

# **The Future has Arrived: Changing Theological Education in a Changed World**

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*The future has arrived.* It's an illogical statement, I know. The future is always arriving, so it can never be portrayed in the past tense. Most times, the future arrives as the present passes, like the sun rising in the morning after it sets in the evening. This time, it doesn't seem to be happening that way. It is as if the future has moved faster than the present and the sun has risen in the east before it has set in the west. The future has plopped itself full blown into the present; it has arrived.

Thomas Friedman has told us that the earth has gotten flat; the financial markets have told us that, in a globalized economy, national debt in Greece can depress seminary endowments in North America; the demographers have told us that racial/ethnic composition of the North American population has changed more quickly than anticipated; and flattened mountains in Appalachia and oily waters in the Gulf of Mexico tell us that our fossil-fueled past cannot extend far into the future.

The change has been rapid and ubiquitous, and ATS schools have been affected by both the scope and the pace. Twenty years ago, theological schools were barely on the Internet; now thousands of students are completing courses online. Schools spent significant amounts of money to wire their campuses just as wireless technology made it possible to do the same thing at significantly less expense. More has changed than technology. Religion has changed, higher education has changed, and students have changed. The Association and its member schools have some catching up to do. *The future has arrived.*

What are the responses that will make theological schools as effective in the future as they have been in the past? Because change has been so massive, theological schools need to focus their attention on the areas where their efforts can have greatest impact: North American religion and the practices of theological education. Religion is awash with fundamental change, but it remains to be seen how faithfully theological schools will change.

This Biennial Meeting is designed differently than most, and this is the only plenary address. I apologize that I'm the speaker, but I have to be here and make the same salary whether I speak or not. I may not be good, but I'm the cheapest option available. The other plenary sessions of this meeting are devoted to the business of the Association and Commission and sorting through proposed changes to accrediting standards and procedures, considering revised policy statements, and discussing the ways in which theological degrees should be changed. As we begin, I want to share my perceptions about how religion has changed and speculate about responses that ATS schools should consider making.

## **The changed world of North American religion**

Religion has changed in North America, if you haven't noticed.

### ***Denominations***

Denominations have changed and are changing. The reunion of two U.S. Presbyterian church bodies that formed the Presbyterian Church USA is twenty-five years old, and in little more than two decades, membership is down by one-third. The Assemblies of God, on the other hand, has grown each of the past nineteen years, and now equals the PCUSA in size. The Unitarian Universalist Association has charted membership gains during the past two decades, while the U.S. membership of the Church of the Nazarene<sup>1</sup> has been relatively flat. Evangelical Lutheran Church in America membership has declined gradually for many of the years following the merger that formed it,<sup>2</sup> and membership in the massive Southern Baptist Convention<sup>3</sup> plateaued during this past decade and registered slight declines in the most recent years. The United Church of Canada has lost almost half of its membership since its mid-twentieth century peak. Even stable numbers mask considerable internal change. For example, while Roman Catholics have constituted about 25 percent of the American population across these two decades, almost 25 percent of adults who grew up Roman Catholic no longer consider themselves to be Catholic. (No Protestant denomination has as high a retention rate as the Roman Catholics.) The percentage of the population that is Roman Catholic has been stable because of the large number of immigrants.<sup>4</sup> Some denominations are stronger, most are weaker, and while each has a loyal constituency, it does not appear that denominations will be the structural center of North American Christianity in the future that they have been in the past.

### ***Christian identities***

As denominations have weakened, the Christian identities that denominations cultivated have lessened. People seem less aware of what it means to be a Baptist or a Methodist or a Lutheran. Presbyterians and Methodists move easily from a congregation of one denomination to a congregation of the other, as if Arminian and Calvinist positions are best resolved on the basis of which congregation has the better youth ministry program. The Pew U.S. Religious Landscape researchers conclude that "44 percent of adults have either switched religious affiliation, moved from being unaffiliated with any religion to being affiliated with a particular faith, or dropped any connection to a specific religious tradition altogether."<sup>5</sup> This denomination switching has resulted in an altered sense of Christian identity and religious practices. At my United Methodist congregation in Pittsburgh, I have seen people cross themselves at the communion rail and occasionally genuflect as they enter the pew. I'm no expert on Methodist piety, but I don't think these practices are taught on confirmation retreats. Patterns of piety and religious practice have theological homes that shape a way of being Christian, but as practices are separated from those homes and blended with other practices, the theological coherence of any particular Christian identity is strained.

### ***Religious participation***

Religious participation in North America has changed. The percentage of residents of Quebec who attend church regularly has moved from higher than the Canadian average in the 1950s to lower than the national average now. The numbers are stunning—from more than 80 percent frequent attendees in the 1950s to far less than 20 percent in the past decade.<sup>6</sup> People are attending church differently. Reginald Bibby's data on Canadian church attendance suggest that regular attendees are attending less regularly, and Mark Chaves data on attendance in the United States indicate that an ever increasing percentage of attendees are going to larger membership congregations.<sup>7</sup> The fastest growing religious preference for

adults in the United States is “no religious preference.” Pew Forum’s recent study of “millennials” indicates that these young adults are not only less likely to be religiously affiliated than any other age cohort in the United States, but they also are less religiously active than their parents or grandparents were at the same age.<sup>8</sup> Folks in North America are still going to church—the United States and Canada have the highest estimated percentage of church attenders of any Western democracy—but they are going to church differently than they used to go.

### *Christianity as a world religion*

Christianity as a world religion has been changing. More than 20 percent of all Christians now live in Sub-Saharan Africa; Christianity in that region grew an amazing seventy-fold during the twentieth century, to almost 500 million adherents.<sup>9</sup> Because Christianity embeds itself in the culture in which it is located, Christian practices are reinvented and beliefs take on differing hues as Christianity finds new cultural homes. The center of gravity of worldwide Christianity has moved. This will no doubt be the century of the first non-European pope and the one in which North American Christianity will be more influenced by Christianity in other parts of the world than worldwide Christianity will be influenced by North America. The growing influence of the Global South is already affecting the Anglican Communion and U.S.-based church bodies that have significant membership outside the United States. These influences will only grow as the century matures.

### *Religious pluralism*

North America is increasingly experiencing the influence, interaction, and presence of the religions of the world. At the 1990 Montreal meeting, the ATS Task Force on Globalization presented its first report on the project that the Association launched in the late 1980s. In addition to noting the economic and political issues of a globalized world, the project encouraged theological schools to pay more attention to the world as a whole, to worldwide Christianity, and to the presence of the world’s other religions. The processes of globalization have brought multiple religions into proximity with each other, and religious proximity can be stormy. Religion has been the basis for prejudice and violence, and in a globalized world, religious tensions threaten not only peace but also the fundamental opportunity for human flourishing. The presence of the world’s religions in North America is still limited (about 6 percent of the U.S. population identifies with a religious tradition other than Christianity), but in cultures that value individual expression and do not legally privilege any one religion, the presence of the world’s religions takes on an importance disproportionate to its percentage.

### *Impact on theological education*

This catalog of changes is more illustrative than exhaustive, but each has an impact on theological education. The change in denominational strength and capacity has a direct effect on the majority of ATS schools that were founded by denominations to serve particular needs and structures. What is the mission of the denominational seminary related to a denomination that is losing members and institutional capacity? As Christian identity becomes more plastic and amorphous, what is the role of the seminary to clarify what it means to be Christian? Changing patterns of church attendance affect leadership needs in parishes and congregations. They contribute to the increase in bivocational and alternatively credentialed clergy, as some congregations become smaller, and to the increase of lay professional staff members, as other congregations grow larger. What do these changes mean for degree programs and educational practices? The shifting center of gravity in global Christianity invites North American theological schools both to consider their contribution to a wider world and to embrace the intellectual contributions that the world brings to them. Changed religious preferences call theological schools to reassess their work. How do Christians relate to the growing multifaith character of North

America, and what is their role when an increasing percentage of the population shares no religious preference?

### **Changing theological schools**

Of course, ATS schools have not been living some Rip Van Winkle existence in the middle of so much change. Since the last Biennial Meeting in Montreal, ATS membership has grown from 205 to 252 schools. Most of these additional members are new schools, and new schools typically reflect responses to growing or changed religious communities. Enrollment has grown from slightly more than 56,000 students in 1990 to about 75,000 students this past fall. Perhaps more instructive than the increase in the number of students is the increasingly different forms of theological education in which they were enrolled: far more extension programs than was the case in 1990, a growing number of online courses (which did not exist at all twenty years ago), and a far wider array of degree programs. New degree programs and delivery patterns are institutional responses to changed religious realities and altered patterns of church-related work. Slightly more than 13 percent of all students in 1990 were persons of color, and this past fall more than 24 percent of total enrollment—by the most conservative computation—were persons of color. The percentage of female students has grown less, from 29 percent to 35 percent—but the combined effect is telling: women and students of color account for all the growth in enrollment since 1990. The faculty has changed as well. The percentage of female faculty members has grown from 15 percent in 1990 to 24 percent, and the percentage of faculty of color has increased from 8 percent to 15 percent. Changes in the composition of the faculties and student bodies reflect the changing composition of the population and the shifting roles of women in religious leadership.

All told, this is a great deal of change. ATS schools have not been asleep at the switch, but the world around them has changed faster and perhaps more pervasively than the schools have. Schools have adapted practices and modified structures, but ultimately, realities beyond the schools will require even more fundamental shifts in institutional form and educational character.

### **Possible responses to a changed world**

In the context of these and other changes in the religious reality, how should theological schools respond? I want to offer several proposals, but ultimately, the task of deciding what should be done will be with individual schools. The response must be at least twofold, in my opinion.

#### ***Adapting the gold standard***

The first broad response is to do better what theological schools have already been doing well. The pattern of theological education developed during the twentieth century, conducted as graduate, professional education in schools that were invented for this kind of education, has demonstrated enduring value. It has served Unitarian Universalists and Roman Catholics, Pentecostals and Presbyterians, Baptists and Episcopalians, Nazarenes and Disciples, Lutherans and Orthodox, and it has served them all very well. It brings students together with each other and talented faculty in courses where wisdom has been shared and learning has taken root. It has effectively supported the leadership needs of churches and made it possible for faculty to conduct research that has expanded the understanding of old traditions and generated the perspective of new insights. This pattern of theological education has become a gold standard, and the first response to the changed realities of North American religion is to continue it, with critical attention to how it should adapt to changed religious realities. I

think that some of this attention should be given to the curriculum and perceptions about sources of wisdom for theological scholarship.

*Multifaith understanding and Christian witness.* While much of the curriculum should remain as it is, at least two areas related to the new religious realities in North America need attention. The first is the growing number of persons affiliated with religions other than Christianity, and the second is the fastest growing religious preference in the United States: “no religious preference.”

Ministers and priests will need more sensitivity to the nature of Christian ministry in an increasingly multifaith context. Christian pastors, whose job it is to stand in a pulpit and tell people that Christianity has a vision of the world that is worth their devotion and commitment, need to be able to call Christians to faith in ways that do not alienate them from their neighbors of other faiths or nurture religious prejudices. Pastors need to be able to work with families in which more than one faith is represented, to support the common good with leaders of other faiths, and to deal seriously with the questions their own parishioners have about the religious “other.” These pastoral skills will be increasingly important and require more curricular attention.

Ministerial leaders will need to be equally sensitive to what it means to minister in a culture where the fastest growing religious preference is “none.” In the past, Christian pastors have been able to do their work in a North American culture that was broadly Christian. Every indication points to a future in which that will no longer be the case. For an ever expanding percentage of the population, the Christian story will be a revelation, not a recitation. Pastors will need to learn to relate the Christian faith to people who have little religious interest and no religious commitment. What curricular support will prepare future leaders to serve as advocates for faith in a religiously neutral culture rather than as chaplains of a faith that was privileged by culture?

These two needs do not travel together easily. Multifaith understanding is not typically coupled with Christian witness. Pastoral work has never been easy, but it is going to become more complex, more demanding, more in need of what theological schools can teach. The gold standard needs to be progressive, not static.

*Pastoral wisdom.* In addition to this curricular attention, theological scholarship needs to give increased attention to the sources of wisdom that pastors and church professionals can bring to theological education. As seminaries have leaned into their academic identity, they have increasingly presumed that wisdom accrues from advanced degrees, from research and writing, and from participating in the technical work of academic guilds. Certainly it does. But there are other sources of wisdom, equally intellectually lively and viable, that accrue from the discipline of preparing sermons every week, figuring out what it takes to make congregations work well, engaging a faith community in witness in word and deed, and being with people in the middle of unspeakable pain and sadness. This is hard work, and if pastors do it well, they develop a wisdom that can’t be gained from books and academic presentations at AAR or SBL.

The practice of Christian congregations is changing rapidly, and the wisdom about that practice is not in the seminary. Pastors are on the front lines of change; they and their congregations are inventing new paradigms of congregational ministry that reflect new learning; and they are dealing concretely with many of the issues that will form the next theory of practice. Theological schools simply cannot neglect this source of wisdom. They need to engage talented pastors differently than they have in the past. Fifty years ago, the perception of faculties of ATS member schools was that serious, advanced scholarship was

underrepresented—too many pastors and not enough academics. Now, ATS schools have significant academic talent and it is pastoral talent that might be underrepresented. The gold standard for theological education must include both the wisdom that accrues from academic work and the wisdom that emerges only from pastoral work.

### *A big tent of educational practices*

The second broad response is to diversify educational practice to meet an increasing diversity of educational need. Since ATS became an accrediting agency in the 1930s, it has erected a big tent for theological education. Big tents require a large fabric, and for ATS, this has been a common understanding of graduate, professional education for ministry. A big tent also requires tall poles along the center line to give it height. In recent history, these tall poles have been exemplar institutions that embody the gold standard patterns of theological education. It also needs poles around the circumference that maximize the space, and these poles have been schools that have expanded the common educational model to diverse ecclesial communities. This big tent has served denominational Christianity particularly well by providing a standardized model for theological education. The problem for the single standard model is that denominational Christianity is weakening and other patterns of Christian organizing are in the ascendancy. In a recent interview, Michael Lindsay compared bureaucratic denominations to Sears, and some newer forms of Christian expression to eBay.<sup>10</sup> Both retailers were invented to sell products, but one is proving to be more successful than the other. Sears has depended on standardization of products, while eBay depends on diversity of products without standardization. A single pattern for theological education fit bureaucratic denominations very well, but if the future is going to look more like eBay than Sears, then theological education will serve the Christian project best if it provides a diversity of educational strategies.

ATS schools need to consider erecting a new kind of big tent. In this big tent, the large fabric will be an understanding of theological education that serves an even broader range of ministry settings—full and part-time leaders, leaders who are as likely to be noncongregation-based as they are based in congregations, persons preparing for ministry, and persons already in ministry. The tall poles on the center line will be the current model of theological education, and the shorter poles at the circumference will consist of diverse educational models. I realize that metaphors are risky, and that extended metaphors are dangerous. You may have concluded that I have transformed theological education into a circus, but I will stand my ground. Diversity of educational practices in the future will be as crucial as uniformity of educational practice was in the past. Diversity of practice, however, is not intrinsically valuable. It becomes valuable only as it serves the multiple needs of a changed religious reality, reflects passionate and thoughtful educational practice, and has intellectual substance. Theological education must have more diverse models, but these models will have limited value if they do not reflect the equivalent of a gold standard for each. What forms might this diversity take?

*Baccalaureate theological education.* One form might be the development of more theological education at the baccalaureate level. One president of an ATS member school who was struggling with the uniform postbaccalaureate pattern of theological education asked me to explain the difference between a baccalaureate-level funeral and a graduate-level funeral. His point, of course, was that many of the central tasks of pastoral ministry can be learned effectively at more than one educational level. Theological education practices could be broadened to include levels of education other than graduate, professional education, and in so doing, might be strengthened, rather than weakened. Religious communities need more educated leaders who are from recent immigrant communities and some racial/ethnic groups that have a low percentage of baccalaureate degree holders. As compensation in

many small and mid-sized congregations continues to be more stressed, the church may need more leaders who have been theologically educated at the baccalaureate or even associate degree level. What would constitute a gold standard for theological education at this level? How might ATS schools partner with undergraduate institutions to provide ministerial education at this level?

*Alternatively credentialed clergy.* Another form will be theological education for alternatively credentialed clergy. While Protestantism has always had a large percentage of smaller membership congregations, the percentage of part-time pastors has emerged as a growth industry in mainline Protestantism across the past two decades. Lutherans, Disciples of Christ, United Church of Christ, Presbyterians, American Baptists, and the United Church have all been busy inventing patterns of education for alternatively credentialed clergy, and most of these programs have limited requirements and expectations. While the educational preparation needs to be different for regularly and alternatively credentialed clergy, much of the work of ministry does not vary by congregational size. The family whose child is dying of cancer who attend a small membership church needs skillful pastoral support from an alternatively credentialed pastor just as a family with the same trauma in a larger congregation served by a seminary graduate. Part-time pastors cannot leave their primary jobs for three years to study at seminary and then return to a part-time church, but they need more than the current alternative educational models are providing. They need educational programs that prepare them for the complex tasks of ministry, but designed in accessible and thoughtful ways. What would the gold standard of theological education be for part-time pastoral leaders?

*On-the-job education.* Theological schools need to give increased attention to the character of education that supports persons who are already engaged in ministry. Seminaries have built educational systems primarily on the professional school model in which students go to school, get a degree, and then begin work in ministry. For most professions, this is a mandatory model. Not so with ministry. An increasing number of persons who have already begun ministry need theological education to advance their ministerial work. They are lay ecclesial ministers already at work in large Roman Catholic parishes or program staff members of larger membership Protestant congregations. According to the National Congregations Study, while 90 percent of pastors of congregations with at least 200 regular attendees have a seminary education, only 29 percent of education and youth ministers have attended seminary, and 18 percent of music ministers.<sup>11</sup> Theological schools need to develop effective patterns of postemployment education that enhance ministerial work already underway. These patterns of education will recognize that the congregation or ministry context is the primary community of formation and will use that community in developing educational practices. It should assume that these students already have ministerial skills and that they are as capable learners as on-campus degree students. What kind of good education practices would form the gold standard for on-the-job theological education?

*Lay education.* Still another needed form of theological education is for persons who want to enrich their understanding of faith but do not want to pursue vocational ministry or advanced higher education degrees. The deepest layer of identity for most ATS schools is the education of clergy. Most ATS schools have expanded that identity to educate lay persons who want to work vocationally in ministry. Both of these groups are well served by this professional educational model. Many schools also offer academic degrees. The educational aim of professional degree programs is to equip students to exercise religious leadership. The educational aim of an academic degree program is a more thorough and comprehensive understanding of an area of study, often in preparation for advanced study. The students whose educational needs are *not* well met by either of these kinds of degrees are lay persons who are seriously interested in learning their faith but do not want to work in ministry vocationally and do not want a specialized academic degree. Many schools squeeze these students into one of these two programs, but

the educational design does not address their real educational motivation. The church is in as much need of educated lay persons as it is educated ministers, and theological schools are among the best environments to provide this kind of education. What would gold standard theological education look like for lay persons who are often better educated in almost every other area of their lives than in their faith?

### *Tapping a broad array of resources*

If ATS schools are to build a big tent of diverse educational practices, they will need to tap a broader array of educational resources.

*Higher education conventions.* First, theological schools will need to broaden their use of higher education conventions. North American higher education has a variety of educational practices, from community colleges to research universities, but ATS schools have tended to model their work more after research universities than the others. This model includes conventions of full-time faculty with research expectations, tenure, a nine-month academic year, and periodic time away from instructional responsibilities for reading and research. These are all good educational practices, but as a set, they are very expensive. Some sectors in higher education have never had these practices, and other significant sectors are shifting their practices. Some theological schools may need to pay more attention to these other higher education conventions for financial and missional reasons. While it would be tragic if no ATS schools functioned like research universities, it might also be tragic if others do not develop very different educational practices.

*Other theological education providers.* Second, theological schools will need to pay closer attention to the educational integrity of other theological education providers. The uniformity of the postbaccalaureate model has led to the perception that theological education doesn't begin until the student enrolls in a graduate professional degree program. That has also led to a tendency to devalue education in other educational settings. In the future, ATS schools will need to reassess this perspective. While schools have learned to value clinical pastoral education, many have tended to undervalue what can be learned in field education, have assigned too little credit for learning in context, and have not required as much contextual learning as ministerial practice requires. Social work education is similar to professional ministry education in its overall educational goals, but it differs in that carefully supervised field work is the organizing educational principle. While most students do not enter a theological school with any baccalaureate education in relevant fields, some do, but their background does not count for much. The current standards do not permit articulation of any undergraduate work into an ATS approved degree, except by examination. (I know that many schools have creatively skirted this accrediting limitation, but I'll save commentary on that practice for another time.) Would it be advisable to develop articulation procedures whereby appropriate learning at the undergraduate level could be counted in a graduate degree, as is the case with graduate, professional social work or engineering degrees? Many Latino/a students have attended Bible institutes or other church-based programs and learned a great deal about the Hispanic church and ministry in Spanish speaking communities. Is there a better way for ATS schools to honor this experience and the learning that it has generated? The answer to these questions is bound to the ability of ATS accredited schools to understand the broader ecology of theological education providers and determine how they participate in that ecology, instead of over against it.

*Technology.* Third, theological schools need to embrace the full range of educational opportunities that technology makes possible. Information technology is changing higher education and scholarly work. While online resources for theological education are less abundant than they are for medical or legal

education, these resources are increasing. Google Books, for example, has digitized most of the holdings of the Andover Harvard Library, one of the premier theological libraries in the country. After the legal issues are resolved, texts that used to be available only at great effort can be downloaded to your Kindle. The American Theological Library Association has digitized the entire series of a core set of theology journals. You can read every issue that ATS has ever published of *Theological Education* online, if you want, although I don't know of anyone who has ever wanted to. As the literature that theological study requires becomes more available digitally and pedagogical capacity of online courses increases, technology can help theological schools meet many of the needs that the current residential model of education leaves wanting. All educational strategies function in service to educational goals, and technology might advance the effectiveness of theological study, not retard it.

## Conclusion

The future has arrived and brought a multitude of changes in cultural norms, educational models, international tensions, business practices, and religious presence. Theological schools need to change to meet the needs of changed and changing religion, and there are a few things worth remembering along the way.

The first is that Christianity in North America is changed but not diminished. Loving neighbor as self is still noble moral guidance. Doing "good" remains crucial to the common good. The Christian message has not lost its power to heal human brokenness or guide the human family in life-giving ways. The Christian message has not been rendered powerless; its promise has not been eviscerated.

The second is that theological schools are needed as much in this changed world, if not more, as they have ever been. As denominational structures weaken, as the organizational center of North American Christianity shifts, theological schools will be called both to educate students for service in a newly ordered religious landscape and to help the church remember its past and envision its future. Religion has an increasing number of organizations, but organizations have a tendency to come and go. It needs institutions that can dig in for the long term and provide the setting where, in Hugh Hecló's words, "the shadows from both past and future lengthen into the present."<sup>12</sup> A historical moment when the sun appears to be rising in the east before it has set in the west can be dizzying, but a place where the shadows from the past and future lengthen into the present can be energizing. Religious leaders will need all the education they can get, and religion will need institutional homes where its vision can be sustained and renewed over time.

The third is that there will be adequate resources to accomplish what needs to be done. It has been a brutal two years for most ATS schools economically, and many are not out of the woods yet. I know that some of you were putting a price tag on everything that I have said this afternoon and wondering how any of it could be done. The economic model that many schools have used in the past will not carry them into the future, and we are not sure what the new model will be. What I am sure of is that providence and hard work and frugal budgets and deep commitments and creative strategies will provide the resources to do what most needs to be done.

Most of the executive leadership of North American theological education is in this room. You have the gift of the future and the opportunity of a lifetime. *The future has arrived*, and it is full of promise.

## ENDNOTES

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