

Piety and Plurality inspires future-oriented conversation



Eleven veteran theological educators gathered in Pittsburgh for a day of conversation around Glenn Miller's recent book, *Piety and Plurality: Theological Education since 1960*, the third and final volume in Miller's trilogy. Having lived the history that the book chronicles, these experts brought their personal perspectives to the table and observed broad patterns of change and lessons learned during the past 50 years. Using Miller's book as a touchstone, the group also speculated about likely future directions in theological education.

In the 1970s, Robert Lynn, then president of Auburn Theological Seminary, noted that Protestant theological education needed a comprehensive history. Work began on the Auburn History Project when Glenn Miller was a PhD student at Union Theological Seminary, and he was part of the initial group of researchers. What began as an institutional project continued as a personal

project for Miller that resulted in three volumes: *Piety and Intellect*, the history of theological education from the colonies to Civil War, published in 1990; *Piety and Profession*, covering theological education from the Civil War to the 1960s, published in 2007; and *Piety and Plurality*, published in 2014 and chronicling the 1970s through the most recent era.

Patterns of change and lessons learned

The rise and decline of the professional model

The professional graduate school model of theological education that became the norm after World War II was a century in the making. It gradually replaced a model that was rooted in classical education and a liberal arts focus. As soon as the professional model was seriously established, however, challenges emerged from several directions. "It was never uncontested," said Barbara Wheeler. Religion began to be less privileged in the public arena, and ministry began to lose its establishment character. The rapid growth in the number and enrollment of evangelical schools raised questions about the model of graduate professional education for ministry and brought a somewhat different focus. The increase of Roman Catholic schools after Vatican II brought a more formational perspective. The social unrest of the 1960s and beyond raised questions about the role of institutions and introduced the image of the minister as an agent of social change. Growing constituents of women and racial/ethnic minorities brought different needs and aspirations for theological curricula.

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As a result, the professional model—while still the dominant model—has been in decline. What’s next? The experts discussed many emerging patterns of theological education that will be studied in depth through the ATS Educational Models project during the next three years. Among the patterns discussed were more formational models, variations on the curriculum model embodied in the ATS standards (Biblical Studies, Church History, Theology, and Pastoral Studies), mentor models, non-institutional models, functional models, monastic academic models, education for human services, and “deschooling” patterns that result in “pieced-together” degrees comprising credits, certificates, badges, etc.



Clustering, mergers, and consortia

In the 1970s, ATS encouraged consortia and affiliations among a growing number of small schools as a way to “reinvent” theological education and introduce models demonstrating the strength that comes with denominational diversity, shared resources, and expanded delivery systems.¹ Collaborative efforts such as the Graduate Theological Union, Catholic Theological Union, Minnesota Consortium of Theological Schools, and Toronto School of Theology were among many varying patterns of consortia that developed within the ATS membership. The consensus among those gathered to discuss *Piety and Plurality*, however, was that clustering and consortia may not be as effective now as they were in previous decades because schools are becoming ecumenically oriented and denominationally diverse on their own. What

does seem to be a current trend is for smaller, freestanding seminaries to affiliate with research universities.

Trending toward formational models

The introduction of the Program of Priestly Formation (PPF) in 1971 expanded the notion of the intellectual life as a spiritual discipline and called for seminary education to be conducted with a pastoral aim. At the same time, an expansion of lay ministry adapted the formational model to be more inclusive. Jerry McCarthy discussed the need for seminaries to provide ongoing mentoring and post-ordination training.

Subsequent discussion of the Basic Issues Project of the 1980s—that spawned a great deal of literature—sought to think about theological education theologically and concluded that preparation for professional ministry calls for more than just an aggregate of functions; it should include a more theologically informed perspective on theological education. While the project achieved many things, its longest-lasting contribution may be in the influence of this literature on the 1996 redevelopment of the accrediting standards, which describes the theological curriculum in these terms:

4.1.1 In a theological school, the overarching goal is the development of theological understanding, that is, aptitude for theological reflection and wisdom pertaining to responsible life in faith. Comprehended in this overarching goal are others such as deepening spiritual awareness, growing in moral sensibility and character, gaining an intellectual grasp of the tradition of a faith community, and acquiring the abilities requisite to the exercise of ministry in that community.²

Formational models carry their own set of opportunities and challenges, not the least of which are how to integrate formation into curricular goals and practices

¹For a summary of arrangements, advantages, and issues related to consortia, see William R. Myers, “Considering Consortia,” *Theological Education* 41:1 (2005): 165–173.

²General Institutional Standards, Standard 4, Section 4.1.1, 1996, in *Bulletin* 47, Part 1, 2006, 148.

and how to evaluate its success through the assessment processes of accreditation. In many ways, the formational model still seems to be an elusive goal.³

Learning from one another

Terry Muck commented that “the theological school is a place where the church does its thinking.” He added that ATS can learn from its Catholic constituency, where—in addition to a longtime focus on formation—different ideas of mission have spawned a model of different orders. He likened it to the “plurality of traditions” model that Miller presents, with different schools providing different lenses through which to view the world.

McCarthy noted that Catholic schools can, in turn, learn from ATS. In particular, he identified governance and leadership formation and educational/ pedagogical approaches, including field education and ecumenical encounters.

Finally, the group honored Miller with a citation of gratitude for his career-long legacy of scholarship that has enriched the capacity of theological schools to understand their history across three centuries and has provided vital perspective to address their future.

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³Daniel Aleshire discusses the emerging formational model in “2030: A Theological Odyssey of the Work of the Theological Educator,” New Faculty Conference, October 2013.

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