

AAR

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The AAR Theological Education Steering Committee (John J. Thatamanil, Chair) sponsors *Spotlight on Theological Education*. It appears in *Religious Studies News* and focuses on issues of concern to theological education.

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Theological Illiteracy and Its Effect on the Enterprise of Theological Education

Kathleen Talvacchia, New York University

From the Editor's Desk



Kathleen T. Talvacchia is assistant dean for Academic and Student Life in the Graduate School of Arts and Science at New York University. Formerly she was associate professor of Ministry and Theology at Union Theological Seminary. A member of the AAR Theological Education Steering Committee, she has published in the areas of theological reflection, educational formation, and multicultural pedagogy. She is the author of Critical Minds and Discerning Hearts: A Spirituality of Multicultural Teaching (Chalice Press, 2003).

WHAT DOES it mean to be theologically illiterate? Is it only ignorance about the basic tenets, beliefs, and practices of a religious tradition? Or is it something much deeper and pervasive that for religiously formed persons may involve a lack of critical thinking or an unwillingness to open oneself to new religious experiences? Who defines what it means to be theologically literate? As it faces varieties of illiteracy in the student body, in what ways must theological education respond to this reality in its curriculum and teaching?

This third issue of *Spotlight on Theological Education* grew out of discussions in the Theological Education Steering Committee about Stephen Prothero's 2007 text, *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know and Doesn't* (New York: HarperOne, 2007). Defining religious literacy as "the ability to understand and use in one's day-to-day life the basic building blocks of religious tradition" (11), the committee members reflected upon Prothero's statement about theological education. Regarding seminaries, he says,

"Basic religious literacy is lacking even in seminaries, where many ministers-in-the-making are unable to describe the distinguishing marks of the denominations they are training to serve" (7). While many could identify positively with the statement — at least anecdotally — the committee members engaged in a spirited discussion about the legitimacy or inadequacy of it both within their contexts and in the larger world of theological education.

In order to subject the issue to a scholarly analysis, the committee sought to assemble a distinguished panel of theological educators to investigate the implications of theological illiteracy on the curriculum, instruction, and institutional practice of theological education, making it the subject of a Special Topics Forum at the 2008 AAR Annual Meeting. The papers produced for that session have been further developed here for this issue of *Spotlight on Theological Education*.

The writers are from a variety of seminary contexts and scholarly disciplines and have been asked to reflect upon the implications of theological illiteracy for theological education on the work of teaching, the formation of leaders, and ways that theological educators define their mission. For their task, they considered questions such as: How do scripture courses function when students no longer know Bible stories? How do field educators place persons in ministerial settings when students know nothing about their church's polity or history? How do we do theology or religious education when would-be pastors need a basic understanding of a tradition? How can we teach interreligious dialogue when students know other traditions, but not their own?

For Lee Butler, one of the primary influences creating theological illiteracy in seminarians involves the ways in which American culture dualistically interprets the separation of church and state. This type of dualism extends theologically to a student's claim that he or she is "spiritual, but not religious." He calls for theological educators to shift away from a training mode to an educating mode so that they can begin to see theological illiteracy as the "beginning of a process instead of a product."

Historian Daisy Machado challenges Prothero's description of the lack of religious literacy in the United States, and argues that, in fact, the United States population is quite religious. The more important problem that she perceives is that people do not care about religion and do not see it as an important reality in their lives or in the world. Thus, she sees the crucial challenge for theological education to be honoring the religious literacy that students bring to the seminary, discovering ways to make the Bible matter through engaged scholarship, and creating seminary teaching and curriculum that is connected to the concerns of communities.

From the perspective of theological field education, Emily Click understands multiple meanings for literacy that require diverse types of professional preparation. She understands theological literacy to involve not just understanding content, but a "readiness of heart, an openness of spirit to fruitful questioning" in the face of complexity.

Elizabeth Conde-Frazier, a religious educator, examines theological illiteracy through analysis of a "World Religions in Dialogue" course. The course uses personal history as a starting point to understand and to articulate the students' particularity of experience within the Christian tradition. From the expression of that particularity, theological literacy is developed that assists the students in their understanding of other religious traditions.

John Thatamanil considers the problems that theological illiteracy poses for teaching comparative theologies. He examines lack of knowledge of spiritual disciplines, lack of understanding of intra-Christian diversity, and ignorance of Christian attitudes to other faith traditions, along with the temptation of uncritical eclecticism, as major challenges that theological illiteracy brings to the student of comparative theology. He finds that each problem also holds within it a source of promise for the development of theological literacy.

The history of religious communities suggests that each era presents its own particular version of the problem of theological illiteracy to which theological education must respond. It is our hope that these reflections shed new light and develop fresh ideas for this era that will contribute to this ongoing discussion.

Called to Educate

Lee H. Butler Jr., Chicago Theological Seminary



Lee H. Butler Jr. is professor of theology and psychology at the Chicago Theological Seminary (CTS). An ordained minister of the American Baptist Churches in the United States since 1988, he joined the CTS faculty as assistant professor of theology and psychology in 1996. A former director of the CTS Master of Divinity program, and the founding director of the Center for the Study of Black Faith and Life at CTS, his teaching and research interests are in the areas of pastoral theology and the practice of ministry focusing on such topics as African-American religion, pastoral theology, spirituality, and sexuality. He is the author of *Liberating Our Dignity, Saving Our Souls* (Chalice Press, 2006), *A Loving Home: Caring for African American Marriage and Families* (Pilgrim Press, 2000); and numerous articles on the subject of pastoral care. Prior to his joining the faculty of CTS, he was on the faculty of the Lancaster Theological Seminary from 1992–1996 as assistant professor of pastoral theology. His professional development includes experience in pastoral ministry, chaplaincy, pastoral counseling, ecumenics, and denominational and seminary administration. He is a member of the American Academy of Religion, the Society for Pastoral Theology, the Association of Black Psychologists, and is President of the Society for the Study of Black Religion. He received his BA from Bucknell University, MDiv from Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary, MTS from Princeton Theological Seminary, and MPhil and PhD from Drew University.

ILLITERACY is the inability to read and the inability to engage the world through reading print media. While illiteracy is not a reflection of a person's intelligence, it does affect a person's resources for interpretation. Theological illiteracy, therefore, affects a person's ability to read the signs and reflective responses of the times in which we live. Theological illiteracy not only means that a person does not have the vocabulary for theological reflection, it also means a person lacks the critical resources, like Bible stories, for engaging in critical theological reflection. The problem of theological illiteracy, however, is not limited to entering students and budding theologues. The problem is a pervasive issue that includes professor and student alike. This essay suggests a way of understanding and addressing theological illiteracy within the theological enterprise and proposes to theological educators a course of action for engaging theological illiteracy.

Religion, Spirituality, and American Culture

An important dimension of theological illiteracy is actually imbedded in American culture. We can hear it in our confusions and concerns related to our interpretations of the separation of church and state. This fundamental Americanism supports the dualistic, dichotomous thinking that marks much of the Western world. I consider this one of the primary influences of theological illiteracy. I believe it expresses itself so strongly today because of the culture's insistence on religion being "the problem" of the day.

The current manifestation of United States culture expresses an ever-deepening commitment to a spirituality that stakes a claim of being "spiritual, but not religious" without understanding the religious declaration being made by such a claim. Many people willingly profess a spiritual power at work within the human being, a power that can be nurtured through meditative practices. Yet, spiritual power is often regarded as power that is independent of religious form or tradition and is, therefore, unrelated to theological commitments. The contrast that many have established declares theology is about God, spirituality is about humanity, and religion is about people's godly practices. With this understanding, they declare, "I am spiritual, but not religious."

Spirituality and Theological Education

This disposition has found a home within many seminaries and divinity schools. Professors and ministry mentors who have been wounded and disillusioned by the "faith of the Church" are guiding and misguiding religiously disenfranchised students and mentees who have come to seminary after having sensed a movement of the Spirit. That spiritual experience, often understood in a universalist way by virtue of its separation from a particular religious tradition and theology, is being interpreted as a call of God without a traditional container for discerning a call. Also, we must not overlook those who enter seminary from the multiple paths of many religions that have converged in a syncretistic confession of faith. It is not unusual for students to enter a liberal theological institution with a confession formed by a variety of Eastern religions, Wicca, humanism, Islam, atheism, and other expressions blended into a neo-Christianity.

These dynamics are further complicated by a dialectical tension between denominationalism, nondenominationalism, and new forms of religiosity. As we are in the throes of what some are calling another Church Reformation, denominations that are being challenged with the threat of extinction are clashing with nondenominational conservatism over biblical interpretations regarding why people are suffering and dying. And neither of these is addressing the new religiosity whose faith claims are rooted in a social justice deism or social justice humanism. Consequently, launching a campaign to address illiteracy as a unidimensional problem (e.g., as being only about students) might provoke educators to become theological apologists at best and "litmus-testing gatekeepers" of traditions at worst. Whether apologists or gatekeepers matters not. Either way, we will lose sight of the task of education if the burden of knowledge is placed upon the theology student. If this happens, I

think we will surrender our calling and dismantle the enterprise of theological education from the inside out. We, theological faculties, must reimagine why we do what we do; and for some of us, this means visioning without the burden of having to develop new programs that are intended to tap new markets for the purpose of attending to our institutions' fiscal crises.

The Role of Theological Educators

Many faculties must make the critical paradigm and pedagogical shifts to become theological educators instead of emphasizing theological training in the name of education. Too many of our colleagues are sharing important insights from their respective disciplines in core requirements, yet have no idea how their important insights fit into a MDiv curriculum intended to prepare persons for ordained ministry. Many theological institutions develop their MDiv curriculum on a model of higher and lower theological disciplines. The higher disciplines — purported to require more critical thinking skills — place much of the burden for the preparation for ministry on the "practical disciplines," which are often seen as the stepchildren of theological education. One might ask, for example, "How do scripture courses function when students no longer know Bible stories?" In actuality, many Bible scholars actually prefer that students not have knowledge of Bible stories because "Sunday school education" tends to get in the way. The larger challenge is: If students do not know Bible stories, on what have they based their discernment to declare their calls to ministry? Yielding to theological illiteracy, many are now being invited to seminary who profess, "I don't know if I have been called to ministry; but I know I have been called to seminary." This is another way, I believe, of expressing "spiritual, but not religious."

Curricular Foci

If the redress of theological illiteracy encourages a focus upon Bible "higher theologies," one might suggest that the theological enterprise should give more attention to church history and, perhaps, earlier attention to denominational history and polity. However, the extent to which the theological enterprise has been constructed by hierarchy and the compartmentalization of disciplines has already placed biblical and systematic/dogmatic theologies in superior positions. A more appropriate redress may be to blow the trumpets that will bring down the compartmentalized walls allowing for a redesign that will be more interdisciplinary and equitable and will actually educate instead of train. This new construction should also make room for theological education to have a closer relationship with contextual education and denominational judicatories. Sometimes this closer relationship is implied through our relationship with field educators, but their influence is rarely felt when it comes to decisions made about core curriculum.

Illiteracy among Colleagues

Theological illiteracy is made more complex by the fact that many theological educators are also theologically illiterate. Frequently, the only theological position they know is their own. They have limited knowledge and little appreciation for the ins and outs of many ethnic religious traditions and divergent theological

positions. This was evidenced in the public arena with the Trinity United Church of Christ–Jeremiah A. Wright Jr. controversy last year. Try to recall the plethora of illiterate opinions that circulated about the work of black theology and the life of the black church. Trinity Church was described as a separatist cult and condemned. Wright was described as a lunatic and metaphorically lynched. The black churches that subscribe to black theology were described as anti-American and irrelevant. Not many theological educators were actually willing to jump publicly into the media fray to bring clarity.

Another example of this illiteracy occurred while I was interviewing for a faculty position at a predominantly white theological school. Although I had, at that time, taught at two different predominantly white seminaries for more than ten consecutive years, when it became clear to the interviewers that my passion is in the area of African-American pastoral theology, it was declared by members of that faculty, "We don't have many African-American students here, and you will not [as an African-American man] be able to teach white women." The obvious statement is that African-American religious studies is only good for African-Americans while other theological approaches are universally good. The pervasiveness of theological illiteracy means that care must be taken not to define theological literacy too narrowly.

Inspiring Teachers

Theological educators must become students of theology in order to inspire theology students to become learners and lovers of the theological enterprise. Theological educators must also mentor theology students in such a way that they see ministry as a theological activity. This task and challenge is great because the spiritually minded students who enter the teaching/learning space of the theological classroom enter with training rather than education on their minds. If the educational pedagogy is directed by theological illiteracy, performance expectations and standards are lowered. When theological education institutions are understood as professional training schools by all parties involved, the educational process becomes a miseducation, ultimately promoting theory and practice without praxis and thereby legitimizing theological illiteracy. If learning theology is only training, and if the pedagogy structures questions intended to produce measurable outcomes to say one has been trained, then the theological enterprise is more likely to graduate students who have not synthesized thought or done much to integrate their experience into their being. This approach will perpetuate the theological illiteracy that the person entered with and will encourage the theology student to become a performer of the arts of ministry without having the reflection gifts of spontaneity and improvisation.

Whereas theological education should be regarded as the theoretical that gives way to, and is an integral part of praxis, there has been a tendency to reduce praxis to practice and to dualize theory and practice. This results in a tendency to relativize or universalize the human experience by reductionism, meaning the theological enterprise promotes a methodology that reduces everything to simplicity.

See BUTLER, page viii

Daring to Engage the World

Daisy L. Machado, Union Theological Seminary



Currently Daisy L. Machado is professor of the history of Christianity at Union Theological Seminary in New York City. Prior to this, she served as vice president for Academic Affairs and dean at Lexington Theological Seminary in Kentucky. Machado, who has taught seminary for fifteen years, is an ordained minister in the Christian church (Disciples of Christ) and has served inner-city Latino congregations in New York City, Houston, and Fort Worth, Texas. In addition to her book *Of Borders and Margins* (Oxford University Press, 2003) and her coedited volume, *A Reader in Latina Feminist Theology: Religion and Justice* (University of Texas Press, 2002), she is author of numerous book chapters and encyclopedia articles.

THE SOCIOLOGIST Peter Berger once remarked that if India is the most religious country in the world and Sweden the least, then the United States is a nation of Indians ruled by Swedes. We all know that this is not the reality we are living in today and, since the very prominent rise of the Moral Majority in the 1980s (and as a historian I can tell you that this has been the case for many decades before that), religion is very much part of the politics of the United States. However, the focus of this paper is not on politics and religious illiteracy, which is a topic one can barely keep from responding to, but on the theological enterprise and the effect of theological illiteracy upon that enterprise. The pressing issue facing those of us who teach in seminaries, and especially for those who teach in denominationally affiliated seminaries, is how do we respond to this very real theological illiteracy? However, as we look around us and hear the many voices that are attempting to provide an answer to this question, we realize that in an attempt to prove a solution, I think an even greater problem is being created, one that challenges seminaries and schools of theology in very profound ways. Let me begin with the well-known author Steven Prothero, who tackles the issue of religious illiteracy in his bestseller, *Religious Literacy*. In an interesting take on the problem, Prothero moves beyond the confessional nature of biblical literacy to a broader issue. In an archived debate that appeared in the *Washington Post's* "On Faith" website, Prothero says,

"Americans know surprisingly little about their own religions, or those of others. Many Protestants can't tell you any of the four Gospels. Many Catholics can't name the Seven Sacraments. Many Jews can't tell you the first book of the Hebrew Bible. But this isn't just a religious problem; it is a civic one. Whether you like it or not, American political debates — about abortion, stem cell research, and the environment — are shot through with religious reasons. And it is impossible to understand the international scene, not least the war in Iraq, without

some basic understanding of Islam and other religions."

Prothero further argues that while there are many other kinds of illiteracies in this country, such as geographical, historical, and scientific illiteracy, "religious illiteracy is particularly dangerous, since it is in the name of religion that so much evil (and good) is done in the world." Surely this argument holds some validity and appeal — the study of religion is important for the public good, for developing adolescents who, when they become adults, will be aware of and sensitive to religion because it has civic value. Prothero suggests that a key way to respond to this illiteracy is to teach the Bible along with world religion courses beginning in the public high schools. For those who will immediately jump in opposition to this proposal, Prothero responds,

"The Supreme Court has repeatedly said not only that the academic study of religion is constitutional but also that it is important. For example, this ruling in the 1963 religion and public education case, 'It might well be said that one's education is not complete without a study of comparative religion or the history of religion and its relationship to the advancement of civilization. It certainly may be said that the Bible is worthy of study for its literary and historic qualities. Nothing we have said here indicates that such study of the Bible or of religion, when presented objectively as part of a secular program of education, may not be effected consistent with the First Amendment,' (*Washington Post*, "On Faith," archived debate, http://newsweek.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/religion_in_school.html).

Clearly Prothero is appealing to a broad teaching curriculum that is not just Bible-centered but allows for a dialogue with other religious traditions and religious texts. This type of curriculum can be very helpful and may indeed make the high schoolers of this nation find value in religion and religious texts. Prothero says to those who are opposed to public schools teaching religion that the Bible is already currently being taught in the public schools even if the numbers are presently low. According to research done by the Bible Literacy Project, only 8 percent of the nation's public high schools offer Bible electives and the Bible Literacy Project wants to see that number increase to 80 percent; they are working to make that number a reality. Their classroom text, *The Bible and Its Influence*, which is currently used in 262 schools in forty states "is the first and only student textbook created for public high school literature or social studies electives about the Bible" (see the Bible Literacy Project website). But what is really going on here? Is this the response that Prothero intended? The many critics of the Bible Literacy Project, including the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL), say this project is not biblical and is not literacy. In the SBL's review of *The Bible and Its Influence*, the reviewer, Steven McKenzie, makes this observation,

"There is no real critical analysis concerning such matters as authorship, date, and historicity of biblical books. The treatment of the biblical material is essentially a superficial summary of content. Statements in the text are, for the most part, accepted at face value without the recognition that such acceptance is in itself an interpretation. . . . Perhaps,

therefore, the main question raised by this textbook is why biblical scholarship as an academic discipline is so blatantly ignored in a work that professes to provide an academic approach to the Bible. Certainly, part of the answer lies in the nature of the Bible as a work considered scripture by various faith communities."

And what informs that push against an academic study of the Bible? McKenzie writes, "Some of that suspicion may well have influenced the conception and composition of this project. But part of the responsibility for the suspicion may also lie with our profession to the extent that we as scholars have tended to isolate ourselves and our discipline, failing to engage the wider readership of the Bible."

The challenge again falls into the categories that theological schools have been dealing with since their inception: how do you teach faith? And to give it a more historical ring: How does faith seek understanding? Teaching religion and the sacred texts of those religions is not and cannot be a purely scientific and neutral task; religious education should be subversive education because it dares to hold up a mirror to our culture and our world. However, in the case of the United States, because of its long history of manifest destiny and empire, because it has created and upheld its national myths by using biblical language and religion (i.e., the United States as "the ark of salvation of the nations," as the "light upon the hill"), Prothero's suggestion to teach religion in the public schools can only be fraught with controversy and bitter debate. From those that decry the Bible Literacy Project as a tool of the Religious Right because of the names that make up its board, to those who see this type of education as a way to continue to blend Christianity and capitalism, to those who call for a strict separation of the teaching of any religion in a public institution, how will the reality of such a profound religious and biblical illiteracy in this nation be addressed?

For seminaries and schools of theology, this question must translate into a matter of curriculum. What do Bible courses need to look like in order to respond to the lack of basic biblical knowledge found in the majority of seminarians? But beyond Bible courses, this same biblical illiteracy has an impact in theology and homiletics classes, in ethics classes, and in church history courses, as well as worship classes and, of course, in Christian education courses. But can we truly believe that the newly entering seminarians of Prothero's future will have more biblical know-how and be more in tune with religion, more open and aware of the role of religion in social change, because they have studied religion and the Bible in high school and then built upon that with more classes in college? I have many doubts about this scenario precisely because the problem is not that people in the United States don't know much about the Bible, but that they basically don't care and this is an entirely different matter.

The crucial challenge to seminaries that are engaged in the theological enterprise is to make religion (in this case Christianity) and the Bible truly matter. The challenge for theological schools is to do what McKenzie notes has not been done or has been done ineffectively: to really engage the world with our scholarship; which means to intersect our teaching/curriculum across our disciplines with the living communities that surround our schools. The hard fact is that the diverse

world we live in demands a seminary curriculum that dares to engage the world, so that our students can begin to see how the Bible matters and how Christianity can not only speak a word to the politician whose ethical behavior brings us all shame, but also reexamine our nation's concepts of wealth and poverty given the present economic crisis we all face — or to look again at how the manifest destiny inherent in our history continues to influence our attitudes, from immigration to what it means to be a nation of such military power. And this is also the time to take a very close and hard look at the many communities of faith that our theological schools and seminaries have ignored for so long. Making the Bible matter and teaching biblical literacy means to learn from and respect those many communities, especially racial and ethnic communities, for whom the Bible has been the core text for their survival in a society filled with racism and fear. Having grown up in a Latino Pentecostal church in New York City, where study of the Bible, and especially memorization of biblical passages, was part of a continuous Christian education as children and adolescents, I want to remind my colleagues who teach in seminaries that there may be many students like this younger version of myself in your classes. I certainly can attest to how the academic study of religion in seminary helped me to expand my own religious horizons; how it helped me to see the use of the Bible as less of a private text that spoke to my spiritual needs and created in me an appreciation for the Bible as a text that spoke to humanity in ways that were much more profound than confessional statements. However, I also must say that I was able to make this shift precisely because I was so grounded in the text, because I had read the Bible, I had memorized it, because it was a text that connected to my life because it mattered.

Our goal as professors in seminaries is not "to beat the Bible out" of students because we feel this kind of reading of the Bible is too simplistic, too literal, too unsophisticated, too unacademic, or too conservative. Our goal is to take that student's love for the Bible and familiarity with the text and expand it, make it grow, and become even more real in their context. Our goal is to enable students to leave our schools and be able to build bridges for others in their communities and not to return to those communities filled with a pride that somehow they have been given the "truth" about the Bible (or about God), which their home church cannot comprehend and is not even able to comprehend. We want our graduates to succeed in their ministries because we have given them the tools and we have modeled for them respect and acceptance tempered with critical thinking and good intellectual inquiry. When we create in our classrooms a space that embodies respect for difference so that students can learn without fear of ridicule, we will have moved forward in our efforts towards creating the kind of theological education where students who have never read the Bible and those who have memorized much of the text can learn from one another and not sit in judgment of one another. In her book *Teaching to Transgress*, bell hooks notes: "Hearing each other's voices, individual thoughts, and sometimes associating those voices with personal experience makes us more acutely aware of one another." To be more "acutely aware of one another," this is the kind of subversive teaching our theological schools need. RSN

The Cultivation of Imagination as Literacy for Theological Education

Emily Click, Harvard University



Emily Click is assistant dean for ministry studies and field education and lecturer on ministry at Harvard Divinity School. Her scholarship has focused on new ways of conceptualizing connections among adult education theory, human development theory, and education for religious leadership. She is ordained in the United Church of Christ and has a decade of congregational ministry experience. She currently serves as chair of the steering committee of the Association for Theological Field Education (ATFE), the North American professional association for theological field educators. She teaches in the areas of leadership, administration, and finance, in addition to teaching about mentoring and the process of theological reflection on the practices of ministry.

IMAGINE THAT throughout the history of theological education, teachers have worried over whether their students have come into programs with adequate preparation. At one time, the concern may have centered on whether students had sufficient knowledge of Greek or Latin to read ancient texts. Today's teachers similarly express concern over the inadequate preparation of their students, usually focusing on the lack of church attendance, membership, and experience of their students. Here, I will focus on other possible ways to think about preparation for theological study. There are multiple meanings to the concept of literacy, which implies there may be diverse types of preparation that will best enable students to engage fully in theological learning experiences. I begin by considering what I expect students to come into theological education ready to do, what skills I would hope they bring, and what level of understanding I would hope they have.

Let me briefly describe a few unique or particular aspects of our programs at Harvard Divinity School. One outstanding feature of our present MDiv program is its interfaith engagement. We now have a curricular requirement that every MDiv first declare the religion on which they will focus, and that they then take at least three courses in another religious tradition beyond the one on which they will focus the majority of their studies. We make this requirement out of a conviction that students benefit from preparing for ministry through deep engagement with multiple traditions. Put another way, one only knows one's own tradition well if one also knows another.

This curricular requirement also creates practical realities that mean students must learn to express their own convictions while actually being in community with others who hold contrasting or deeply different convictions.

For example, every MDiv student is required to take a team-taught course called "Introduction to Ministry Studies" in which students read Gregory and Emerson, as well as texts like one written by a Voodoo priestess who engaged ministry in New York City. Students are clustered in small groups, where they share their own faith journeys. We coach students to expect that the very faith discovery that was liberative for them might be the faith journey from which a neighboring student might just be fleeing. These dynamics, as you might expect, lead sometimes to misunderstandings and disagreements. Yet they also lead us all, staff, students, and faculty alike, to constantly work on developing the ability to partner as learners across lines that often divide in the wider society. They lead all of us to confess our own limitations, to struggle to honor our own deepest convictions, and yet to listen and speak and act as respectfully as possible across those "dividing lines."

You can anticipate, therefore, that what I think of as literacy, or preparedness to enter into such an educational enterprise, might differ from what other teachers in theological education might long for. I want students who are ready to critique their own stances and to study other positions and actions with openness to how those traditions might deeply inform their own convictions. Not every student is ready to do this work, but I find that to assess such readiness, one cannot administer a test that measures knowledge in the content of just one religious tradition. Instead, students are likely to be ready for this work if they have already engaged in work that has been messy but compelling, and if they have brought passion into that work even before they enter theological education.

In his recent book *Earthen Vessels*, Dan Aleshire tells a story from his own early seminary days. It was the 1970s and one day in May the Ohio National Guard opened fire on students at Kent State, killing four of them. He says that the seminary decided to have a day of prayer in response. He was taking a class from Wayne Oates, whom he describes as "one of the school's best-known professors, and one whom students thought was especially wise." Aleshire tells how Oates handled class that day:

"After the bell rang, and the last few students straggled in, he looked over the lectern and said, 'this has been declared a day of prayer. My son is in the Mekong Delta, on a gun boat, fighting in this war. My namesake, Wayne Barnett (son of another seminary professor), fled the country because he concluded that this is an immoral war. You tell me how to pray.' He was quiet for a while, then said, 'Class dismissed,' and walked out the door. At first, none of the students left. We just sat quietly in our chairs. Our moral certainty was stopped in its tracks by the complexity of prayer in morally ambiguous moments. The fundamental need for humility in all prayer began to dawn on us. We left slowly, each of us at different times." Aleshire concludes: "I still remember that moment vividly. I was shaped by that moment, maybe even changed by it" (28–29).

I think that what we are here to consider today is how students are shaped in advance of moments such as these, so that they can then fully receive the wisdom of professors

such as Wayne Oates who have the good sense of how to capture teachable moments. I would therefore argue that theological literacy is both a grasp of some content, or information, and also a sort of readiness of heart, an openness of spirit to fruitful questioning in the face of what Aleshire calls moral ambiguity, or what I would name as complexity.

While at Harvard Divinity School, I have had the good fortune to be able to develop a field education program in which some students go abroad for field education experiences during their master's programs. Students generally design their own international field education experiences, and in recent years these have included working with orphans in Tanzania, helping the St. George cathedral in Cape Town, South Africa, develop its memorial to apartheid, and studying with Buddhist teachers in Nepal. I see such experiences as crucial to the development of an aptitude for suspending one's certainty that one's own perspective is necessarily the most comprehensive and the best for engaging in the adaptive work most of our graduating students will lead. A student who discovers they learn and gain more than they can possibly give while sojourning in a supposedly underdeveloped and impoverished context returns to their own environment far more ready to see possibilities of engaging and sharing leadership with capable others.

When I consider what prepares students to be ready to engage in learning experiences such as those I have just described, I would point to the way that many of our students enter theological study after doing significant social justice work, either during their undergraduate studies, or in years between graduation and entering our program. We admit many who have been part of community organizing efforts, such as Teach for America, Peace Corps, and other valuable exercises. I think these programs teach far more than how to be a public health worker, teacher, or organizer. They teach students how to suspend certainty in favor of gathering good information and how to delay forming opinions in ways that enable nuanced judgments. These are some of the competencies I would like for us to consider "literacy" for theological education.

I serve as one faculty person on the admissions committee. So I actually contemplate the question of assessing transcripts and applications for the type of "literacy" that I think will best prepare entering students to take advantage of educational opportunities at Harvard Divinity School. On the admissions committee, we argue over transcripts that range from outstanding undergraduate study in religious study to transcripts that show evidence a student has focused on math or science or music. Whenever I read an application, I look for a student who has exhibited a spirit of diligence in study, coupled with a heart for exploration and curiosity. One without the other, I think, does potentially point to the kind of deficit in preparation that might be called "illiteracy." An abundance of curiosity that has not been matched by diligence in extending difficult study over time is unlikely to sufficiently prepare a student for the range of experiences and studies at our school. Similarly, a student who has only focused on amassing details of religious traditions, but has never engaged their heart or poured out their energies in difficult engage-

ment with intractable life problems, or entered into the sorts of captivating relationships that grow out of intense and challenging contexts, is perhaps equally "illiterate" for the work we will expect them to complete in the classroom and beyond.

Earlier, I described several of the defining characteristics of the Harvard Divinity School curriculum: its focus on interfaith study in preparation for ministry and its fostering of respect across divergent traditions. I would also like to describe the ethos of the place in this time. As we prepare ministers who will serve as congregational pastors, community organizers, lawyers, journalists, and as professionals in many other settings, we focus on developing a lasting habit of heightened imagination, as one crucial competency for ministry in an increasingly complex context. Additionally, we foster the development of what we call pastoral agility. This phrase, often employed by my colleague Stephanie Paulsell, points toward the ability to hold one's convictions in such a way as to imagine those convictions might point to various faithful actions and ways of engaging social justice. So as I contemplate our goal to develop imaginations and foster pastoral agility, I return to the type of literacy that will best prepare them to come and be part of this exercise.

In an article on integrative learning, Mary Ann Davies talks about helping students develop the capacity to "recognize the interrelationships that shape their world" ("The History Teacher," *Integrative Studies: Teaching for the Twenty-first Century*, Vol. 34 No. 4, August 2001, 471). Students will gain the most out of theological education, I believe, if they are already practiced at recognizing how diverse disciplines inform each other. They may develop such abilities in great religious studies programs, but they may also develop this competence through other routes as well.

I do want to name a kind of illiteracy that I have seen that can block students from fully learning in our environment. It is the uncritical adoption of the assumption that Christianity, as the dominant religion, is a monolithic problematic religion that has not ever fostered self-critical capacities in its leaders. The abundance of evidence that some Christians are highly ignorant and take their dominant position of privilege as an excuse to oppress others is unfortunate. But there is a small minority of students who have never encountered the multiplicity of Christian perspectives and who sometimes reject Christianity as a valid and ethical religion. This is one kind of illiteracy that I think can prevent students from taking full advantage of education in a school with a tradition of Christianity, but which now engages fully in multiple faith traditions. I find an environment in which such questions live both inside and outside the classroom the very best for preparing ministers of many traditions. For such is the world environment, full of varieties of understandings, each of which must be considered and engaged in order for the best cooperative action to become imaginable.

I will conclude with another quote from Aleshire's *Earthen Vessels*; he asks, "What is learning for religious vocation? It is the development of theological understanding that

Theological Literacy through World Religions

Elizabeth Conde-Frazier, *Esperanza College of Eastern University*



Elizabeth Conde-Frazier is a Latina religious educator who has taught at the Claremont School of Theology for nearly ten years. Currently, she is dean of Esperanza College of Eastern University in Philadelphia. She has written on participatory action research, second generation youth, multiculturalism, Hispanic Bible institutes, and the spirituality of the scholar. She integrates religious education, practical, and Hispanic/Latina theology.

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

When I wrote this piece, I was at Claremont School of Theology teaching the "World Religions in Dialogue" course. This article comes out of that experience.

Our Student Context

AT THE Claremont School of Theology, we deal with a multiverse context where students come from many different cultural groups (Vietnamese, Korean, Chinese-American, Nigerian, Mexican, Mexican-American, Puerto Rican, African-American, German, Samoan, Tongan, among others) and theological ranges within Christianity. More recently, there has been a growing diversity of faiths represented (Wiccan, Pagan, Unitarians, Jews, Muslims, Buddhist, and Harikrishna). Among the Christians, we have a variety of mainline denominations (AME, Pentecostals, Charismatics, Armenian Orthodox, Coptic, the Metropolitan Community Church, and Catholics).

Given this context, when I enter the classroom there are few assumptions I can make about a common knowledge about students' traditions. Even the Christian tradition is not the Christian tradition. This means that in the organizing of my courses I include a variety of spaces for us to talk to one another about who we are. For this to happen, persons need to look deeply into whatever tradition has been a part of their lives whether or not they feel that they own that tradition at that particular point. They soon realize that even when they feel that no particular tradition has shaped them, indeed there was a tradition that was lurking in their family's set of values and patterns of living that shaped them. By listening to these places in their personal history, they are able to have a starting point for defining a new direction or for deepening and expanding their tradition.

I will speak about how this is a part of the "World Religions in Dialogue" course that we teach at the Claremont School of Theology.

The Introductory Course

The course takes place during a full academic year. It is broken up into modules rather than semesters.

- Module #1. The understanding of religion and its role in different faith communities.
- Module #2. The history of the Christian

church's encounters with other religions and the theologies that informed those encounters.

- Module #3. Explores our own theologies of world religions.
- Module #4. Looks at models of religions in dialogue.

Students maintain a yearlong "intellectual and becoming" journal where they engage the readings and interactions of experiences at an intellectual and personal level. A final reflection as they read their journal is submitted at the end of the course, where students speak of their beliefs, attitudes, and the way these have been tested, affirmed, or changed. They discuss experiences or moments that were transforming for them. In this discussion, they try to analyze the components of the transformation and how this might be helpful for guiding others on a similar trajectory.

We begin with an understanding about religion. This helps students become familiar with different definitions of religion, the different frameworks of religion, and the lenses of these frameworks. From this point, we seek to acquaint students with some of the major religions through text, exposure to worship settings, and interaction with persons who practice the different religions studied. These interactions include lectures, shared meals, sharing a particular social justice practice of that religious community, or participation in other practices with the faithful. Students are left to decide which they feel comfortable with. Students must participate in at least three interactions with a different religious community.

When the students have done some initial reading about another religion, but before we discuss it in class, we do a class visit to houses of worship. This is so that students have to experience being strangers. Having too much initial information makes them feel as though they already know what things mean and this shuts them down to new understandings. It locates them in a place of power. In our discussions, we also point out where they begin to compare rather than to explore information more deeply.

To understand the place of religion in people's lives, we study the role of these religious communities for immigrants. For example, we discuss how religion is about reforming community, identity maintenance and formation, and empowerment.

To Engage Students in the Process of an Interreligious Becoming

This course is constructed to help persons understand their religious and interreligious becoming. Even when we think that we know our tradition well, it is not until we need to look at it from the perspective of an outsider that we realize that there is much about our own tradition that we had not thought about. The assumptions of our beliefs and practices have become like cultural blinders. Reflection upon the process of religious and interreligious becoming places students with a broad understanding of their tradition and students who are somewhat undefined at a semiequal standing. We start with:

- A social location exercise to begin to define and become aware of categories of being operating in our lives;
- Discussion of Bobby Harro's socialization process and Terry Ford's multicultural becoming model. These name the ways in

which we have attained and are attaining our sense of the world, ourselves in it, and how we see others;

- A religious genogram, with a reflection paper that looks at how students have been socialized religiously, how this socialization has influenced their present religious beliefs, understandings, practices, and attitudes towards persons of other religions (These exercises help students begin to identify the religious threads of their own formation. They need to explore and define these more closely. That leads to the exploration of theological pieces as well as worship formats and other spiritual practices in their lives. It leads to these "aha moments" in their lives about the attitudes they have toward particular traditions and practices);

"A course whose goal it is to bring students on an interreligious becoming is a course that seeks to transform the intersecting ideologies of exclusivism that have given shape to the hegemonies and prejudices we have been socialized into and to function in accordance with them."

- We proceed to explore the ways that Christians have engaged the religious "other" in the history of different missionary encounters: Jesuits and the Chinese, the Germanic peoples, the Nautl peoples, the Africans, and the Native Americans. We discuss the theological underpinnings that guided these encounters and how they were informed by the sociohistorical and political movements of their times. This gives persons an understanding of the types of influences that give shape to theologies and missionary movements. It shows the ways that these become ideologies and thus form the consciousness of persons and consequently their ethical constructs and actions;
- Through the use of Paul Knitter's categories of religious theologies, students are able to locate themselves in the range of theological understandings of dialogue with persons from other religions. This entails gaining an understanding for how each of these change their Christology and soteriology. If they had not defined their Christology or soteriology, this is where they begin (While they are taking this course, they are also taking a course in the Christian tradition which combines theology and church history);
- This section also begins a classroom dialogue between persons of different theological perspectives. We reflect on what dynamics and information are or are not helpful to the dialogue. In their journals, students record the types of thoughts and feelings that they experience as they locate themselves and interact with persons who are located differ-

ently than themselves. This brings us to an understanding of the "proximate other." It also begins to define a habitus of interaction for dialogue. We realize that the habits of the mind are important to one's formation for dialogue;

- Students study the different models of interreligious understanding from different theological perspectives (Heim, Hicks, Cobb, Panikar, Suchocki, and Thicht Naht Hahn);
- Students engage persons from different religious communities as they relay their own experiences and understandings of dialogue;
- Students explore a diversity of models of dialogue in literature, video, or community events or programs. Each model sees the final purpose of dialogue differently (some models promote exposure for appreciation, consciousness raising, and corrections of prejudices, social justice, debate, or mutual conversion);
- Students form a dialogue model that has as its grounding their theological understanding of interreligious dialogue and that addresses a particular context. They begin to give shape to these models by putting together Lego models and we have a type of art gallery so that we can engage each other's models and get ideas for the refining of our own; and
- We also arrange for an interreligious panel to take place in class.

This is a hard course for students and professors. There are resistances that students bring to this course — rules of discussion are necessary. We have developed a set of rules that has been very helpful. One of the things we do is to encourage people to say "tell me more" when they feel themselves ready to judge.

Professors need to be cognizant of the silent and articulate voices. There are moments for contemplation and silent reflection during which some students like to write. It is a way for students from more contemplative cultures to later find their way to express themselves in the discussion. Elders from the Pacific Island cultures may find their moment of wisdom during that time. We may use traditions from another culture that may contribute skills helpful to our process (i.e., the establishing of the "va" in the Samoan culture. The "va" is the space created for relational interaction. Each "va" is different in accordance with the type of relationship being formed).

The course makes use of different types of knowledge rather than simply focusing on rational knowledge. Rational knowledge is the intellectual ability to gather, organize, and use information in order to analyze situations. Then there is creative knowing or the capacity to remember, to imagine, and to create. It is the premonition of ideas. This is the person who asks, "What can I do with this information?" Heart knowledge is the capacity to feel. The emotions affect the quality of our interactions and work, as well as influence learning and dialogue. Being able to discern emotions helps us to recognize contradictions and confusion and to gain clarity about power relations. Do not underestimate the conflicts and contradictions that can take place when one encounters others or attempts to create community. Dreams are another source of knowledge. The Western world and its understanding of the enlightenment has trouble with this one, but

The Challenge of Theological Illiteracy for Teaching Comparative Theology

John J. Thatamanil, Vanderbilt Divinity School



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JUST LAST YEAR a student came to my office after the second session of my "Hindu-Christian Dialogue" course. Needless to say, I was surprised that any student would come to office hours so early in the semester, but her question to me was more surprising still. She had recently decided to become a minister because she thought it would be a good job that would allow her to work in a leadership capacity. But she wanted to know which of the Christian denominations might be most likely to accept that salvation is available not just to Christians alone. That would be the right denomination for her.

I am not able to convey with vividness the sense of bemused disorientation I experienced as I listened to her, in part, because I cannot recall her precise words. Nonetheless, several things became clear: 1) She was denomination shopping, a hardly surprising phenomenon. What was surprising is that she was shopping not as a would-be congregant but rather as a would-be clergyperson. Searching for a job in the right denomination was not unlike looking for a position in a firm or company that shared her values. Plainly put, she was on a job hunt, and even talked about ministry as a good career that would allow her to work with people in a leadership capacity; 2) She was absolutely lacking in any of the traditional nomenclature or patterns of meaning-making that come from denominational or ministerial formation. Words like "discernment," and "calling" were not in her vocabulary. We might once have taken for granted such formation in students entering seminary or divinity school but no longer; 3) Although she had some familiarity with general notions of spirituality and some knowledge of other religious traditions, she did not know much about Christian traditions. In fact, her rudimentary knowledge of Buddhism and Hinduism were in some ways deeper than her knowledge of Christian traditions; and 4) For her, ordained ministry could not come at the price of exclusivism: openness to other religious traditions was a fundamental and non-negotiable value.

As it happens, my student is one of a growing number of students that come from non-denominational churches. Perhaps this is a gross simplification that approaches caricature, but if I am to take many of my students as any indication, it seems safe to say that the Christianity of such churches is equivalent to whatever the pastor in question declares Christianity to be. Precisely because these churches are nondenominational, there is no clear and self-conscious sense of connection to any particular historical trajectory within Christian traditions. So, it is hardly surprising that students from such churches have no access to a historically deep theological vocabulary even at a rudimentary level. I suspect that this particular configuration of theological illiteracy may be less common at denominational seminaries, but it is not uncommon in a nondenominational divinity school such as Vanderbilt.

But it is not just students from nondenominational megachurches that are lacking in even a rudimentary level of biblical and theological knowledge. As Stephen Prothero has shown, religious illiteracy is a widespread phenomenon, and entering seminary students are not exempt. Moreover, instructors cannot safely assume that most of their students will come to seminary after completing a religious studies major. Moreover, a fair number of religious studies majors come from departments where Christian theology is not emphasized or is even entirely absent.

The question I want to take up here is this: how does such theological illiteracy bear on the work of those who teach theologies of religious pluralism and comparative theology? I suppose the sharpest and most playful way to put this question might be to offer a riff on Max Müller's old dictum, a sacred mantra for comparativists: "He who knows one knows none." If Müller is right, then what do we say about those who don't even know one? Just how does one teach comparative theology and theologies of religious pluralism to students who lack a minimal command of their home tradition?

It is not my intention to offer comprehensive answers to that question so much as to spell out how and why the question is a serious, even daunting, matter. My primary practical intention is to describe and map out just those junctures in which theological illiteracy presents itself and then to offer some proposals about how to move forward. In fact, as I proceed, I will attempt to demonstrate that every problem I identify is also a source of promise.

Illiteracy about Spiritual Disciplines

As a comparative theologian who works to bring Christian traditions into conversation with Buddhist and Hindu traditions, I find that my teaching of the latter traditions is impeded by the fact that most of my students know very little about spiritual disciplines within Christian traditions. The standard claim that non-Christian traditions tend to be more orthopraxic than orthodoxic, while simplistic, enjoys considerable merit. Hence, it is impossible to have any adequate appreciation for Buddhist traditions without having at least a rudimentary and felt appreciation for basic forms of Buddhist meditation. I can and do remedy this lack by incorporating medita-

tion into the classroom. What I find more difficult to attenuate is my students' sense that such practices are alien and akin to nothing in their own tradition.

Of course, the sense that the meditative disciplines of Buddhist traditions are altogether alien is due to the fact that the vast majority of my students know little about Catholic and Orthodox Christian traditions. Hence, it is not surprising that their basic reactions to such practices are often expressed in a fashion that unwittingly echoes traditional forms of polemical Protestant anti-Catholicism.

"Might not this focus on meditation be a form of works righteousness? How is it that a tradition that seems so acutely interested in teaching selflessness is so obsessed on turning inward in meditation?" If my students were familiar with Catholic traditions of contemplative prayer and Orthodox understandings of hesychastic prayer, some of these objections might be reframed and recontextualized. To know that Christian traditions too have emphasized practices of calming, concentration, and analysis would make Buddhist practices seem less exotic even if the Protestant question of works righteousness is likely to persist. At the very least, issues that seem, at first glance, to be entirely *interreligious* might be reframed as also *intra-religious* ones.

The promise in engaging this problem: Putting Christian traditions into conversation with Buddhist and Hindu traditions generates in my students an interest in homologous phenomena in Christian traditions. Indeed, it is often the case that it is precisely by introducing the role and meaning of meditative disciplines in other traditions that one can generate in students a desire to investigate Christian traditions more carefully in search of intra-Christian resources.

Illiteracy about Intra-Christian Diversity

The lack of knowledge about Christian spiritual disciplines points to a larger problem generated by theological illiteracy. Many of my students do not have a genuine appreciation for theological diversity within Christian traditions. We have already seen how this lack of appreciation bears on questions of spiritual discipline. At a more fundamental level, my students tend to project their sense that Christianity is internally homogenous onto other traditions. Because they lack an appreciation of diversity within Christian traditions, they assume that Christianity is fairly monolithic. It then follows by extension that other traditions too must be likewise homogeneous or monolithic.

The promise in engaging this problem is multiple: I tackle this problem by teaching the fundamental conflicts that are internal to other traditions. When I teach Buddhist traditions, I make some time to talk about internal tensions within Buddhism as between Madhyamika and Yogacara Buddhists or at a still more subtle level the debates within various forms of Madhyamika schools. Such teaching allows me to invite my students to ask just what a tradition is. They come to see that a tradition cannot easily be depicted as a historical community grounded in consensus! I suggest that perhaps we know that we stand within the "same" tradition precisely because we understand each other well enough to

know when we agree and when we disagree. A challenge in much interreligious conversation is that often we do not know just when we are in agreement. Ultimately, presenting debates within other traditions not only helps me to broach questions about what constitutes a tradition, but it also provides fertile ground for discussing abiding tensions internal to Christian traditions. In sum, teaching the conflicts within other traditions can prove to be a safe way of moving students toward a deeper appreciation for the varieties of Christianities.

Illiteracy about Christian Attitudes toward Other Traditions

Because many of my students are largely ignorant about their own traditions in historical depth, they assume Christians are obligated to be exclusivists. Not knowing about Justin Martyr's notion of the *logos spermatikos* or even Vatican II, they assume that exclusivist positions are the novel and idiosyncratic creations of liberal Vanderbilt professors. Not that they mind. They are happy to hear more open positions on religious diversity. What is problematic from my standpoint as a theologian is that they might assume that such positions lack grounding in ancient strands of Christian witness.

The promise in engaging this problem: Taking up questions about the meaning of religious diversity for Christian faith allows me to talk precisely about the ancient and modern uses of the *logos* doctrine in Justin Martyr as well as in key Vatican II documents, most especially *Nostra Aetate*, also known as the *Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions*. In so doing, I am able to find yet another way to teach that Christian traditions are subtle, complex, and internally variegated.

Theological Illiteracy and the Temptation of Uncritical Eclecticism

Yet another challenge posed by theological illiteracy is the temptation of uncritical eclecticism. The challenge presents itself when a certain segment of incoming students enter as unreflective perennialists. Let me affirm explicitly that I take a reflective perennialism as worked out in the writings of Huston Smith and John Hick to be a live philosophical option. I myself don't hold to that position, but some of my students accept an easy rather than hard-won perennialism. They believe that Yoga is essentially the same as Buddhism, which is essentially the same as Daoism, which is essentially the same as Hinduism. Paraphrasing Hegel, in the East it is always night and all cows are black. For such students, Christianity is the problem. While Eastern traditions can be taken to affirm some materially identical version of monism, Christianity is the tradition that cannot be thought in comparison to the religions of the East.

The promise in engaging this problem is comparative theology: Learning about other traditions in rich detail interrupts uncritical perennialism. One of my students this semester was brought up short by his first introduction to the Buddhist idea of *anatta*, no-self. He found himself utterly unwilling to face up to

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New Editor of *Spotlight on Theological Education* Announced



Emmanuel Lartey is professor of pastoral theology, care, and counseling at Candler School of Theology at Emory University. He holds degrees in psychology, theology, and counseling. Born in Ghana, West Africa, he has taught in Africa, Asia, and Europe, as well as North America. His expertise lies in intercultural pastoral care and counseling, African religious traditions, and health. His book publications include In Living Color: An Intercultural Approach to Pastoral Care and Counseling (Kingsley Jessica Publishers, 2nd Ed., 2003) and Pastoral Theology in an Intercultural World (Pilgrim Press, 2006). Lartey can be reached at elartey@emory.edu.

I feel greatly honored to have been asked to serve on the Theological Education Steering Committee and to take up the mantle of editorship of *Spotlight on Theological Education*. I come to this role following twenty-five years of teaching, researching, and serving as a theological educator on three continents — my home of origins in Africa, my location of higher learning in Europe (Britain, specifically), and my place of current service here in North America.

Following obtaining my PhD from the University of Birmingham (UK), I returned to my native land of Ghana in West Africa, where for five years I taught seminary students in a Protestant ecumenical theological seminary, as well as other university students at my alma mater, the Department for the Study of Religions at the University of Ghana,

Legon — a national secular university. In 1989 I returned to Britain, where I taught students from many different parts of the world enrolled in a master's program in pastoral studies and practical theology in a secular university department of theology — with Muslims, Christians, Jews, Buddhists, and practitioners of many other religious faiths living together and practicing their religions peacefully.


Following twelve years of lecturing in Britain, together with annual forays in teaching intercultural care and counseling to adult educators and social workers in Germany, I moved to the United States. I taught at Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, Georgia for three years and have for the past four years been teaching at Candler School of Theology and the Graduate Division of Religion at Emory University. The joys and sorrows of crossing boundaries and attempting to help others do the same have been the main activity of much of my professional life.

I am an African Christian who has been shaped and formed by Western Christian traditions, especially Protestant experiences and interpretations of Christianity in its various global expressions. My African religious and cultural heritage lies at the roots of my being. My Christian heritage has provided energy and impetus for my journey through life. I continue to enjoy teaching at the interfaces of these diverse fronts. As a theological educator, I have come to appreciate the tremendous value and significance for our understanding of God and the world that lie in global dialogues in which many participate.

I would like to see *Spotlight on Theological Education* provide a space where religious and theological studies are seen not merely as studies of the doctrines and propositions that can be made about God out of various traditions, but also as explorations of what is ultimately real and true about the world we inhabit and how we may all live faithfully and humanely with one another within this world.

I have been nurtured, stimulated, and challenged through being a part, for most of my life, of ecumenical, secular, and interreligious institutions in the parts of the world in which I have lived and within which I have traveled. My thinking has been shaped and influenced by experiences of traditions and peoples of many different faith professions. I am firmly convinced that interfaith dialogue and interaction presupposes religious and theological integrity on the part of those who participate in such activities. I perceive, write, and reflect out of my own African Christian heritage. Each of us theological educators inhabits particular identifiable traditions and cultural heritages. I am convinced that “dialogue is not advanced by a mushy sentimentality that seeks to obliterate any differences between participants. There can be no dialogue without the owning of distinct and clear positions.” (*Pastoral Theology in an Intercultural World*, 7). Clarifying and critiquing one's own faith positions are therefore crucial to any endeavor in theological or religious studies.

in or without them with due attention to what is affirmed, to nuances, strengths, and weaknesses inherent within them, and that critical examination and reflection will be an integral part of this internal inquiry. Second, that there will be what I dub “external integrity”; namely, that respect, openness to learning, and nonviolence will be manifest when the faiths of others are approached and explored. Third, that religious practices as well as texts, doctrines, and teaching will receive scholarly scrutiny and attention. I refer to this as the “integrity of faith and practice.” This is not simply because I am what you might call a practical theologian. Rather, it is because far too much significance in our faith is conveyed through our rituals and practices for us not to pay attention to the practice dimension of our faiths.

I look forward to stimulating and vigorous engagement. 

“ I would like to see *Spotlight on Theological Education* provide a space where religious and theological studies are seen not merely as studies of the doctrines and propositions that can be made about God out of various traditions, but also as explorations of what is ultimately real and true about the world we inhabit and how we may all live faithfully and humanely with one another within this world. ”

As such I would hope that three forms of integrity would continue to be the hallmarks of *Spotlight's* contribution to our scholarly pursuits and to our craft as theological educators.

First, that attention would be paid to what I call “internal integrity.” Here the traditions, beliefs, and practices of particular faiths will be respectfully engaged by those who speak from with-

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that demanding denial and insisted in class, “I know that I have a Self!” Henceforth, that student and others will find it impossible to speak of Eastern religions in undifferentiated ways. He now knows about the millennia-long debate between Hindus and Buddhists about the status of the self. More importantly, he also knows that the body-soul dualism is a contested issue among contemporary Christian theologians. He also knows now that Ancient Israelite tradition had no such dichotomy. Matters have become complex indeed! Teaching comparative theology interrupts a theological illiteracy that stands prepared to equate any idea or practice found in one tradition with ideas that seem similar in others. It also prevents my students from borrowing practices from other traditions in haphazard fashion. As a provocation, I compare such uncritical borrowing with raiding one’s neighbor’s medicine cabinet. Her pills work for her, but that does not mean that they will work for you. I give conceptual rigor to this metaphor by introducing a medical model for comparison. I invite my students to ask how particular traditions — and even strands within them — diagnose the human predicament, offer etiologies, prognoses, and ultimately, therapeutic regimes for addressing that predicament. I urge them to appreciate what careful comparison shows: traditions are marked by robust internal debates on just these matters. Even agreement about diagnosis need not eventuate in agreement about what therapeutic regime is best suited for addressing the ailment at issue.

The Anxiety of Theological Illiteracy

Among a small but noteworthy segment of my students, I find that a fundamental existential anxiety presents itself: How can I safely engage Buddhist or Hindu traditions in some depth

when I don’t really know my own? What will become of my own untested faith? On rare occasions, that anxiety has led some students to drop my comparative theology classes in the first week or so. For this challenge, I have no ready solution. All I can do is offer an empathetic and pastoral presence. I can acknowledge the difficulty that often comes with a compelling introduction to a winsome and profound tradition when a student is not rooted in his or her home soil.

This past semester, in a move that I found both surprising and illuminating, my co-instructor, who is steeped in various forms of Buddhist practice, invited our students to work with this anxiety in practice. During meditation, my co-instructor invited my students to note where in the body they experience their anxiety. They are invited to sit with it as we do elementary breath work. Such mindfulness enables students to register their own discomfort and resistances. Students report that such awareness enables them to cope better with the psychological stress of encountering traditions that challenge much that they hold to be sacred. At the intellectual level, it also becomes evident that knowing another tradition in depth and detail need not lead one to minimize commitment to and passion for one’s own tradition.

One final note: As a comparative theologian, I find that theological illiteracy generates one especially persistent pedagogical difficulty: I must simultaneously teach three very different bodies of knowledge and skill sets in a single course. In addition to introducing Buddhist or Hindu traditions. I must also teach the craft of comparison. But in order to do that, I must also introduce students to Christian traditions. I cannot take for granted that students are well grounded in any of these three areas. Striking the right balance between these three tasks is enormously difficult. That challenge notwith-

standing, I find that such work is doable: comparative theology generates a richer and more nuanced appreciation in my students for their own traditions as well as the traditions of others. It may be possible to envision some putatively ideal program of study that would have students immerse themselves in their own tradition before they encounter another, but such a venture would surely be quixotic. The contingencies of American life in the twenty-first century — a life often marked by multiple religious participation, intermarriage, and routine interreligious interaction — make any neatly linear regimen improbable if not impossible and perhaps even undesirable.

As noted in the example above, an encounter with Buddhism in serious depth compels my students to think hard about theological anthropology and most especially about the nature and status of the self or soul. That question would not take on the same urgency if inquiry about the status and nature of the self were framed solely in intra-Christian terms. It is precisely the encounter with Buddhism that makes students ask especially subtle questions about body-soul dualism in Christianity. That question in turn generates important questions about strands of the Hebrew Bible in which no substantialist notion of the soul is to be found. The discovery that some Buddhist anthropologies are closer to some Ancient Israelite perspectives than many contemporary Christians are to a past that they are all too eager to claim is just the kind of subtle knowledge that motivates me to teach comparative theology despite the demands generated by theological illiteracy.

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those of us who did not go through the passageway of the enlightenment have found it to be a rich source of knowing. It is the knowledge that opens up to us the subconscious dimension where all is possible and real and the seemingly bizarre is the key to interpretation. It is the place where the Divine takes the form of symbols. Dreams give us knowledge that constructs a vision. Spirit knowledge is the fifth type. This is the capacity to be and have energy for purpose in life. It connects us with all living entities and is therefore important for coming to a deeper understanding of our interdependence with others whom we may at first perceive as different from ourselves. And lastly, there is holistic knowing; which helps us to see the connections between the different types of knowing and integrates them all. It facilitates synthesis.

Things We Have Changed and/or Learned

We originally had another module. It was where we exposed students to a religion other than their own. It was the second module. While it was a good idea, we realized that it was a bit ambitious to cram into seven weeks and so it is now a follow-up course. It also left us with seven additional weeks to expand the first module.

As we look at the way that most books define the major religions of the world, we realize that these books are written through Western lenses and when we look at definitions with a postcolonial lens, then these criteria change. We need to have this discussion and to

change our selections of which religions are engaged in the first module.

Conclusion

Students who come with an undefined religious understanding or who know little of their own tradition must scramble to find the roots of their thinking, their values, and their beliefs. They confront the reasons why they had not given themselves to the formation of a particular tradition. As they write their theologies of world religions, they begin to give shape to a theology that they want to operate out of and to see how that theology will shape not only a set of practices but a whole consciousness. This is important for leaders of religious communities today.

A course whose goal it is to bring students on an interreligious becoming is a course that seeks to transform the intersecting ideologies of exclusivism that have given shape to the hegemonies and prejudices we have been socialized into and to function in accordance with them. To transform an ideology and hence its power, one needs to generate a new consciousness with the purpose of developing critical movements or mobilization that require group action and practices for engaging one’s energy in ways that reinforce a different ideology and that have the goal of creating change or an unjust system. Generating a new consciousness involves coming to an awareness of one’s cultural blinders and ideological filters through which we interpret the world. It also involves creating experiences of enough depth, duration, and intensity such that the prevailing interpretations can be transformed. We understand that a curriculum is not suffi-

cient for all this but we can plow the ground for planting the seed or nurture the seed for such transformation to take place.

In this course students become aware of these influences in themselves. They learn to identify the lenses that shape the assumptions of a religion and its practices. We speak of the constructs necessary for formation as well as its dangers. Religious leaders today must not only be formed or literate in a tradition but must also understand the constructs and power of the formative pieces of a tradition that they might use them in ways that are life giving.

New rituals and symbols that are more relevant to the lived realities of persons may evolve from this type of formation because students have come to understand the constructions of these. The deepening and expanding of the tradition takes place. The energies that kept students away from their traditions are rechanneled in positive ways. The problem will arise when they have to go to ordination councils that wish to see the church become what it always has been, especially as its membership dwindles and they hang on to the last vestiges of their religious practices, while these students have the energy to bring reformation and in a sense revival to these forms and thus the potential for a new expression of the tradition in a changing world. Finding ways to expand and deepen the traditions of a congregation is what we deal with in later required religious education courses in the teaching of the Bible and pedagogies for transformation.

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relates to responsible life in faith. This understanding is not the result of acquiring knowledge in different subject areas or accumulating different educational experiences.” He concludes, “The goal of theological learning is not the accrual of ever greater amounts of religious knowledge; it is the transformation of learners into different kinds of Christian believers” (35). Such transformation, of course, will look different depending on the type of program in which students engage. When we consider literacy as a problematic in theological education, I encourage us to recall the multiple meanings of preparation to engage in study in particular theological school contexts. This will call us to consider the diverse types of preparation that will best enable students to engage fully in the learning experiences we provide.

BUTLER, from page ii

The idea is that if we “keep it simple,” we stay alive and in touch with “the real world” reality show. Hence, if the theological enterprise subscribes to a spirituality that is devoid of religiosity, then theology will become the servant of the state. And, of course, everybody knows that the seminary is the cemetery where people go to bury their faith. In those instances where simplicity is not immediately evident, we pray until we can make it simple as a way of escaping the complex messiness of life! When teaching and learning are grounded in reductionism, differences are seen as abnormalities that result in a theological enterprise of “the blind leading the blind.”

Conclusion

It is my conviction that if theological educators develop a clarity of the calling to become educators, then theological illiteracy will be seen as the beginning of a process instead of the end product. Seeing the theological enterprise as the generative power to name and rename means honoring the stories people come with as the ground of their theology while inspiring them through an educational process of preparation. My starting point in the classroom is the place of calling. The call is an educational experience where we are awakened to know who we are, whose we are, where we have come from, and where we are going. Theological education should be formational, reformational, and transformational. I do not understand my work as training people to do tricks or to act without thinking. Theological education develops theological literacy because it teaches people to read life while seeking the wisdom to understand. Theological education renews the human spirit to become healers, liberators, justice workers, proclaimers, peacemakers, revolutionaries, and daughters and sons of God committed to the struggle. Whereas the theologically illiterate train learners to hate themselves by encouraging learners to privilege another’s story, theological education encourages the learner to enfold their story and to love their flesh. Theological education is the work of Spirit who gathers us together and touches our hearts, minds, mouths, and bodies in order that we might do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God and others. Theological education is God’s work in and through us.