

Who is my Neighbour? Theological Education in the Global Village of the 21st Century: Panel One Introduction

A running theme throughout the first panel of the second day is the struggle to retain the vitality of the presence of God in theological education today, in contexts that are, not only increasingly diverse, but are also – in some cases – increasingly dismissive or wary of the Christian tradition.

While Hill's keynote address suggests that this vitality of presence can be retained by adopting a liberal biblical theology, the first respondent, Roland De Vries, considers what is lost when we allow "the myriad of demands placed on theological education" to obscure this vital presence, the very thing that gives theological education its coherence in the first place.

The second respondent, Heather McCance, argues that an important part of overcoming this struggle lies in training students to form a theological imagination – "the capacity to grasp the presence of the holy in and through all things." Reminding us that this vital presence is what allows theology to reach into "the crevices (or, better, *fractures*) of life" that other disciplines tend to ignore, Cory Andrew Labrecque ends the panel by offering a series of reflections that highlight the ongoing value of theological education in the twenty-first century, even in spaces that might want to exclude it.

Keywords: theology of presence, theological education, theological bioethics, theological imagination

In the Interest of Theological Education

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The *Christian Oracle* was founded in 1884 as a magazine of the Disciples of Christ denomination in the United States of America. At the turn of the century, from the nineteenth to the twentieth, the magazine decided to give itself a new name. The first issue published in 1900 bore that new name: *The Christian Century*. Today, of course, it is a well-known publication that can be easily found within the mainline and progressive tradition of Christianity in the United States and to some extent in Canada.

We can well imagine what was intended by that new title. It was renamed under the assumption that the twentieth century would be “the Christian century.” The renaming was rooted in the publisher’s confidence in the continued growth and expansion of Christianity as this was expressed in the identity of the church in the United States and the expanding mission movement at the time.¹ The renaming was also rooted in the assumption that the church in the West would consolidate its position at the heart of the culture. It seems, in fact, that enlightenment confidence and historical progressivism could not be expressed any more clearly and unashamedly than it was in the renaming of a church magazine as *The Christian Century*. The apogee of Christendom, perhaps.²

Retrospectively, the publishers of the magazine may have been correct in a way that they did not intend or anticipate. With significant growth in Christianity in the global context, and with the concomitant shift of the geographic centre of Christianity from north to south, it did turn out, in some sense, that the twentieth century was the Christian century.³ Nevertheless, what the publishers of the *Christian Oracle/The Christian Century* imagined at the turn of the century turned out to be dramatically out of step with what unfolded.

The “Christian century” in North America, and particularly in Canada and Quebec, has turned out to be one of dramatic ecclesial decline.⁴ In some cases, there has been outright repudiation of Christianity and in many others, simply a slow slide into disinterest – accelerated most recently by the pandemic period

1. Mark Toulouse, writing in *The Christian Century* at the outset of the year 2000 (a century after the renaming), puts it like this: “At the turn of the century, Protestants in America were largely hopeful and optimistic. Culture and politics in America reflected the habits and routine of Protestant life in general. In the aftermath of the Spanish-American War in 1898, these Disciples believed America stood poised to play a significant role in the Christianization and elevation of the world.” See: “The Origins of the Christian Century, 1884–1914: A Climate of Optimism,” *The Christian Century*, January 26, 2000, <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/origins-of-the-christian-century-1884-1914>.

2. David Bosch offers a compelling account of this enlightenment confidence in his *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in the Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 280–291.

3. As Jenkins writes: “Over the last century, however, the center of gravity in the Christian world has shifted inexorably away from Europe, southward, to Africa and Latin America, and eastward, toward Asia. Today, the largest Christian communities on the planet are to be found in those regions. If we want to visualize a “typical” contemporary Christian, we should think of a woman living in a village in Nigeria, or in a Brazilian favela. In parts of Asia too, churches are growing rapidly, in numbers and self-confidence. As Kenyan scholar John Mbiti has observed, ‘the centers of the church’s universality [are] no longer in Geneva, Rome, Athens, Paris, London, New York, but Kinshasa, Buenos Aires, Addis Ababa and Manila.’” See: Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (Oxford University Press, 2011), 18.

4. For one simple expression of this, we note Michael Wood Daly’s remarks: “The Pew Research Centre reports that in 1986, more than four in ten Canadian adults aged 15 or older (43%) were attending religious services at least once a month. By 2010 that figure for Canadian adults had fallen 16 percentage points to 27%.” See his *God Doesn’t Live Here Anymore: Decline and Resilience in the Canadian Church* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2023), xvi.

of 2020–2022. Also, in most places, there has been a consolidation of the relegation of Christianity to the private and sacred side of those now very tired dualisms – private/public, sacred/secular. Today we continue to stumble through this era of ecclesial decline, wrestling with the task of theological education in a world that thinks the church is quaint at best. That we are seen as quaint was clearly expressed by Professor Tomoko Masuzawa in her Birks Lecture at McGill University in 2022. The lecture was entitled “Queen in the Attic: Theology and the University,” and Professor Masuzawa seemed simply bemused at the prospect that theology could have any place in the modern university, even if her more narrow argument was simply that theology has never had the place of prominence many have presumed.

That the *Christian Oracle* got it so wrong in the year 1900 (in retrospect, perhaps it would have been more faithful and helpful for the publication to have remained the *Christian Oracle*) is a reminder, among other things, that the church is singularly ill-equipped to anticipate what will unfold in the future. We are ill-equipped to anticipate where the twenty-first century is going, particularly post-pandemic. And, therefore, we are ill-equipped to anticipate, also, where the church is going. We could add, in a Kierkegaardian vein, that what has unfolded in the past provides no measure of what the future may hold – no measure of what God may do in that future or of who we or the church may become.⁵

Theological education is a work of the church, for the church, within the church – a work also undertaken at the point of intersection between God and the world that God has created and redeemed in Jesus Christ. To the extent that we cannot know what will unfold for the church in the coming years, let alone decades, theological education is similarly in a place of profound uncertainty and challenge. Anticipations and prognostications about how church and culture will develop in the coming period of time will be largely unhelpful in the context of theological education. (Never mind anticipations: We remain largely unaware, in the present moment, of the myriad and complex ways in which the present cultural context has enabled or sustained the church in its present form.)

Added to the uncertainty of our moment, and on quite a different note, is the fact that there is no end of proposals made for theological education today – no end of proposals as to the subjects it should address, the partners it should engage, the voices it should prioritize, the gaps to which it must attend, the claims it must qualify, the language it must abandon, and the list goes on. A failure to respond to these questions, proposals or doubts is invariably cast as a failure to meet the needs of the moment, a failure to address the future of the church, or a failure to be a sufficiently chastised and humbled body. This is to say nothing of the merits of any one of these proposals or questions – for now, it is helpful simply to name this reality.

But let me also name another dimension of the present question. And let me name it in a slightly embarrassing way – by quoting my own words. This will be doubly embarrassing; it must be admitted since the words of my own that I will quote are words I wrote on the social media platform Facebook. This is triply embarrassing because I have already quoted these words of my own during an opening chapel service of the Presbyterian College in September 2022.

5. As Climacus puts it in the *Postscript*: “Existence itself is a system – for God, but it cannot be a system for any existing spirit. System and conclusiveness correspond to each other, but existence is the very opposite [...]. [W]hen an existence is a thing of the past, it is indeed finished, it is indeed concluded, and to that extent is turned over to the systematic view. Quite so – but for whom? Whoever is himself existing cannot gain this conclusiveness outside of existence, a conclusiveness that corresponds to the eternity into which the past has entered.” See Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, vol. 1, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 118.

In something like a fit of pique, and in response to a myriad of apparently Christian articles and videos and other materials posted on social media, I recently wrote these words: “You’ve got to work for a Christianity that needs Jesus. Mostly Jesus is named or convenient or a bit of an embarrassment or an illustration or ignored and/or dead. Mostly, Christianity gets what it needs elsewhere.” It is also evident to me, at least, that one could easily swap out “Christianity” for “theological education” in this quotation of mine, as follows: “You’ve got to work for a theological education that needs Jesus. Mostly he’s named or convenient or a bit of an embarrassment or an illustration or ignored and/or dead. Mostly, theological education gets what it needs elsewhere.”

This is to say, in part, that theological education today is neither properly theological nor necessarily rooted in the living faith of the church – these two are, of course, closely related to each other. Theological reflection and theological education, with a nod to Karl Barth, is our wrestling with who God has been revealed to be, and our wrestling with who God is, in the light of God’s self-revelation in Jesus Christ. The starting point of theological reflection is the realization that God in Christ has taken on human life, has reconciled the human to God and humans to one another, and given the human over to the task of bearing witness. Such bearing witness takes more forms than we can yet, perhaps, imagine, yet it is always simultaneously a bearing witness both to the risen and ascended Jesus and to the form of life that he would and does sustain in the world and by the Spirit.

My point, of course, is that in today’s context, as we address the continuing decline of the church and as we face the myriad of demands placed on theological education, we are at profound risk of having no meaningful location from which to respond coherently and faithfully. Today, of course, we love to *bask* in the uncertainty of it all, to *elevate* doubt, and to *play* at the intersection of presence and absence, but it really does not take very long before all of that basking and elevating and playing hollows out everything, leaving us with nothing to say that is not already being said in the world around us. Leaving us at the mercy of ideological winds, blowing from left or right. This is, simply put, and simplistically expressed, because we are no longer spiritually or theologically preoccupied with the risen and ascended Lord. Our anthropological and ethical reflections have become our theological reflections.

In a brilliant little book published in 2022, *Reading Theology Wisely: A Practical Introduction*, Kent Eilers of Huntingdon University offers at least part of the answer to what I am wondering about here.⁶ In his chapter on theological vision, he speaks about the way that theological studies change a person – not simply through engagement with texts and ideas and context and colleagues and the world but through God’s engagement with us. We are changed by God. By way of appeal to both Catherine of Sienna and the later Calvin, Eilers writes: “The Living God of the gospel is not inert or passive but actively pursues the one who studies. God draws his students into his presence and toward their true selves. We might say that God is *interested* in the one who studies.”⁷

It is a question, of course, of the identity of this God – further specification of which is too uninteresting to too many in today’s church and in theological education. The God who is interested in the student of theology – and interested in the professor of theology for that matter – the God who would transform them in and for the world God loves, is none other than the God who draws near in Jesus Christ. God’s interest in us must be specified with reference to the one who was in very nature God but did not consider equality with God something to be grasped – who became human and took the form of a servant. Who humbled himself to death and through obedience has been vindicated in resurrection life. There is a

6. Kent Eilers, *Reading Theology Wisely: A Practical Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2022).

7. Eilers, *Reading*, 32.

transformative encounter with God that is possible, through text and narrative and argument and poetry and dialogue and community – and it is a transformative encounter with the God whose interest in us is expressed in the risen Jesus and in the Spirit that Jesus breathes for the formation of his people (to reference John’s version of Pentecost [John 20]).

There can be no theological reflection that neglects Jesus’ presence, no encounter with the scriptures that is not in some way attentive to him, no exploration of history that is not curious about his intentions, no wrestling with ideas that are not rooted in his identity, no engagement with a community that does not discern his presence, no growth in gifts and competencies that does not seek his leading and equipping. Attention to the risen Jesus is not merely a spiritual exercise safely relegated to the private, religious sphere on the east side of Montreal’s University Street (the theological colleges are on the east side, the university itself on the west side), but is at the heart of every question we wrestle with, every new orthodoxy or idolatry we perceive. At a more quotidian level, attention to the risen Jesus is in the middle of our reading of an article that keeps us up until 1:00 a.m. preparing for class, whether as instructors or students.

It is perhaps an old-fashioned plea that I am offering – let theological education in the twenty-first century attend to the one who gives theological education its coherence, who infuses it with hope, and whose interest in us means everything. Let this be so even on the west side of University Street, and especially in a chapel that the university has declared a mere *heritage* chapel – the space in which this paper was first presented. (The university renamed the chapel in this way, it is worth pointing out, to prevent the institution from having to provide also prayer space to Muslim students. Evidently, the risk of granting Christians a contemporary and faith-filled space would mean giving Muslim students a faith-filled prayer space as well, and “We can’t have that!”).⁸ Let the final word simply be that, notwithstanding the hesitation or resistance of the university, the risen Jesus may meet us here, interested in who we are and what we are saying.

8. The editors of this issue would like to clarify that the University determined that no faith should have a space of its own. The Birk’s Heritage Chapel, housed in the Birk’s building – which was originally built by the Birks family – was given to the then Faculty of Religious Studies, and therefore to the University. The donation of the building, however, had certain stipulations in terms of how the building was to be used. At one time, the former Dean of the Faculty of Religious Studies, Donna Runnells, tried to accommodate Muslim students by allowing them to use the Chapel as a prayer space; however, the Muslim students did not feel that the space was adequate, so a new space was given to them in the basement closer to the washroom to facilitate ablutions. The Chapel was never banned as a prayer space by the University. The Chapel is intended as a neutral space for all traditions and religions and continues to act as such.

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Who Do You Say That I Am? The Cultivation of Theological Imagination Through Theological Field Education

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The entire theological enterprise aims at an engagement with, if not an answer to, the question posed by Jesus of Nazareth to his disciples in the region of Caesarea Philippi: “Who do you say that I am?”¹ Whatever the discipline – be it biblical, systematics, or historical; whatever the methodology – be it anthropological, historical criticism, literary criticism or myriads of others – theology seeks an understanding of the nature of the divine.

This question, of course, was preceded by another: who do people say the Son of Man is? For students of theology, much of their time and energy is spent pursuing the answers to this first question. Whether they are learning the differences between the Jesus of the Synoptics and the Christ of the Johannine canon, or seeking to understand how historical contexts contributed to the Christologies of Thomas Aquinas and Jacqueline Grant, gaining an understanding of “who do [other] people say that I am?” is a necessary and entirely worthwhile enterprise.

While it is possible to come to an answer to Jesus’ question apart from the answers of others, to do so is not to study theology. When Simon Peter offered his answer to Jesus’ question – “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God!” – his response was shaped by the traditions and theological understandings of those around him and those who had come before. When “doing” theology, one must participate in a lived and deep engagement with what others have to say about the nature of the divine to come to one’s own conclusions on the topic.

Thus, theological education² seeks to form in students a theological imagination. Theological imagination is the capacity to see in the world not only what is accessible to the five senses but also that which is beyond all that is seen, heard, touched, felt and tasted, namely, the divine reality that is beyond human understanding. To frame their understanding of the nature of the world, those who rely solely on observable facts are not able to access dimensions of hope that are opened by theological imagination. As James Smith has suggested, the primary work of education is actually “the transforming of our imagination rather than the saturation of our intellect.”³

Contrary to ordinary fantasies, theological imagination demands that the imagine-er live within the products of that imagination. As the capacity to grasp the presence of the holy in and through all things grows as a result of engagement in theological study, the life of the imagine-er comes to be built progressively around the answer to Jesus’s question. Theological education is never simply a philosophical or intellectual pursuit. Sought with integrity, theological education changes lives. Theological education, perhaps unlike religious studies, carries implications for one’s personal faith and, by extension, the

1. See the following biblical passages: Matthew 16:13–16, Mark 8:27–29, and Luke 9:18–20.

2. While there are many possible definitions of theological education, the one offered by Daniel Aleshire may be helpful here: “The goal of theological education is a wisdom of God and the ways of God fashioned from intellectual, affective, and behavioral understanding and evidenced by spiritual and moral maturity, relationship integrity, knowledge of Scripture and tradition, and the capacity to exercise religious leadership.” See *Beyond Profession: The Next Future of Theological Education* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2021), 82.

3. James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 17.

communities in which one participates as a believer and potentially as a leader. “Because we don’t know exactly what the [church of] the future will be like, we need leaders who are able to think theologically in line with kingdom values and so are prepared to face any question and any circumstance.”⁴

In his keynote address, Dr. Robert Hill suggested a three-fold, one might even suggest a trinitarian, approach to the study of theology, in which categories of presence, freedom, and experience are brought to the forefront as categories that theological education should seek to pursue.

I wish to add another dimension to Dr. Hill’s suggested approach, that of the *practice* of ministry. In addition to the disciplines of systematics, history, ethics, and biblical studies, traditional theological education has also always included pastoral theological disciplines.

Theological field education is comprised of both supervised ministry experiences and the practice of theological reflection on those experiences. Most involved in theological education, students and instructors alike, expect the former; there is an understanding that field education will be a practicum, during which students will learn the “how-to” of ministry. Those in theological field education expect that students will be placed in a parish church or some other ministry context, and will learn how to lead worship, how to conduct a pastoral visit, and how to lead a Bible study group.

What is less well understood, however, is the critical role of theological reflection in theological field education.⁵ During theological reflection, the student engages with another to learn from lived experience. This reflection is not only, nor even primarily, about ministerial function, although certainly, a student who has made a mistake would seek to learn from it. Instead, theological education examines and analyzes a thick description of a ministry event/experience to reveal underlying layers of meaning. The exercise is reflexive in nature and requires that the event/experience is interrogated through the lenses of Christian Scripture and tradition, and that those Scriptures and traditions are interrogated by the ministry event/experience. There are many methodological approaches to theological reflection; sometimes it is undertaken with a mentor-supervisor, other times it is performed in a peer group setting, and sometimes with a professional field educator. Regardless of the method, the theological imagination begins to blossom genuinely when it is examined through the lens of embodied ministry experience.⁶

It has been said that “field education is the epistemological and hermeneutical epicentre of theological education.”⁷ Through the lived practice of ministry and the exercise of theological reflection, students are required to bring together all other elements of their study into their theological field education. It is from the practice of ministry and theological reflection that students seek to answer questions about meaningful problems and issues that lead them back to the texts and traditions found in the other disciplines. “Field education is certainly not the only thing, and it is not everything, but without it we risk students misunderstanding the rest [of the theological disciplines] and misleading people about what is truly important.”⁸

4. Emma Ineson, *Ambition: What Jesus Said About Success and Counting Stuff* (London: SPCK, 2019), 85.

5. For further conversation, see the various essays in Sung Hee Chang and Matthew Floding, eds., *Enlighten: Formational Learning in Theological Field Education* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2020).

6. One helpful definition of theological reflection, therefore, comes from William Pyle and Mary Alice Seals: “The process of examining the events of life through the lens of faith in order to integrate experience and faith.” See *Experiencing Ministry Supervision: A Field-Based Approach* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1995), 142.

7. Donald Payne, “Re-envision and Reinvent,” an address to the Biennial Consultation of the Association of Theological Field Education, January 26, 2023, Estes Park, CO.

8. Payne, “Re-envision and Reinvent.”

The Search for Meaning and the Symbolic Presence

Dr. Hill speaks of the need for presence as a core value in theological education. The practitioner of ministry will recall times when being present evoked and confirmed the presence of the holy – a presence that for others manifests in some of life’s most difficult times. The minister will understand, through the cultivation of theological imagination, that symbolic presence allows others to catch a glimpse of the nature of the divine in moments when a search for meaning becomes critical. The practitioner of ministry will recall times when being present evoked and confirmed the presence of the holy.

The minister might recall the family who stops by the church office on their way to the hospital but is otherwise completely unconnected to any faith community. Mom is dying. It is two days before Christmas. The doctors have said that there is nothing more to be done. One son wants to turn off the life support and let Mom die in peace. The other son believes that turning off the life support is tantamount to murder and cannot face taking responsibility for such action. This action could also lead to the possibility that Mom would pass away on Christmas Day. The family has come to the church unknowing what exactly they seek – guidance, wisdom, perhaps permission – but the minister understands that what is most important at this moment is being present, so that God’s presence might be known.

The minister might recall the phone call one evening. A core member of the faith community is alone in the emergency room of the local hospital. She is pregnant, but bleeding began that afternoon. She is alone because her husband has had to find childcare for their two other children before being able to join her, and she asks the minister to come. So, the minister is present as she waits for the test results. The minister is present when the ER doctor, with a horrible sense of “bedside manner,” returns and asks the member, “Are you sure you were pregnant?” The member has requested the minister’s presence in hopes of receiving support, prayer and possibly a miracle, and the minister is aware that being present at this time is crucial so that God’s presence might be known.

The minister might recall the funeral of a nineteen-year-old young man who died by suicide. The teen had not been part of the church community, but every summer had attended, and later as he matured into a young man joined, the staff at the summer camp run by the denomination. He had tried to hang himself but had been discovered before he died, so he lingered on life support for days before his parents had been told there was no hope. They were then told that their son’s organs could no longer be donated as he had remained on life support for too long. This discovery further added to their anguish as their son’s life could no longer save the lives of others. The funeral is held in the church building, and although it is a celebration of the young man’s life, it is mostly a gathering of people seeking an answer to the question of why. The minister knows that presence and being present at this moment is crucial so that God’s presence might be known.

Who do you say that I am? In moments of deep distress and pain, people are not immediately seeking meaning. However, meaning will certainly come and the minister who is trained and has a capacity for theological imagination will be equipped to help people through that process; in those moments where presence is not only a necessary response but a crucial one.

The Search for Freedom

Dr. Hill speaks of the value of freedom as core to the enterprise of theological education. I believe that to exercise one’s theological imagination through one’s lived faith, rather than to adhere to a fixed

black-and-white moral code, is to be free. Moreover, to equip others with that same capacity for theological imagination is to invite them likewise to be free.

This freedom can be expressed as a choice that is nurtured, one that brings new meaning to one's life. The minister might recall the baptism of a three-year-old boy. At birth, the child was taken from his mother by the Children's Aid Society (CAS) and placed into foster care. The foster parents who received the child had cared for many other children over the years, and they regularly brought the children in their care to worship and church community events. The church loved these children and prayed for God's blessing upon them as they returned to their birth families or were adopted into new families. But this boy, the foster parents had decided, they would keep. They began the adoption process to make the boy their son and once that was legally as true as it already was in their hearts, they spoke to the minister about having him baptized. That Sunday morning, the minister, when the time came, asked the boy, "Do you wish to be baptized?" And the three-year-old boy, who had now been part of this church community for his whole life and beloved by all present, stood up on the pew, jumped up in the air, hands raised above his head, and shouted as loudly as he could, "YES!" And the minister rejoiced in his freedom.

This freedom can also be expressed as a coming together, one that seeks to unite. The minister might recall the protests and marches, standing vigil at the provincial legislature, carrying signs through the streets, and addressing crowds of people seeking to make their voices heard. The minister recalls the interfaith actions, the ecumenical actions, and the actions without any explicit faith component. The minister recalls the power of the unity, of the coming together of people from different walks of life who all sought to make the world a more just place, despite their differences. And the minister rejoiced in their freedom.

This freedom can also be expressed as determination, the strength one finds to change. The minister might recall the man who came to the church office after being released from prison. There is a halfway house for those leaving the prison system up the hill from the church, and the man with only the clothes on his back chose to walk into the church. He told the minister his story – a life of poverty, childhood abuse, and addiction. The barroom fight had been the third strike on his record, which meant that he had been in jail for three years. He was determined to change his life, that things would be different this time, determined not to contact the "friends" who had been enabling the addiction, and determined to start a new life. He had a phone number for someone who said they would give the man a job when he got out. The man just needed a little cash for the bus fare to the town where he was going to build a new life. The minister expected to see resignation on the man's face but instead, he saw hope. The minister rejoiced in the man's freedom.

Who do you say that I am? The cultivation of theological imagination in those who will be leaders in faith communities allows them the freedom to follow, to shape their own lives, and the capacity to equip others in those communities to do the same.

The Role of Experience

Finally, Dr. Hill speaks of the critical role of experience in the enterprise of theological education. The practitioner of ministry will know without any doubt that this last element is indeed an essential one.

This experience comes in many different forms. The minister might recall the liturgical theology class they took, the writings of Dix and Kavanagh, as they place the host into each set of outstretched hands and wonder what holy things those hands will accomplish in the coming week. The minister might recall the writings of Gutiérrez and Cone, as the members of their faith community come forward to read the

Pentecost story, one verse at a time, in the languages with which they grew up; as they read from tattered Bibles that belonged to parents and grandparents, and feel goosebumps raised as the Spirit's presence is known. The minister might recall that sermon wherein, after years of studying homiletics and writing and practicing, their own authentic preaching voice was finally born.⁹

The cultivation of theological imagination transforms every lived experience of the theology student into an opportunity for theological reflection. From this reflection, the minister daily and hourly confronts, engages, and lives the question Jesus posed to his followers. Who do you say that I am?

9. While clearly students engaged in theological field education will not have access to all the real-life ministry experiences presented in this paper, they will experience some of these and bring to them the work of theological reflection. These are offered to illustrate the intersections of reflective practice that are core to the nature of theological field education.

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Theology in the 21st Century: (Re)shaping Conversations

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The Rev. Dr. Robert Hill’s insightful reflection brings us to the heart, I think, of theological education or at least of that which attracted me to theology and its sibling, the study of religion, in the first place: an open, engaging, and constructive conversation about what we call “the big questions” that have everything to do, as Hill mentions, with identity, history, and mystery. These are the questions that prompt an exploration of who we are as finite, vulnerable, embodied beings in relationship to other finite, vulnerable, embodied beings in community, contemplating God and our fleeting place in the created world, wrestling in the ostensible ordinariness of the day-to-day with what to believe it all means.

I think that we – perhaps especially those of us in Quebec – forget that, worldwide, more than eight in ten people identify with a religious group.¹ In some places (such as the public university), theology lurks as “a fraternal shadow [...], an absent presence in many of the questions we ask, and the answers we give.”² In others, it is a voice to be harkened, having a significant impact on conversations (even policy-related conversations) at local, state, national, and international levels about health care, education, human rights, climate change, and everything in between. The number of talks that I have been invited to give as of late, in both Canada and the US, on theology and artificial intelligence, theology and “companion and social robots” for older persons, theology and transhumanism, theology and medical aid in dying, and theology and the ecological crisis might boggle the mind of those who consider the study of God to be antiquated; but it makes all the sense in the world to me that scholars of theology and religion are being called upon to contribute actively to these discussions on the cusp of innovation. Constructive engagement is at the core of theology, which is woven into our social and cultural fabric; theology is everyone’s “business,” as it were. It is no wonder that John Wesley thought it a worthy pursuit to become *homo unius libri* (“a man of one book”) if, indeed, the *liber* in question was one that explored, in some way, the big questions, as Scripture does.

The historian Jonathan Sheehan, a professor at the University of California Berkley where he directs the Berkeley Center for the Study of Religion, puts it this way:

In every corner of our public world, we find people arguing about, mobilizing, and developing politics around things *theological*. Theology is as much part of the world we share as race, sexuality, money, art, and literature – if we aren’t studying it in the public universities, then we are ignoring a mountain in the middle of our political and cultural landscape. And I’d argue that the public university is in a unique position to transform our by-now predictable yet intractable conflicts about religion and secular life.³

It seems that many of these big questions – Who am I? Why am I here? What am I supposed to be doing? – gain more of our attention as we, or those we love, approach the end of life. Lydia Dugdale – a physician, ethicist, and director of the Center for Clinical Medical Ethics at Columbia University – wrote a wonderful book, called *The Lost Art of Dying*, in which she recounts a time when a patient, in her office for an annual exam, seemed particularly flustered. “I just had my seventieth birthday,” she blurted out, “*Seventy!* For the first time, I realized that I am closer to death than not. And I have no idea what I believe. I mean, I was brought up Methodist, but I

1. Forum on Religion & Public Life, Pew Research Center, “The Global Religious Landscape,” December 18, 2012, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2012/12/18/global-religious-landscape-exec/>.

2. Jonathan Sheehan, “Why We Should Teach Theology in the Public University,” *Religion Dispatches*, May 9, 2016, <https://religiondispatches.org/why-we-should-teach-theology-in-the-public-university/>.

3. Sheehan, “Why We Should Teach Theology in the Public University,” italics mine.

left the church years ago. Do I believe in life after death? I don't know!"⁴ There it is, theology, lurking just out of sight, until something stirs it up to the surface.⁵

People around Dugdale's patient were talking about end-of life issues outright and in the open, issues which she had not paid much heed to before, only to note that said issues were increasingly relevant as the reality of dying suddenly grew visible on the horizon. Theology has been a forum for the exploration of these meaning-of-life, existential, spiritual questions for centuries, but our world distracts us from reflecting on these questions, pushing them to the margins, making it harder to find a space in which we can feel free and comfortable talking about them seriously and intelligently without fear of judgement or ridicule. My own move from the study of medicine to the study of theology-religion-bioethics was very much the result of my search for said forum, for an intellectual environment that was attentive to the signs of *the* times and that brought insight to help me read, and navigate, the signs of *my own* times.⁶

Both Robert Hill and Amy-Jill Levine remind us that biblical theology, a careful and critical reflection on the sacred texts, is as pertinent and important as ever. It is true that some may discount the Scripture without a second thought, unconvinced that it has anything useful to say to people of reason in the age of science and technology. But biblical theologians study these ancient texts with rigour; their skill is reading beyond the words, understanding the important influences of history, genre, language, culture, gender, power dynamics, and context on what is written and what is being said between the lines. They mull over questions of authenticity, authorship, meaning, the challenge of translation, and the complex art and science of interpretation. Are these not skills that we need still now, especially in the era of "fake news," at a time when we rely heavily on the media – sometimes without an ounce of scrutiny – not only for information about the world, but for information that will shape how we choose to be in the world?

As a professor of theological bioethics, I teach about how the Abrahamic religions (with a focus on the Christian tradition) think about ethical issues in medicine, environment, and biotechnology. My work on current and emerging ethical issues constantly engages with major theological concepts and themes. In reflecting on ethical questions raised by the latest developments in science and biotechnology, I make use of theological resources, some of them centuries-old, which a number of people may dismiss off the bat as hardly being applicable in our day. For example, in my teaching and writing on accompanying the dying, I make reference to the Christian *Ars Moriendi*, or the art of dying tradition, captured in text some six hundred years ago on the heels of the Great Plague that decimated Europe, parts of Africa, and Asia.⁷ The church's concerns at that time were about the distribution of limited resources and personnel, service and ministry at the risk of contagion and death, how to be present at the bedside of the suffering and dying, the good of the collective versus the freedom of individuals, and so on; concerns that are hardly outdated. We are asking very similar questions, now centuries later with the rise of COVID-19, and so I look for wisdom in conversations past. The field of theological ethics – that draws on a myriad of Christian sources to discern what kind of persons we ought to be, what kind of virtues we ought to cultivate, and what kind of actions we ought to take – is very much all about this; many of us (and not solely theologians or theological ethicists) are interested in these questions.

Lisa Sowle Cahill suggests that "a distinctive contribution of theology [...] can be to challenge exclusionary systems of access to social and material goods under the aegis of 'love of neighbor,' 'self-sacrifice,'

4. L. S. Dugdale, *The Lost Art of Dying: Reviving Forgotten Wisdom* (New York: HarperOne, 2020), 137.

5. Sheehan, "Why We Should Teach Theology in the Public University."

6. Cory Andrew Labrecque, "Healing, Stitching, and Presence," *Life and Death Matters*, February 3, 2023, <https://lifeanddeathmatters.ca/healing-stitching-and-presence/>.

7. See, for instance: Cory Andrew Labrecque, "Restez ici et veillez avec moi : une alliance de présence à l'autre," *Spiritualité-santé*, December 1, 2020, <https://www.chudequebec.ca/a-propos-de-nous/publications/revues-en-ligne/spiritualite-sante/dossiers/le-proche-aidant/restez-ici-et-veillez-avec-moi-une-alliance-de-p.aspx>.

or ‘the preferential option for the poor.’”⁸ In the health care context, this is made evident in a theological bioethics that “tends to prioritize distributive justice and social solidarity”⁹ and does not hesitate to ask questions such as: what is justice when there is one ventilator, but five patients who need it? What is justice when hospitals are overcrowded and there are whisperings about diverting resources to younger, more promising “cases”? What was justice or, maybe, what theology was in place (or was not in place) as colonialism, racism, sexism, classism, and other forms of discrimination and othering swept the lands as they continue to do? We can talk at length here about the rise and relevance of many different theologies in context – including feminist, womanist, disability, African, and Asian theologies, for instance – which not only shape the way we think about theology and the “big questions,” but how we do theology in the twenty-first century.

Hill’s reference to the big questions makes me think about the major concepts of theological bioethics. I call to mind here one in particular: human dignity. Although it is frequently invoked in both secular and theological bioethics, this is often done without giving much pause to reflect on what exactly is meant by it. I bring my comments to a close with a quick story related to this concept of dignity tied to our conversation about theological education today.

Some time ago, a few years into my appointment as a professor at the Center for Ethics at Emory University in Atlanta, I received a call from a reporter who was writing for a widely circulated newspaper in the US. They wanted to discuss the case of Brittany Maynard: a twenty-nine-year-old American woman who had been diagnosed with terminal brain cancer and who, after being told that she would inevitably be facing unbearable suffering as her condition worsened, chose to end her life by assisted death in Oregon on November 1, 2014. The reporter, on the phone, began: “are you the Catholic bioethics guy?” I replied, taken aback somewhat, “I am that guy, I think.” And then she asked, “do you know about the Maynard case?” I assured them that I did. She continued with the haste of an impending deadline, “I have just one question for you: could you tell me why the Catholic Church is against dying with dignity?”

My answer must have come as a shock: “The Church is not against dying with dignity. In fact, I think we could argue that the Church has been one of the world’s greatest champions of dying with dignity.” There was silence on the line. And then, with some reluctance, the reporter responded with, “I thought the Catholic Church taught *against* euthanasia.” “Oh, it does,” I confirmed, “but that was not your question.” There was another pause. I thought it cruel to let her linger in confusion, so I jumped right in: “the Church has a different vision than a good part of our society when it comes to what is meant by dignity.”

I went on to explain – perhaps to the disdain of the reporter – that Catholic theology teaches that dignity is inherent, sealed on all humans – individually and as a collective – by virtue of their being created in God’s image, ipso facto – no matter their social status, the condition of their health, or their ethic or lack thereof.¹⁰ Being in the divine image¹¹ is not contingent on the possession of particular attributes (reason, rulership, righteousness,

8. Lisa Sowle Cahill, *Theological Bioethics: Participation, Justice, Change* (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2005), 51.

9. Cahill, *Theological Bioethics*, 42.

10. Kilner argues that sin damages people, not God’s image. He says, “if people *were* God’s image, then by damaging people, sin would plausibly damage God’s image. However, if people are created *in* (i.e., according to the standard of) God’s image, there is no damage done to the standard just because people are later damaged.” See Kilner, “The Image of God, the Need for God, and Bioethics,” 265, italics mine. On this point, see also: Mellon, “John Kilner’s Understanding of the *Imago Dei* and the Ethical Treatment of Persons with Disabilities,” 290–293.

11. For centuries, theologians and philosophers have meditated on the meaning of the *imago Dei* (Gen. 1:26–28). The literature on this is extensive and while I cannot, by any stretch of the imagination, do justice in this short reflection to the rich (and not always convergent) scholarship (biblical, patristic, medieval, Thomistic, and so forth) on the image of God, it is important to note that this concept has gained a certain prominence in Christian bioethical discourse. For insightful discussions on the significance of the *imago Dei* for bioethics, especially regarding the link between this concept and human dignity, I recommend: Mark J. Cherry, “Created in the Image of God: Bioethical Implications of the *Imago Dei*,” *Christian Bioethics* 23, n. 3 (2017): 219–233; Mary Jo Iozzio, “Radical Dependence and the *Imago Dei*: Bioethical Implications of Access to

etc.), which would inevitably admit degrees or variations of the *imago Dei* from one human to the next.¹² It is the person in his or her wholeness (a composite of body and soul) and in his or her createdness who is in the image of God; there are no gradations in this image, as Martin Luther King, Jr. once reminded us.¹³ However, what seems to be more commonplace in our world is, in fact, a linking of a person's worth to particular attributes, operating on the premise that dignity is lost when certain functions are lost. That is, if your ability to speak, to deliberate, to remember, or to go about your day-to-day activity autonomously are on the decline (because of, say, illness), then you are in danger of losing your dignity.

On the contrary, the Church's social teaching reminds us that in our deepest vulnerability – that is, when we are the most *woundable* – human dignity not only remains ever intact, it demands protection and support. The universality of our wound-ability, as it were, calls for a compassion that is far-reaching and never selective or conditional. “So,” I concluded, “we are looking at different definitions here.”

The reporter was grateful, I think, for the clarification; it was not, she admitted, the “sin, damnation, and hell” kind of answer that she was expecting. And while the wheels were turning in the reporter's head, I had hoped that some of this theological anthropology would have made it into the article that afternoon. It did not, of course. Alas, at least the headline did not read “confused Christian bioethicist has no idea what he is talking about.”

Theology reaches into the crevices (or, better, *fractures*) of life, where so many other disciplines stop short. It is not shy to talk about love – when others scoff at the concept as being unworthy of serious academic inquiry. It does not hesitate to put human vulnerability at the center of discussion and to draw out when people – of faith or not – have taken part in the *vulnerabilizing* of others. It does not dodge delicate or difficult questions about mortality, suffering, illness or about subjects that we would be more comfortable setting aside until we have no choice but to face them head-on because of a dying loved one or a sudden diagnosis. Theology does not retreat from discussions about God (a name we dare not speak of in the secular forum lest we be branded as irrational or arational), the sacred, the need for meaning and purpose, caregiving and hospitality as sacred ministries, hope as a virtue, stewardship as a model for living gently upon the earth rather than a vision of dominion that amounts to despotism, or progress less as that which advances our mastery over the material world and more as that which contributes to solidarity writ large. Theology is not reluctant to use a language and refer to concepts that we are often hesitant to employ in the secular setting lest we be disqualified from sitting at the table with other disciplines because our sort of reason does not quite fit the mould.

This said, theology is challenged, in this century as in years past, to make its language and concepts accessible to those who do not (or choose not to) partake in God-talk. Again, and this cannot be overstated, the study of theology – surely in the university – must also make room for critical analysis and constructive engagement; in identifying when, how, and where theological motivations have resulted in actions, on the ground, that blatantly go against the vision – informing much of Christian theology – that recognizes all human beings to be made in the very image and likeness of God.

On this, I give the last word here to Jonathan Sheehan, who says that “[i]n terms of religion (and much else), we live in a world that rewards those who shout the loudest. New atheists shout at the devout, and the devout

Healthcare for People with Disabilities,” *Christian Bioethics* 23, n. 3 (2017): 234–260; John F. Kilner, “The Image of God, the Need for God, and Bioethics,” *Christian Bioethics* 23, n. 3 (2017): 261–282; Brad F. Mellon, “John Kilner's Understanding of the *Imago Dei* and the Ethical Treatment of Persons with Disabilities,” *Christian Bioethics* 23, n. 3 (2017): 283–298; Bryan C. Pilkington, “Putting Image into Practice: *Imago Dei*, Dignity, and their Bioethical Import,” *Christian Bioethics* 23, n. 3 (2017): 299–316; Andrew Lustig, “The Image of God and Human Dignity: A Complex Conversation,” *Christian Bioethics* 23, n. 3 (2017): 317–334. See also: International Theological Commission, “Communion and Stewardship: Human Persons Created in the Image of God,” 2004, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20040723_communion-stewardship_en.html.

12. Kilner, “The Image of God, the Need for God, and Bioethics,” 262–263.

13. Kilner, “The Image of God, the Need for God, and Bioethics,” 262–267. See also: International Theological Commission, “Communion and Stewardship: Human Persons Created in the Image of God,” n. 9.

shout back, and the result is mostly noise. The university is one of the few places where we seek to create something different, namely, both opportunities for critique and spaces for response, both settings for arguments and the cultivation of the sympathy that makes arguments worth having in the first place. People often bemoan the apparent irrelevance of the university—here is an opportunity to help reshape a conversation that really matters.”¹⁴

And it is a conversation that matters to many if not all. It is, perhaps, not all that surprising that, during the pandemic, a number of theological learning establishments across North America – including my own Faculty – reported an increase in enrollment,¹⁵ especially in programs concerning spiritual caregiving. People were experiencing and witnessing things on the ground that encouraged a revisiting of the “big questions,” and not a few turned to theology for guidance. Yes, even in the age of science and technology.

14. Sheehan, “Why We Should Teach Theology in the Public University.”

15. Rabia Gursay, “Theological Seminaries See Enrollment Rise During the Pandemic,” *Washington Post*, December 3, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/religion/2021/12/03/theological-seminaries-enrollment-covid/>.

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