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The widespread cultural turn to spirituality is impossible to miss. Interest in spiritual disciplines is high, and the descriptor “spiritual but not religious” has become commonplace. Not surprisingly, interest in spirituality is also pervasive among seminary and divinity school students. Hence, students in a variety of institutions are calling for curricular and co-curricular attention to spirituality. Such attention is hardly new at Catholic seminaries but has often been absent elsewhere, most especially in nondenominational divinity schools.

Student interest notwithstanding, much remains unclear. What do we mean by “spirituality”? Can spirituality be taught? What accounts for the cultural turn toward spirituality? Is this interest in “enlightenment” a sign of the end of the Enlightenment? Are we in a postmodern moment in

which it has become credible once more to think about the relationship between the task of knowing and the formation of the knower? What might this turn to spirituality mean for theological education at large?

The AAR Theological Education Steering Committee (TESC) convened a Special Topics Forum at last year's Annual Meeting in Montréal to foster reflection on these questions. In this issue of *Spotlight on Theological Education*, we present two of those papers. The TESC does not intend to dive into talk about spirituality presuming that we already know what the term means. Moreover, we are well aware that there are groups within the AAR who have long been investigating these matters (the Christian Spirituality Group for example). Instead, we seek to launch a larger collaborative conversation about the cultural turn to spirituality and explore the ramifications of that turn for theological education.

As already noted, students now come to seminary from within a cultural milieu soaked in a broad, if somewhat nebulous, spirituality discourse. By contrast, scholarly work in spirituality studies is hardly nebulous. There is now a substantial interdisciplinary literature in the study of spirituality. The question is "How might the fruits of that labor find meaningful institutional embodiment within seminaries and divinity schools?"

As theological educators work out the answer to that question, it is worth noting that higher education is not waiting. The [Association for Contemplative Mind in Higher Education](#) and the [Contemplative Studies Initiative at Brown University](#) are but two prominent ventures among many in which secular organizations and institutions are taking the lead in thinking rigorously about the relationship between spiritual disciplines and the work of learning. Of course, more than rigorous thinking takes place in such quarters: there is also a robust investment in contemplative practices themselves. Educators are going on retreats and training to rigorously immerse themselves in contemplative practice in order to introduce such practice into the classroom. What might these larger movements within higher education offer theological education, and what might theological educators contribute to those movements? You will find in this issue that both Tom Beaudoin and John Makransky take on some of these large and daunting questions.

Tom Beaudoin is a distinguished practical theologian with considerable expertise on the cultural turn to spirituality, having published extensively on how young people deploy the term "spirituality" and what they mean by it. He is the author of several books, including *Virtual Faith: The Irreverent Spiritual Quest of Generation X* (Wiley, John and Sons, 2000).

In his essay, “Spirituality and Practice in Theological Education,” Beaudoin first directs his attention to the concrete practices that make up the teaching life and asks how those practices might be understood as spiritual disciplines that contribute to the flourishing of students’ lives. Only then does Beaudoin turn to the practice-rich lives of his students and the practices of learning in which the lives of teachers and students meet and intersect. The theoretical heavyweights to whom Beaudoin makes appeal include Foucault as well as Pierre and Ilsetraut Hadot, but the questions he poses are starkly concrete and driven by a fundamental ethical passion. He writes, “...I see the question of spirituality as an ethical question for the theological educator, a matter of asking what hand we have in shaping and forming, and toward what, in whose interest. Theological education has a role to play, however modest, in the sometimes irreversible good or damage we have the power to do to each other, individually and communally.” Throughout, Beaudoin adroitly avoids the temptation toward privatization that marks so much cultural discourse about spirituality. His is not an understanding of spirituality that can easily be commodified, a spirituality that can be bought and sold as but the latest among fashionable trends.

John Makransky is also uniquely qualified to shed light on these issues as a Buddhist theologian (a term that he and others defend in his volume *Buddhist Theology: Critical Reflections by Contemporary Buddhist Scholars*, coedited with Roger Jackson, Taylor and Francis, Inc., 1999), who teaches at a Catholic institution (Boston College). Makransky is a teacher not only for his students at Boston College — he is also an authorized teacher within and for Buddhist communities. As such, he brings a wide range of teaching experience to bear on questions of spirituality.

Makransky argues that Buddhist monastic traditions have never suffered a rupture between rigorous conceptual investigation and spiritual disciplines, a problem that has plagued Christian reflection for much of modernity. That rupture continues to afflict Western universities and even theological institutions but not centers of Buddhist learning. So, what can Western theological institutions learn from Buddhists about how to integrate spiritual disciplines with rigorous dialectical inquiry? What can Buddhist curricula for the formation of scholar-monks teach theological educators about spirituality and spiritual disciplines? John Makransky is uniquely positioned to help us answer these questions.

In his essay, “Buddhist Reflections on Theological Learning and Spiritual Discipline,” Makransky argues that, “the guiding principle,” of Tibetan Buddhist monastic education, “is that further understanding informs further levels of spiritual practice experience that empower further understanding — including both intellectual and non-conceptual modes of understanding. This learning framework is ubiquitous in Tibetan monastic institutions, inherited from scholastic

Indian Buddhist tradition, broadly analogous to the ‘faith seeking understanding’ paradigm of Christian theology.” The feedback loop between practice and understanding cannot be severed without undoing both.

In addition to his discussion of Buddhist modes of learning, Makransky also offers a concrete account of the ways in which he incorporates adapted Buddhist practices into his classes on comparative theology and Buddhism at Boston College. Why include such practices? He writes, “I try to show many connections between doctrine and practice not just to help students understand Buddhist traditions, but also to point them toward analogous integrations of thought and spiritual practice in Christian traditions, and perhaps in their own lives.” His essay well demonstrates that comparative theology classrooms can be rich loci for the comparative study and practice of spiritual disciplines. The reader is left with a profound respect for the broad knowledge of Buddhist and Christian traditions that Makransky brings to his students at Boston College and elsewhere. His essay also demonstrates that thinking about spirituality need not be free-floating and tradition-free, but may well be most rewarding and productive when particular traditions are engaged in all their rich and subtle textures.

I conclude these introductory remarks by inviting readers to join the conversation. This first online issue of the *Spotlight on Theological Education* offers readers a novel opportunity to pose questions to our authors and to add their own two cents to this conversation. Look for responses from Beaudoin and Makransky in the days ahead.