

# AAR

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### Editor

Lawrence Golemon  
The Alban Institute

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## spotlight on

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## Forming the Theological Imagination: Strategies of Integration in Theological Education

Lawrence Golemon, The Alban Institute  
Editor

### From the Editor's Desk



Lawrence Golemon,  
The Alban Institute

Lawrence Golemon is a research associate at the Alban Institute. He was a member of the research team for the Carnegie Foundation's study of clergy education, and is co-author of *Educating Clergy: Teaching Practices and Pastoral Imagination*. He has taught and directed research initiatives at Dominican University of California, the Graduate Theological Union, and Union Theological Seminary in the Philippines.

IN THE 2005 Auburn study of faculty at ATS schools, the two primary concerns that theological educators had about their teaching were critical thinking and integration. In this, the first issue of *Spotlight on Theological Education*, we take up the second of these concerns as an issue with which each school and faculty must grapple. This *Spotlight* is an initiative of the new Theological Education Steering Committee at the AAR, which is dedicated to the academic resourcing and professional development of educators in theological schools.

The articles here address the issue of integrative teaching and learning from several educational contexts: some come from denominational seminaries, some from university divinity schools, and others from interdenominational consortia or seminaries. They discuss the multiple strategies needed to tackle this complex subject. Several educators lift up organizing rubrics such as practical theology (Couture), religious tradition (Benson), or a new global reality (Hopkins) that reshape classroom, communal, and curricular goals and strategies. Some teacher-scholars focus on classroom pedagogies (Butler, Conde-Frazier, Jones), others on communal pedagogies (Battle, Rhodes), and others on cross-curricular strategies

(Liebert, Hymans, Russell). Each of these reflective practitioners demonstrates a fluid and adaptive teaching practice that responds to the changing student bodies, vocational trajectories, and goals of integrative teaching and learning in theological education.

I was fortunate to be part of the recent Carnegie study of clergy education among Protestants, Catholics, and Jews, now published as *Educating Clergy*. There, we developed several frameworks for discussing integrative teaching practices in the theological and rabbinical schools we visited. The first we called the "four signature pedagogies" in theological education. Pedagogies of *interpretation* challenge students to engage sacred and historical texts with critical and linguistic skill and with their own questions, in order to find their significance for a specific "horizon" of meaning: be it historical or contemporary, local or global. Pedagogies of *formation* guide students into the spiritual practices of a tradition in order to nurture an awareness of the divine, form the practice of holiness, and shape their pastoral leadership. Pedagogies of *contextualization* develop students' analysis and understanding of social, cultural, and congregational contexts and bring students into creative and transformative encounters with them. Pedagogies of *performance* develop complex pastoral skills and judgment through the reenactment of clergy roles and tasks, the development of their own style of clergy practice, and the demonstration and internalization of standards of excellence within a practice. Effective teaching and learning, we observed, draw students into one or more of these practices through a disciplinary field or subject matter.

In these articles, you will see similar expertise at work, as these educators move back and forth between these and other pedagogies. One educator reframes the entire theological interpretive task in light of a radically different global context (Hopkins); another relates the ethics and stance of interpretation to students' religious cultures and contexts (Butler). One teacher-scholar relates vocational and spiritual formation to contextual analysis (Liebert); another develops theological imagination through rhetorical gestures and performance (Jones). One educator introduces us to the orchestration of interpretation, context, and performance throughout one school's

curriculum (Hymans); and another tells the story of how one seminary reshaped its entire curriculum and pedagogies around interdisciplinarity and contextuality (Russell). I could go on, but already you see how integrative teaching embodies more than one of these pedagogies.

Another paradigm from the Carnegie study that helps one think about integration is that of the *three apprenticeships* — the intellectual, skills, and identity apprenticeships — that shape all professional education, from law and medicine to clergy and engineering (Sullivan, 2005). These apprenticeships distinguish the professional school from the graduate department in the university, because educating the professions requires concomitant teaching practices that integrate the cognitive, practice, and ethics/identity standards of a given professional domain. For example, discrete professional skills — like medical or pastoral diagnosis, and the ethics and norms of a profession — like the confidentiality of a good therapist or cleric, are vital to the education and formation of the professional mind, imagination, and dispositions. Because many professional schools feel inadequate to engage professional ethics and identity, they are looking to seminaries and divinity schools to learn about pedagogies that integrate complex knowledge, professional competencies, and a personal identification with a profession's ethics and mission — what traditionally has been called "formation."

Practices that integrate the three apprenticeships of professional education abound on these pages. There is a description here of a personal and theological *metanoia* through cross-cultural learning that integrates newfound knowledge and identity (Conde-Frazier). There is an argument for introducing critical, historical knowledge in ways that do not demolish but expand pre-seminary piety and identity (Butler). One educator describes the common life and ethos of a school — including shared table and worship — as embodying a relational epistemology that shapes professional identity and the knowledge of God (Battle). Another professor relates identity-forming, spiritual practices to broader community practices of learning and worship (Liebert). One field education program has the commitment to integrate

# Practical Theology at Saint Paul School of Theology

Pamela D. Couture, Saint Paul School of Theology



Pamela D. Couture is Vice-President for Academic Affairs and Dean at Saint Paul School of Theology in Kansas City, Missouri. Her PhD in Practical Theology is from the University of Chicago and her MDiv is from Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary. She has written and edited several books, including *Child Poverty: Love, Justice and Responsibility* (Chalice, 2007), *Blessed Are the Poor? Women's Poverty, Family Policy and Practical Theology* (Abingdon, 1991), *Seeing Children, Seeing God: A Practical Theology of Children and Poverty* (Abingdon, 2000), and, with Rodney J. Hunter, *Pastoral Care and Social Conflict* (Abingdon, 1995). She is an elder in the Northern Illinois Conference of the United Methodist Church.

**S**AINT PAUL SCHOOL of Theology (SPST) was born as a pedagogical experiment. In the early 1960s its charter faculty envisioned “a seminary like no other.” It built the curriculum around the integration of theory and practice, interdisciplinary work, team teaching, and critical reflection on practice. Social activism and community formation infused the learning environment. SPST’s ethos drank heavily from faculty activism on behalf of peace, racial reconciliation, sexual equality, and class interpretation. Its literature has long stated: “John Wesley, Dorothy Day and Martin Luther King Jr. would understand” its pedagogical mission. These saints would also understand the current community’s work to respect theological diversity and define itself in ways that defy the “liberal-conservative continuum” that is so convenient for many of its constituents.

Such an environment embodies social tensions. How might the discipline of practical theology describe those tensions, as lived in the pedagogical experiment at SPST? Over the years my work has drawn heavily on the practical theological thought developed at University of Chicago, the International Academy of Practical Theology, the Association of Practical Theology, and the Society for Pastoral Theology. Practical theology helps me identify five tensions in the pedagogical experiment at SPST.

## Applied theology or practical theology?

Practical theologians distinguish themselves from applied theologians. Integration at SPST began primarily as applied theology: determining one’s best theology and identifying how that theology can be embodied in a practice of ministry in the church or in the world. Practical theologians begin by understanding a situation or practices through “thick description,” using qualitative, quantitative, ethnographic, or anthropological methods. Practical theologians investigate the

theories and theologies embedded in these practices, theologically interpret them, and propose strategic action. The applied theologian trusts that the validity of the theology will yield good practice; the practical theologian uses practice yielded by theology as the norm that tests the integrity of theological interpretation. SPST’s faculty has a long tradition of team-teaching experience in which all reflect on practice. Whether a professor’s theological reflection on practice is derived by applied theological methods or practical theological methods does not neatly divide between those located in the “classical” and “practical” disciplines. Some faculty in “classical areas” use practical theological methods; some faculty in “practice of ministry” areas use applied methods.

**Theology and science.** Practical theology developed a dialogue between theology and the sciences, especially psychology, sociology, anthropology, biology, and economics. Practical theologians may engage original research, such as congregational studies, or may evaluate and theologically interpret the scientific research of others. Scientific research is brought into conversation with theology through empirical (Van der Ven) or hermeneutical (Browning) methods. SPST has engaged science throughout the curriculum.

**Theology for the church and for the world.** Practical theology has generally tried to hold together preparation for leadership in the church and in the world. Leadership for the church is associated with courses in the “practices and arts” of ministry — preaching, worship, religious education, pastoral care, leadership and administration, evangelism, mission, congregational studies, community formation, and spirituality (Ballard and Pritchard; Wright and Kuentzel). Leadership of the church in the world is often associated with ethics, though most faculty would agree that every practice and theory can be analyzed to reveal its ethic (Browning, Forrester). As a seminary of the United Methodist Church, SPST educates future ordained and lay leadership in practices that are related to leadership internal to the church, and, reflective of its history, SPST helps the church speak to the world. For example, the MDiv requires “Engaging World Religions” so that all students explore interfaith dialogue. The Cleaver Program, honoring alumnus Emmanuel Cleaver II, a United Methodist pastor, mayor of Kansas City, and, now, United States congressman, explores the church’s relationship to the political world. In this sense, it creates “public theologians” (Martin Marty).

## Meaning, power, and diverse voices.

Practical theology interprets the relationship between the critical interpretation of meaning and the analysis of power relationships in practices and systems. Some practical theologians have sought to discern, articulate, and publicly express the meanings inherent in practices in critical correlation to theology and Christian tradition (Browning, Viau). Other practical theologians have analyzed how power operates within theology and Christian tradition (Poling). Some legitimize practices to the exclusion of scripture and tradition (Graham). Some use narrative methods to bring forth unheard voices of marginalized people and their theological affirmations (Ackerman, Andrews, Bons-Storm, Lartey, Miller-McLemore). SPST

engages all these strategies but one: scripture and tradition are critically engaged but cannot be de-centered. Our students come to us shaped in various understandings of scripture and return to communities for whom scripture and tradition are normative. Our students must grapple with the ideology and spiritual power of scripture, tradition, and the church, and how these authorities shape the life of the congregations they lead.

## Public criteria, spiritual formation, and aesthetics.

Early discussions of practical theology sought “publicly warranted” criteria for theology (Tracy) and the development of *habitus*, “a disposition, power, act of the soul itself” (Farley). SPST assists Christians to make their case for their beliefs and actions in public in dialogue with those who do not hold those beliefs — within and beyond Christianity. Curricular outcomes also stress the importance of students’ spiritual formation, as individuals and in community. Spiritual formation reflects students’ education in the classroom, as classes directly and indirectly shape students’ spirits, and it occurs as students participate in community worship, governance, meals, and other forms of community life. Spiritual formation often seeks aesthetic expression in music and visual imagery (Ballard and Couture, Viau). As technology infuses pedagogical practice, the aesthetics of the learning environment will become increasingly important. Spiritual formation in Wesleyan tradition, in ecumenical tradition, and in opposition to or contrast with these traditions can be found among students, faculty, and staff at Saint Paul.

## SPST’s current pedagogical experiment.


The MDiv curriculum implemented in 2005 sustains SPST’s historic pedagogical values but recognizes that the learning environment has changed. Most theological disciplines today are inherently disciplinary, and faculty articulate the way their discipline does interdisciplinary work. Team-taught interdisciplinary courses culminate the curriculum, bringing this interdisciplinary work to fruition. In the past, the theory-practice integration model was depicted by some as courses labeled “theological” on one wing and courses labeled “practical” on an opposite wing, hinged by ethics that was sometimes considered theological and sometimes practical. This model of interdisciplinary integration has yielded to new combinations of interdisciplinary work that have for the first time allowed biblical professors to team-teach with persons in other fields and professors of specific practices to teach with one another. These opportunities recognize that all practices have theories, and all theories engage practices. In these Advanced Praxis Courses, new forms of theological reflection will emerge.

In the Contextual Education sequence, students reflect on their experience in communities and congregations in SPST’s immediate surroundings and students’ ministry sites in urban, suburban, and rural settings. SPST is a neighborhood anchor in a low-income, inner-city community. Formerly, community immersion experiences led by now retired faculty took sheltered students where the genteel church was likely not to tread. Now, we teach in a different cultural situation than did those faculty. Students come to us exposed to all possible terrors. We have learned to deconstruct the heightened social fears that are evident in current American culture. Now, we gradually introduce our

students to the sensations of our community. The same skills equip students to interact with the suburban and rural communities in which they minister.

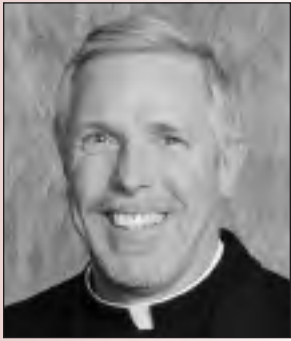
Reading the theoretical literature I reviewed for this article, I was struck how often practical theologians agreed that no one method would fit all times, all places, all situations. At SPST, faculty have helped students integrate their educational experience using many methods, some represented in literature on practical theology, some not. As faculty have introduced students to practical theological methods, some students have experienced a shock of recognition. Practical theological methods as developed for the last 30 years have helped students to integrate their entire pedagogical experience — the formal curriculum, community life, and other experiences they are having at SPST.

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# How Religious Tradition Serves Theological Education

Richard Benson, St. John's Seminary



Richard Benson, CM, is a Vincentian Father, a member of the Congregation of the Mission, Province of the West. Currently he is the Academic Dean and Chair of the Moral Theology Department at St. John's Seminary in Camarillo, California. He teaches fundamental moral theology, Catholic social teaching (social justice), and Catholic bioethics. He obtained a BA in philosophy from St. Mary's Seminary in Perryville, Missouri, in 1974, and a MDiv and a MA (theology) from De Andreis Institute of Theology in Lemont, Illinois, in 1978. He was ordained a Catholic priest in 1978. He obtained a third MA (biological sciences) in 1980 from California State University Dominguez Hills. Finally, he obtained a STL (License in Sacred Theology) in 1990 from the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (Catholic University of Louvain) in Belgium and a PhD and STD (Doctorate in Sacred Theology) from the same university in 1993.

**Q**UESTION: "Who made me?"  
Response: "God made me." Question: "Why did God make me?" Response: "God made me to know, love, and serve in this world, and be happy with him in the next."  
Question: "What is a sacrament?" Response: "A sacrament is an outward sign, instituted by Christ to give grace."  
Question: "What is the Mass?" Response: "The Mass is a recreation in an unbloody manner of the sacrifice on Calvary."

Those of us who enjoyed Catholic parochial education prior to the Second Vatican Council would recognize the dialogue above as a very traditional method of Catholic religious education based on the popular and almost ubiquitous *Baltimore Catechism*. The caricature of Catholic religious education that many non-Catholics have been able to experience through the play *Late Nite Catechism*, although a bit over the top, is humorously and somewhat frighteningly authentic. However, it is clear

that the tradition of memorizing the questions and answers in a catechism was honored for centuries in both Catholic and non-Catholic Christian communities as a trusted method of religious education, especially of youth and converts. Unfortunately, this particular tradition has been exaggerated to almost mythic proportions. Would it be fair to say that the example presented is the only model of religious tradition for theological learning? Let's hope not.

Nevertheless, religious traditions have, too often perhaps, been viewed as obstacles to serious inquiry and thus to real education. After all, how can students learn authentically if they are told that there are notional, theoretical, or practical moral boundaries that cannot be crossed in pursuit of intellectual honesty? Is not learning reduced simply to pantomime in such a situation? Isn't this just another clear example of education reduced to indoctrination? Can any real learning take place in an educational arena that is artificially circumscribed? Is it at all possible that, of all things, religious tradition just might provide an integrating framework that helps form an authentic and useful theological imagination? Wouldn't it more than likely do just the opposite? Before we rush to judgment, let's take a closer look.

Without moving into a complex and systematic analysis of exactly what comprises "religious tradition," I would venture that, in general, religious tradition can define the space where legitimate theological inquiry can happen. In fact, it could be argued that without a tradition, integration is impossible. Without a tradition integration might be nothing more than a narcissistic enterprise. One is reminded of the fact that in the wonderful play *The Fiddler on the Roof*, the father, Tevye, did his remarkably honest and powerful theological reflections within his own religious tradition.

For example, in our seminary the definition of theological inquiry proposed in the eleventh century still remains both useful and used: "*fides querens intellectum*" or *faith seeking understanding*. Students learn within a tradition that not only encourages but demands that theology define itself as a "work in progress." Theology as it is practiced and taught at St. John's attempts to engage a community of learners in an ongoing work that belongs to the entire church, that is of understanding ever more deeply the meaning of divine revelation and its implications for discipleship.

Seminarians learn that their Catholic tradition does not stifle creative inquiry, but rather encourages it as constitutive of the theological enterprise. Theology seen in this way can never be reduced to the repetition of dogma, but rather is an open study of the truths of revelation with every tool of intellectual inquiry available. Across the curriculum, the word "why" must be encouraged, not discouraged. Truth can never be afraid of inquiry or investigation. On the contrary, it must invite it.

For example, there are some who would suggest that the notions of "evolution" and "natural selection" are incompatible with Christianity. The Catholic theological tradition would not be so quick to allow such a conclusion. The Catholic tradition sees faith and reason as complementary partners in the search for truth, and provides both space and boundaries for an intellectually honest discussion of these notions. Is it reasonable to believe that the Bible in general, and the book of Genesis in particular, is true but at the same time does not need to be scientifically or historically accurate to convey divine truth? The Catholic response is that the creationism-evolution debate is in most of its aspects a scientific one, not a theological one, and therefore one cannot judge one's Christian authenticity by one's scientific conclusion.

This particular aspect of the Catholic religious tradition that allows the engagement of philosophy in the service of theology, encouraging faith and reason to walk side by side, provides a useful point of departure for theological education at the beginning of every one of our students' studies and a valid means of integration throughout the educational process. Students who bring their theological conclusions with them to the seminary find themselves confronted by professors asking them to enter into a tradition that challenges assumptions and conclusions that disrespect religious tradition. Thus rather than a hindrance to authentic inquiry, religious tradition often provides a very legitimate context for real learning.

My own field is moral theology. I have found that one of the most effective methods of learning the Catholic moral tradition is to have the students engage and memorize traditional moral terms and principles in Latin. I do this because in Latin the principles (three font principle, the principle of double effect, etc.) are expressed so succinctly and because the students feel that, by appropriating traditional

moral vocabulary in Latin, they are in touch with a tradition in a way impossible by relying only on contemporary translation. Real fun and real learning ensues when the students are confronted in class with contemporary moral cases and begin publicly discussing how these traditional terms and principles, some centuries old, can be helpful in solving contemporary moral dilemmas and consequently be valuable in pastoral ministry.

I have the privilege of working in a Catholic seminary that resembles the church it serves. The Catholic Church of Southern California is at one and the same time both a local and a world church. Every weekend in the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, the Eucharist is celebrated regularly in over 40 different languages. Our seminary is arguably one of the most multiculturally diverse Catholic seminaries in the United States. Our white students are a minority of our population. While only a small percentage of our students are "international" students preparing to return to their home dioceses, almost half of the rest were born outside the U.S. Our learning community is wonderfully diverse and our students represent a rich resource for learning. Students bring not only their own cultural vision and understanding of the world and the Catholic church; they bring particular learning styles that often are incompatible with a pure Western, Euro-American approach. For example, U.S.-born, Euro-American students have been raised in a liberal atmosphere of individualism that encourages the development and sharing of ideas and so they are often ready and even anxious to share their opinions, whether in or out of class, on just about any subject (many times without much forethought), whereas students from other cultures may come with a very different approach to society and education. They may be decidedly less individualist, more communally centered. In the same vein, they may have been conditioned to understand that the role of the student is to listen to the experts (teacher) and give back the wisdom and truth they have been told. These students may be generally less willing to enter into the American free-for-all of intellectual debate. A familiar religious tradition provides a safe space for them to participate in their education in a confusing cultural context different from their own.

See **BENSON** p.vi

**GOLEMON**, from p.i

vocational competency and identity in the social context of local "communities of accountability" (Rhodes). Each of these collaborative social practices involves complex intellectual knowing, discrete professional skills, and person-forming capacities. Developing mature personhood, I would argue, is one of the marks of theological education, as compared to many forms of professional schooling.

In this *Spotlight* we ask, "How do integrative teaching and learning practices shape *theological imagination*?" Educators that appeal here to religious tradition or denominational context do so in a dynamic way (Benson, Hymans), where "faith seeks understanding" in living dialogue and debate with a theological tradition. One teacher-scholar describes a course's movement from practicing the systematic logic of a Barth or Rahner to coaching students in their own integrative, theological imagination by playing with new rubrics and gestures (Jones). One professor describes transformative practices that move students from a dominant culture position to one of multiple cultural realities and views (Conde-Frazier). Other educators challenge the theological imagination to be shaped through wider public engagement: with the sciences,

social politics of power, or the new U.S. empire (Couture, Hopkins).

In the end, developing a "theological imagination" at the MDiv level marks the transition from being a skilled beginner — who can recite various theological sources, teachings, and perhaps even frameworks that relate to a ministry situation — to a competent practitioner who "thinks on one's feet" theologically, in order to quickly assess and act in unforeseen situations. This is no soft view of the imagination, but one rooted in reconstructive knowing, doing, and perceiving that goes back at least to Kant. One prominent social theorist of globalization, Arjun Appadurai, has described the imagination as a "field of social practices" by which local communities negotiate the global flows (technology, media, ideology, etc.) to form symbolic "neighborhoods" that allow human subjects and their practices of meaning to flourish. A theological imagination, then, could be the set of social practices by which seminaries, congregations, and other communities of faith selectively co-opt, critique, or resist various global forces, for the sake of human meaning and flourishing in their locale. If this is the case, then theological education may be one of the few social practices in today's academy that can engage popular movements and institutions, through teaching and ministerial leadership, in local and imaginative prac-

tics of human meaning and hope. If symbolic retrieval, renewed social practices, and the reconstruction of meaning are at the heart of the theological enterprise, and if the imagination is one of its primary fields of operation, then the theological imagination is well served by educators such as the ones represented here. May their work continue to be blessed and thrive.

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# Teaching and Learning Scripture as if We Remember Why We Cared about It in the First Place

James T. Butler, Fuller Theological Seminary



James T. Butler is Associate Professor of Old Testament at Fuller Theological Seminary, where he has taught since 1982. He is Baptist, ordained, and coordinates the InterSem program and other interfaith dialogues. Courses regularly taught by Butler include Pentateuch, Jeremiah, and Job. Previously, he taught Hebrew Scripture at Princeton Theological Seminary.

IMAGINE YOURSELF as a first-year student in a prestigious school of design. You have always loved to draw, and as an undergraduate art major you found your interests broadening into a fascination with art in various media. You enjoy the very materials of art, the studio environment, the craftwork. You find that your interest in art puts you into touch with people that you like, who share your enthusiasms and who stimulate your creativity. And you realize that art increasingly informs your ideals — you have come to believe that aesthetic creativity is not only a wholesome but a crucial aspect of life. So here you are, hoping to train for a vocation in doing what you love and believe in.

Now imagine that you are the seasoned professor who will teach the first class that this student takes. You have pursued an academic route to your present post, as have most of your colleagues, and your vita is appropriately filled with analytical works that assess the kind of art that your students aspire to do. You remember, too, your early fascination with the practice of art, the charcoal and the pigments; but in your studies you were quickly distinguished by your interests and abilities in thinking about what constitutes good art, the role of art in society, and other theoretical questions. From the vantage point of your years of experience, you are increasingly convinced of the shallowness of most artistic praxis in our society. Commercialization has corrupted the sensibilities of the public, galleries are obsessed with dumbing down their exhibits to popular tastes, and the best-paying jobs are going to graduate students who will practice what you deplore. You find that even your best students are compromised or coopted by this cultural environment, as they are dulled by the pap they see or as they aspire to train in commercial techniques. So here you are, determined to play your small part in subverting the commercial takeover of what you love and believe in.

Perhaps this kind of *Kulturkampf* is characteristic of all professional education, but certainly it is familiar to those engaged in theological studies. Some portion of our students have come to us with an introduction to theology already begun in undergraduate school. But virtually everyone we teach comes to us from a church, synagogue, or college organization in which they originally became enthused with or convicted about our subject. Not a few of our students are beginning a second career, pursuing at considerable cost and dislocation something that they feel is more fulfilling or more important than what they had done before. And yet, we find, we must disturb their enthusiasm with unsuspected problems and uncomfortable truths. As one of my departmental colleagues once put it, in defense of the substantial hours devoted to biblical studies in our curriculum, “But they have so much to unlearn!”

## On Testing Our Imagery: Reconstruction or Transformation?

Surely all worthwhile education requires iconoclasm. However much we may want to promote a relatively incremental growth in knowledge and maturity, we also recognize the acute need to deconstruct false or inadequate understanding. Indeed, it might seem that the more intuitive order for these tasks is to begin by “clearing the ground,” modeling our work as construction that must be preceded by demolition. After all, if the challenge is not sufficiently radical, if it does not rout the defense mechanisms that always protect cherished ideas, the result will either be stiffened resistance or a superficial accommodation. So, whether we proceed with pious pain or unholy glee, we fill our lectures and our reading lists with all of the problems, we eschew easy apologetics, and (to use an expression I heard from an appreciative student) we “blow the kiddies out of the tub.”

But as I look back over 30 years of teaching, I recognize how often such therapeutic “demolition” has unintended consequences. Some students, usually those of a more academic bent, are quickly won over to their professors’ perspective, and begin to acquire the critical tools that will distance them from the cultural womb that produced them. Others will buy into the educational process enough to gain a patina of sophistication, but, faced with the demands and predilections of the theological consumer culture, they will put together the nuts and bolts of their eventual practice in ways that are largely unaffected by their professors’ insights. Finally, a few others simply will become cynical about theological education, get the required degree, and then quite intentionally fulfill their professors’ worst fears by embracing and cultivating values that are now “battle hardened” against wool-gathering academics. I have had experience of such results in mainline Protestant and progressive evangelical environments, but I believe they are found to greater or lesser degree across the spectrum of theological education.

In my experience, an ability to recognize and to imaginatively attend to the nexus of cultures confronting our students — the culture of their earlier formation and the culture of their anticipated vocational service — is one of the most crucial pedagogical skills that a theological educator can nurture. Our job is not simply to provoke dissonance and crisis, but also to help students to negotiate these crises appropriately — to work with them to find larger contexts of explanation, and, when appropriate, to model honesty and humility in the face of intractable texts or interpretive issues.

## Some Examples

One aspect of respecting the culture of the students’ theological formation is asking questions about and accumulating examples from their prior interpretive frameworks. In teaching the book of Esther, for instance, I was surprised to learn of a view apparently widespread in evangelical churches that portrays the heroine negatively as one who compromised rather than risk, as did Daniel, a martyr’s death. By allowing this understanding to surface, we engaged in a fruitful discussion of various ways of dealing with disempowerment. I was able to mention the story of a Jewish feminist author whose friend was appalled when her daughter was chosen to play Esther in a Purim Spiel: “I don’t want her to be Esther — I want her to be Vashti!” Still, were there not values to be affirmed and dangers to be faced in both challenges? Students from societies in which they were part of religious or cultural minorities were able to weigh in with vivid experiences.

I also have found that students are more likely to share aspects of their earlier formation when I am vulnerable enough to share my own path with them at times. In beginning a segment on Daniel, I once took to class a worn book of dispensational charts that I had purchased as a boy with my paper route earnings. They would quickly see that I had other things to offer them, but meanwhile we had a productive time talking about the fascination in some circles with apocalyptic literature, from Hal Lindsey to the *Left Behind* series, with some reminders of ancient antecedents in the history of the church. Once the problems were framed from their experience, and once we had an opportunity to explore not only what we regretted but what might carry theological value in such popular expositions, it was natural to talk about form-critical definitions, comparisons with other literature, analyses of historical and social setting, and new theological assessments.

Communicating respect for the background of students is also a critical element of learning from the diversity of our student populations. It is one thing to recruit and to celebrate diversity, developing pedagogical structures to pose questions that we feel confident will give voice to neglected perspectives; but it is another thing to allow students to articulate their diversity on their own terms. Creating an atmosphere that encourages students to


bring their background into the classroom creates not a few surprises. A discussion of call narratives, for instance, might bring from an international student an energetic defense of the need for an audible word from God, or an account of a dramatic healing or of struggles with spiritual warfare. If we do not begin by privileging western questions, but by inviting a respectful sharing of experience, we end up with a much messier but more invigorating, more truly dialogical discussion.

## “Appreciative Inquiry”

In recent years, insights from a theory of organizational change called “appreciative inquiry” have been addressed with interesting results to assessments of both congregational life and theological education.<sup>1</sup> Of the basic assumptions of this theory, two seem particularly relevant to our discussion. First, “[P]eople have more confidence in the journey to the future when they carry forward parts of the past.” When an organization approaches change by talking about what is wrong “participants express their fears in resistance.” By contrast, “confidence and trust can be built when questions create direct links with the organization’s best and most appreciated narratives.” Second, “organizations are heliotropic”: that is, they “lean toward the source of energy — whether that energy is healthy or not.”<sup>2</sup>

If our approach to the communities that produce and employ our students is primarily one of diagnosis and prescription, we risk creating resistance or alienation. Perhaps, like our colleagues in medical education, we need to recognize more fully the value of promoting health as well as diagnosing illness. And we need not fear, I believe, a loss of critical acuity, as though we are accommodating popular pressures and forsaking the lessons we have learned in our guilds. Instead, if we let students know we are in common cause with them, and that we are respectful of their journeys and of the commitments that have brought them to us, they will often be more severe in their critique of poor theology than we could be, and more creative in finding constructive and hopeful alternatives.

<sup>1</sup> For an introduction and further bibliography, see the work of my colleague Mark Lau Branson, *Memories, Hopes, and Conversations: Appreciative Inquiry and Congregational Change* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2004). The recent Carnegie Foundation study of professional theological education adopted appreciative inquiry as their research framework (C. R. Foster, L. E. Dahill, L. A. Golemon, and B. W. Tolentino. *Educating Clergy: Teaching Practices and Pastoral Imagination* [San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006], p. 384.)

<sup>2</sup> Branson, 24–27. 

# Cultural Diversity as a Theological Resource

Elizabeth Conde-Frazier, Claremont School of Theology



Elizabeth Conde-Frazier is a religious educator who integrates the discipline of religious education with theology, spirituality, and the social sciences. She has written on multicultural issues, Hispanic theological education, and the spirituality of the scholar. She also teaches at the Latin American Bible Institute in La Puente, California, and has taught in Kazakhstan. Her scholarly passions involve her in doing participatory action research with communities working on justice issues, such as immigration and ecumenism, as they relate to religious education. She is an ordained American Baptist minister with more than ten years experience in the local church. She is the author of *Hispanic Bible Institutes* and co-author of *A Many Colored Kingdom: Multicultural Dynamics for Spiritual Formation*.

IN A CLASS on religious education at Claremont we were discussing a paradigm that facilitated teaching persons in congregations how to become involved in social justice. The paradigm invites us to look at the brokenness in the world. The conversation had gathered the different passions of students and inevitably one issue clashed with another until a very heated discussion around issues of racism was ignited. Questions turned into accusations and stereotypic remarks, which angered even the quiet students into explosive speech. What should I do? I could become apprehensive and cut off the discussion as inappropriate. I could intervene, name what was taking place in the discussion, and suggest ways to foster fuller listening. I could overpower the other voices with my authority as professor by offering theoretical expertise and shutting out the emotions as if these had no knowledge to offer. What was my role as professor? How did my personal experience with conflict and racism shape my inner conversation?

Dealing with multiculturalism is not only about having students from different cultures in the classroom or the inclusion of peripheral materials outside of the accepted curricular canon. Multiculturalism develops through human interaction. In the book *Becoming Multicultural*, Terry Ford reminds us that it is a way of being, perceiving, thinking, and acting in the world. Becoming multicultural indicates changing from a dominant perspective which has been shaped by our socialization process to a view that includes multiple realities and perspectives. This suggests that we need a shift from learning that is conceived as transmitting knowledge, to learning that has as its goal the co-construction of knowledge. In knowledge construction, the learners are viewed as active participants in the creation of their own knowledge. Because learners interact with and interpret the

world, knowledge is a function of the learner's background and purposes.

This makes the learning process a transactional one. It means that in classroom dynamics we will engage the historical, social, and cultural backgrounds that learners bring with them since these factors influence how learners engage one another and the content material of the course. In a transactional teaching/learning context, teachers must recognize that we bring to the learning context our own values, meanings, and interpretations which our histories, cultures, and communities have helped to construct. This is the stuff of which becoming multicultural is made. To be multicultural, a person must become aware of their social location and the life experiences that have shaped that positionality. This requires much reflection. The goal of this reflection is to become more conscious of ourselves and the process by which that consciousness is brought about and shapes how we and others operate in the world. It includes becoming aware of how and to what degree we have been made in the image of others. It is in critical reflection of one's experiences, and the meanings and origins of the past interpretations of these, where one begins the multicultural becoming.

## Pedagogical Considerations

To begin the process of critical reflection, I use a social location exercise which explores gender, social orientation, class, networks, and political and religious stances. We look at how these things were taught, reinforced and enforced in our lives. "The Cycle of Socialization," by Bobbie Harro in *Readings for Diversity and Social Justice*, helps us discuss what it would mean to change our socialization. This knowledge makes us aware of the personal projections we place upon texts and contexts. It teaches us to identify the conceptual context of a writing, i.e., the writer is immersed in Neoplatonic thought that dominated the tradition in which he was trained. When students and I understand where we are coming from and why this is important to us, we are able to respect different views even when they make no sense to us because we honor that view as a way for the person to make meaning for their life. This is a starting point for critical thinking and dialogue.

Critical thinking about the cultural construction of meaning is a rite of passage from innocence to awareness. New awareness can be frightening and liberating. It may begin with inner conflict. I create rituals in the classroom where persons can bring symbols to help articulate their new awareness and stances. I also make space for moments of reflective silence; meditation and journaling may be part of this time. There is a small altar in the center of the classroom and students decorate it with symbols that are meaningful to them. On occasion, they place pictures on it that represent their emerging understandings. From these moments come deep commitments and involvement in community projects. Students may also come to powerful moments of repentance, at which time they write their preconceived judgments on pieces of paper and place them at the altar. They can burn these in a litany of confession and forgiveness.

Creating space for affecting one another is also important. One student writes in his blog about another student:

She was different from me in many ways. She was theologically more conservative and far more religious. She was one of those persons I may have never met except at this school. Subsequently, she added much to my first year and perhaps my life. That is kind of the point, Claremont uniquely brings together those who we may or may not have met otherwise. We come together and discuss topics, issues and ideas that are tough to face but could help transform the world. Each person different than myself has helped me transform.

Conflict is an inevitable part of becoming multicultural. We are speaking from and acting out of personal perspectives that do not match the perspectives of others. Exploration can be one way to channel the energy of conflict. "Tell me more" is a phrase we learn to use as we pause before exploding or coming to premature judgments. In my classes we construct rules for our dialogue that guide how we respond during conflict. Another source of conflict emerges when a person finds and uses his/her voice for the first time. This is a powerful and sometimes explosive experience. In order to allow for such healing while respecting others, we want to design the rules of dialogue such that they may accommodate confrontation with respect. This helps us to speak the truth in love. We can avoid "protecting" persons from what they need to be confronted with.

Perspective transformation is the miracle of multicultural teaching. It involves revealing and unraveling the assumptions that maintain the views considered normative in our culture and theology, which then allows us to change our minds and consider or incorporate alternative worldviews. I remember a student who consistently confronted me in class discussions. I soon learned that he did so because he trusted me to listen while also answering with strong honesty. I would challenge him and he would argue back. We modeled for the class what it meant to recognize our deep differences while engaging them so that both of us were able to expand, deepen, and at times transform our perspectives. Others in the class began to risk fuller engagement with each other as well as the theoretical content and the places where it intersected their personal experiences and ministerial contexts. Things seemed to be "making sense" for persons.

This "making sense" takes place as persons begin to reconstruct their ideas, practical understandings, and spiritual practices. It can be seen in the reflections of a Nigerian student who traced his perspective transformation in a class on interfaith dialogue:

The indoctrination of my faith taught me that the Muslim is unfaithful, a devil. . . . The indoctrination of the Muslim also taught that the Christian is an infidel and to kill an infidel is to go to heaven. We are devils to each other and to engage each other is to pollute each other. These are unquestioned doctrines on both sides. They become the biases that are ingrained in us about each other. Through these lenses we see each other. This violence destroys our communities.

He is able to trace his journey from this beginning to the recognition of the role that fear and political interests plays in the socialization of these prejudices (deconstruction). He began reconstruction by deep inquiry into both of the religious traditions, reading and comparing the histories and sacred writings. He continued by engaging Muslims in prayer and dialogue. His journal entry reads:


To realize the presence of God/Allah in the tradition of the Muslim allows me to fully participate in their practice of prayer and in dialogue. I can dialogue because I understand that I am listening to a servant of God and not to a devil. . . . Education leads us to find common places. Now we can begin to talk about how to solve our common problems in the community.

The student has integrated past personal experience, course content and inquiry, and the skills of interfaith dialogue. He has come to understand that there is a journey from violent prejudice to communal cooperation, and he seeks to integrate and apply the elements necessary for constructing such a journey in a particular ministerial context. The journal becomes a place for integration — it allows him to trace his own journey of theological *metanoia*. He can identify his theological framework and the ways that it justifies and cements the elements of his group's identity into a cohesive, meaningful, and tangible world order. He can then create a strategy for bringing others on a similar journey of reconstruction that is sensitive to how the religious functions to mediate the absolute.

## Conclusion

Multicultural engagement as a theological resource calls for a transformative process for teachers and students. It calls for connected knowledge where a teacher engages in authentic conversations with her students with the possibility of constructing shared perspectives. Such teaching is where the content of our disciplines intersects with the different perspectives garnered from our experiences and the issues and problems of our communities. It is forming students who can reinvest religious traditions with new meanings from which they construct ministerial strategies in response to changing circumstances in shifting contexts. This is the beginnings of what Craig Dykstra refers to as prophetic and pastoral imagination in *Initiatives in Religion*.

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# Coaching Theological Imagination

Serene Jones, Yale Divinity School



Serene Jones is the Titus Street Professor of Theology at Yale Divinity School. Ordained in both the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and the United Church of Christ, Jones serves on the Advisory Committee for the Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion, and on the Yale University Women's and Gender Studies Council. She also has faculty appointments at Yale Law School and in the Department of African American Studies. Jones is the author of *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology: Cartographies of Grace* (2000) and *Calvin and Rhetoric: Christian Doctrine and the Art of Eloquence* (1995), and co-editor or contributor to several other works.

ever, I explain to my students that you don't learn doctrines by memorizing dates, names, and a series of creedal propositions, because our beliefs aren't just facts we spout off. They are habituated "plays of mind" learned over years of practice in Christian communities. Or better, they are gestures of imagination that, as Christians, we have developed and used, over time, to orient our lives and make meaning in the midst of our worlds.

I also explain that, because they are gestures, you have to practice them regularly if you want them to become second nature. To do that, you need a coach, and here's where my teaching comes in. My task as the class coach is to help strengthen the muscles of head and heart these mental motions require. And like all good coaching, the best way to do this is not by telling but showing them how to do it, and then getting them to do it themselves.<sup>1</sup> I like this image because it highlights the action-packed, almost game-like quality of theology. You never do it in the abstract but always on the ground, in the midst of everyday comings and goings, caught up fully in life's messy, vibrant flow. Like swinging a bat or twisting your body around in a yoga stretch, it's a full-fleshed, world-engaging endeavor. And because of this, coaching matters.

“Teaching them these — the basic rules of Christian thought — is our most demanding task because it requires showing them that these rules are both firm and flexible, both sturdy and open.”

Our Systematics syllabus is designed to do this — to combine showing and doing. Over the course of two semesters, students read a lot of Karl Barth and Karl Rahner, two great masters of theological imagining. Our hope is that by repeatedly following their plays of mind, students will begin to learn (and be enabled to practice) the deep logic that drives their projects. We also read contemporary theologians — feminists, womanists, liberation theologians, communitarians, process thinkers, postmodernists, etc. — to learn new gestures practiced in the church today, some of them artful, improvised, and graceful, others not.

In my biweekly lectures, I also try to show them how to practice theological gestures.

Here, they see me do it on my feet and in conversation with the world around me — with texts, traditions, my own life, politics, church culture, and, perhaps most importantly, their own pressing questions. I've never quite mastered the complex case-study method used by my colleagues in the social scientific fields, but for me, it would be impossible to lecture without multiple “examples” of the doctrinal moves I'm exploring. Whether I'm describing *justification by faith* by showing them how it pertains to their anxieties about an upcoming exam, or exploring *creation* by reminding them how odd it is to think of the air they breathe as a divine gift, I'm trying to show them that it's in these accounts of lived experience that the gestural logic of our faith resides.

I also try to show them that doctrines shape much more than our carefully considered, well-ordered God-thoughts. “Think of an ordinary, everyday thing like an apple,” I tell them. “How do you imagine it? What string of associations does it conjure up for you? And how might Christian habits of thought play a role in that conjuring?” I then give them an example of how it might happen by letting them in on my own theological stream of consciousness:

*Apple? Eve's apple. An Apple computer. Technology as temptation. Technology as gendered. Does the Internet represent the knowledge of good and evil? Is there good knowledge and evil knowledge? Is information an idol? How does information affect our understanding of divine Providence? Our social responsibility? Are these different for people who don't have access to the Internet? For people who have at their fingertips an ever-expanding world of knowledge? It's ambiguous, isn't it? . . .*

*Apple as gift. Sin and pleasure. Or basic sustenance? How does technology shape our relation to food? Our distribution of it? As site of sin's enactment, a temptation, a pleasure promised? The apple falls. Grace descends. The future stands in front of us somewhere, yes? No? If it's a tangent line intersecting a circle, maybe the apple bite is the place where infinity touches history. Do apples have a future on our earth, if global warming continues? Maybe Apple will outlive us all. (Would Jesus have a PC or a Mac)? Will technology replace human effort and creativity? Will it replace God? If so, what are the eschatological implications of that?*

And on it goes . . . this rather chaotic flow of thoughts shaped by doctrines.

Of course, until students grasp the fundamental logic of various Christian doctrines, the patterns embedded in this stream-of-consciousness example won't be apparent. Teaching them these — the basic rules of Christian thought — is our most demanding task because it requires showing them that these rules are both firm and flexible, both sturdy and open. I use the image of a hedge to symbolize this dynamic. Like a tall wall of trees

circling a large patch of earth we call faith, Christian doctrines stand at the borders of our meaning making and mark out the terrain of what we believe. Note that as hedges, they aren't brick walls but organic life forms that make a rough border around a plot that has space for a variety of imaginative gestures — but note as well that even though these hedges are twiggy, sometimes overgrown, and change with the seasons, they are hedges nonetheless. Faith has form. Our theological imaginations do have discernible shape.

Students also get to try on these gestures for themselves — in a more organized form than my above example suggests — in weekly discussion sections and monthly papers. If our curriculum and the broader school environment are working well, students are also practicing these movements in Bible, preaching, and ethics classes (to name only a few), as well as in the dining hall, by the mailboxes, in chapel, and even while listening to NPR in the middle of a traffic jam on I-95. If the training really takes hold, these plays of mind are probably shaping their night dreams and their morning prayers, too, although not necessarily at a conscious level. All this is to say that if they are learning doctrine — really learning doctrine — every corner of experience is affected by it. And when this starts to happen, the integrative goals of the course (and of our school's mission statement) begin to be realized.

It's hard to tell, though, when exactly this happens or how to evaluate it. Sometimes it shows up in papers or in office-hour conversations. But more often than not, I have to trust that it is happening (or will happen) in places and times that I, as a teacher, will never know. Here's where my own theological practice of *providence* comes into the picture, as an imaginative gesture that allows me to let go of history and of their lives — as if they were mine to control in the first place — and to affirm that the integrating work of the Spirit extends far beyond the walls of my class or the school. Here, too, I am called to practice, alongside my students, gestures embedded in the doctrine of *grace*, affirming that it matters enormously that such integration occurs, and yet that it doesn't matter at all, because excelling as a student or a teacher earns us nothing with respect to the already/always fullness of God's love. There is perhaps no more difficult task in teaching than mastering this motion of mind and heart. And yet when one is finally able to grasp it, the freedom of gestural motions it allows is breath-taking. And a whole new level of teaching, learning, and integration begins to unfold.

<sup>1</sup> Here I use Kierkegaard's famous description of how we learn the concepts of faith. They are shown not explained. [RSS](#)

BENSON, from p.iii

The dialogical method of inquiry present in the Catholic religious tradition is but one example of a religious tradition that is effective for learning here at St. John's. It offers a process of integration that allows the learning at our seminary to cross cultural boundaries. Students are encouraged to apply the insights of their learning to the particular cultures from which they come. Dialogue is not about competition but about complementarity. The tradition provides a common center, but students are encouraged to make reasonable and creative responses that move to the periphery, responses

that are traditional but creative. Working within an authentic religious tradition can be far from stultifying — rather it can provide a factor that is unifying, encouraging a community of learners, but without reducing itself to a cookie-cutter approach to education.

Students who complete their work at our seminary take away a sense of owning their tradition, but at the same time they know that they have been empowered to understand and apply that tradition in different contexts. The multicultural context in which they have been learning has provided them with the challenge to understand the Catholic religious tradition from within their own cultur-

al context while being sensitive to the fact that “one size does not fit all.” The Vietnamese seminarian needs to be sensitive to the importance of the Quincenera celebration within the Mexican Catholic culture. The Euro-American seminarian needs to understand that not all Spanish-speaking Catholics are Mexican, enjoy spicy food, and have a devotion to Our Lady of Guadalupe. Religious tradition, to be a truly integrative force, needs to be integrated into and nuanced by culture, but without loosening its boundaries or losing its essential identity. [RSS](#)

# Community Practices of Integration

Michael Battle, Virginia Theological Seminary



Michael Battle is Vice President and Associate Dean of Academic Affairs at Virginia Theological Seminary (Episcopal). Michael lived in residence with Archbishop Desmond Tutu in South Africa for two years, 1993–1994, and was ordained a priest in South Africa by Desmond Tutu in 1993. He has written out of his studies and friendship with Desmond Tutu, including such books as *Reconciliation: The Ubuntu Theology of Desmond Tutu and The Wisdom of Desmond Tutu*. He is also the author of *Blessed Are the Peacemakers: A Christian Spirituality of Nonviolence*; this book wrestles with how Christian practices of nonviolence are often neglected, and makes explicit connections between Mahatma Gandhi and Christian spirituality.

IN THIS ESSAY I will attempt to do a strange thing: to begin practically and end theoretically. What I mean by practical is to sketch a description of our common seminary life. And what I mean by theoretical is to argue for why our common life cannot be separated from our academic life. So, I begin with the practical. The purpose of our common life at Virginia Theological Seminary is to increase our attention span for God and neighbor. One of my favorite Christian mystics, Simone Weil teaches communities like ours that the key to a Christian conception of studies is the realization that prayer consists of attention. She believes that prayer is the orientation of all the attention of which the soul is capable toward God. The quality of the attention counts for much in the quality of the prayer, but she cautions that this quality does not mature without a joy for learning. Without a desire and joy for learning, we cannot give our whole attention to God. Our intentional use of the common life through worship, classrooms, shared meals, and small groups always seeks how community reveals God. We have learned that communal practices are inseparable from theological vision.

What I describe here is not meant to paint a picture of an insular community detached from most American universities and schools. In fact, our seminary seeks to be one of the best theological academic institutions in the world. What I do describe as community practices of integration are those regular events among us that continue to remind students, faculty, and staff why we are here and why we exist at all. This means that academic studies cannot be separated from all of the other formative experiences that are described in our seminary life. For example, the life of prayer conducted in our chapels or in small groups in faculty homes is also pedagogically linked to our rich academic attention to God in our classrooms and seminars. So, when a student prays for the people of Darfur in chapel, these same students are held

accountable by their prayer in my class, “Jesus and Nonviolence,” to learn more deeply about the circumstances of Darfur. There is an inextricable link between what goes on in the classroom and what goes on in the rest of the life of our residential seminary.

Students in our master and doctoral degree programs are reminded daily of Weil’s wisdom that prayer consists of attention as the rhythms of our seminary life cultivate a desire and joy for learning. The goals of writing a paper, understanding the meaning of the text, creating a Bible study in a prison, and even receiving a degree are not completed in themselves alone. There is always the greater need of paying attention to God through informal conversation or laughter at lunch, where a common language, even a shared humor, is formed. In short, our common life must never become “busy work” or a means to an end. Our being together is its own reward. We are mindful of this gift of time and space set aside for the cultivation of learning. We are especially reminded of this through the sacrifices of communities around the world who send students to Virginia Theological Seminary to do what most people in the world are not able to do: to be resident in an academic and spiritual community. Therefore, the responsibility is great for those who enter our programs — to remain mindful of the privilege of learning, not only for one’s personal gain, but for those communities who also depend on us to cultivate their joy of learning about God and our neighbor.

“Worship, I argue, is another way of knowing communally. Without communal epistemology, we seem to be in a perpetual search for God at our own convenience, and often made in our own individual images.”

The joy of learning that comes from our various communal practices helps us synthesize a tautology: we can only seek God if we already know God. We break this circular argument by depending upon others to know God and ourselves. After all, this is theological formation — that individuals are formed for ministry in community. To live in community, however, is not an easy endeavor. Such life requires change, tradition, and creativity — three forces that must be held together intentionally. For example, as part of our broader review of worship life at the seminary, one day I addressed the role of living outside of our comfort zone for both our leadership and personal roles in worship. Such openness would be needed to make sense of why a traditionally Protestant evangelical seminary was now adding daily Eucharists to its tradition of Morning Prayer. I spoke to our seminary community about living outside of our comfort zone for a season so that

change, tradition, and creativity could become more than the sum of their parts.

The essential question I tried to answer was: “How can our worship life together deepen, rather than contradict, our personal and corporate identity as the Protestant Episcopal Theological Seminary in Virginia?” The problematic issue, I assumed, in answering this question was the comfort zone of Western Christians — namely, personal spirituality. Communal spirituality beckons Western Christians like me to function at the edge of competency. Although I had been serving as the academic dean for less than a year, I tried to express a vision of community practices of integration to answer how our worship deepens our corporate and personal life together.

## Relationality and Worship as Knowledge

One of the essential functions of worship is that it gives us knowledge of God. It used to be said that it was from our worship we learned to do theology. The assumption here is that worship always precedes theology (Wainwright). I still believe, however, that God, through Jesus Christ, gives us knowledge through relationality which is the essence of worship. For example, only through the knowledge of a child can a child know her parent; for the youngster, there is no other way of knowing the parent. Yet, being in relationship to its parent, the child’s incomplete knowledge becomes satisfied. Jesus has defined our relationship to God as a child to a parent, but it would prove difficult to find many Western Christians who are content in their relationship to God. Herein is the Western discomfort. Western individualism inevitably confuses the reality of God with one’s own idea of reality. Again, I return to the image of a child who becomes aware of her incomplete knowledge of God and asks: “How do I know that God is real?”

European philosophers were the main constituents who tried to answer this question by discussing God as the object of our ideas. To his credit, Immanuel Kant was the pivotal thinker who questioned the possibility of our knowledge of any object, but he remained within the Western cosmology in which individual epistemology is dominant. In such a way of knowing, worship does not precede theology because an individual’s agency in knowing becomes primary. Worship, I argue, is another way of knowing communally.

Without communal epistemology, we seem to be in a perpetual search for God at our own convenience, and often made in our own individual images. There are Western theologians who help us think through a deepened sense of worship and who challenge Western Christians out of their comfort zones of personal piety.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s theology teaches that God is both being and action most clearly seen in the person of Jesus Christ. For Bonhoeffer, we cannot help but worship Jesus who constantly points away from himself and to others. Jesus’s nature is to be for the other. Bonhoeffer’s genius is that he constantly reminds us that we have a hard time with Jesus because we are constantly tempted to worship our individual selves instead of God. If we end up trapped in our own solipsistic forms of spirituality, however, we can no longer know God in the manner that God is known — namely, through others. We do not know God in the autonomy of an individual. Such an approach

inevitably causes failure of knowing the presence of God.

So, how does this all help us with the question: “How can our worship life together deepen, rather than stagnate, our personal and corporate identity?” In short, Bonhoeffer teaches us that worship is essential in knowing God. In fact, he teaches us that Christians know God essentially through worship. God is no object of our ideas that somehow statically rests out in space for us to think about. We can only know God’s being through God’s actions. And we can only make sense of God’s actions through worship. When we learn about what God has done through Christ, we cannot help but adore God — indeed, worship God. Worship is the way we know God. We deepen in worship because we are invited into the mystery of knowing God, who is not an object of our ideas, but the subject of our life together. We know God only through the relationality that Christ creates for us. Such relationality leads to two growing edges for Western Christians. First, we learn to pray in common. It is essential that we have common habits of worship, whether we feel like it or not, because it is through the mystery of the community’s worship that Christ is known. And second, through a good pneumatology, it can be argued that Christ exists among us as community.

Another western theologian who I think would agree with my argument is Austin Farrer, an Anglican theologian at Oxford who died in 1968. In *Finite and Infinite*, Farrer states:

Theism cannot be anything but nonsense, if we are not allowed any sort of connection but either the accidental concomitance established by induction, or the formal implications between the terms of a language qua language.<sup>1</sup>

Farrer helps us see that we are not convinced of God’s presence simply by talking inductively or analytically about God. We must be somehow connected to God to know God. Just as a child imprints on a parent, knowledge is derived or discovered. A child will not know why her father is a theologian until she first realizes her relationship to him, and second, until the father discloses himself to his child. Similarly, only God can say who God is and that God is present with us in relationship.


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# Shaping Vocational Identity in Field Education

Lynn Rhodes, Pacific School of Religion



Lynn Rhodes is Associate Professor of Ministry and Field Education at Pacific School of Religion. She has been there since 1983. Before that she taught at Boston University School of Theology in field education, and was a research associate in women's studies at Harvard Divinity School as well as a campus minister. Her areas of interest and research include feminist interpretations of ministry practice and vocation and economic justice.

mation focuses on the ability to be critical theological practitioners who are flexible and able to change roles as contexts and issues shift. There is no model of ministry that can address the complex and ambiguous nature of our changing world. There is incredible need for leaders who can lift up the vision from wherever it comes, practice communal discernment, change roles as needed, be critical thinkers with knowledge of historical resources of the faith, and attune to present conditions.

“We are trying to move from student-centered education to education for communal accountability and faithful witness in the world.”

This makes it very difficult to define or shape pastoral/vocational identity for specific roles or leadership functions. We try to develop education that encourages people to reflect critically upon contexts and their own self understanding and upon discernment issues of ministry within communities of accountability. We try to counter the “lone ranger” model of ministry while committed to prophetic work. In our understanding of “communities of accountability” we include local faith communities within the larger context of our accountability to our earth and sustainability, to all marginalized communities, and to those labeled the “least” in our country and the world.

## Teaching Practices/Strategies for Practical Theology and Field Education

As field education faculty, I have co-taught the “Frameworks for Critical Engagement in Ministry” for the past two years. The purpose of this course is to introduce the students to theories of reflective practice by engaging them in contexts and texts that address issues of suffering and hope. This course is taught in the first year as an introduction to the methods of critical theological reflection that inform preaching, worship, education, pastoral care, community leadership, arts, and spiritual formation. Our faculty present their praxis models of interpretation in teams. For instance, the faculty in worship and in sociology of religion gave a joint presentation on lament. They presented a psalm and hip hop. The psalm was presented as voiced by a woman who was raped by a friend and the hip hop was presented by young street artists. The discussion was on ritual practices of lament and theological understandings of lament as a form of resistance in times of suffering. This course is the practical theology field attempt to provide common language about the ways preaching, worship, education, the arts, spirituality, leadership, and pastoral care relate, inform, integrate, or challenge.

In the second year our field education classes are shifting from student-centered to

community-centered learning. We are moving from the emphasis on individual call theology to theology of discernment of the common call that is given to all Christians. The issue is how to discern what that means in particular contexts, with particular resources, education, and gifts. In this sense there are no “special calls.”

The field education material and strategies now focus on leadership preparation that encourages seminarians to learn how to analyze contexts of ministry and to do critical theological reflection upon ministry practices. They are asked to develop parish teaching committees as centers of theological reflection upon the faith community and the congregants’ daily lives and work.

We have changed the focus of parish teaching committees from the task of evaluating the work of the seminarian to articulating the congregants’ understanding of their own ministries and how that relates to their experiences of the faith community. For example, when a student preaches, the questions include the more general topic of how sermons relate to the daily lives of the congregants.

In our field education program we are doing more of our teaching with the teaching parish committees. We are working with them to provide resources and orientation towards their own theological reflections upon their experiences of the faith community and how that informs and shapes their daily lives. They become the people with whom the student engages the common issues of ministry.

The questions then shift from how well one preaches to what role does preaching have in people’s daily lives. What kinds of community interactions support, nurture, and challenge Christian witness in the daily work of congregants? What does it mean to develop more faithful living and working practices for the whole community and the individuals within it?

In addition, all students in field education participate in small weekly reflection groups. When it is possible, the group meets on the sites of ministry. This, I have found, is a powerful way to de-center the individualistic focus on the seminarian. When the whole group is introduced to the context and encounters the diversity of ministry sites, they become much more sensitive to the importance of context and the diversity of experiences. We encourage them to make connections between their sites and the larger communities.


Each student presents a critical incident in their ministry. All students reflect upon that incident in class. They are not to answer the questions or issues raised by the writer of the paper, but to identify their own issues of ministry raised by that incident. If they cannot identify any issues for themselves, they are not allowed to speak. This has become a critical aspect of the class. Each situation of ministry becomes the whole groups’ issue. After all the questions of theology, ministry practices, and contextual analyses are raised, the whole group decides which questions to address. The teaching goal is to provide experiences of communal discernment and new insights. I try to get them to think about the theological assumptions, issues, and questions that underlie their ministry practices.

The final paper for field education is their theology of ministry. In this paper they integrate their theology of ministry with their practice of ministry. The paper is written in draft form for group discussion. After the discussion of the paper, the student rewrites the paper and then explains to the group what new insights the student had after the group discussion. When a student does a “draft” paper, she/he is much more willing to examine it in discussion. It is a concrete way to emphasize that theological insight is never complete and that people with very different theological positions can inform and shape each other’s theology.

Another critical aspect of field education is the teaching/learning with field mentors. I meet with them six times a year. This is critical for the integration between field and seminary classes. We engage in formation for mentoring through dialogues, other faculty presentations, and mentors’ wisdom.

How do we recognize integration when we see it? The immediate feedback for integration comes from the evaluations that the student, the field mentor, and the teaching parish or teaching agency provide. These evaluations are based on the learning objectives that each student develops each semester. It also comes from the content of their theology of ministry papers. I also keep in touch with graduates — they are the greatest source of knowledge about what was helpful in integrating what they learned in seminary and what they are experiencing in their ministries.

We understand integration begins when seminarians make connections between their work and the work of their faith communities; when they see complexity and different perspectives with real openness; when we are taught by them to see their communities in greater complexity; when they can hold ambiguity and passionate commitment together; when they gain courage to face destroyed lives and communities and find connections to others and God that sustain them in their work; when they have self knowledge that is transparent to others; and when they can articulate for others a theological understanding and a practice that shapes their vision and is still open to further insight and discernment.

We hold ourselves accountable for educating for ministries of justice and compassion. We are far from having an integrated approach, but we are learning about it through team teaching and through accountability to our common principles of education. Integration is a very fragile thing. Often we are in the midst of chaos and diversity and challenge that remind us daily that we are really living in ambiguity and great diversity of experience. We are committed to the well-being of each other, our communities, and the whole of creation. Our school is struggling to understand what it means to live less fearfully in such a time as this, with more courage, less arrogance, and more passion, and with intentional critical reflection upon context and diversity of knowledge, experience, and historical resources. 



# Spiritual Formation as Integrative Practice

Elizabeth Liebert, SNJM, San Francisco Theological Seminary



Elizabeth Liebert is Professor of Spiritual Life at San Francisco Theological Seminary and a member of the Christian Spirituality doctoral faculty at the Graduate Theological Union. Her teaching regularly includes spiritual formation classes for persons preparing for ministry in Christian settings. She frequently writes on spiritual practices and their transforming potential for ordinary persons. Her next book will focus on using discernment in decision-making.

**A**MONG THE WAYS that integration occurs in the seminaries, especially in the person preparing for ministry, spiritual formation holds a significant (though not exclusive) place. Seminary students engaged in intentional spiritual formation regularly report that they make significant breakthroughs about their own strengths and their emerging vocational direction through formation practices. At moments of struggle, they are grateful for a “holding environment” that allows the struggle without imposing predetermined outcomes or time frames. They can continue the struggle as long as necessary, trusting that their searching and wrestling are held confidentially and prayerfully in the hearts of their colleagues, and co-travelers engaged in their own searches and struggles.

Spiritual formation can be defined in various ways. In its widest sense, spiritual formation means *attending* to the Holy’s manifestation, *discerning* the authenticity of this manifestation from other “voices,” and *responding* through appropriate actions and practices. In attending, we learn to look in expected and unexpected places for the traces of the Holy: in oneself, in relationships, in communities of many sorts, in systems and structures that organize society, and in the natural world itself. In discerning, we sensitize ourselves to listen — to ourselves, to others, to cultures, circumstances, nature, as well as to sacred texts and liturgical practices of our various traditions — and to distinguish how God might be present and active. In responding, we come alongside God in God’s gracious activity, discovering our own particular call within the rich web of relationships that we inhabit and how to live out this call in our lives. This threefold dynamic continually repeats: the Holy continues to call, communities and voices shift, and we continue to respond as challenges come and go.

Spiritual formation, then, is a lifelong endeavor, available to all persons, no matter what their religious tradition or cultures. Spiritual formation will, of course, vary considerably between different people and contexts, religious and otherwise. A Torah study group, a charismatic prayer meeting, a high school mission trip, a colleague support group, a vision quest, even a visit to the art museum: all are

potentially spiritually formative in their respective contexts. The integrative potential of such diverse experience appears directly related to the ability to reflect on the experience in light of one’s faith commitments.

At another level, spiritual formation is also an intentional task of faith communities as they continually reflect on how to transmit the wisdom of the tradition to the next generation and invite their members into continually deeper lives of faith. The relationship of theology to spirituality becomes relevant at this point; theological commitments frame and structure the community’s understanding of spiritual formation. How does this community envision the Holy, and the possibility of God’s communication with humankind and our ability to receive it? What is the “story” of this community of faith into which it invites its adherents, and how is it being lived at the present? Who are the “saints” or holy people envisioned in this tradition, and how does one become like this kind of person? What have been the time-honored forms of spiritual formation in this community’s past, and how can they be effectively employed in the present? Clearly, spiritual formation can vary significantly from one faith community to another, even in different local manifestations within the same faith tradition. But the community that ignores, abuses, or significantly restricts spiritual formation soon finds itself stagnant, even dying.

For better or for worse, spiritual communities have agendas that they carry out through spiritual formation. At its best, formation is more than assimilation into the status quo. It is, as Davina Lopez notes, “the process of critically creating and re-creating ourselves in relation to a larger whole, all the while engaging questions of who we need/want to be and what kind of world we envision.”<sup>1</sup> One of the tasks of a seminary-based spiritual formation program must be to teach the critical skills for evaluating the spiritual formation that is explicitly encouraged, that which “just happens” without much attention, and even that which is taught by its absence.

“*In its widest sense, spiritual formation means attending to the Holy’s manifestation, discerning the authenticity of this manifestation from other ‘voices,’ and responding through appropriate actions and practices.*”

At the level of the institutions that prepare leaders for faith communities, I believe spiritual formation must contain two foci: 1) the spiritual formation of the emerging leader, both in the present and for their future as religious leaders, and 2) their preparation to, in their turn, offer spiritual formation in their future places of ministry. They will be the catalysts of the spiritual formation in their own settings, the ones who set the example, invite, supervise, evaluate, and integrate spiritual for-

mation into the life of particular faith communities. But they must also themselves be persons of vibrant faith in order to carry out their spiritual leadership over time. When the spiritual formation of the minister dries up — sometimes at the encouragement of the busy congregation — clergy more readily crash and burn, causing damage to ripple throughout their congregations. I am convinced that ongoing clergy spiritual formation is one of the most effective prevention programs available to communities of faith.

## Spiritual Formation in Seminary Life

Spiritual formation, then, whatever its setting and theological grounding, participates in three primary dynamics, *attending, discerning,* and *responding*, with the goal of helping one become a more integrated person of faith. Any one or combination of these dynamics can provide moments where integration occurs. Let me illustrate these three dynamics with what we do at San Francisco Theological Seminary, a seminary of the Presbyterian Church (USA). At SFTS, spiritual formation finds its formal and required curricular expression in the field-education and integrative studies curriculum, a new configuration of which we are currently implementing. Three continuous threads of vocational discernment, personal spiritual formation, and contextual analysis weave themselves through the integrative studies classes and internship. We believe that these three threads are intimately inter-related, because who we are and will become is situated in a particular tradition and must be lived out in the service to particular faith communities. At various moments in the integrative studies curriculum we introduce and then circle back again to such questions as: “Who are you? How have you become who you are? What kind of person do you want to be? What kind of leadership do you want to exercise? What Rule of Life will support that goal?”

These integrative threads are set in dialogue with the critical theological and biblical formation carried on in their respective parts of the curriculum, providing, we intend, three legs that contribute to the overall spiritual formation of clergy. Our desired outcome of “whole leaders for the whole church” requires the entire seminary curriculum for its realization. We seek to prepare future leaders of faith communities who not only understand but have internalized the Christian biblical tradition (biblical studies), recognize the varieties of ways Reformed and other Christians have lived out their Christian life with others (history of Christian thought and practices, world Christianity, interfaith dialogue), can speak critically and responsibly about their tradition (theology and ethics), and have the skills and arts of ministry (homiletics, pastoral and spiritual care, administration, Christian education). This formal curriculum is surrounded by a vibrant chapel program, with four regular worship services per week. The chaplain and chaplain’s assistants, who are students, not only oversee the preparation of these services, but also attend to the spiritual care of the campus community. A counseling center, which offers spiritual direction as well as several counseling modalities, is available to

faculty, staff, students and their families, and to the larger community. In a very real sense, spiritual formation is the task of all the disciplines and all the professors, and, indeed, a goal of the entire life of the community.

In addition, San Francisco Theological Seminary also has a long-established Program in Christian Spirituality invested with the task of extending and deepening the spiritual formation offered in the curriculum, as well as providing specialized preparation for leadership in spiritual formation that the students will employ in their future pastoral roles. In a rotation of five one-credit elective courses, we invite students to deepen their practices of biblical prayer, centering prayer, contemplative listening, personal discernment, and discernment of systems and structures, while at the same time learning practices of spiritual reading and small-group spiritual guidance. We invite them to pay attention to their service and leadership and to see how those are connected to their spirituality, and we encourage them to connect their spirituality to life in the world. We assist them in finding spirituality courses in the various schools in our consortium that match their needs for preparation in spiritual formation ministries.

While much of what the Program in Christianity does is curricular, we are particularly attentive to providing safe spaces for personal spiritual exploration within small group communities, holding at bay the pressures of “right answers” or “right behavior” in order to allow maximum freedom for individuals to notice how God might be at work in them, their surroundings, and the wider world. We invite all students to participate in spiritual direction and provide referrals (on and off campus), and we offer a highly respected diploma for specialized training in the ministry of spiritual direction that students can begin during their MDiv studies. We encourage other faculty and staff to mentor individual students or small groups beyond what the staff of the program can ourselves do, and to support students in setting up their own formation groups. In short, recognizing that spiritual formation can take place at various nodes in the institution, we provide what we hope is a balance of formal courses and less formal spiritual formation offerings so that students can find that which most helps them at various moments of their seminary journey.

A student recently told me, at the end of one of our one-credit formation classes, “I struggled with the practice all semester, and I am clearer than ever, that this practice, however valid for some persons, is not one that nourishes my spirituality. But I’m glad I stayed with it because I really know what it is. I feel I could with integrity introduce it to a congregation.” I want to say, in return, “Great! You’ve learned some very important things: people pray differently; your way of praying will not fit all others in your congregation; and God is faithful beyond any particular practice.” Not bad for a couple hours a week for a semester.

<sup>1</sup>Lopez, Davina C. “Marking Time, Shaping the Future.” *Religious Studies News* 24, no.12 (October 2006): 12. [RSN](#)

# Integration across the Curriculum

Diane Hymans, Trinity Lutheran Seminary



*Diane Hymans is Professor of Christian Education and Associate Academic Dean at Trinity Lutheran Seminary in Columbus, Ohio. She teaches courses in educational ministry, youth and young adult ministry, children in the church, and teaching/learning theory and practice. Her research interests include the role of the imagination in teaching in faith communities, and children and the Bible. She is also interested in curriculum development and has chaired the curriculum review process at Trinity.*

IN A RECENT New Testament II class at Trinity Lutheran Seminary, the subject for the day was Paul's emphasis on giving oneself for others, looking particularly at the Christ hymn in Phillipians 2:6–11, as well as related passages, including Paul's reference to himself as an example (Phil. 2:20–21). One insightful student commented, "Paul isn't a very good example of self-care, is he?" The student was bringing content from her first-year "Person in Ministry" course into this second-year New Testament class. Professor Clayton Croy, who teaches the course, reports that the student's comment led to a fruitful conversation about the differences between a modern parish pastor and the form that Paul's itinerant, sometimes dangerous, ministry took during the Roman empire. Croy reports, "We considered that self-care and giving oneself for the gospel are not necessarily mutually exclusive, and that proper self-care enables one's ministry to be stronger and longer-lasting." The discussion also led to the observation that some persons, even now, may be called to more perilous ministry than others.

This incident is an example of one form that integration across the curriculum takes at Trinity Lutheran Seminary. It is not uncommon for content from one course to find its way into the discussion in a course in another discipline. The faculty hopes that this will happen, and, in fact, encourages it. Since the 1980s, when the faculty realized that pre-seminary theological training could no longer be assumed, integration has been one of the core values underlying the curriculum at Trinity.

The MDiv curriculum at Trinity Seminary is more structured than in many theological schools, with a significant number of required courses taken in prescribed sequence. It is built around the classical theological curriculum — biblical studies, historical and systematic theology, and practical theology. In addition to a

sequence of required courses in these foundational disciplines, students are expected to take a variety of courses designated as options in specific areas, including the arts, missiology, preaching, and several Bible options. In what room they have left in their schedules, students may choose elective courses. The core courses serve as prerequisites for almost everything that follows. The essentials of this curriculum have been in place since the early 1990s, though many aspects have evolved since then.

The curriculum is front-loaded with the basics. Entering juniors take courses in Bible, systematic theology, church history, and worship. All are intended to provide a base from which to move into the middler year, when more courses in practical theology come into play. In this second year, MDiv students add to the sequence their first course in homiletics, along with courses in pastoral care and counseling and Christian education. ELCA students also take a course called "Lutheran Identity," organized around the Lutheran confessions, while students from other traditions take a course related to their own background. The intent is that the content from the first-year foundational disciplines will find its way into these second-year courses on the practice of ministry. The courses related to denominational identity are designed to move beyond simply learning the content of the confessions to exploring how they shape the witness and ministry of the church in distinctive ways.

## Integrative Sites in the Curriculum

There are some required courses in the curriculum that are intentionally designed to nurture the practice of integration from the beginning of students' work in seminary. First-year students are involved in two of these integrative courses. The first is "Person in Ministry," which brings the resources of pastoral psychology into conversation with those of the Bible and theology to help students understand themselves and the ways in which they relate to others in light of their emerging pastoral identity. The second is "Faith Seeking Understanding," which is designed as an introduction to the entire theological education enterprise. Nearly everyone on the faculty puts in a guest appearance at some point. The course is not "theology lite," because it introduces students to substantive issues in theology and ministry from three points of view — content, context, and method — and it introduces the concept of integration. As faculty members model practices of integration, first-year students can ask questions about the relationship between faith and intellect.

Concurrently, contextual experiences are an important component of Trinity's curriculum. Students in the MDiv program are required to participate in a Ministry in Context assignment, CPE, and a one-year internship. Ministry in Context (MIC) begins in the junior year. After the Christmas break, students are assigned to an MIC site, usually a congregation. For

this first year, students are primarily involved in observing the life of the congregation and assisting in worship. During their middler year, students are exposed to a wider range of activities and take a more active leadership role. In many instances, the sequence of involvement in specific aspects of ministry is related to the sequence of courses that they are taking. For example, one assignment in the required course in educational ministry asks middlers to teach in an educational setting at their MIC site. They are to design a series of three lesson plans, teach the sessions, and write a reflection paper afterwards. The teaching experiences that students are having in their MIC setting become part of the classroom conversation that explores the teaching-learning process. In turn, the content of many students' teaching designs comes from what they are studying in other courses at the seminary.

*The first two years of the curriculum are intentionally moving toward the primary contextual experience for students at Trinity — the third-year, full-time internship in a parish.*

The first two years of the curriculum are intentionally moving toward the primary contextual experience for students at Trinity — the third-year, full-time internship in a parish. This is required by the ELCA for all candidates for ordination. Internship helps shape the pastoral identity of Trinity students in powerful ways. They are exposed to the full range of ministerial responsibilities, which test the knowledge and skills learned in their first two years of classroom work. Supervising pastors receive training from the seminary to help students reflect on their experience and integrate course work with the reality of life in the congregation.

When students return for their final year of seminary study, they are different. The senior-year curriculum builds on previous coursework and the internship experience to bring it all together for students as they prepare to move into their first call in a parish. Two major integrative courses carry much of that load. "Pastoral Leadership in Ministry and Mission" spans two terms and focuses on the role of pastor as leader. Drawing heavily on case study methodology, students reflect on their experience as interns and work to integrate theological understanding with the experience of ministry and mission in the church. In their final term, students also participate in a course in "Constructive Theology." Here a primary question is "How does theology matter in the decisions we make in ministry?" The course seeks to help the student build a theology to carry into the parish. The internship

experience is a continuing conversational partner in exploring the issues involved.

One more aspect of life at Trinity seeks to foster integration for students. Every student is assigned to an I-group. More formally called Integrative Groups, because they are encouraged but not required, their weekly gatherings are an aspect of the informal curriculum at Trinity. Each group consists of students from every degree program and from each year of study, along with a faculty advisor. While there is some structure to the group experience, each I-group takes on its own character. For instance, each group is responsible for planning one week of chapel worship each year. And second-year students are required to bring a critical incident from their MIC experience to I-group for processing. But the mix of students fosters a great deal of sharing from the whole of the seminary experience, including what happens in class, contextual experiences, and the personal lives of students.

For Trinity's faculty, integration does not just happen. It is built into the structure of the curriculum in the way courses are sequenced, and in the relationship between courses and contextual experiences. It emerges in the way individual faculty members design their courses, in class discussions, and in specific assignments. When the current curriculum was put into place, faculty met in interdivisional groups to talk about integration. Those teaching the junior-year courses, for example, met to compare notes on such matters as content and assigned readings. Though this practice no longer happens in a formal way, it is still a part of the informal conversation among faculty members.

The challenge will come in the next academic year. In fall 2007, Trinity will move from a quarter to a semester calendar. We have just completed an extensive revision of our curriculum to fit this new reality. We are retaining many of the elements of the current curriculum, such as the junior- and senior-year integrative courses, and all of our contextual requirements. Sequencing becomes more difficult when students can take fewer courses in a year, but we are committed to working at it. The faculty members who will teach the senior-year integrative sequence, which will now consist of a course titled "Pastor as Leader," followed by a course called "Pastor as Theologian," are already making plans for how the two can flow into each other. And our academic dean has indicated his intention to gather small groups of faculty as we move into the year to talk about integration in each particular year of study and throughout the sequence of the curriculum.

Does it work? For the most part — yes. Faculty members often hear students relating learnings from one course to another. It's not uncommon to hear students say, "It's all starting to fit together." And that applies to students in every year of study. Not every student gets it — they never do. But, after many years of working with it, integration is becoming second nature to Trinity's faculty. [RSN](#)

# From the Bottom Up: The Role of Contextualization in Theological Education

Keith A. Russell, American Baptist Seminary of the West



Keith A. Russell is President and Professor of Pastoral Theology at American Baptist Seminary of the West in Berkeley, California. Russell has been engaged in contextual theological education since 1976, first at New York Theological Seminary and for the last decade at ABSW. He also serves as Editor-in-Chief of the Living Pulpit, a quarterly journal on preaching.

**A**MERICAN BAPTIST SEMINARY of the West is a small, predominantly African-American seminary located in Berkeley, California. We are a founding member of the Graduate Theological Union, a nine-member consortium of seminaries which provides a common library, cross registration, and MA and PhD programs. We have been transitioning for over a decade from being a historically white seminary to a primarily African-American school, while at the same time experiencing significant changes within our denominational life. As many of our denominational leaders and pastors turned increasingly to the right on social, political, and theological issues, ABSW sought to occupy the progressive middle. As a result, we have lost both financial and moral support from many leaders and churches.

As the school was experiencing all these changes, it was important to clearly state the mission that would form our future. After much conversation at all levels of the school's life, a mission statement was crafted:

*ABSW is a Christ-centered school that trains men and women for leadership in the church of the twenty-first century who are:*

- Prepared to minister in a multicultural and multiracial world
- Rooted in an evangelical heritage and tradition
- Equipped for ecumenical partnership in ministry
- Informed theologically and biblically
- Skilled in the practice of ministry for personal, ecclesial, and social transformation
- Committed to the justice demands of the Gospel.

How are we to fulfill this mission in a time with fewer resources and changing denominational patterns? For over two years the faculty of ABSW, aided by a grant from the Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning, worked on developing a curriculum that would accomplish our stated mission.

## Reinventing Our Curriculum

One thing that was clear to our faculty was that we could not conduct business as usual. The traditional theological education pedagogy which placed more emphasis on knowledge than skill development simply was not equipping men and women for leadership in the church. We had been relying on a “banking theory” of education where the emphasis had been on “opening accounts” for students in various fields — New Testament, Old Testament, theology, history, pastoral care, etc., and then you would fill each account with basic information. A successful student would leave seminary with his/her account full of vital and interesting information. The focus of this method was more on content than application and more on the mastery of material than on acquiring critical learning skills.

This “top down” understanding of teaching/learning, which posited certain materials and areas of concentration as true, or at least valuable, did not necessarily take seriously the context or contexts in which both students and faculty were learning. It is as if there was universal truth/knowledge that needed to be learned in order to be theologically educated without much consideration of relevance or application in the context of ministry. Everybody assumed that “practical theology” was a lesser discipline that was secondary to the disciplines of Bible, theology, and history. Nor was there any consideration given to the question of how contexts might change the nature of both what is taught and how it is understood. For instance, does the Pauline language about obedience sound different in an African-American context than its does in a majority white context? Does language about obedience have different meanings to women than to men? Is the Pauline context important in grasping how texts from the first century are carried over into the twenty-first century?

Our faculty came to the conclusion that we needed to abandon the “top down” understanding of teaching/learning and replace it with a theory of learning that included a focus on context. *We needed to start from the bottom up.* When we looked at the base line of our mission statement, we kept running into the issue of contextuality. We could not prepare men and women for multicultural and multiracial ministry without a focus on context. Our evangelical heritage and tradition is a context from which we operate. Ecumenical partnership is also contextual. Even biblical and theological formation is a process which must be accomplished in the context of time and space. Clearly, developing skills in the practice of ministry for personal, ecclesial, and social transformation hinges on understanding, exegeting, and reading multiple contexts of culture and ministry.

Slowly but surely, a conversion began to occur in the imagination of our faculty about the importance of context in the reinvention of our curriculum in order to meet the goals of our mission statement. *A consensus formed around this basis insight: Whatever we do in developing our curriculum, it must be radically contextual.*

A second insight developed in relationship to the first. When you take context seriously, you have to take multiple angles of analysis using several disciplines to gain knowledge and perspective. *Radical contextuality requires radical interdisciplinarity.* For instance, to understand the context of ministry in an African-American Baptist church in East Oakland, you have to understand African-American history, ecclesiology, and urban ministry, just to name a few of the relevant disciplines. The minister or faith community must learn to do this multilevel analysis in order for ministry to be defined and implemented. The question arose as to whether we as a faculty could learn to teach in a multidisciplinary manner and still be a member in good standing in our academic guilds? Would our commitments to the disciplinary thinking of the academy impede our openness to this new pedagogy? This may be the most difficult of the tensions that we continue to deal with.

## Designing a New Model

Out of our two insights on contextuality and interdisciplinarity, the following picture of a new curriculum emerged. We created two year-long interdisciplinary colloquia that each had a contextual base. Each of these required colloquia was 12 units and involved a team of faculty engaged in the teaching. Context was the element which served to integrate the two-year sequence. The design was as follows:

### Year 1 – Junior Colloquium

Team taught by the ABSW faculty, the aim of Junior Colloquium is for students to develop basic understandings and practices in the areas of theology, Old Testament, and the history of Christianity while engaging in congregational studies. Visits to ministry contexts are part and parcel of the study of theology, OT, and church history. The theoretical work is always done in relationship to the contexts of ministry. Context visits are led by pastors and church staff.

### Year 2 – Middler Colloquium


This required second-year MDiv colloquium comprises six credits of academic work per semester integrated with placement in a ministry setting for the academic year. The colloquium meets twice a week and also assumes that each student will work 10–12 hours a week in a teaching congregation. During the first semester, the two major subjects integrated into the practice of ministry are ecclesiology and the Gospels with emphasis on the pastoral arts of preaching and worship. In the second semester the study of ecclesiology considers the contemporary church in light of the New Testament Pauline Letters and communities. This study is integrated with the pastoral arts of worship, pastoral care, and congregational programming as these relate to baptism, the Lord's Supper, weddings, and funerals. Pastors are trained to be teaching pastors and join the faculty in teaching and supervising students placed in their ministry sites. Pastoral evaluations are part of the assessment process used to judge student progress.

A third year-long sequence was created to further enhance student integration of learning. The Senior Mentor Project seminar is designed to give each MDiv student the opportunity to choose an area or issue in ministry for exploration and study. A person who is an authority in that area of ministry is to be appointed by ABSW to serve as a mentor to the student. Under the mentor's guidance, along with ABSW faculty, students gain expertise in a particular area of ministry that concludes in developing, executing, and evaluating a ministry project.

## Measuring Our Progress

This third year-long sequence has provided us with the opportunity to evaluate how we are doing in helping students to develop skills in both evaluating contexts and thinking from a multidisciplinary perspective. The ministry projects in this final year of seminary give evidence as to whether students can conceive a problem, research a problem from several theoretical angles, and create a project which addresses the problem that they have defined in a particular context of ministry. Since we have been engaged in this new curriculum for five years, we now have evidence of how students are learning. We have had projects that range from death and dying in an African-American setting, to developing a church for the homeless in downtown Oakland, to creating a discipling program for children and youth in a large black Baptist church in San Jose, to new membership training for a black Baptist church in Pittsburg, to a program on conflict resolution in a Chinese Baptist church in San Francisco.

The final-year mentor project enables us to ask how we can improve what we teach in the Junior and Middler years so that students learn better skills in critical thinking, multidisciplinary analysis, and the exegesis of contexts and texts. We are pleasantly pleased by the progress our students are making even while we seek to deepen and expand our teaching in the first two years of our program. We are producing students who do understand contexts and who can think critically using multiple disciplines in their ministry leadership.

The big challenge for our faculty is to ask how we can extend this commitment to contextualization and interdisciplinarity to the rest of our curriculum. We have been able to develop our core curriculum (42 units) to reflect these twin insights. Can we do the same in other elective courses so that they reinforce what is happening in our core work? This is our ongoing challenge. We do celebrate, however, how contextualization and interdisciplinarity serves to integrate our theological training. 

# Theological Education in the New Global Reality

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FROM JUNE 2005 to July 2006, I sought a deeper global understanding of theological challenges for the start of this millennium. Consequently, I visited England, Australia, India, Japan, Fiji, Hawaii, Cuba, Jamaica, Brazil, Ghana, Zimbabwe, Botswana, South Africa, and various locations within the United States.

Exciting challenges for theological education at the beginning of the twenty-first century consist of at least two important concerns. One deals with the increasing reality of the world context of all that we think, believe, and do. Some call this a question of globalization, internationalized multiculturalism, religious pluralism, post-colonialism, or the radical shift to a single, imperial superpower. In this macro context, the second issue confronts the interplay between particularity and universality. How does theological education respect the particularity of various expressions of faiths and spiritualities while, at the same time, discern how particularity adds to the universal conversation among multiple communities of faiths and spiritualities? In short, can there be a healthy relationship between the local and the international, or the particular and the universal? This question has implications for the nature of theological education today. I argue that some of these implications can be grasped by facilitating a dialogue between the "First World" United States and the Third World (or so-called developing nations).

## Gospel and Empire

Since the fall of the Berlin Wall on November 9, 1989, and the subsequent decentralization of the U.S.S.R., the global scene has shifted radically. For the first time, the U.S. government became the sole, undisputed global giant. Prior to

1989, military language contained such phrases as "balance of power," "spheres of influences," and the protection of smaller "client states." Since 1989, the language of the U.S. government — the sole military, political, and monopoly capitalist superpower — has shifted to "we're number one," "we won the Cold War," "we have a moral — even God-given — responsibility of ruling the world." In fact, this major shift in language has concrete implications in the real material world. The sole superpower is building an empire.

And a new form of religion, spurred on by institutions in the United States, has aggressively targeted the world for dominance. We might call this a third wave of Christian missions. The first wave was the so-called mainline churches and black church outreach — Episcopalian, Roman Catholic, Methodist, Presbyterian, Baptist, African Methodist, etc. The second was the classic pentecostal churches — that is, Church of God in Christ and the Assemblies of God. The new third wave existed before the fall of the Berlin Wall, but it has taken off exponentially since the establishment of one superpower. In fact, its global missionary activities are supported by the U.S. government.

The third and new form of Christian missionaries, arguably the religious arm of the U.S. empire, is called neocharismatic Christianity. It emphasizes a wealth and health prosperity gospel, or the name-it-and-claim-it good news. If a poor person wants to be rich or have expensive things, he or she simply has to name what they want and claim it in the name of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ wants poor Christians to have a Mercedes Benz because material things show forth the power and blessings of salvation. In addition to wealth advocacy among the individual poor, neocharismatic Christianity performs spiritual healing and deliverance concerts by the laying on of hands to cast out demons from inside the individual bodies of poor people.

What neocharismatic Christian missionaries do is mimic some of the same values of neoliberalism and U.S. democracy. They advocate individualism and prosperity. Culturally, they export forms of U.S. culture and, simultaneously, they attack the indigenous culture in the Third World as heathenism, devil worship, and the Anti-Christ. And politically, they push for American interpretations of democracy and freedom. Militarily, they give religious sanction to U.S. armed services present on foreign soil.

Furthermore, throughout the Third World, neocharismatics have an international cable network called the God Channel. The American prosperity gospel preachers have developed an international mechanism that, like other global media, has to get clearance from the U.S. government to access satellites circling the globe to broadcast their Christianity to the Third World. Now one can be poor in the developing world, not travel from one's village, and still watch the major American prosperity gospel televangelists. The God Channel takes American imperial values, beliefs, and tastes, and deposits them into the homes,

common yards, and hotels of the Third World. Here, the more one praises Jesus Christ, the more one becomes an American by way of neocharismatic theology.

For poor people in the developing world, neocharismatic missionaries link a U.S. vision to the vulnerability of their very being in terms of their faith with the divine. Religious hope becomes fused with American global perspectives. Neocharismatic Christianity is the fastest growing example of world Christianity, outstripping mainstream denominations and even indigenous religions.

Hence, if we academics are to teach theology as a critical practice, we need more profound theological investigations and sophisticated theoretical scaffolding in order to equip our students, disparate faith communities, and broader American constituencies.

## A Global Theological Strategy

In this century, to do theology as if the United States is the only or most dominant social location of theological education is an incomplete strategy. Of course, those in the First World United States have a lot to contribute. Theological scholars in the United States have a long tradition and highly sophisticated investigation of God-talk and interreligious conversation. And so when the First World participates in dialogue with the Third World, the First World interlocutors bring their full selves to the table.

Still, our educational processes are so much more enriched by participating in the multiple ways that theological studies unfold in the disparate communities throughout the world, especially the Third World. Such a dynamic interaction pushes U.S. intellectuals 1) to clarify taken-for-granted theological definitions; 2) to question their usual audiences; 3) to surface the unspoken American presuppositions; 4) to hear and experience new ways of doing theological education; 5) to realize that theological studies takes risks with the given faiths and spiritual traditions in a changing cultural context; and 6) to really perceive how all of our theological teaching and writing are subjective statements that achieve their universal significance when put to the test of non-Americans throughout the world.

Theological education at the dawn of the twenty-first century has to take seriously the realities of the peoples who occupy the majority of the world. Millions of these peoples, but not the majority, are Christians. Inevitably, as theologians engage world Christianity, we will enter pedagogical and epistemological encounters with peoples of other faiths and spiritualities. So one of the first lessons we might learn is that global Christian partnerships as well as global interreligious connections must move away from a posture of simply converting people to one's faith or a narrow interpretation of a common faith. No, what is needed is an orientation where we First World North Americans participate as equals with the rest of the global family. This in itself would be a radical shift because inherent to American culture is an

unexamined arrogance that the United States is the best country in the world. This orientation too often permeates the church and its educators' approach in conversations with the Third World.

Second, theological education needs to accent more an interdisciplinary methodology. For the majority of the Third World, religious educators begin with a social analysis of their families, communities, countries, and regions of the world. They do not start with an idea removed from the prior reality of their social locations. Because all theologies emerge from the particular social situation of the theologian advancing the theological education, one needs a host of nontheological disciplines to help unravel how religion operates in a complex, particular, and messy environment. Political economy as well as psychology can aid the theological field.

Third, theological education has to become more a public enterprise. Unfortunately in the U.S. tradition, theological education stresses an individual journey or something that is mainly, if not only, accountable to a small group of 10,000 scholars. I do agree that this is one vital public. But there are other publics calling for accountability. If theological education is about the relation between "theos" and "logos," then "theos" and "logos" inhabit all of creation. There are additional publics that need the input of theological education, like the church and the wider civic society. And, because the United States is the sole imperialist superpower in the world, there is the public of the Third World.

Fourth, as we seek to have critical and self-critical conversation with the public of the Third World, it is important to devise ways of forging ongoing, structured, and accountable ties with these regions. Although we in the United States are in an environment that fosters the belief that theology comes out of Europe and North America, if we reorient ourselves, we will discover the vast numbers of theological scholars in the developing world. We will also encounter the intellectual quality of their written production in the academic study of religions. One of the main reasons U.S. and European theology dominate the world is because many local publishers in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, Latin America, and the Pacific Islands are being blocked from global distribution.

Fifth, the biblical example of Jesus shows an individual who traveled the highways and byways affirming, critiquing, and relating to diverse peoples and communities in the world as he and his community knew the world to be. Jesus advanced theological education by linking the particular with the global (in what he considered by the world of his day).

Finally, when the First World United States develops ongoing ties with the majority of the world, one might discover that the global issue for theological education is not terrorism but poverty. This in turn might even help refocus our eyes domestically on the pressing issue of poverty within the 50 states of the U.S. itself. 