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## TOWARD A CRITICAL THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION

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Before I entered the field of theological education, I spent my entire teaching career at a liberal arts college. As I made my way through the first months of my deanship at Harvard, I came to recognize that the challenges I faced as a teacher, scholar, and administrator in the interdisciplinary context of the liberal arts are not all that different from those I face as head of an interdenominational university-related divinity school.

For a decade, I have sought to reflect on the peculiar challenge of teaching Christian theology within the humanities division of a secular educational institution. The liberal arts setting of the small college encourages a great deal of interdisciplinary conversation: one's closest colleagues are often in departments other than one's own, and so it becomes necessary to familiarize oneself with diverse but related disciplines. My own teaching and research have been deeply influenced and immeasurably strengthened by exchanges with philosophers, social theorists, historians, and anthropologists on the Haverford College faculty.

One of the lessons I have learned from those conversations is that such exchange requires a combination of openness and self-confidence on the part of both conversation partners. Each must have a clear sense of what he or she can contribute to the conversation, even as together they seek to gain new insights from one another. Interdisciplinary cooperation can quickly come to an end if the conversation becomes too one-sided, if one partner tends to dominate to the detriment of the other. The goal of this kind of cooperation is not to create some new discipline or interdisciplinary department, but to create a new community of discourse, a group of people who identify a number of issues or questions they face in com-

mon and who seek to engage in mutually beneficial investigation of those problems.

I call attention to these reflections on my previous educational experience, because I believe that participants in theological education can learn a great deal from the conversational paradigm that I have briefly described. We have entered a period of great excitement in theological education; many of the old scholarly verities have been challenged, and many of the standard forms of education have been discarded. During the past decade, we have witnessed the rapid rise of liberation and feminist theologies and the dramatic shift in the gender and age distribution of our student bodies. We have all come to recognize the importance of cultural, ethical, and religious pluralism and have sought to diversify our curricula while still struggling to find some principle of coherence to hold it all together. Some mornings we awaken enormously stimulated by the bracing excitement of this ferment; on other mornings, we pull the covers over our heads fervently hoping to avoid the cacophonous confrontation of that collection of competing interests we call our faculties.

### DEFINING STANDARDS FOR EXCELLENCE

There can be little question that we are still in a time of shifting foundations and unsettled priorities. It would surely be a mistake to define prematurely a curricular center or principle of coherence. At the same time, we must raise the question of whether we can begin to identify the criteria and standards for excellence in scholarship within theological education. If we cannot begin to define those criteria, then we face the unpleasant alternatives of borrowing standards from other fields that may not be appropriate for theological scholarship or abdicating our responsibility for developing and setting standards for the subfields within theology. In either case, the integrity of theological scholarship is threatened.

We face a number of difficulties in seeking to address the question of the future of theological scholarship. The extraordinary diversity of our disciplines, which range from philological and archaeological studies to practical courses in communication and parish administration, suggests a vast and impossible array of standards. What could possibly unite these various disciplines? What criteria of excellence might they hold in common? What principles of coherence bind together a seminary or divinity school community? In particular, do the traditional theoretical disciplines—historical, philosophical, and hermeneutical studies—have

anything in common with the practical disciplines: arts of communication, counseling, and pastoral care? Indeed, are practitioners within these latter areas properly defined as scholars, and are they engaged in the kind of research activity we should describe as scholarship?

There are additional difficulties. Liberation theology has brought political categories to prominence within theology. How are we to distinguish appropriate political analysis from an inappropriate *politicizing* of theological scholarship? And finally, how do we discern and encourage an appropriate future for scholarship in theology? As we build our faculties for the twenty-first century, what kind of research should we encourage? Are there new fields we should seek to develop, and should other fields be allowed to die unlamented deaths?

### RAISING THE DIFFICULT QUESTIONS

The enormous range and complexity of these problems might lead us to despair of seeking solutions. Perhaps we should simply allow ourselves to muddle through, trusting that a process of natural selection will determine the future of theological scholarship. To some extent that will undoubtedly happen; good arguments and solid research will inevitably survive the trends and fads of any contemporary moment. But a *laissez faire* attitude toward these matters could leave us unable to respond to the peculiar demands of contemporary intellectual and religious life. I am convinced that we need to raise the difficult questions about the future of theological inquiry, even if we do not see the precise ways in which we will answer them. In the midst of the stimulating diversity of theological education, we need to seek those elements that provide a sense of coherence in our common intellectual task. We need to define more clearly what we mean by the word *theology*.

In particular, we need to address three closely related issues. First, in what sense is seminary and divinity school education genuinely theological? Second, how is theology, rightly understood, a critical discipline, and how might it serve both to unite the various aspects of our curricula and enable us to be better conversation partners with those outside the theological world? And third, what is the relation between the theoretical and practical aspects of our educational programs, and how can those aspects be integrated into a critical theological education?

Until we reach some agreement on the nature of theology as a critical discipline, we clearly will not be able to discern the standards for excellence in theological scholarship or to project a future for our com-

mon endeavor. Of more importance, until we gain some clarity about what theology is and why it is important, we will be unable to make a contribution to the crucial intellectual, political, and social problems facing our world today. If theology remains in its current state of disarray, it will continue to play a marginal role in American intellectual life, and theologians will have little influence on debates within either religious or political communities. If we want to engage in a critical conversation with those outside of the theological disciplines, then we must have a clearer sense of what we can contribute to that conversation precisely as Christian theologians. If we do not have a sense of the nature and significance of our own theological discourse, then we can hardly expect others to find what we say interesting or important.

### THE HISTORY OF THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION

I want to offer a conception of theology as a normative, critical, and public discipline. But before I develop my proposal for what I hope is a broader and more inclusive understanding of theology, I need to review in brief compass some of the history of theological education that has brought us to our current situation. I will refer liberally to Harvard's place within this history. I do that not because of any particular pride of place but simply because it is the history I have come to know the best.

In 1808, immediately following the Unitarian Controversy sparked by the election of Henry Ware as Hollis Professor of Divinity at Harvard, a separate theological faculty was established by orthodox congregationalists at Andover. The founding of Andover Theological Seminary marked the beginning of professional theological education in the United States. Harvard liberals, unwilling to concede victory to the more conservative Calvinists, began planning for the establishment of their own independent theological faculty. On July 17, 1816, the Society for the Promotion of Theological Education in Harvard University was established, thus beginning a process that led to the founding of a "faculty of theology," or Theological Seminary, at the university.

It is important to note the place of theological studies within the broader university at this time. If we use Harvard College as our example, it is clear that by the beginning of the nineteenth century, undergraduate education had moved quite far from the founders' original concern to provide a literate ministry to the churches. By the time of the founding of the Harvard Divinity School, Harvard men were educated in a broad

curriculum oriented more toward liberal education than ministerial studies. Prior to the nineteenth century, of course, theological training was an integral part of university education. At Harvard, every student was instructed in classical languages, rhetoric and grammar, and natural philosophy, studies that prepared the student for a better grasp of God's revelation within scripture and the natural world. During the eighteenth century, Harvard's president was responsible for the final year of instruction in divinity, the capstone of a student's university education. By the turn of the century, however, theological instruction was limited to the courses offered by the Hollis Professor, and there were no advanced courses in theology for those preparing to enter the ministry. As natural philosophy gave way to the natural sciences, a new understanding of critical reason emerged within European and American universities, one that did not so easily support the faith and piety that undergirded studies in divinity. By 1816 it was not self-evident that theological training ought to be a fundamental aspect of a general university education.

The founding of the first professional theological schools thus marked an important shift in the rationale for theological education. Training in divinity was no longer essential to those studies constituting a liberal education, but had become the course of studies appropriate for those entering into a specific profession, the Christian ministry. Thus, precisely as the ministry gained professional status, the *intellectual* justification for theological education became blurred.

The uncertain place of theological education within the general university context was highlighted during the so-called conflict of the faculties that occurred in Germany in the later eighteenth century. With the founding of the modern universities at Halle and Göttingen, a new understanding of rationality (*Wissenschaft*) came to dominate German intellectual life. A rational, or scientific, discipline is defined as one characterized by autonomous, critical, historical inquiry. Rational inquiry accepts no authority other than that of autonomous reason and seeks the truth unhindered by dogma, tradition, or institutional hierarchy. Given that definition of *Wissenschaft*, it is surely not self-evident that theology has a place within the modern scientific university. Indeed, in the eighteenth-century debate, Johann Fichte argued that because theology was founded on revelation and faith, it ought to be denied academic standing in the university.

Other eminent scholars, however, came to the defense of theology and thereby secured its place in the modern university, but the arguments they offered in support of theological education served further to undermine the intellectual standing of theology. Immanuel Kant and Friedrich

Schleiermacher both offered pragmatic arguments in support of theology within the university. Kant argued that the theological faculty, like the faculties of medicine and law, offered essential service to the state by training clergy for leadership roles in the churches. Schleiermacher developed a more sophisticated argument, but one that depended on the cultural assumption that religious piety is an indispensable social practice. Theology provides the skills and knowledge correlative to the indispensable practice of piety in the same way that medicine and law undergird the indispensable practices associated with health and the social order. The three faculties train persons for positions of leadership in the institutions designed to promote and develop these necessary societal practices.

These arguments, which are designed to secure both the professional status of the Christian ministry and the essential role of theology within the university, do not travel well across the Atlantic, because they depend upon assumptions that are difficult to sustain in a pluralistic, liberal democracy. Kant's argument presupposes a state established and supported religion, a constitutional impossibility within the American democracy. Schleiermacher's position rests upon a conviction that religion, and particularly Christianity, is an indispensable social practice. Although that contention might still receive some support in our contemporary culture, it is a controversial and debatable assertion. And surely the one place where it is least likely to gain widespread support is within the intellectual culture of the American university. The tendency of American theological educators to borrow our intellectual rationale from Europe has impeded our ability to develop a distinctively North American approach to theology, and it has aided and abetted the intellectual marginalization of theology within American society.

In the midst of this marginalization of theology, a strategy did emerge for relating at least some of the disciplines within seminaries and divinity schools to broader developments in American intellectual life. The commitment to critical historical studies has provided a powerful justification for the inclusion of biblical studies, and more recently the history of religions, within the university. But the focus on critical studies has not provided a justification for other aspects of the curriculum, particularly systematic and pastoral theology. Indeed, critical inquiry within the theological curriculum has often been very narrowly defined, eliminating from its purview any hint of normative investigation or evaluation.

The strong philological and archaeological orientation of the biblical departments at Harvard is just one example of the sharp distinction between critical-historical studies and normative theological studies in

American theological education. It is arguable that this strategy allowed divinity schools to maintain good university relations during the period of positivism that dominated university life from the 1930s to the 1960s. But it is also arguable that this strategy has become outmoded and irrelevant in a very different social and intellectual environment within the contemporary university. The distinction between objective (or "hard") historical studies and subjective (or "soft") normative studies is a false distinction, one that has contributed to the current fragmentation within theological education.

### WHERE WE ARE TODAY

We find ourselves, then, in the following ironic situation. On the one hand, separate programs of professional ministerial studies have been justified by an argument for the social necessity of Christian piety, an argument that has, first, diminished in persuasiveness in the 170 years since the founding of the first independent divinity schools, and second, has separated those programs from the mainstream of American intellectual life. On the other hand, a program of critical religious studies within the university has been justified by an argument from objectivity that eliminates theology from the core of critical studies. The irony of this dual argument is that the justification for ministerial studies fails to establish the intellectual status of the curriculum, and the argument for critical studies, although providing a justification for some disciplines within the university, appears wholly disconnected from the preparation for ministry.

As questions of faith, commitment, and value became increasingly alien to "objective" critical studies, the internal connection between theology and practice was severed. The so-called theoretical fields have developed into discrete disciplines with their own professional societies and journals, and the technical, specialized research emerging from these disciplines has little or no relevance for ministry in religious communities. At the same time, practical studies, unleashed from their theoretical counterparts, have become in their own way technical and specialized, focusing on the technical skills of communication or counseling or administration. Insights for these courses are often borrowed from the related professional fields of communications or psychology or business administration, and their theological and religious aims and rationale have begun to disappear. The final consequence of the separation of theory and practice is the "detheologizing" of divinity school and seminary education.

It is scarcely surprising, then, that seminary and divinity school students complain that practical courses lack intellectual rigor and that scholarly courses seem irrelevant to their vocational and professional goals. The classical model for American theological education creates an enormous gap between the academic and practical aspects of a ministerial curriculum. Just as important, this standard model eliminates theology from the core of both practical and academic studies. Theology as a theoretical discipline appears disconnected from the skills needed to be a successful parish pastor. Theology as an inquiry emerging from faith and piety appears to lack the marks of an impartial and critical discipline.

In order to address the problem of integration within the theological disciplines, in order to begin to develop standards of excellence for theological scholarship, we need to reassess the capacity of theology to unify theory and practice, critical studies and pastoral concerns. *Theology can, and I believe must, regain its status as a significant critical inquiry within the church, within the university, and within our broader cultural and public life.* A recognition of theology as a critical inquiry emerging out of deeply held religious convictions can greatly enrich the cultural, intellectual, and spiritual life of our society. A restoration of theology to a central point in divinity school and seminary curricula can help us to overcome the gap between the academic and ministerial, between the scholarly and pastoral, that so bedevils American theological education. And, finally, the reestablishment of theology at the center of our common intellectual and spiritual task might allow us to perceive the future directions of theological scholarship.

We can begin addressing these issues by articulating a broader and more inclusive understanding of theology. We need to recover a sense of theology as a generic term, describing not simply one discipline among others but the common task in which we are all engaged, whether in biblical studies, constructive theology, historical studies, or comparative religion. Theology rightly conceived is a communal, formative, critical, and public activity that can serve both as the integrative factor in seminary teaching, and as a key link to the rest of the university and the wider society. That is a rather sweeping claim, so I will highlight each of the elements within this definition.

*Theology is a communal activity.* Theology has traditionally been understood as an activity of religious communities, as faith seeking understanding. Yet the notion of community that has undergirded that view of theology has been narrowly and exclusively defined. Among modern

theologians, the community of faith has been essentially defined as the community of elite, male, Anglo-European clerics. The effects of this narrow definition of community have been manifold. Women and people of color have been effectively eliminated from participating in the conversation that serves to define the nature and goals of the community. Theological discourse has become the language of elites, having little relevance either for the congregations of practicing religious people or for the broader secularized society. The marginalization of theology within our culture has been aided and abetted by this narrow definition of the community of faith.

During the last two decades, various liberation movements have demanded greater inclusiveness within religious communities. These movements have met partial success, and religious communities and their governing hierarchies have certainly become far more diverse. Nonetheless, traditional patterns of domination and subjugation continue to reign within religious and educational institutions; therefore, the situation of traditionally disadvantaged groups remains precarious. That is why the kind of community that exists at theological institutions is so important.

We are embarked on a bold experiment, dedicated to the belief that institutions that seek to represent the cultural and religious pluralism of our world can still function as intellectual and spiritual communities. Our traditions of open and unbiased inquiry have been extended to include voices not previously heard in the academic and theological conversation. We strive to be communities in which the conversation is rigorous yet open, critical yet candid. We cannot claim to be ideal communities of discourse, free from systematically distorted speech. But we can claim that we are seeking to construct an environment in which serious and thoughtful arguments, coming from diverse speakers and traditions, are given equal footing in our theological discussions.

One important contribution of this diverse and occasionally cacophonous environment is that we are guarded against succumbing to a false ideal of community. Too often we think of community as a notion limited to those groups of people who share a common history and a set of well-defined beliefs and aims. Although communities must have some aims that they hold in common, their diversity and disagreements are signs that they are living and vibrant. True communities are, in Alasdair MacIntyre's useful phrase, "historically extended, socially embodied argument(s),<sup>1</sup> arguments precisely about those aims and goods the community should seek. Theological thinking within such a community is

inescapably temporal. Theology is a thoroughly historical discipline that does its work in the midst of communities and their traditions. Such a theology acknowledges the diversity of faith's expressions and the pluralistic environment within which faith must operate. It sees temporality as a crucial dimension of faith as a living, developing social phenomenon and accepts the culturally conditioned character of all human knowledge (including the knowledge of faith) as a sign that the transcendent God has become incarnate in human history and culture. Theology, then, is the discourse by which the arguments of these diverse perspectives are voiced.

As we seek to define criteria of excellence within our diverse theological communities, we must seek to develop genuine communities of discourse in which people of differing and even conflicting points of view engage in critical conversation with one another. The greatest danger we all face is that our diversity will lead to fragmentation—to the creation of separate communities of discourse, each locked into its own subworld of reality within its own standards of judgment. Such a development would both undermine the coherence of the theological task and make serious conversation with those outside theology increasingly unlikely. Those of us with administrative responsibility must seek to create an intellectual atmosphere in which there is an open and candid exchange of ideas. Such exchange will occasionally be sharp and contentious, but it is only within that kind of honest, if somewhat painful, conversation that a consensus about our standards of excellence can emerge. Failure to develop such critical dialogue will, I fear, yield a rather bleak future for theological scholarship.

*Theology is a formative activity.* Theology is, quite clearly, a reflective and cognitive activity. And yet it is a peculiar form of cognitive reflection, because its goal is not simply the further expansion of knowledge. Theology seeks a quite practical goal, what I would call the formation of religious identity.

It is a commonplace to observe that human identity is formed within the matrix of roles and structures that constitute a society. Our identities are formed precisely as we identify with the various social forms that bestow meaning on a society and its participants. Religious communities have traditionally played an important role in the process of identity formation, a role sufficiently central to socialization in Western cultures that Kant and Schleiermacher could, as we have seen, still argue in the nineteenth century for the social necessity of religion. More re-

cently, religious communities have exercised only marginal influence within the broader socialization process and have had a decreasing impact on the identity formation of their own members. Although there are surely multiple causes for this phenomenon, one major contributing factor has been the separation of theology from the communities and practices that form religious identity and character. It is hardly surprising that communities cut off from the critical and reflective guidance of theology have become aimless and uncertain. Nor is it surprising that theology cut off from communities of practice has become the esoteric discourse of academic elites.

*Theology must once again become an activity engaged in the formation of religious identity and character.* To play that role, theologians must be engaged in reflection upon religious practices. Some of those practices will be located within religious communities, whereas others may be broadly distributed within society and culture. Theologians need to attend both to the practices of congregations, for example, worship, preaching, and counseling, and to societal practices that have religious and moral dimensions, for example, political discourse, public policy decisions, behavior in the professions. By analyzing the structures and language of those practices, theologians can identify the basic convictions and value commitments operating within them and seek to subject them to analysis and criticism. In so doing, theologians can then seek to contribute to the reformation of those practices and of the human identities shaped within them. In that process, theology's most critical and analytical activity can make a direct contribution to the way human beings actually live out their lives.

*Theology is a critical activity.* I have already indicated that I understand theology to be a critical reflection on religious practices. If theology is to be a truly critical inquiry, then the standards according to which theologians make their critical judgments must be articulated. Given the current diversity within divinity school and seminary communities, and the broad range of practices for which our students are preparing, the task of reaching consensus about our critical standards will not be easy. But as we begin to build theological faculties for the twenty-first century, we must ask some hard questions about the future of theology. How can we continue to diversify theological education while developing rigorous standards of excellence? How can theology continue to serve the needs of the churches while it addresses broader social, cultural, and political questions? How might theology contribute to the revitalization of the

churches precisely as it assumes this broader, more ambitious agenda? These and other questions about the intellectual integrity of the theological disciplines can easily be set aside as we face the more imminent challenges of recruitment, placement, and finances. But we must face these perplexing intellectual issues if we hope to secure a future for theological reflection.

Happily, we have some allies in this search for critical standards. Attention to criticism, or more technically, "critique," has always been an essential form of Marxist analysis. Neo-Marxist critical theorists have produced an impressive body of scholarship analyzing the role of critique as a form of reflection that combines theory and practice. Although much of this scholarship has been either uninterested in or downright antagonistic toward religion, I am struck by the remarkable similarities between the problems faced by Christian and Marxist scholars at the end of the twentieth century. I believe we need to engage in serious conversation with the Marxist tradition as we seek a way out of our current impasse.

Another intellectual trend that deserves attention within theology is that represented by pragmatism within American philosophy. The pragmatist tradition, more than any other school of thought within post-Enlightenment philosophy, has consciously sought to give primacy to practice in its struggle to overcome a false dichotomy between reflection and activity. It is ironic that American theologians have given so little attention to that distinctive American tradition represented by Dewey, James, Peirce, and, more recently, Richard Rorty. We have traditionally drawn our resources from the European intellectual scene or most recently from developments within the Third World. In fact, one of the most powerful resources for our task lies ready at hand in our own intellectual culture. Our failure to produce a distinctively North American theology may reside in part in our neglect of this indigenous philosophical tradition.

Finally, we need to be in conversation with developments in the field of literary criticism. Traditional theological scholarship has been text oriented, focusing on the analysis of ideas within textual traditions. Historical critical inquiry has raised sharp challenges to some of the assumptions of that scholarship with regard to the literary integrity of texts, to their historical reliability, and to the authority of textual traditions. The crisis of authority within religious communities has contributed to the confusion within theological scholarship. As we seek for new directions, we may be assisted by the important discussions occurring within literary criticism. Literary critics are acutely aware of the political dimensions of



interpretation and are seeking to develop political hermeneutics appropriate to literary texts. We need to attend particularly to the debates about the "literary canon" that are raging within departments of English and comparative literature. We can both contribute to and learn from those important discussions about the structure of college and university curricula, for these debates will influence significantly the ways in which young people in America are taught to read and interpret, as well as the texts that they are encouraged to study.

Discussion of the criteria of a truly critical theology can make an important contribution to the universitywide reflection on the nature of a liberal education. As we develop our conception of theology as a critical discipline, we have an opportunity to raise new queries about the relation between the descriptive and the normative, and between the critical and moral dimensions of human understanding. In so doing, we can contribute to the ongoing discussion about the moral applications of critical thinking, but we can also pose fresh questions about the fiduciary and moral presuppositions inherent in all critical inquiry.

*Theology is a public activity.* Finally, we need to recapture a sense in which theology is a public activity. Throughout our history in the United States, political rhetoric has had a strong theological dimension. The presidential inaugural address is the classic genre for theo-political rhetoric. Abraham Lincoln was the master of such rhetoric and was arguably America's most significant public theologian. John F. Kennedy could also invoke theological and biblical themes in his attempt to gain public support for his policies. At the same time, analyses of Kennedy's political practice indicate that his policymaking was in no obvious way directly influenced by his religious convictions. The plight of religion in the contemporary world is that (in Peter Berger's fetching phrase) it has been reduced to public rhetoric and private virtue.

One of the most encouraging developments in the sphere of public affairs in recent years has been the American Roman Catholic bishops' pastorals on peace and economic justice. Those statements have been both praised and criticized, but they have made the important contribution of introducing overt theological discourse and analysis into the public debate. Their positions have received widespread media coverage and have elicited thoughtful responses from scholars and policymakers outside the religious community. The question remains whether their statements will have any real or lasting impact on the structure of public

policy—whether they will move beyond rhetoric to influence our common public reality.

There has been a great deal of discussion in academic theology about "public theology." Most of that debate has focused on the question of whether theological arguments are available for public examination and whether theological assertions are intelligible beyond the confines of a particular religious community. Although such issues are intellectually interesting and important within a rather small circle of academic theologians, they only begin to help us address what I consider the far more important questions: Will religious convictions and theological analyses have any real impact on the way our public lives are structured? Can a truly public theology have a salutary influence on the development of public policy within a pluralistic democratic nation? The real challenge to a North American public theology is to find a way—within the social, cultural, and religious pluralism of American politics—to influence the development of public policy without seeking to construct a new Christendom or lapsing into a benign moral relativism.

I have begun my deanship at Harvard at one of the most challenging but exciting times in the history of theological education. I believe that the key to the revitalization of theological scholarship lies in the revitalization of the theological dimension of our various disciplines. If we can make some progress toward developing a more inclusive and more critical conception of theology, then we might discover that theological scholarship has a future that is of interest to those in the church, the academy, and the wider society. And then we might find ourselves engaged in a critical conversation that may have enormous significance not only for the future of scholarship but for our common human future as well.

## NOTE

1. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 207.

# CONSTRUCTING A PUBLIC THEOLOGY

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*THE CHURCH IN A PLURALISTIC CULTURE*

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