

Karen-Marie Yust, Union Theological Seminary and Presbyterian School of Christian Education



*Karen-Marie Yust teaches Christian education at Union Theological Seminary/PSCE in Richmond, Virginia. Yust's work focuses on the spiritual formation of persons across the life span and in a variety of settings. Her major publications include *Attentive to God*, which proposes an alternative strategy for adult faith formation and leadership development; *Real Kids, Real Faith*, which opens a dialogue with parents about spirituality in the home; and an edited volume, *Nurturing Child and Adolescent Spirituality: Perspectives from the World's Religions*, which invites interreligious discourse on faith formation from birth to age 20. Her latest book, *Taught by God* (with Ron Anderson), explores the relationship between transformational learning theories and classical spiritual practices. She is ordained with dual standing in the UCC and Disciples traditions. Contact:*

This e-mail address is being protected from spambots. You need JavaScript enabled to view it
.

The languages of critical thinking and religious imagination run through various literatures of theological education. Often, critical thinking is associated with fields traditionally identified with theoretical analysis: biblical studies, systematic theology, ethics, and history. We view the tasks of exegesis, theological debate, cultural critique, values assessment, and historical interpretation as primarily rational operations, a parsing of concepts and their logical implications for religious communities. We presuppose that certain intellectual traits, such as an ability to clearly and precisely define and defend one's position, underlie work in these areas. Critical thinking is a guard against a religious life and leadership based on unfounded, untested, and blatantly biased ideas. It requires seminarians to pause, analyze, and evaluate their tradition and its claims.

The language of religious imagination appears most frequently within the disciplines associated with practical theology. The experiential orientation of coursework in homiletics, pastoral care, religious education, and liturgical studies often encourages creativity, intuitive connections, and effective engagement in the practice of ministry. We presume that these tasks require an unbridled mind that bypasses analytic categories in order to attune the heart to the needs of those one serves. The fruits of religious imagination are “vision” and “inspiration,” which serve as guards against a reduction of religious life and leadership to conformity with historic ideals and patterns.

Critical thinking and religious imagination both belong in theological education. Yet our bifurcated assignment of them to particular areas of study deepens the gulf between the so-called systematic and practical fields and exacerbates the gap seminarians experience between their work in the classroom and their ministries in congregations and communities. What theological education needs is a concept and practice of “critical imagination” that draws the primary approaches of the systematic and practical arenas into conversation. Without such conversation, theological educators and students will continue to struggle with the best construction of relationships between biblical exegesis and sermon illustrations, cultural criticism and educational events, eschatology and pastoral visitation, and historic creeds and liturgical practices.

John Eusden and John Westerhoff, in *Sensing Beauty: Aesthetics, the Human Spirit, and the Church* (1998), write:

All learning depends on the ability to image, to picture both accurately and imaginatively. We can deceive ourselves if we do not image accurately the way things appear, but we also need to be able to perceive what is not visible — to vision, to see, to picture with the imagination. All learning and growth depend on the combination of these abilities. . . . (83)

Obtaining an accurate picture of a tradition and the cultural contexts in which it has been and continues to be lived out is a prime task for critical thinking. Learning to perceive that which is as yet a dim reflection in the mirror of faith is an obvious task for religious imagination. But what if we approached both of these exercises with a pair of theological bifocals on, engaging in a critical reading of both traditional texts and visionary images and also casting our eyes upward to catch a glimpse of the undocumented aspects of history, the passion of a revered theologian, or the ambiguity of a familiar sacred text? That would be the work of critical imagination.

The authors of *Educating Clergy* (Foster, et. al., 2006) took several steps in this direction when they identified four pedagogies (interpretation, formation, contextualization, and performance) involved in the theological education of religious leaders. One might be tempted, based on

colloquial definitions, to categorize the pedagogies of interpretation and contextualization as essentially critical thinking approaches and those of formation and performance as prime venues for religious imagination. However, the case studies identified by the authors defy neat categories. The practices of a biblical scholar as well as two practical theologians exemplify pedagogies of formation. A homiletics professor stands beside professors of Talmudic studies and moral theology in the discussion of pedagogies of interpretation. A church historian and a liturgist provide cases for reflection on pedagogies of performance. The examples related to pedagogies of contextualization fall only on one side of the theoretical–practical divide, and two of those three cases come from the field of ethics, which frequently crosses over from theory into practice. The cases explored in *Educating Clergy* (Foster, et. al., 2006), then, strongly suggest the possibility of teaching practices in all theological disciplines that transgress the stereotypical boundaries of critical thinking and religious imagination.

However, an instructor’s decision to cultivate critical imagination by strategies that integrate critical thinking skills and imaginative exercises still leaves the matter of students’ openness to this approach undetermined. Seminarians frequently struggle to discern a meaningful connection between their theological studies and their spiritual lives precisely because they equate work in an academic program almost exclusively with critical thinking and personal spirituality with religious imagination. Even those practical theology courses that the academy equates more closely with religious imagination may appear to students as primarily theoretical disciplines when contrasted with the presumed freedom and creativity of personal prayer.

In my own teaching, I have decided to address this false division directly as a subject for student exploration. A required course in Christian spirituality challenges students to explore the idea and experience of theological education as a spiritual practice, rather than as the antithesis of spirituality. Students read an essay on Reformed spirituality, which highly commends the spiritual practice of study. They also read two essays related to the practice of hospitality, in which themes of “preparation” and “openness to the stranger” are prominent. Throughout the week of our exploration, they engage in intentional acts of hospitality to a variety of “others,” including the strangers who author their textbooks and whose ideas they may fear. During a plenary session, we practice *lectio divina* (holy reading) with a set of critical texts: a comment by T. Hartley Hall on learning as a means of responsible discipleship; a reflection by Simone Weil on the usefulness of school exercises for cultivating attentiveness in prayer; an observation by Douglas Steere on the significance of sustained attention; and a well-known excerpt from Karl Barth’s *Evangelical Theology* (1983), in which he declares, “Prayer without study would be empty. Study without prayer would be blind” (171).

In addition to listening for the text that piques their imagination in the first movements of *lectio*, students reflect communally on four questions in relation to the particular text that chose them and some other members of the class: 1) What does prayer have to do with our intellectual life?

2) How might the character of attention given to studies relate to the character of attention to God in prayer? 3) How might your reading of class texts in theology, Bible, history, and/or ethics invite you to pose new questions to God or move in sympathetic response to God? 4) What does it mean to speak of theological education as a spiritual discipline? They conclude their discussion and the lectio process with prayer for one another as they seek to live hospitably in a period of life dedicated to study and preparation for religious leadership.

I wish I could report that every student who spends this time pondering theological education as a spiritual discipline becomes eager to continue the process of forming a critical imagination, but the fruits of this work are mixed. For some students, the idea and practice of interweaving critical thinking and religious imagination offer an opportunity to pull disparate aspects of their lives together more effectively than they have in the past. They begin to dwell in seminary classrooms with their eyes and ears more open to the interplay between analytic theological exercises and playful theological experimentation. If they find few opportunities in their formal coursework for such dialogue, often they develop study and prayer habits that compensate for the missing elements. They may institute a regular practice of lectio with texts assigned for biblical exegesis or sing and pray their way through elements of a liturgy as they design an assigned worship service. They may wrestle cognitively with a class lecture on the doctrine of revelation and then sit in silence before God with mind empty and open to revelation. Each of these approaches cultivates a critical imagination through tandem attention to critical thinking and religious imagination.

For other students, the disparity they perceive between the affective and intellectual aspects of academic study and of spiritual experience is so great that the idea of theological education as a spiritual discipline is at best an unrealistic ideal and at worst an attempt to hoodwink them into appreciating the very activities that threaten their faith. As one student remarked, "It sounds good in theory, but that's not my experience of seminary!" Some skeptics can imagine limited interplay between critical thinking and religious imagination in ministry classes, but they would prefer that instructors spend more time on spiritual nurture and ministry skills and less time on analysis of arguments and ideas. These are the students who most need environments with strong orientations toward forming a critical imagination, for they cannot create such spaces alone. As theological educators rethink traditional divisions of pedagogy and academic identity, we redefine theological education for students suspicious of critical thinking and reinforce the efforts of students engaged in theological education as a spiritual discipline, cultivating both hearts and minds for religious leadership.

Bibliography

Barth, Karl. *Evangelical Theology: An Introduction*. Translated by Grover Foley. Eerdmans, William B. Publishing Company, 1983.

Eusden, John Dykstra, and John Westerhoff. *Sensing Beauty: Aesthetics, the Human Spirit, and the Church*. Pilgrim Press, 1998.

Foster, Charles, Lisa Dahill, Lawrence Golemon, and Barbara Wang Tolentino. *Educating Clergy: Teaching Practices and Pastoral Imagination*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006.