

“The Millennial Generation and the Future of Theological Education”
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1. Introduction

As often happens when one moves from a faculty position of teaching in a particular field, to presidential leadership, the topic of theological education more broadly becomes the focus of one’s concern. It has become a primary focus for me the last two years, though I enter as a newcomer into a stream of distinguished academics and administrators over the last half century who have shared their respective visions on this theological education—reaching back to H.Richard Niebuhr, James Gustafson, Ed Farley, David Kelsey, and more locally, Claude Welch, Judith Berling, and sill others. It’s an impressive list.

One can make the case, I believe, that one who enters this stream today is entering a rapidly changing context of religion in America. But I suspect each one of the above named figures would have said the same thing, so we must contextualize what this change consists in. I’ve had to ask myself a very basic question in this new role: why do I want to be involved in the theological education of ‘20-somethings’ under present conditions, when the very institutions theological education are meant to serve appear to be dying? I think there are very good reasons to press on, but the question for all of us ought to remain in the foreground.

After Ted Peters asked me to present this evening on the topic of the future of theological education, I chose to narrow my concern still further to the topic of the future of professional degree theological education. I think the reasons for this will become clear in a few minutes. I have also chosen to speak within my own voice as an educator in the Christian tradition, hoping that those who come from other traditions may hear and contribute to the discussion from other angles.

I want to function less as a specialist for obvious reasons of my two years of presidential experience, and more as a ‘provocateur’ for the sake of discussion. So let’s begin.

2. Demographics: the Context for theology in the future if trends continue—

The recent Pew Report on religious life in U.S. today has 80 pages of statistical data. My interest is in one aspect of the report: the millennial generation (considered to be those today who are between ages 18-28) has not changed in its practices incrementally relative to past trends; it has changed more rapidly. ‘Unaffiliated’ is now the single largest category checked off by millennials, including Roman Catholic, the various mainstream protestant churches, and the once growing now leveling off evangelical and mega churches. Moreover, the millennial generation does not consist in a high percentage of unaffiliated people who are ‘seekers’, in the traditional sense of looking for a church home. They may be trying to make sense of their lives in various ways, but many of them are indifferent to the historical institutions, belief systems, and practices of even recent history.

The Pew report also mentioned a very high percentage of Americans who report they still attend church regularly. But as one NPR commentator said about this aspect of the study, this just isn't true or there would be evidence of it in the churches; traffic jams heading into parking lots. The peculiarity about older generation of Americans is that they are still in a place of not wanting to admit this untruth—perhaps because of some nostalgic or normative hold on them from their past. So it's something like telling your dentist that you floss your teeth daily, but you really don't; you just feel you should.

I'm not focused this evening on older generations, except to say that we better be doing some pretty aggressive estate gift planning, because they are the source of money that keeps the lights on. I'm concerned about the rapid change in millennial generation practices and what it means about theological education for a new generation of leaders. How do we train leaders who have to make the case from scratch, and cannot count on catechesis in the background, or any cultural formation whatsoever? It takes only two generations for there to be rather deep forgetting, and emptying out of formative practices, and frameworks of belief. How will new church leadership engage a generation, which may be project-oriented but far less institution-oriented in their patterns of life? How do we theologically prepare 20-somethings if they will not meet their millennial peers at the front door of the church, but through other doorways scattered throughout the matrix of public life?

The 'unaffiliated' status should not be identified as the loss of the spiritual dimension in American culture. As Tillich, among others, has noted, 'spiritual' simply is the depth dimension of what it means to be human—the human quest for meaning and the organizing of value around what one takes to be ultimate. David Burrell adds, "To speak of a spiritual dimension to human beings is not, in the first instance, to make an odd metaphysical claim as it is to remark on our capacity to respond intelligently and affectively to the world..." we may do that in a humanly-sub-par way, but that's a different matter.

The more important point about the spiritual, in my opinion, is this: If we take the human being to be a social reality, so that intelligence, affections, and intentional actions are directed and formalized in patterns of life in community, then what is the *form* of this new spirituality? What forces in public life, or new communities, function as doorways to what we have in the past called religious life? Is the chat room the new Eucharistic community? Netflix the source of ritual action and liturgical drama?

Keep this in the background for the rest of what I have to say. If the trends hold then the long term picture would suggest that church as we presently understand it is simply not a form that has a strong future. And, no philosophy of history that I know would suggest that if you just work harder and think better, pray more fervently, then we can return to the church of the 50s when pews were full and the young seminary graduate could presume upon a fairly recognizable form of life. Something quite new seems to be happening.

3. The Constants of Theological Education

The secular doorways to spiritual awakening may be far different from the frameworks of prayers, beliefs, creeds, and rituals that have inspired mission, moral life and so forth. Now the spiritual portals of secular culture may be medical issues, and

policy around end of life wellbeing when our parents are dying; land, food and water use in a time of scarcity and creating policy that reflects justice; local organizing to strengthen infrastructures of exchange in local communities; the justice system and policies of incarceration; business morality on the inside and financial industry practices on the outside; climate change and catastrophic natural effects—any one of these may trigger spiritual crisis and awakening—eye opening to something more ultimate than self and the day-to-day grind. These are among the secular gathering points, I suspect, where matters of spirit will kick in and show themselves.

So the question I wish to raise is this: if religious culture has changed, and is changing in these ways, how should it affect the way we train and teach in theological education professional degree programs? What remains constant and time tested? What is variable and dependent on this context?

The first thing that remains a constant aspect across every generation of theological education for ministry is formation. Kyle Small, in an excellent essay on theological education, names this “culturing the soul.”¹ We recognize these things in our own communities of theological education in the time tested disciplines of meditation and prayer, rhythms of corporate worship (both eucharistic and daily offices), habits of reading and reflection, reading perhaps in *lectio divina* groups, meals together, practicing the art and morality of good conversation—i.e., being truthful to self and honoring the other in the form of one’s discourse. All of these habits of life testify to the distinctive feature of theological education as total self-involvement unlike any other domain of inquiry. It is, in a sense, a process of placing one’s life in the way of the evidence related to that which is being learned and explored. We are not passing on a body of functional knowledge only, because the subject of theological education (wisdom and inquiry into divine reality, and its relation of self and world) is so core to who one is that to change one’s orientation toward it in any way is to change who one is. Thus, in principle there is constant movement from learning to appropriation. Formation is necessarily part of theological education because of the self-involving nature of this kind of work, but I suspect we become more conscious of it in times of profound moral crisis, just as Bonhoeffer was very intentional about the kind of formation necessary in life together in a time of cruel holocaust and war.

A second thing that remains constant is critical thinking skills. We might say about this that it is not just developing the practice of reading, but learning how to read, and read critically. The skills of critical rationality are the entry way to the second order discipline of looking over one’s own shoulder to discover, analyze and when necessary transform all aspects of the life of religious belief and practice. We have taught our students mostly through the German model of theological science to overcome false coziness with sacred texts, and sent them on a path that often leads to alienation and distance from the text before it becomes living text once again, and we do this to enable them to interpret the lives of those they will serve. We know the skills we attempt to pass along—higher critical reading, historical method and philosophy, systematic and constructive theology, theoretical backgrounds to basic pastoral theology. Sometimes, however, after our displays of mastery, we stop short and don’t take the constructive step

¹ “Missional Theology for Schools of Theology,” in *The Missional Church and Leadership Formation*, ed. Graig Van Gelder, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans) 2009

of re-igniting the fire in the student, creating anew the passion found in the constructive step, and getting back to the simple and basic question: Why do those seeking professional life care about the sacred texts? Surely not to remain perpetually at a distance from it as if a mere artifact of academic interest. It either is part of a living conversation through history that matters, or it is not. Critical thinking must lead us finally to why and how it is a living conversation, or it is not serving the professional degree.

4. What needs to change in theological education

I think to state what needs to change we need to go back to the very elements we have called constants—formation and critical thinking—and reform them. And here I am going to step out on a limb with some generalizations about our past.

“If the use of intelligence for inquiry is part of the divine image,” said Rowan Williams, “then intelligence is always related to love; it belongs to love. And if love is about how connections are built and maintained between what is different and strange, then intelligence is inseparable from that activity. It is about making connections, drawing fragments together into some sort of wholeness.”² Somehow, what needs to be conveyed is the experience, over and over, of being grasped by that which is greater than self, experiencing wonder in a world that is increasingly a commodity, being swept off one’s feet by the attractive presence of God (to paraphrase what I think is in Augustine’s *Confessions*) who is source of all and ground of wholeness.

What churches wish to convey along these lines must be offered to a secular world, which increasingly does not know the church’s forms of language, but *does* recognize the experience of companionship, of love, and has capacity to search for wholeness where today there is fragmentation. The real critical task may be finding a way to communicate without using the code language of religious speech. Think of the specifically Christian doctrines—trinity, creation, Christology, eschatology, and so forth. These aren’t even categories of thought for the ‘unaffiliated’, so how do we interpret their significance to a wider social world where the surface language increasingly bears absolutely no relationship to these categories? What critical skills are necessary to do this? How, for example, would you let a stranger to the church know ‘trinity’ is important to you?

Most of us as faculty entered our specialty guilds, credentialed as professionals, through one of the theological domains learned through sciences of higher criticism, historical method, and other kinds of theoretical disciplines. It was critical thinking from above, so to speak, learned in the academy and filtered for use in professional degree programs in seminaries. Rationality in these domains was a matter of keeping a critical distance from the object of inquiry. It was a pedagogy of the ‘mentor-knower in dominant relation over student-learner, in what was essentially a matter of conveying a body of specialty knowledge over which the student was to gain an appropriate level of mastery.

Few of us, unless we voluntarily chose it, can make the case that we are equally skilled at ground-up, experientially based forms of critical thinking. Take an almost

² <http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/2634/archbishop-delivers-inaugural-cuac-lecture>

cliché-ish example; say you felt called to serve the homeless down in Berkeley's people's park because Jesus commanded it—you want to facilitate a sense of belonging, of human relation for and with the people in the park. What stands between the sacred texts of Jesus' teaching and this experience if you want to serve intelligently and efficiently, and still further, if you want to impact the social infrastructure that perpetuates bad social practices? Would it be better and better historical/critical skills from the sciences, or better grassroots experience and understanding of the people in the park and their social condition, and the infrastructures that reinforce dissonance between following the way of the religion, on the one hand, and actual practices of believers, on the other hand? What does the seminary graduate need to know? I am not pitting *Wissenschaft* over against ground up processes of critical thinking, but asking how these work together and how must we find a basic shift in emphasis, if the 'unaffiliated' is the future, and it has significance. I think the model of deployment, then reflection—something that gives priority to practices as the ground of the critical thinking steps—must be given more emphasis in professional education.

There is growing recognition of the need for critical thinking skills to be gained in the tension between faith and the complexity of world condition as lived. That is, there is need for practical bearing that grounds an intentional reflection on sacred texts, histories, interpretations of the creeds and canons of our traditions. And here, the matter of formation and critical thinking go hand in glove, because we are left open to the possibility of continual conversion and transformation. We should be asking whether our pedagogy reflects the shift necessary to answer Leslie Newbegin's basic question: What would be involved in a missionary encounter between the core meaning of our faith tradition, and the way of seeing, thinking, and acting we call the Modern West?³

The seminary ethos and agenda cannot be set by the faculty's sense of legitimation as a specialist, and as sole conservators of the tradition, even though the specialized knowledge plays a very important role. If we begin with academic specialties to be passed on, there is very little incentive to participate in educational transformation and new pedagogical paradigms. In fact, there may be resistance to the task of moving from the specialty conversation to contextual outcomes for ministry. What was true of my theological education at Princeton and I suspect true for others as well, was the expectation that professors would pass along a particular body of classic theological material—higher critical and historical tools for reading scriptures, historical method and critical historical consciousness, school theologies, philosophical foundations of ethics, psychology and social science for pastoral theology, etc—tools for ministry within the walls of the church. Sadly, little pedagogical effort was given to the interface of this body of knowledge with the day-to-day experience of would-be clergy forming congregations for mission in the public domain. As a matter of fact, the theological disciplines themselves were treated in isolation from each other with little integrative effort. Kyle Small, again, worries that in our professorial guilds of mastery, we easily lose sight of teaching for the purpose of forming and culturing.⁴ Because of this, faculty are conservative institutional forces (rightly so, because there are treasures to be

³ *Foolishness to the Greeks*, Eerdmans, 1986, p.1

⁴ *Ibid.* 69

preserved, but wrongly so, when this reinforces an institutional ethos that needs to change).

Michael Welker states that what the seminary theologian needs first “...realistic, honest, self-critical, penitent renewal...and true engagement with one’s location, both personal and institutional,”⁵ This will ground both critical thinking and formative practices in theological community.

Many of you will remember Avery Dulles’ classic *Models of the Church*, in which he outlined the models of the church that emerged from Vatican Two. Only one of the five models issues directly from the premise of this cultural condition of a secular age. In four of his models—the church as institution, as mystical communion, as prophetic herald, as sacrament—the church is the subject and the world the object. In the most extreme form of this, the church is the ship of salvation in the temporal world, crossing the waters of history, with the mass of perdition clinging to the side of boat, waiting or hoping to be lifted to safety. But in the fifth model—the church as servant—things are turned round. The world is the subject, and the church is its servant. The irreversible turn of the Enlightenment leads to the recognition that the world is the location of God’s saving work.

In this spirit, JAT Robinson said decades ago: “...the house of God is not the church but the world; the church is the servant, and the servant lives in someone else’s house, not his own.”⁶ To this, Gibson Winter added: “The church is no longer an institutional structure of salvation alongside the world structures of restraint,” but rather, “...a community within the worldly structures which recognizes God’s gracious work for all humankind.”

This last phrase is a significant corrective. One had the sense in this earlier phase of the ‘secular city’ that the liberal church went out into the world to serve, but had lost its own core, its own formation. Today, I think we recognize the church is not a group of pious social workers slavishly and sentimentally attached to secular culture, but the carrier of a recognition of grace always to be translated into faithful action. This requires formation and critical thinking from below, and it marks a difference from some of the earlier thinking in the time of ‘the secular city’.

But have we or should we recognized this in the manner of our theological education? My point here is that if the church is the subject and the world the object, then the traditional education model may be what we want. But if the dynamic world is the subject and we are servants in this context, then we will need a theological education that moves from local neighborhood to the classroom with an intentionality formed in the context. Again, this is a pedagogy of deployment, then reflection.

Barbara Wheeler, a foremost theological education consultant in the U.S., states, “For whatever reason, seminaries are not viewed as civic assets in their communities and beyond... When important decisions about social policies or community projects are at stake, seminaries are rarely asked to participate, even to comment. Creating a more active role in public life depends on the quality of conversation inside the seminary, and the expectations placed on seminaries with respect to their education and future.” I take

⁵ Welker, *God the Spirit* (Minneapolis: Fortress) 1994, p. 25. From *The Missional Church and Leadership Formation*, Craig Van Gelder, ed., p. 69

⁶ *The New Reformation*

this to mean that if the approach to the classic theological disciplines is not first grounded in honest and truthful interpretation of experience, then we will remain insulated, and not needed in the affairs of public life.

Not long ago, I met with the President of Kaiser Permanente in the Western Region of the U.S. In our conversation he stated that he has been looking unsuccessfully for seminary graduates who can participate in public policy making around serious medical issues about use of medical technology, end of life issues, and more. We need to be thinking about this as a culture from early ages of adulthood and there are serious spiritual implications that policymakers must account for. The gist of the conversation left me thinking that he and others in his profession had more respect for the contribution of the theologically educated professional than theological schools have.

In some respect this will take us back to the basics of faith, again, to the capacity to translate our in-house frameworks into public conversation. By analogy, think of the practice of scriptural reasoning (established by Peter Ochs and others) as a model when you consider what leaders in the millennial generation will have to do. When a Jew, a Christian, and a Muslim sit together, and one of them in her or his own voice opens up a sacred text on a topic, and talks about it to others who may know it but not from the inside, we are quickly forced back to simplicity. We have to be prepared to answer: Why do I and my community care about this text? Why have I attached myself to this way of getting at some of the basic stuff of life's meaning? One has to do this in and for the company of others who have different forms of life and practice. In a similar way, the theologically educated professional has to make her or his form of life accessible to a larger public that does not know or share it.

This, I think, requires every bit as much rigor as in the past. Take an example from Vincent Miller's work on *Consuming Religion*. He writes about how, under the model of Clifford Geertz, religion functions as a culture, a tradition that transmits a pattern of meaning embodied in symbols from which the community passes along knowledge, attitudes, and patterns of life. And indeed, there is a logical connection between symbolic structure and beliefs, attitudes and actions. But it seems palpably false that there is this *clear line* from symbols of meaning to practices, especially if we look closely and honestly at how traditions are overwhelmed by the systems and influences of consumerist capitalist culture? Aren't we largely coopted into actions that are dissonant from belief in spite of our intentions? Consumer capitalism, says Vincent Miller, seems immune to ideological criticism, capable of absorbing its harshest critics right into its path. Go to your pension plans and see just how deeply religious institutions are wrapped up in portfolios that support practices that may be directly detrimental to the voiceless people in society. Telal Asad counters Geertz claiming that it is not at all clear that religious symbols are primary in informing practices. At least the entailment is not direct. So what does the theological student need to know to understand the hidden variables between meaning systems and mission practices? More theological science and rational distancing, or more grounding in the experience of the dissonance itself, then gaining tools for reflecting on it? Where today do the critical thinking skills need to come from?

5. Ministers, Priests, Rabbi and Missional Leader

Theological education today, grounded in the perspective of world as the location of God's action, cannot send seminary graduates out solely into ministry as administrative oil in the machinery of congregational life, but must send them out to lead congregations to participate in God's mission outside the parish gates, with an attitude of generosity and trust that this is the place of God's presence. This will be a matter of leading congregations into coalitions with other specialized religious organizations, and still other institutions in civic society. This is what our Episcopal Church bishops are crying out for when they say we urgently need students who are entrepreneurial leaders with confidence at the interface of the faith community and public life.

I think preparation for this kind of ministry of the future is demanding. It requires knowing how to use social analysis without being a research sociologist, and knowing how to teach and question intelligibly about the relationship between faith and various knowledge points assumed in general culture, encouraging dialogue that is integrative of the worlds we live in. It requires meeting people at their point of passion who have lost some of their security and need to believe in something, need to recover a context of meaning.

I think the outcomes we ought to seek in education for the professional degrees is what one might call 'rabbinic' and 'missional' leadership. By rabbinic I mean teachers who pass on to their communities a heritage of wisdom, mindful that it is not wisdom until it takes form in community life—in practices of honest conversation, modesty of belief, openness to continual conversion, all for the purpose of congregation as missional community. This view of teaching is ongoing action and formation, practices of prayer, and quests of knowledge as a pursuit of the good. This formation will distinguish the church now from the early servant model of the church in the 'secular city' era, by passing along formative practices.

If we believe our own theology of spirit-indwelling, then the spirit is not an infusion of something uncommon; but the presence of God in history. We must trust it and lean into it, because the public world simply will not care about us in the future unless we are actively engaged in it, making ourselves needed, as Barbara Wheeler has stated.

I began with some statistics about the millennial 'unaffiliated'. I'll end with a professional degree research project in response to this new reality. An assignment will be given to every entering student, due at the end of her or his program, and coached by the faculty along the way. The assignment has the following premise: you have been talking about a changing church for three years, and now you are graduating, and the stark reality of change hits you personally. You will not be hired as an assistant in a congregation, nor any other in the traditional church structures that offer a pension plan and medical benefits. Instead, you have been offered a job in a local bakery (earning enough to take basic needs off your mind) and your task is to start up and build a community that gathers regularly to pray and form some common life. What would you do? How would this community be gathered and on what premise? *What* people among those around you would you seek out to be this community, and why? Would it look like your last parish home, or would it be constituted differently? What social and spiritual analysis would you need to understand your location and the conditions of the people around you? What network of resources (skills and finance) would you rely on, or need to

develop? What assets do you personally bring to the task? What deficits will you need to fill and seek out in others? Students, the clock begins ticking on the assignment now!