

Theological Education for this Moment¹

—Willie James Jennings

This is an unprecedented moment in theological education where all of us involved in this endeavor are faced with the same crucial question—how do we receive the diverse gifts embodied in the women and men that God is sending to us today? We remain in the midst of an old story in theological education—the story of women and men in search of God, in search of meaning, struggling with and against an urge, a compulsion, a calling if you will, to be agents of change in religious communities and in society. But we are also in the midst of a new story—the story of women and men not previously imagined as students in predominately white theological schools and who themselves had not imagined these schools as sites for their transfiguration. We theological educators now live between these two stories and this constitutes one part of the new situation for theological education in the western world. The other part of this new situation has to do with a world at war, at war with its own diversity, convulsing over the intensifications of life together, life bound ever more tightly together by economic and environmental crises and by the manufacture, promotion, and distribution of weapons.

A world at war with its own diversity and religious institutions struggling with the profound transformation of their student bodies and their audiences present a unique challenge for the theological academy and its dominant pedagogies. In North America, our task is painfully clear—find ways to overcome the deep cultural conflicts and racial antagonisms that characterize life here or become foot soldiers or complicit bystanders in the coming race war. The skirmishes are all around us. When and where do we theological educators enter in this task? This question has less to do with logistics and more to do with the form of life necessary for theological education today. To be a theological educator is already to have chosen a road less traveled, one where the social prestige and financial benefits that usually come with years of formal academic study and advanced degrees are not awarded to us. Theological educators have already chosen an austere form of life that yet gestures toward the ancient ascetic. We are in a real sense modern day monastics, either willingly or reluctantly. We live with our lives circling around and being encircled by dynamics similar to those ancient inhabitants of monasteries—struggling against the lack of resources, needing to discipline body and mind, having to address the crushing needs of those we teach and serve, and most importantly, seeking to embody devotion to God. Yet today a new reality of choosing is upon us, one that demands we consider a fresh the form of life most needed both for the new situation of theological education and the continuing global conflicts with diversity.

There are some theological educators and some institutions that do not discern this moment as a new situation and who do not see the connection between our work and the deep global conflicts with diversity. This is

¹ This article was the opening statement at the plenary on “Theological Education after Ferguson” at the Association of Theological Schools Biennial Meeting on June 28, 2016 at St. Louis, Missouri.



due in large measure to the dominant pedagogies that yet hold court in theological education. These pedagogies encourage both a form of detachment and an impoverished ecology of learning. The form of detachment they promote invites students to imagine themselves *as students* in a space disconnected from the histories that make intelligible their lives. Pierre Bourdieu in his work, *Pascalian Meditations*, calls this form of detachment the scholastic disposition. It is a cultivated form of being in the world, operative in the academy, that imagines a state of detachment from the social, cultural, and material conditions that constituted its very existence and that are inextricably bound to its continuation.² This form of detachment schools students away from the cultivation of a stronger historical consciousness, one that would help them situate their lives *and* their education within the global struggles for justice and situate those struggles within the life and agency of God. Theological education suffers most acutely when it bifurcates these intertwined histories—the life and agency of God in the world and the global struggle for justice. Indeed the struggle for justice is most intelligible when we understand it in light of the actions of God in the world, and we cannot take seriously the life of God unless we understand God’s constant desire to bring about a world shaped in justice and righteousness. Yet we have excluded the history of theological education from these intertwined histories.

We stand in the long history of projects of formation - religious, nationalist, cultural, Christian, colonial, gendered, sexual, emotional, aesthetic, geographic, and architectural, within which theological education has often been embedded. Yet the dominant pedagogies in the theological academy tend to ignore the history of these complex projects, assuming that its own formation hovers above or out of reach of this history. We can no longer ignore this history or refuse to situate students in a theological education profoundly attuned to that history and determined not to repeat its most damaging effects. We must help students recognize, understand, and where necessary, to challenge formations that destroy lives and, at the same time, equip them for the task of life-giving cultivation of others. A theological education that promotes a historically detached form of formation is one not appropriate to our present moment.

The form of detachment encouraged by the regnant pedagogies of the theological academy also promote an impoverished ecology of learning that strangles the capacity of teachers to see themselves as learners with their students. The colonial legacy that yet informs theological education created a vision where the entire population outside of Europe were seen as perpetual students and the white Christians of the west as the eternal teachers of the world. This legacy shows itself precisely in the ways we teachers often imagine ourselves in relation to our students, as those living and moving outside a shared space of life and learning. A shared space of learning does not mean that we have nothing to teach our students. It means that the work of teaching must always be embedded in the work of learning, learning not only our students but the worlds—social, cultural, geographic—out of which they come. It means learning the deep histories of place where we teach and live, and it means being open to the expansion of our identities toward the life-worlds of our students. This way of thinking about the space of learning is counter to the ways so much educational modeling has formed in the theological academy. We too often still imagine our students as guests in a world that we host, rather than as the host of a world we have entered as guests. We are guests who have joined our students in order to come to know, embrace, and love them for the sake of a God we believe has done the same.

Recently I was sharing these thoughts with a group of faculty at a school with a robust theology department that requires two courses in religion and theology of all their undergraduates. Their students are increasingly nonwhite, either nonwhite American or immigrant. One faculty member, clearly frustrated with both this

2 Pierre Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 16-30.



situation and with me, said that his students have nothing to teach him. He went on to say that his job is to teach these students the things they will need to learn to be well educated according to the standards of this institution. For him, the increasingly diverse student body meant that he had to double down on his task, because the plethora of backgrounds of his students and the unevenness in their preparation for college meant that his limited time must be devoted to giving them the basics, and if possible shaping their thinking to understand this vital subject matter. I have sympathy for this faculty member and the daunting task of teaching in this new diverse situation. Yet he could not see his students as the opportunity for a new way of teaching that rooted itself in his own growth toward their worlds.

In a fundamental sense, this teacher functioned ahistorically in his pedagogy. He could not see his work inside a history of decolonization, of undoing a way of being in the world that must be undone if theological education will thrive in this moment. What must be undone is a theological educator who is not first a learner. Yet the kind of learner necessary now is not one who just wishes to learn a few more facts about their students, but is one who imagines their world and their work from within gestures of incarnation, of enfleshed journeys into far countries where we engage in constant becomings, constantly entering into the worlds of those we are honored to teach in the expansion of our lives into their lives. Such expansion is not a new colonial conquest but an embodied desire for life together. We who teach are guests who again and again enter the worlds of our students and we must create and perform a pedagogy that shows that entrance in honor and love.

We share this world with our students; this is the truth that must find its way more tangibly in the pedagogy of the theological academy. We need such a vision of shared life because of the time and space in which we do our work. We do our work in the aftermath. No matter what religious or denominational affiliation, no matter what theological school of thought, no matter what social or political sensibility reigns in the institution, we work after the name of God has been spoken and yet violence has been done. After the name of God has been spoken and violence has been thwarted. After prayers and tears and cries have been offered. After words of anguish and words of hope have been shared. After the death of black bodies, and after bodies have been joined in protest, after Flint, after Baltimore, after Ferguson. Students come to us before and after and they invite us to help them make sense of this before and after. What form of life is necessary for theological educators who teach students in the after?

It is a form of life that unrelentingly presses toward joining, toward life together, toward shared understandings and mutual learnings. The dominant pedagogies that yet hold court in theological education resist this new form of life. Yet the changing racial and ethnic population of our society and our schools means that our transfiguration is at hand. The most crucial question we face in theological education is whether we can discern this new moment.





Willie James Jennings is Associate Professor of Systematic Theology and Africana Studies at Yale University Divinity School. Dr. Jennings teaches in the areas of theology, black church and Africana studies, as well as post-colonial and race theory. He is an author of numerous articles; his book, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (Yale University Press, 2011) was awarded by the American Academy of Religion for best book of the year. He just completed a commentary on the Book of Acts, which will be published by Westminster/John Knox.

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