

## Introduction

*Tina Houston-Armstrong, David J. Downs, and Amos Yong*

It is now a common trope to note that the landscape of theological education has undergone dramatic shifts in recent years. Seminaries and Christian colleges in the twenty-first century are grappling with challenges raised by cultural changes, shifting demographics, globalization, the politics of identity, financial limitations, new modes of online teaching, and missional questions, among others, to say nothing of the tidal wave of uncertainty that all institutions of higher learning will face in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet these challenges, and others not listed, present opportunities for seminaries and Christian colleges to reflect carefully not only on what they are teaching and how they teach it (as well as how to fund this teaching) but also on how students are formed by and through their learning.

To think about formation in the context of higher education in general and of theological education more particularly is of course not surprising. To be sure, post-secondary education has long been an arena for the formation of the life of the mind. The standard model bequeathed by modernity is the professor – one who professes, note – as the so-called “talking head,” a depositor of facts and information in the malleable brains of students who voraciously devour such intellectual data. Content is dispersed and knowledge is expanded, first generally at the undergraduate level where there is learning in the sciences and the humanities as well as in the student’s major field of study, and then, for those who pursue further study, at the graduate level where there is deeper comprehension opened up through disciplinary inquiry. Student minds are at the very least

“enlarged,” metaphorically speaking, although appropriately so as we mentally picture the in/formative potencies of the professorial lecture.

In the late or post-modern milieu, the “talking head” is perhaps less prevalent at least in some circles (especially in the so-called “flipped classroom” in online platforms) although the professor or instructor facilitates “conversation,” which is itself a process that can be understood as central to intellectual formation. While the emphasis now is less on knowledge acquisition (although that obviously continues to happen), it is also clear that minds are formed at least in two interrelated ways: first, that students are invited not merely to receive but also to process what they are given, whether through mini-lectures, readings, or other content media, which is the prerequisite to feeding-back into the discussion, and second, through this process of growth in verbalization and articulative capacity that provides the evidence (so our assessment tools confirm) that learning is occurring, there is reciprocal and interactive dialogue between teachers and students, and between students themselves, that reinforces learning. What is distinct in this more dialogical endeavor is that in its ideal expressions, learning is occurring in both or multiple directions since all conversation partners in principle are able to gain from the exchange. Teachers are here given another venue for embodying the commitment to life-long learning and now through the practice of their craft even as they welcome students into the community of mutual or co-learning wherein the intellectual life is continually deepened, developed, and extended.

As theological educators – which is shorthand in the context of Fuller Seminary’s multi-school framework for the theological, missiological, and psychological combined – the formational work that we do is also no less intellectual. The gospel writer records Jesus saying to his followers, “you will know the

truth, and the truth will make you free” (John 8:32),<sup>1</sup> so that at the least, theological instruction conveys and elaborates on such alethic notions. On the other hand, this same writer also indicated that such truthful knowledge is relationally mediated, pneumatically (he writes) through the divine wind or breath: “When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth” (John 16:13a). Here the knowledge imparted by Jesus the sage—the “talking head,” to make the connections to the above explicit—is at least complemented by the more dynamic Spirit-led process. There is a mutuality to the life of the mind in this divine-human interaction even if the metaphor breaks down in that the Spirit cannot be said to be a co-learner in the same way as the human counterpart.

Yet even if post-secondary educational formation remains irreducibly intellectual, the relational character of conversational dialogue highlights also that the cognitive is not and can never be merely cerebral. Dialogue, in other words, is not merely about content, even if such is included; rather, conversation depends on relational capacities and, more to the point, on the skills and competencies that enable interchanges—of ideas surely but also of feelings, hopes, needs, and even wants—that cannot be circumscribed by the intellect. From this perspective, then, formation in the undergraduate and the graduate classroom must also be about practice, not just how we are transformed in our heads, but how we are shaped and equipped with our hands, so to speak. The former ideational or intellectual sphere, we now realize more clearly than ever, is intertwined with the latter performative or practical dimension. The exchange of ideas in the dialogical event is most invigorating and palpable—formative, to be exact—when the conversation partners are skilled in the practice of relating to one another in more engaging ways rather

---

<sup>1</sup> All Scripture citations are from the NRSV unless otherwise noted.

than only conceptually or linguistically.

The formation of heads and hands, then, has to be more clearly in sight when we think about our work as educators. Of course, what immediately comes to mind in the higher educational enterprise is the formation of professionals, whether nurses, doctors, lawyers, counselors, and the like. Here we understand that education enables doing, not necessarily the working with hands in the literal sense—although that is surely true for nurses and doctors, for instance—but the work that requires the application of ideas and theories in the real world, which are the skills and competencies lawyers and counselors (for instance) have to acquire and hone in ways differentiated to their work. Now there may have been a time when such professional work was compartmentalized as being derivative from their foundational concepts or underlying ideas and, especially in the modernist frame, subordinated in importance simply because of the axiological presupposition at least among some that theory precedes practice. Our late or post-modern situation, however, more clearly recognizes that theory actually emerges from practice and goes back to inform practice so that at best, both are part of the hermeneutical circle. There is a fundamental sense, arguably—and here no less from the perspective of developmental psychology—in which the mind is dependent on the hands more so than the other way around. The point, then, is that formation is also about practice in general, surely including the various kinds of more specific practices that inform professional work in various social directions, but no less practice that can also be understood as the other side of—never divorceable from—theory.

As theological (and missiological and psychological) educators, we can follow out the threads of how intellectual and practical formation are interrelated. The life of the mind is interrelated with the work of the hands at least in the sense that knowledge of the truth is never merely for its own sake but for

being set free, as already indicated. Knowing in this theological sense, then, has a teleological direction, so that mere theological learning (intellectualism, or knowing *about* the divine) must open up to something like theological practice (perhaps wisdom, or knowing and loving God) that moves us along life's journey. More particularly, however, theological, missiological, and psychological education also has its practice or professional component: the formation of preachers, pastors/clergy, mission-workers, therapists, and the like. Again, in a former (modernist) era, these expressions were relegated to the realm of practical theology allegedly as a byproduct of the theoretical fields of biblical, historical, and theological studies; and yet again, in the current scene, there is a greater appreciation for the back-and-forth dialogue and mutually informing character of these undertakings. Theological education that does not form practitioners is increasingly dispensable, surely not worth the price of admission. Put another way: theological education that is most powerfully formative of the intellect is also that which inspires action, empowers the hands, and equips for practice that engages the needs and hurts of the real world.

We now need to close the loop, however, in that we must make clear that the formation of heads and hands involves a depth dimension that we can name as the heart. We don't need or want to become mushy so let us put aside any understanding of this notion as referring to the sentimental side of the human. Rather, to expand on the preceding discussion, we are considering here the fully personal aspect of educational formation. If the head is manifest in the words that are part of the dialogue and the hands are the expression of interlocutors as embodied creatures, then the heart focuses on the persons who are at the conversational table. The fully personal in any dialogical encounter brings into the exchange not just abstract ideas and performative or practical skills but tangible loves, concrete desires, and aspirational hopes, and all of these are present if only

implicitly. Intellectual formation, then, not only goes hand-in-hand (pun intended) with practical formation but both are presumably embodied or expressed most fully in and through whole persons.

In the course of undergraduate studies, this aspect of what we are calling heart formation has in general been lodged in what has long been named as the core curriculum. With the humanities at the center (at least historically), this dimension of collegiate formation sought to nurture the critical and moral thinking capacities that shaped the character of student souls. The goal was the infusion of various dispositions and virtues that shape and empower citizens for social participation and responsibility. More recently, then, this combination of intellectual-practical-character formation has been understood more holistically: the formation of whole persons. Such nomenclature is especially prevalent among Christian colleges and universities, so that what happens in the classroom is now situated within, rather than abstracted from, what happens in the chapel, the dorm room, or the athletic event, among other sites. Yes, minds and hands are surely being formed, but members of a whole person rather than on their own.

And whole persons, we know, are shaped in relationship to others not just within their educational institutions of choice but also via the many complex networks outside. For seminarians like in our institutional case, there are of course at the first level communities of various sorts: families, churches/congregations, employers, and other relational communities. Each of these are informed by other voluntary associations: neighborhood, civic, organizational, and so on. All of these are situated within wider local, state, national, transnational, and electronic domains, each layered over by social, economic, political, and related dynamics, and further shaped by cultural, racial, and ethnic factors. Our loves, desires, hopes, and anxieties are forged out of the fluid intersection of these milieus. Here we name the breadth dimensions of our vocational efforts that touch the depths of our hearts, so that formation of whole persons is more effective when

attentive to and engaged with the many levels of student contextual rootedness, exploration, and movements.

As theological, missiological, and psychological educators, then, we can make explicit how these various perspectives are part and parcel of the formational task. Psychologically, our formation as whole persons cannot be less than an interdisciplinary venture since we cannot be whole unless we understand and learn to live integratively. Missiologically and theologically, our formation cannot be any less than for the purposes of discipleship: the capacity to love God and neighbor fully – the former driven by our devotion to the one who matters most and the latter unveiled in our vocational embrace of others, not least in the unfolding of our various professions but as emergent from out of our being called by God to do so. The formation of heads, hands, and hearts, then, is inextricably interwoven. Intellectual inquiry, driven by our curiosity and wonderment at the divine, will never be exhausted, and such is the nature of the life of the mind theologically refracted; yet practical inquiry, motivated by the continuous call of our neighbor, will also continue to require our urgent attention, and such is the nature of the life of discipleship understood as vocationally and missiologically reflected, even as personal transformation, inherent in our nature as created in the *imago Dei*, will be part of our longing and yearning. Any theological formation inattentive to this heart dimension will inevitably be the worse for it.

## **Overview of the Volume**

The essays in the pages to come not only delve deeper into many of the themes mentioned above but also open up other trajectories of inquiry both implicit in the preceding but also quite distinct on their own terms. We have collected them in three parts: the biblical, the theological, and the psychological. The last consists of contributions from our School of Psychology faculty

while the first can be seen as part of the commitment to Scripture that is central to our mission as a seminary rooted in the historic practices of the Christian church. The middle section includes a range of considerations that are loosely categorized as theological, each unfolding considerations of formation in and from various contextual perspectives.

The first part of the book leads off with John Goldingay's "Formation and Vocation in the Scriptures." How do the Scriptures help us in our understanding and practice regarding vocation, our Old Testament colleague asks? His response considers the following: how the Scriptures themselves speak about vocation or calling, how contemporary understanding compares with the thinking in the Scriptures—how it is both broader and narrower—and how the Scriptures might thus be a resource to us in thinking about and responding to our being called by God.

Kirsteen Kim's "Mission and Discipleship: Putting Matthew's Gospel Back Together," follows. Missiologists (and Kim is no exception) not only realize that mission is the mother of theology (as Martin Kähler famously put it over a century ago) but also know that Scripture establishes the basis for missiologically-minded theology and theologically-funded missiology. Proceeding in part from these assumptions, this chapter considers how the commission to make disciples in Matthew's Gospel shows that discipleship is not primarily about personal development but about participation in God's mission to transform the world and work toward a new multicultural community. Three key statements on mission and evangelism, *The Cape Town Commitment*, *Together towards Life*, and *Evangelii Gaudium* are discussed in this direction.<sup>2</sup> Individually and together, these demonstrate a new integration of mission and discipleship, and are suggestive for how contemporary world

---

<sup>2</sup> See chapter 2 for the full bibliographic information.

mission perspectives have significant implications for vocational formation in seminary contexts and in Christian higher education.

As both a doctoral student in New Testament studies and one who has worked with the Seminary's Office of Vocation and Formation for a few years, W. Ryan Gutierrez, *"Called to a Life of Faithful Agility: The Practice of Learning to Love in 1 Corinthians and Beyond,"* emerges from this nexus. Recognizing that rapid technological innovation and economic disruptions have forced institutions of higher education to re-examine critically the role knowledge plays in how their students are formed to address challenges created by a rapidly changing world, he observes that such developments raise a theological question: what kind of Christian formation is required to enable students to mobilize their academic learning to meet the unexpected challenges that await them and their communities after graduation? Using Paul's discussion of eating practices in 1 Corinthians 8:1-11:1 and looking at a current curricular program at Fuller based around practices, Gutierrez argues that formation produced by a socially embedded way of knowing develops the capacity to meet these unknown challenges in ways that are faithful and agile. What is envisioned, then, as the goal of a theologically reflective and socially embedded way of knowing is a faithful agility that enables students to adapt to disruptions in ways that align with the truth and power of the gospel.

Part two of our book provides various contextual perspectives on formation and vocation in theological education broadly considered. We open with Hak Joon Lee writing on "Formation and Vocation in Ethical Perspective." As a theological ethicist, Lee proposes a covenantal basis of vocation with a focus on its moral aspect and claims that a moral dimension is critical for any idea of vocation, and a covenantal approach addresses this dimension, effectively countervailing the current individualistic and existentialized cultural view of vocation today. In particular, he examines how the biblical idea of covenant can guide the

vocational formation of especially (but not only) young people in such a way that their sense of identity is clarified, their virtue formation is facilitated, and their sense of public responsibility is both awakened and deepened.

Public theologian Sebastian Kim follows with his chapter, “Formation Towards a Community of Credibility: Reflections from the Korean Protestant Church.” His considerations are based on the assumption that one of the important aspects of formation for Christian ministry is credibility in the eyes of God, the Christian community, and the wider society. Kim thus examines the credibility gap of the Christian community in two recent cases in Korean Protestant churches and, by employing Martin Marty’s conception of the “public church,” suggests an agenda for Christian formation in Korean theological education. While this chapter discusses specifically the Korean Protestant churches, the lessons about formation toward a community of credibility apply to theological education in general, including in the West.

Systematic and comparative theologian Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen next unfolds a vision of “Vocation and Formation for a Multireligious World.” If among the many and diverse challenges most Christian ministers face in today’s secular and religiously pluralistic world, few, if any, are more complex and complicated than interfaith issues, then training for a vocation in a multireligious world calls for both attitudinal shaping and material teaching of other living faiths’ spiritualities, teachings, and practices. Ideally, he urges, this kind of training takes place in an interdisciplinary educational setting in which theology, religious studies, and cultural disciplines collaborate. If Fuller might be one of few theological seminaries in the world—with three faculties—which could meet this challenge, then Kärkkäinen seeks to vision and outline such a project.

Leadership professor Scott Cormode argues that “The Vocation of All Christians” should include the work of all followers of Christ. His re-formulation derives from Martin

Luther's insight that all Christians are called by God to love their neighbor wherever they are planted and from the biblical metaphor of ambassador in 2 Corinthians 5. Christians ought to understand that "My vocation proceeds from the people entrusted to my care." The structure of the essay revolves around a series of questions that any Christian can answer in order to clarify and hone his or her own calling in the world.

Tod Bolsinger and Amy Drennan's collaborative "Formation and Vocation (Online) for Leadership" takes off from the reality that all institutions of higher education, theological or otherwise, have suddenly found themselves with the appearance of the coronavirus in 2020: operating remotely, virtually, and fully online! Their work, however, builds on research in this area that has been growing for a few decades. Although focusing on leadership development programs and how recent studies decry their ineffectiveness and log similar complaints often heard by pastors and Christian leaders about the ineffectiveness of seminary education for the actual work of congregational leadership, their response is relevant for theological education more generally. Bolsinger and Drennan explore how online education and formation can enable reconception of leadership formation as a more effective reflective process of both embedded and disrupted contextual formation.

The final collection of essays focuses on the psychological aspects of vocation and formation. With "Spiritual Formation: Our Spiritual Journey to Clinical Practice," Alexis D. Abernethy begins by describing a mutual process of formation that a small group of students and a faculty member engage in over a ten-week period. The aim of the course, *Spiritual Formation and Integrative Practice Group*, is to provide an experiential formation group that will offer a small group learning experience for students to deepen their reflection on their experience of God's presence in their lives and integrative practice. Key factors that contribute to this transformational opportunity include artistic

expression, individual and group sharing of positive and more challenging experiences with God, and modeling of an integrative life and practice by the professor. Although our biblical scholars and theologians also provide personal accounts, Abernethy's chapter, like many of her fellow psychologists, deploys such skillfully to invite readers into the issues.

Pamela Ebstyne King's "Vocation as Becoming: *Telos*, Thriving, and Joy" lifts up the teleological thread: vocation is an ongoing response to God's grace and call to becoming. As such, vocation is more about joy than a job or profession. Joy entails and invites us to pursue those things that matter most. Theological considerations of human telos suggest that God's purpose for humankind as image bearers is to thrive as we become more like Christ, as our unique selves, and as active participants in God's ongoing work in the world. King presents psychological understandings of thriving that inform how we can grow as we answer God's call and pursue purpose as God's beloved.

Co-authored by Brad D. Strawn (in part from out of his own ministry experiences as a trained psychologist) and one of his doctoral students, Jonathan Doctorian, "The Unknown Vocational Motivations of Seminary Students," unpack the sense that while seminarians may feel a "call" to pursue a vocation in ministry, this "call" will not be enough to help them traverse the challenges of a ministerial vocation. They detail how essential it is that seminarians know themselves and their unconscious vocational motivations in order to face the potential challenges that may ensue. Their chapter explores some of the underlying and unknown psychological motivations of seminarians.

Stephen W. Simpson also provides a personal (counseling) perspective in his "Formation, Deep and Wide." Whereas most professions rely on mastering a specific skill set, existing research is in general agreement that the personal qualities of the therapist have a significant impact on success in mental health treatment. Becoming an effective psychotherapist requires relational,

emotional, and spiritual formation. The suffering and human frailty that arise in psychotherapy have deep theological and spiritual implications. The therapist's vocational journey includes a unique combination of intellectual knowledge, technical skill, emotional growth, and spiritual reflection. Simpson's essay invites readers on this sojourn.

Last but not least, "Embracing Difference: The Instructors Role in Forming Cultural Sensitivity," is presented by Tina Houston-Armstrong from out of her teaching experience. One of the foundational tenants in becoming a health service psychologist is a commitment to cultural and individual differences and diversity. As the American Psychological Association has noted: *"Psychologists, regardless of ethnic/racial background, are [to be] aware of how their own cultural background/experiences, attitudes, values, and biases influence psychological processes."* Houston-Armstrong suggests that embracing such a perspective on difference and diversity allows for both the therapist and the client to grow and develop, and works to assist emerging professionals in thinking about how their faith is contextualized and how that impacts their view of the world in which they live and work. As fostering a student's development in this area requires an instructor who is willing to engage this journey also, she provides an overview of a signature course assignment and offers a personal reflection on the instructor's preparation process, to assist instructors who may want to replicate a similar assignment. An assignment that supports students in exploring their own theological and socio-cultural worldview is also included, with the aim of developing tools to provide services to people different from themselves.

Welcome to the essays.