodist church. Ethnography's tools provided me with a way to approach this fascinatingly diverse communal faith as a lived subject matter. Engaging in two and one–half years of participant observation in this small church, I did interviews, collected documents, and took part in worship and other church activities to get a sense of how members understood their call to diversity.

The self–understandings that emerged from my study connected languages pertaining to racism with the languages of Christian 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 diversity, they were rarely used without a linkage to modern terms like inclusiveness and color-blindness. Combinations of color–blindness with explicit theological themes, for example, had very different outcomes, depending upon whether employed by African–American members or those designated "white." This is because such discourses were linked with other associations that overrode or "shifted" their original function. I stress terms like "linked" and "shifted" to indicate that meaning circulates 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 seemed to be no 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 may not be limited to expert, rarified discourse or the language used by believers only when they refer to God. Constructively this point entails the discernment 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 both the hybridity of language and the crucial theological function of many behaviors that are not marked as ecclesiastical. A second challenge to the adequacy of "talk" emerged as I observed forms of discomfort and visceral reaction that did not completely surface in their narratives, e.g., white members' complaints that the church was "too black." Such reactions imply that bodily enculturations 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 as shaped by markers of cultural "othering" as by inscribed memory, constructs of tradition require attention to bodies and affect in more substantive ways.

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 lines: the generation of theological 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 must first choose an issue of vital importance, articulate their pre–understandings and commitments with the issue, fleshing out the way their social location frames and limits their engagement. Part two requires an interview with someone else who is engaged with the issue from a distinctly different point of view than their own. Here, students must employ interview techniques and pay critical attention to social context. A third requires them to place their own pre–understandings and practices with respect to the issue into critical dialogue with those of the interview subject, identifying the different insights that are surfaced. The final part of the assignment involves identifying a position on the issue in light of the intersection of different views, as well as communicating their position in a relevant way to their dialogue partner. The assignment is enormously helpful in revealing the fluidity of theological discourse and its connection to social location and power, as it plunges students into the thickness of lived faith and surfaces with critical attention to the role of existential concern in the doing of theology.

In conclusion I should say that this pull toward ethnographic work in theology was preceded by an important development in religious studies. The insight that the study of Western religions has too long been focused on the study of texts led to the study of "lived religion" by a number of religious studies scholars. As I see this interest well developed in such places, and as I weigh its deep impact on my own thinking, I can only hope that ethnography will increasingly resource the world of systematics. RSN

MORRILL, from p.ix

people, the presiding minister, the proclaimed word, and the sacramental elements. The students are to participate in the two different Sunday worship services, observing how they do or do not find that fourfold presence of Christ to be evident in the performances of the rituals. Having written field notes in the wake of each visit, the students draw upon the history, contemporary theology, and ritual theory we have studied in the course in order to analyze theologically the two services they describe in their papers. I provide extensive preparatory guidelines for both their trips and the subsequent writing of the formal papers. A class session is devoted to students sharing their observations and initial attempts at analysis.

I make it clear that I do not presume what levels or types of faith commitments the students possess but, nonetheless, am asking them to be participant–observers (a concept we explore in detail). Students regularly describe themselves as never having attended a church other than their own and how the comparative experience brings not only a heightened knowledge of liturgy but also a deeper awareness and, often, critical evaluation of their own religious assumptions and convictions. In course evaluations, students regularly note the project as the highlight of the course. I believe it is a type of knowledge that can only be garnered through engagement with actual performance.

In conceiving and then refining that practice–oriented project over the years, I have kept in mind ethical questions about teaching and learning, including the awareness that the students possess a range of levels of religious commitment (Roman Catholic or otherwise). The students know from the outset of the course (with its syllabus) that they will be asked to undertake this theological project. It is up to them to decide the extent to which they want their own faith commitment to function in the writing of the paper. I have found over several years only rare instances (two or three, total) of students not wanting to do the fieldwork for the project, and in no case has a student mentioned the actual participation in religious worship to be the problem (except for getting up before noon on Sunday morning!). I believe that the clarity of their roles, as well as the extensive preparation, make the assignment not only viable but rewarding.

The other ethical consideration I always revisit in this project is the status of the worshiping communities as subjects for study. I consider it important to inform the staffs that my students will be observing and participating in one of their public worship services. I share with the ministers the theological framework of the study and the guidelines for participant–observation, and these, I have found, met the concern of the one pastor who said he had in the past been leery of people coming to study his parish's liturgy. Over the years, his community and several others have expressed delight in the appearance of another group of Boston College theology students.

Graduate courses in pastoral ministry entail different questions of what the teacher can expect from the students. The students are committed to the practice of the faith and moreover in a public way, insofar as they are preparing to become or already are public ministers or religious educators in the church. They are not skittish about their religious commitment or identity, nor are they embarrassed to explore these openly in class, as can sometimes be the case with undergraduates. In my masters–level liturgical theology courses, then, I am able to pursue a different method for studying Roman Catholicism's rite of Christian initiation of adults, order of Christian funerals, rite of penance, or pastoral care of the sick as fundamentally ritual–performance events.

I form the students into subgroups that are responsible, with my mentoring, for enacting specific rites with and for the class. These students take on the various ministerial roles, as well as those who are the key subjects of the ritual action (e.g., neophytes, or a sick person to be anointed, or bereaved family of the deceased). They stage the given ritual completely with music, vestments, preaching, requisite liturgical equipment and decoration, usually doing all of this 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 for them are genuine faith experiences, moments of deepened awareness of the importance of scriptures and tradition in relation to their lives in the doing of the rites. Such performative work in class, I believe, makes all the difference between students struggling to grasp the histories, theologies, and ritual forms of the rites, as studied 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 various participants and on the social group as a whole; the mutual 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–activity within anthropology courses, arriving at a theory of concentric frames delimiting the social field of the performance practiced, one of which articulates the action 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 possibility for insight into the ritual to emerge freely. I consider my own goals for performing rites within my liturgical theology courses to be similar. RSN

COOTE, from p.viii

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. Critical study can produce answers to 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, though, I quote Annie Lamott: "The opposite of faith is not doubt. It is certainty, and madness." RSN