

Theological faculty as religious educators: how personal beliefs about teaching, learning, and spiritual growth inform teaching practices

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Abstract

This paper provides a summary of qualitative research on how seminary faculty beliefs about teaching, learning, and spiritual growth relate to their teaching. The interdisciplinary study considers both theological and educational questions by drawing together research on postsecondary teaching and learning, religious education, and theological education. The author concludes that teacher beliefs (implicit or explicit) matter to teaching practices, and suggests that faculty need opportunities for training in educational processes and for both educational and theological reflection on teaching to function as “critically reflective religious educators.”

INTRODUCTION

Although spiritual formation has been identified as a primary goal of graduate theological education since the development of theological schools, little research has been conducted with faculty to understand how they relate teaching to spiritual growth. Based on the assumption that seminary faculty have certain beliefs (implicit or explicit) about the intellectual and spiritual growth of students that inform how they teach, I have conducted this study to learn how faculty understand their beliefs to impact this process. When I interviewed seminary faculty and asked them to share a story about a student in one of their introductory classes who they thought grew spiritually, I received the following variety of responses:

There was a student some years ago -- probably 10 years ago -- who asked me if I would disciple him. And you know, I didn't do it. He proposed to meet with me once a week for an hour, and I guess maybe that was a deterring factor in itself. But I guess I'm not really into making disciples. And I wonder if I made the right decision after all. I didn't do it, so he didn't grow spiritually by me.

If there were spiritual growth, it would not be direct. It wasn't because we had talked directly about spiritual matters in the class, or that I had taught them spiritual methodologies because I don't teach things like that. I don't teach methods of meditation, or things like that... You can grow spiritually through what appears to be a truly intellectual endeavor, but it comes home to you -- it isn't abstract anymore. ...I like to think the material in class usually has some personal resonance. It's likely to get somebody thinking about their life.

I'm thinking of several students who perhaps conform to a kind of pattern that I've observed over the years of students who come to seminary from a fairly narrow church and cultural background. Initially, that student may be very timid, very fearful of the whole process of theological reflection, or may be very hostile. Sometimes it takes one direction, sometimes the other. But there have been a number of occasions when students have loosened up their understanding -- their faith has broadened in a way that permits them to

see dimensions they hadn't seen before. Their faith, I would say, has been deepened. They have not 'lost' their faith but have grown in understanding the faith.

To me, learning is a necessary condition for being a Christian. Now, it's not a sufficient condition, but someone who's not learning is on the verge of not living the Christian life. And nobody who's a Christian leader can really lead if they have not caught a glimpse of the sacrament of learning... Students often will wrestle with issues of prayer and personal piety, and they'll come and we'll talk about that because some of them are overwhelmed by the intellectual task, and then they start to dry up spiritually. ...For other students, it's the intellectual problem. They are real spiritual, but they're concerned that learning is going to kill their piety.

Several critical issues for theological education are represented in these faculty responses. First, their comments imply that faculty hold a variety of definitions of spiritual formation and differ on how they believe it relates to academic learning and ministerial preparation. Second, some faculty seem uncertain whether the approach they take is adequate or correct. Third, faculty beliefs seem to develop out of their personal education, experience, and theological beliefs rather than out of research on teaching, learning, or spiritual formation. Finally, differing theological views held by faculty and students underlie their definitions and certain classroom conflicts that may arise, as well as goals or solutions which are proposed.

RELIGIOUS, THEOLOGICAL, AND POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION

This study draws upon three primary bodies of research: religious education, theological education, and postsecondary teaching and learning. A review of the literature in these key areas provided the foundation for developing the questions in this study, assisted with the coding and analysis, and offers suggestions for future research.

Religious Education

For several reasons, I have drawn primarily upon the writings of Maria Harris and James Loder as two religious educators who model how to relate teaching, learning, and spiritual growth. First, their works were helpful to frame the issue in terms of the relationship between teaching and spiritual formation. Second, their writings helped me to formulate some of the theological and pedagogical questions included in the interview protocol. Third, I referred to their perspectives on the relationship between spiritual formation and teaching to engage in a constant comparison of the concepts that emerged during the coding and analysis of the interview data.

Maria Harris identifies several ways that theology informs our understanding of teaching and learning. First, she views teaching itself as a spiritual practice "in response to and in cooperation with the fashioning of people that God is carrying out."¹ Harris defines teaching as "a religious vocation, which, when entered into with grace and dwelt in with fidelity, has the power to re-create the world."² Throughout her work, she maintains a strong focus on the human relationships involved in teaching and learning. In fact, she argues that curriculum itself should

¹ Craig Dykstra, Foreword to Harris, M. (1989) *Fashion me a people: curriculum in the church*, 10.

² Harris (1987), *Teaching and religious imagination: an essay in the theology of teaching*, xvi.

be understood as “the human activities or practices of the people of God.”³ This perspective helps us to move beyond a limited view of curriculum as written materials and places the focus of teaching more appropriately on human growth and learning. Beyond offering theological ways to understand teaching, she also describes helpful teaching practices. For example, Harris adapts the biblical theme of ‘Jubilee’ to show how we might include religious rituals in our teaching.

In relation to this study, her work helped me to develop some of the interview questions. For example, I asked faculty to tell me how their theology informs their teaching and how they define and identify spiritual growth in students. Similarly, I was able to discern whether faculty ever considered teaching and learning as spiritual practices, and to notice whether faculty were connecting biblical or theological ideas to teaching. Also, her attention to women’s development helped me to evaluate course materials in relation to the growing presence of women students in theological education. Finally, her strategies for incorporating religious rituals into teaching helped me to examine whether faculty in this study made any similar efforts.

James Loder also provides a model for how to relate teaching, learning, and spiritual growth. He proposes a “logic of transformation” construed as a five-part, patterned process that he argues has explanatory power not only for our ways of knowing, but also for the fundamental process of human growth and development. Loder describes this dynamic process as: (1) a conflict-in-context, (2) an interlude for scanning (consciously and unconsciously) which leads to, (3) a constructive act of the imagination often felt with intuitive force. This insight results in (4) a release of energy (the ‘Aha!’) and places the self more deeply back in the world. Finally, in step (5) an interpretation is made and action is taken. He contends this five-part pattern of transformational logic serves as the guiding pattern in human knowing and transformation. This foundational theological anthropology has implications for our understanding of spiritual formation, teaching, and learning. For example, his work calls us to recognize that conflict and resistance are necessary but not sufficient parts of adult development and learning. The conflict leads us to different ways of scanning for insight. Pedagogically, the teacher can intentionally provide structure as needed, or can serve as a mentor for students of how to proceed toward some integration or resolution.

Several religious educators have made connections between Loder’s theology of spiritual formation and its implications for teaching and learning. Krych (1987) has written about teaching with “transformational narrative” as a pedagogical method to be used with children. Rogers (1994) has developed a perspective on teaching that he terms a “Spirit-centered education”. Osmer (1992) proposes that we teach for mystery in helping people to understand God. He elaborates on two methods (‘reframing’ and ‘teaching contraries’) to support the use of paradox in teaching and to support the use of conflict or contradiction to foster this process of creativity. Martin (1995) shares Loder’s perspective on pedagogy as illustrated in an article entitled “*Indwelling as a Pedagogical Imperative: A Polanyian Perspective on Christian Education.*”

Loder’s work is relevant to this study of beliefs about teaching, learning and spiritual growth in several ways. His theory of Christian existential transformation leads us to examine whether faculty view deep spiritual growth and change as a goal of their teaching. Taking his work as a model, I have analyzed faculty responses to consider whether they have developed any strategies based on their theological understanding of personal and spiritual growth. Also, I was interested

³ Harris (1989), *Fashion me a people: curriculum in the church*, Ch. 3.

to learn how faculty view conflict in relation to teaching. Interestingly, the majority of faculty in this study named conflict as a necessary element in fostering growth. Finally, Loder's interdisciplinary focus on theology and education helped me to analyze whether faculty have critically reflected upon not only their theological beliefs but also upon their educational beliefs.

Theological Education

Second, I have drawn upon the literature on theological education. The amount and variety of research on theological education in the United States has blossomed in the latter half of the twentieth century, often in an attempt to address the persistent tension between academic and spiritual goals in theological education. Research by the Association of Theological Schools (1995-96) and others has been conducted on several aspects including its development, purpose, structure, leadership, students and faculty members.⁴ Research studies on theological students range from attendance figures to personality profiles and fitness for ministry assessments.⁵ A recent study by the Auburn Center for the Study of Theological Education (see Carroll, J. et al, 1996) reveals drastic theological and ideological differences between an evangelical seminary and a mainline Protestant seminary. This study confirms that the culture of a seminary community does impact student learning and formation by giving students different, dominant messages:

The goal of Evangelical Seminary is to bring a missing religious discipline to Christian and social life and institutions. God's plan for the world and the redemption of human life is an orderly and reasonable one that is inscribed in the Bible... Accordingly, students at Evangelical Seminary are taught the methods of rigorous study of the scriptures, and they are shown and urged to adopt careful habits of life that are consonant with the noble plan that scripture instructs them to observe.

At Mainline Seminary the dominant message is introduced early and regularly restated and reinforced. The message is that religious institutions should embody justice for all people and seek to transform human structures so that they are just and inclusive... Though 'justice' is the central theological virtue at Mainline, daily life is focused on diversity and inclusiveness and the struggle to grant equal attention and power to diverse groups.⁶

While each school offers a unique combination of dominant messages and experiences to students, the study concludes, "There is very little overlap between the sets of authors, primary and secondary texts, and journals and reference works that are standard for each institution."⁷ Assuming that faculty and administrators shape the educational content and experience, their

⁴ Jeanne P. McLean, "Leading from the center: the role of the chief academic officer," *Academic Leadership*, Monograph Series, Vol. 1 (Saint Paul: Saint Paul Seminary School of Divinity, University of St. Thomas, January 1996), 1.

⁵ See James M. Shopshire, "New faces in theological education", *Christian Century*, Feb. 6-13, 1991. Also, see "More college students majoring in religion," *Christian Century*, April 24, 1996 in which "a 1995 study of 251 colleges... cited a 36% increase in enrollment of undergraduate religion majors over the preceding 5 years." See Richard A. Hunt, John E. Hinkle, Jr., and H. Newton Malony (eds.), *Clergy assessment and career development* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990).

⁶ Jackson Carroll et al., "A tale of two seminaries," *Christian Century*, 5 February 1997, 126-128.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 126.

findings clearly reveal that how theological faculty interpret the relationship between academic learning and spiritual growth does effect the education that students will receive.

In the past two decades, Edward Farley's (1983) *Theologia: the fragmentation and unity of theological education* has served as a catalyst to foster discussion about the fundamental structure of theological education. Farley develops an historical explanation for how the current 'structure' of theological education has contributed to the problem of fragmentation both in terms of faculty specialization and the professionalization of ministry careers. Farley argues that historically the study of theology was, as Martin Luther described it, "a process of spiritual formation."⁸ "Theologia," or theological understanding, served as the traditional unifying purpose for studying theology, leading to a practically oriented habit or disposition of one's soul. This approach is often referred to as the 'Athens model' of education focused on character formation for clergy education. Farley explains that in 18th century Germany, however, the increasing specialization of academic disciplines within theology caused a shift from "the study of theology" to the "theological encyclopedia" which divided the study of theology into four specialized disciplines: Bible, church history, dogmatics or systematic theology, and practical theology. This dispersion of theology into a multiplicity of sciences now known as the 'Berlin model' thus became, Farley claims, "the most radical departure from tradition in the history of the education of clergy."⁹ Many seminary graduates today who have difficulty integrating these pieces of their seminary education likely share Farley's criticism:

Education in the theological school is not so much a matter of 'the study of theology' as a plurality of specific disciplines, each with its own method. These areas of study ('sciences', disciplines, courses, catalogue fields) are offered without any highly visible rationale which clarifies their importance and displays their interconnections.¹⁰

This problem of fragmentation was identified over forty years ago in the AATS and Carnegie Foundation study on theological education that concluded:

The greatest defect in theological education today is that it is too much an affair of piecemeal transmission of knowledge and skills, and that, in consequence, it offers too little challenge to the student to develop his [or her] own resources and to become an independent, lifelong inquirer, growing constantly while he [or she] is engaged in the work of the ministry.¹¹

Although several theological faculty and administrators have responded with proposals for a new structure of theological education from various theological approaches, I argue that they are insufficient unless they address the educational dimension as well.

Despite this widespread research on several dimensions of theological education, one aspect that has not received much attention is the relationship between faculty theological beliefs about the spiritual growth of students and their personal theories about teaching and learning. While some educational research has examined faculty perceptions about the seminary's task and goals

⁸ Farley, *Theologia*, 52.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 49.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, xi.

¹¹ H. R. Niebuhr, D. D. Williams, and J. M. Gustafson, *The Advancement of Theological Education*, New York: Harper & Brothers, 1957, 209.

in the preparation of persons for pastoral ministry, how faculty understand the relationship between their own beliefs about spiritual growth and teaching has not been the subject of research.¹²

Postsecondary Education

Since the primary purpose of this study is to talk with seminary faculty as a means of exploring how teaching is understood and practiced, I reviewed the literature on postsecondary teaching and learning. Research on both adult learning and effective teaching practices is vital to the study in several ways. First, theories of adult development and learning indicate several factors that teachers must take into account, including education, age, gender, race or ethnicity, and culture. In this study, it is important to identify whether or not faculty take these variables into account in their teaching. Second, learning theories indicate that true learning should lead to transformation and inner growth. Seminary faculty concerned with the intellectual and spiritual growth of students should utilize learning objectives for both aspects in their courses.

Although the research and professional development efforts related to teaching improvement in postsecondary education are vast, few theological educators make use of this body of knowledge. Realizing that effective teaching takes numerous factors into account and leads to transformative learning, a variety of institutional approaches to enhancing teaching practices and student learning have been proposed. These organizational approaches have focused on aspects such as writing across the curriculum, faculty support initiatives, and various types of rewards. In the past twenty years, many universities have established teaching centers and hired educational consultants to help faculty members and teaching assistants critically reflect upon their teaching and to train them in teaching strategies. The Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion is the only national center created to deal specifically with issues related to teaching in theology and religion.¹³ While Wabash Center journal articles reveal new attention to teaching and theological perspectives, the question of spiritual formation has seldom been addressed.

To consider how teacher beliefs relate to teaching practices, Menges (1994) proposes three ways that teachers can be motivated to improve teaching by drawing upon three categories of how faculty think about teaching. He identifies the following three principles: ‘New knowledge and concepts modify cognitive structures,’ ‘New skills modify schemas,’ and ‘New beliefs modify personal theories.’¹⁴ In fact, a review of the literature and faculty development efforts reflects attention to all three areas: exposing faculty to new knowledge or concepts about teaching, training faculty in teaching strategies, or having them critically reflect on their personal beliefs. In this study, the method of conducting initial and follow-up interviews served as an opportunity for faculty to engage in critical reflection on their teaching and provided opportunity to expose faculty to new concepts about teaching.

Finally four main conclusions from the growing field of research on ‘teacher thinking’ are relevant to this study. These conclusions serve as underlying assumptions that guided the development of this study, evoked certain questions in the interview protocol, and prompted the

¹² Marilyn J. MacLeod, “Faculty values, motives, and perceptions of institutional goals in an evangelical theological seminary experiencing change,” Ed.D. dissertation, Trinity-Evangelical Divinity School, 1994.

¹³ The Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion (a Lilly Endowment program at Wabash College) in Indiana was created in 1995. Their mission statement states their goal of seeking “to enhance and strengthen teaching in theology and religion in North American theological schools, colleges and universities.”

¹⁴ Menges, Robert. “*Improving your teaching*,” in McKeachie, Wilbert, *Teaching Tips: Strategies, research and theory for college and university teachers*, Ninth edition. Lexington, MA: D. C. Heath and Co., 1994.

selection of the ‘grounded theory’ research method in order to interview and analyze faculty beliefs. I have framed these four conclusions as follows:

- (1) Teachers’ mental models of teaching and learning can be identified, are limited in number, and play a vital role in how faculty teach;
- (2) Maturing teachers are those who attempt to make explicit their implicit beliefs;
- (3) Seven principles of a quality postsecondary education have been identified;
- (4) Practicing teachers may hold tacit theories that differ from textbook theories of teaching and learning.

RESEARCH METHOD AND PROCEDURES

Since the systematic and intentional pursuit of the formation and transformation of students in seminary education is exhibited primarily in classroom teaching and learning activities that are guided by the views of faculty, it is vital to conduct research on how seminary faculty understand their personal beliefs to relate to these activities. Based on research studies of teacher beliefs and postsecondary teaching, this study assumes that teachers’ thought processes have real consequences for teaching practices. Menges (1990), in discussing the many settings for teaching and learning, claims that “most teaching occurs in the classroom, (but) most learning does not.” He defines teaching as “the creation of situations in which appropriate learning occurs.”¹⁵ From this premise, I interviewed seminary faculty to ask the following questions:

- 1. What are seminary faculty beliefs about spiritual growth?**
- 2. What are seminary faculty beliefs about teaching and learning?**
- 3. How do their beliefs about spiritual growth and teaching and learning relate?**

Beyond identifying their personal beliefs, it was my intention to identify how their beliefs impact the teaching and learning activities they create. My operational definition of “teaching” refers to teacher activities related to formal courses and will include preparation for the course, teaching and learning activities both inside and outside of the classroom, as well as interpersonal relations with students which facilitate student learning or growth.

Research Sample

To obtain faculty diversity in relation to gender, race or ethnicity, theological perspective, and teaching experience, the sample was selected from three seminaries chosen because of the diversity and large number of faculty. Two are affiliated with mainline Protestant denominations and one with an evangelical denomination. To include a range of academic specialties, I selected faculty who teach introductory courses in New Testament, church history, theology, and pastoral care. These criteria were used to limit the number of interviews and to maintain a consistent variable (courses taught) between the institutions. If any introductory course was not being offered, the most recent teacher of that course was contacted for the study. If more than one faculty member was teaching, I selected one faculty member as appropriate to enhance the diversity of the sample.

The research sample (n=12) was fairly representative of theological faculty and included three women and nine men. The total number of racial or ethnic groups represented were as follows: ten white, non-Hispanic; one black, non-Hispanic; one Asian / Pacific Islander. All participants had earned the Ph.D. in their academic specialization. Two completed their Ph.D.

¹⁵ Menges, Robert. Using evaluative information to improve instruction, in *How administrators can improve teaching*, 1990.

studies in Scotland, while the remaining ten completed their doctorates at ten separate institutions in the United States. The number of years teaching experience ranged from 4 years to 36 years, including teaching at their present institution from 1 year to 36 years. Regarding the introductory classes they teach, class size ranged from 25 to 150 students. Although all were active participants in their churches, only five were ordained ministers with their affiliated denominations. The number of faculty by denominational affiliation was as follows (number in brackets): Conservative Baptist [1], Disciples of Christ [1], Evangelical Lutheran Church [1], Presbyterian Church of America [1], Presbyterian Church, USA [2], Roman Catholic [1], Southern Baptist [1], United Methodist Church [4]. Finally, only three had received any formal graduate training in educational theory or method.

Method and Procedures

One type of qualitative research, called “grounded theory,” was chosen as the primary approach for this study. “Grounded theory” (Strauss and Corbin, 1994; Strauss, 1987; Glaser and Strauss, 1967) is a methodological approach that allows theory to generate from the data. Grounded theory is defined as “the discovery of theory from data (which is) systematically obtained and analyzed.”¹⁶ Realizing that researchers do not approach reality as a *tabula rasa*, grounded theory proponents suggest the best approach to be “an initial, systematic discovery of the theory from the data of social research,” and take the position “that the adequacy of a theory... cannot be divorced from the process by which it is generated.”¹⁷ Similar to other qualitative researchers, grounded theorists accept responsibility for their roles of interpreting what is seen, heard or read. This does not imply that generating new theory or interpretations should proceed in isolation from existing theories. Rather, “Generating a theory from data means that most hypotheses and concepts not only come from the data, but are systematically worked out in relation to the data during the course of research. Generating a theory involves a process of research.”¹⁸ Beyond the original formulation of grounded theory, Strauss (1987) and Vaughan (1992) have developed the methodology of “theoretical elaboration” in which existing (grounded) theories appropriate to the area of investigation may be elaborated or modified as incoming data are meticulously played against them. Drawing on this approach, this study uses comparative analysis (or “constant comparison”) and “theoretical elaboration” as strategies to generate both conceptual categories and theory from the data obtained from faculty interviews and from existing theoretical views provided by the literature on theological education. Regarding the method, the data collection consisted of four components: a data form to collect basic information, a face-to-face interview with each faculty member, a copy of their introductory course syllabus, and a second interview after the original data analysis was complete.

FINDINGS

Following the procedures and guidelines outlined by Strauss (1987), I relied upon the triad of *data collection*, *coding* and *theoretical memos* for the analysis of the data. Grounded theory suggests that conceptual categories for coding the interview data will emerge as recurring patterns are discovered through an ongoing interplay at two levels: first, by a constant

¹⁶ Glaser, B. G. and A. L. Strauss (1967), *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (New York: Aldine de Gruyter), 1.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 3-5.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.

comparison among all the transcribed interviews themselves; and second, between the transcriptions and an external comparison of theoretical perspectives. The interview data was analyzed with respect to the three research questions, and the following key areas of findings emerged: educational beliefs and teaching, theological beliefs and teaching, and beliefs about spiritual growth and teaching.

Educational Beliefs and Teaching

During our conversations, faculty talked about three key aspects of their teaching that relate to educational beliefs: (A) their personal theories of good teaching, (B) their beliefs about students and how they learn, and (C) limitations related to their role as teachers. These educational aspects of theological teaching parallel other research on how teacher beliefs relate to teaching practices. Marilla Svinicki, director of a university teaching center and well-known author in faculty development, summarizes recent research on teacher beliefs in her claim, “Our choices in teaching arise out of our beliefs about how learning takes place, what motivates students to learn, and what our role is as teachers.”¹⁹ Thus, the three aspects that emerged in this study closely resemble prior research and help to answer one of my research questions, namely “What are seminary faculty beliefs about teaching and learning?”

Based on prior research which clearly shows that teacher beliefs impact teaching practices, I asked a series of questions with each participant to obtain an accurate understanding of his or her beliefs. First, to elicit beliefs about good teachers and teaching, I asked faculty to describe their self-image and personal metaphors for teaching, their personal learning style, and some of the teachers or experiences that likely impacted how they teach. Second, to identify implicit and explicit beliefs about students and learning, I asked them to describe both frustrating and rewarding classroom encounters with students. Third, to identify any limitations in relation to educational processes, I asked about their teaching and learning objectives, the strengths and weaknesses of classroom activities, and how they choose and assess these activities. I requested copies of their course syllabi in order to compare the self-report interview data with an analysis of written materials.

At the end of each interview, the faculty all responded positively about having an opportunity to reflect critically on their teaching. Several stated directly either that they had never thought about these issues or that they had never been forced to articulate them. In general, I learned that few have been required or given the opportunity to reflect critically on how their educational beliefs inform their teaching practices. In fact, the interview experience provided the first opportunity for several to engage in such critical reflection on their teaching. One conclusion is that limited opportunities for such reflection is a key factor inhibiting their professional development and possibly hindering effective teaching in theological education.

This study confirms that educational beliefs held by seminary faculty do inform their teaching practices in several ways, regardless of whether they operate implicitly or explicitly. First, it is apparent that many faculty have not received formal training in educational theories or principles. Rather, they are experts in their theological discipline and rely upon that expertise to teach. As a result, they teach according to personal theories about good teaching that often are unexamined and reflect their own educational and ministry experiences. As they gain teaching experience, many encounter challenges from students or other difficulties in teaching that foster

¹⁹ Svinicki, M. (1991). “Theories and metaphors we teach by.” *New directions in teaching and learning*, Spring, 1991, 45.

reflection and/or changes in teaching practices. Some of these challenges may arise from their limited conceptual knowledge of educational processes. For example, an analysis of course syllabi revealed that many develop teaching objectives for a course but label them as learning objectives for students on the syllabus. The lack of clarity in writing objectives for what students are expected to do as a result of the course makes assessment of learning more difficult. In general, the participants indicated that few opportunities exist for critical reflection on their teaching. The lack of formal training in education prior to assuming faculty positions combined with a lack of critical reflection once engaged in teaching appears to force many to struggle alone with issues related to teaching.

Theological Beliefs and Teaching

When asked how theology informs their teaching, faculty responded primarily in three ways that I have categorized as: (1) theological affiliation, (2) theological concept, or (3) theological method. First, some faculty members focused on their denominational heritage or theological affiliation. For example, one professor who is a member of the Evangelical Lutheran Church claimed:

I do have a theology and I think it comes out of the Lutheran tradition -- that *grace* is enormously important. And anytime I see anything that looks like law or legalism working around it, I get nervous because I'm so strong on it... Grace really is fundamental for me theologically, and I try to teach that way. There's always a second chance... Structurally too, I think grace comes through appropriate structure. Grace is not just freewheeling... I'm really strong in structure because I think that's how you create a context for grace to occur. So grace is in the way I want to teach.

Here, Professor B is quite clear on how his theological affiliation impacts his teaching. Similarly, another professor and ordained minister in the United Methodist Church relied upon his theological tradition to explain how his teaching is shaped by his theology. He stated, "Wesley had a wonderful statement: 'let's bring the two together so long separated, knowledge and vital piety.' So that's what I try to do. I try to give them knowledge, but at the same time expose them to vital piety." Thus, Professor A often begins his class by reading a prayer that was written by the figure in church history who they are studying. This is his attempt to teach both church history and prayer.

Second, the majority of participants selected what I call 'theological concepts' to explain how theology informs their teaching. The range of responses included theological ideas such as the Incarnation, unconditional love, unity in diversity, the Trinity, grace, and human nature. One professor identified the concept of 'dependence upon God' as the key:

As a teacher, I recognize when I stand in front of a class, that anything which is going to be accomplished that has eternity stamped on it, that really makes a difference, has to be a work of God in the lives of his people. So I feel that one of the most formative concepts for me in theology is our *dependence upon God*. And I don't lose that when I stand in front of a class... I come across as very positive, and I know what I'm talking about -- but that doesn't change the fact that I have this very, very deep sense that

underneath it all, any value of this depends on God working through it into their lives or it's all a waste of time.

Although this professor teaches systematic theology -- a discipline focused on how people think about God -- he takes an approach that does not lessen the importance of one's feelings and affections. In fact, he stated, "I'm more overt about getting to their affections through the mind." He explained that he had learned to teach this way through prior pastoral experience in various conservative Baptist and community churches.

Third, some participants identified contemporary theological methods such as feminist, African-American, or process theology as the primary forces that inform their teaching. One professor claims to draw upon both *feminist and process theology* in order to teach pastoral care in a manner that is "accepting of what people bring, because if they feel safe, they're going to learn." She also attempts to "give everybody a voice, to help students strengthen a sense of self, and to safely consider another perspective."

Overall, the participants appear to teach in ways consistent with their espoused theological perspectives. Although most shared that they seldom had examined how their personal theological beliefs relate to their teaching, their ability to name specific theological beliefs that shape how they relate to students in a classroom suggests that theological beliefs do inform their teaching. While I have identified three types of responses to show how they lead to different teaching styles, I should note that these categories are permeable and that faculty may draw upon two or more of these approaches as they teach. In general, their theology also is critical to how they understand the purpose of theological education. Moreover, there may be a correlation between how faculty responded to the question (i.e., citing affiliation, concepts, or theological method) and how they construe the goal of a theological education.

The theological approaches represented in this study are consistent with those identified in the literature on religious education. Miller (1995) identifies three categories of contemporary theological approaches that he terms 'church theologies,' 'philosophical theologies,' and 'special theologies.' Thus, faculty who identified themselves as evangelical or Reformed follow what Miller calls a church theology. Others who follow a feminist, African-American, or liberation approach fall under the category of special theologies. Philosophical theologies include positions such as process theology and existentialist theology. The theoretical examples in Miller's book provided a model for what I learned from faculty in this study; that is, how personal theological beliefs relate to teaching.

Beliefs about Spiritual Growth and Teaching

When asked how their teaching relates to the spiritual growth of students, faculty responded in four primary ways: 1) some shared stories about students, 2) some shared their struggles as teachers, 3) some explained how they help students, and 4) some analyzed the terminology in the question. While a few gave examples of specific students, several identified general patterns they observe in how academic and spiritual growth occur in students. A small number responded by asking questions to clarify my use of the terms 'learning' and/or 'spiritual;' however, I requested that they provide their own definition. Also, several indicated that their own lives exhibit this interplay between academic learning and spiritual growth, especially in relation to their teaching and research. Nonetheless, only one of twelve in this study identified an assignment in his course syllabus that was directly intended for the spiritual development of

students. In general, the data indicates that faculty who do not include goals for spiritual growth as a dimension of their courses likely hold beliefs (implicit or explicit) that lead them to exclude spiritual goals; however, at the same time, several questioned themselves as to whether their decision to exclude them was appropriate.

The results indicate that beliefs about spiritual formation also play a factor in how they teach. A spectrum of positions appears to exist in terms of how intentional faculty are in attempting to address the spiritual growth of students in their classes. This then has profound implications for how they examine theological education. One indicated that he includes a “Scripture meditation exercise” that requires students to keep a journal of their spiritual life. Another indicated that he strives to keep spiritual growth subordinate to the intellectual growth of students. A third shared that he declined a student’s request to meet outside of class for spiritual help. Overall, faculty beliefs about how academic learning relates to spiritual growth do affect their teaching practices. While my interviews did not include a discussion about the purpose of theological education, the majority clearly indicated that they view seminary teaching as an opportunity to prepare students to become both spiritual and intellectual leaders in the church and society.

CONCLUSION

In this study, I have engaged in conversation with seminary faculty to clarify how they understand their teaching to relate to the spiritual formation of students. It is clear that most assume their teaching plays an important role in this task; however, this aspect has received little attention in the research. While many agree that formation is the central goal for theological schools, a lack of consensus on defining spiritual formation may be an underlying barrier to dialogue and research. I propose that theological faculty and schools need to clarify their definitions of spiritual formation and realize it as the foundation for developing pastoral identity. Based on my research, I argue that theological schools should become teaching, learning and worshipping communities and that the curriculum and non-curriculum activities should support the wholistic spiritual formation of students, faculty, and staff as the central purpose. Hough and Cobb (1985) point us in this direction when they propose that we must educate students to become critically reflective practical theologians. When discussing the seminary’s contribution to Christian identity, they state:

Our argument, now reiterated often, is that the church needs to know its story, its whole story, in order to know what it is... To say who we are as Christians is, finally, to tell that story. Therefore, all Christians need to know that story, and the church needs leaders who know it well and can help others to learn it. Thus, the Bible and church history are the base of theological education because they are where the church’s future leaders learn who they are as Christians. If this is the principal reason for teaching Bible and church history in seminary, the teaching should reflect its purpose. These courses should guide the students into discovering their inner history. This past should be taught as our collective memory.²⁰

The lack of dialogue and research on spiritual formation among faculty and across institutions has been overlooked as a key barrier for considering spiritual formation as an element that requires more theological reflection.

²⁰ Hough and Cobb (1985), *Christian identity and theological education*, 97.

While attempts to bridge the gap between research on theological education and postsecondary teaching are not numerous, some have begun to propose solutions grounded in an interdisciplinary perspective. In reflecting on theological teaching, Hough and Cobb (1985) have drawn upon the work of Donald Schön, in *The Reflective Practitioner: how professionals think in action* (1983) and in *Educating the Reflective Practitioner* (1990). They support the need to reflect critically on the practice of teaching, as well as to learn from the practice of teaching. Schön (1990) argues for a new epistemology of practice based on reflection-in-action to replace technical rationality as the prevailing epistemology of practice. As theological faculty adopting Schön's work, Hough and Cobb (1985) propose that faculty must engage in reflection-in-action in relation to their task of educating Christian ministers. They claim:

The church will be far better served if its seminaries realize that there are many urgent questions being posed to the church in our time and that we need faculty who will reflect on these questions as Christians... Christian thinkers indifferent to whether they are functioning as theologians or as ethicists can contribute more to theological education and serve as better guides and models for future church leaders. The need in the seminary is for practical Christian thinkers who can help students to become practical Christian thinkers.²¹

Thus, they suggest, "the curriculum be reconceived according to the goal of deepening, broadening, and clarifying Christian identity."²²

Their proposals relate closely to the findings of this study. Several faculty shared the view that the goal of theological education is ultimately for students to learn who they are as Christians and ministers. This goal offers a solution that enables theological schools to balance their dual identities as communities of faith and academic institutions. In fact, the proposal that spiritual formation is the primary goal of theological education provides a theological solution to the problem. For professional religious educators, this view invites us to consider ways to help our students, and other faculty, to teach as critically reflective religious educators.

²¹ Ibid., 106.

²² Ibid., 93.

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