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I used to teach a course in critical thinking at Dominican University in northern California, where my students were introduced to the basic tenets of logic and rhetoric. I assumed that learning to map various truth claims, identify false arguments, and marshal persuasive ones would apply to any field of study or profession these students entered. While I continue to believe that, in time I realized that most fields of study follow their own disciplinary logic of what constitutes “critical thinking.” Literary critics in the English department had their own criteria, religious studies professors in the humanities had another, and practice-oriented fields like nursing still another. While many of these definitions converge around developing what Stephen Brookfield (1987) calls “reflective skepticism” about inherited knowledge, how a discipline uses the critical-reflective moment varies widely. Is critique the scalpel for a thorough deconstruction of inherited texts? Is it the prerequisite for a fresh reinterpretation and engagement with a tradition? Or, is it the basis of an informed intervention around an ethical or practice situation?

In the Carnegie Foundation study *Educating Clergy* (2006), we identified several marks of critical thinking in theological education. First, critical thinking is done in relation to a horizon of interpretation (religious tradition, sacred canon, or practice-context) that remains porous, changing, and adaptable. Second, critical thinking reframes linear views of time to bring past, present, and future into new patterns of creativity. Third, critical skepticism is accompanied by passionate engagement with a tradition. In other words, critical thinking is an essential component of a broader interpretive and ethical agenda in theological education. No longer the “queen” of the sciences, theology has adapted to various roles in the academy: from that of handmaiden to the transformative potential in other disciplines, to that of a leader in the formation of personal and professional identity and ethics, to that of a siren who lures other discourses toward their inherent crisis, in the hope of metanoia.

In this second issue of *Spotlight on Theological Education*, scholars from a range of institutions and traditions share their own frameworks and teaching strategies for fostering critical thinking. The authors represent Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish traditions, and they teach in

free-standing seminaries, rabbinical schools, university divinity schools, and undergraduate departments. Because theology is an advocacy-based, practice-oriented discipline — much like gender or culture studies — and because it is often taught in professional contexts of forming religious leaders, we have invited these authors to reflect on the use of critical thinking and praxis in their own teaching.

The first four essays explore critical thinking as an interpretive practice aimed at reconstructing existing theological traditions. Each author argues that existing traditions must be analyzed and reconstructed against a horizon of interpretation that is both vital and integrative. Capetz discusses the importance of subjecting one's own beliefs to a Socratic examination in relation to the long history of theological interpretation. Lehman examines how Talmudic dialectics generate a dialogical pedagogy around the social construction of knowledge. Yust describes the role of critical thinking in the formation of religious imagination and engagement. And Stassen builds historical and ethical criteria into a theological framework that he calls "incarnational trinitarianism."

The next four essays explore how theological studies adapt discipline-based definitions of critical thinking. Lakeland explains how social and critical theory reshape theology as a reflection on faith praxis in a given context. Fulkerson discusses how the teaching of ethnography reorients theological reflection toward the contextual, local, and practical. Ross relates how womanist and feminist critique helps deconstruct, broaden, and reinterpret existing theological practices and assumptions. And Coote employs communications theory to describe "biblical criticism" as a public argument about its ambiguities and provisional meanings.

The final four essays explore how critical thinking issues form and helps fund religious and professional practice. Morrill addresses the normative, pastoral, and ethical implications of a performative approach to teaching liturgical theology. Sanders talks about congregational life as a resource for ministers to learn ethical reflection and discernment. Click discusses how theory and practice enter a mutually critical and reconstructive relationship through effective field education. Finally, Cohen explains how sacred texts must be engaged critically around their original context and their history of interpretation in order to be "recontextualized" for one's spiritual and professional life.

I hope theological educators will find new conversation partners here around the shape and importance of critical thinking in their scholarship of teaching, and I hope others in the academy will come to appreciate the diverse and complex role that critical thinking takes on in theological studies.

Bibliography

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