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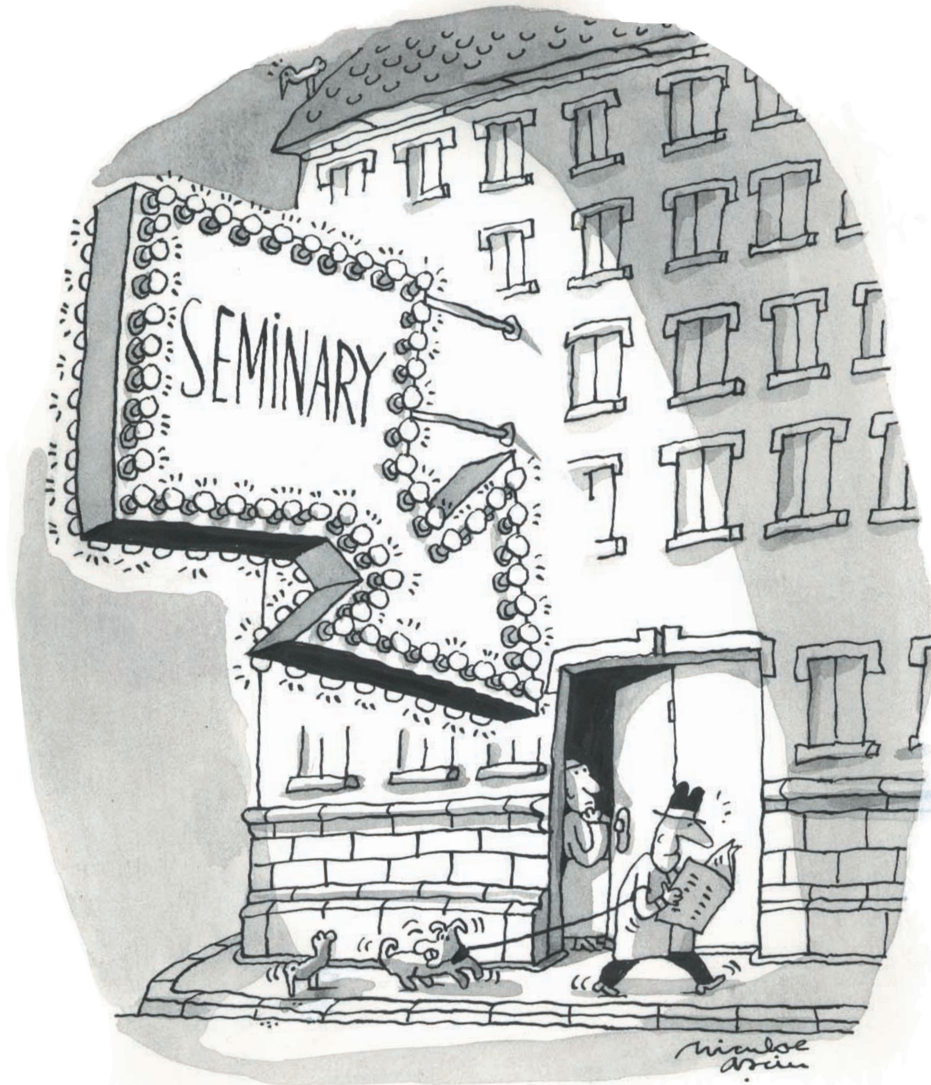

MISSING CONNECTIONS

PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION AND RELIGIOUS LEADERSHIP

BY ELIZABETH LYNN AND BARBARA G. WHEELER

About this Issue

Three themes guide Auburn Center studies of theological education: practices in teaching and learning, the management of institutional resources, and the role of theological education in religious and public life. With this issue of *Auburn Studies,* we present our first report related to the critical, but complex, reality labeled by our third guiding theme.

In the spring of 1998, a research team visited four cities to interview leaders in all sectors of society—business, politics, education, religion, community service, philanthropy, and others—about perceptions of religious leaders and their training. Members of the research team were Lisa Anderson, doctoral candidate in theology at Union Theological Seminary; Elizabeth Lynn, Director of the Project on Civic Reflection at Valparaiso University; Benton Johnson, sociologist of religion recently retired from the University of Oregon; Barbara Wheeler, President of Auburn Seminary and Director of the Auburn Center; and Mark Wilhelm, Associate Director of the Auburn Center.

The lead essay, "Missing Connections," reports what we found and—as the title implies—what our interviewees reported they don't find in today's religious leaders and theological schools. The lead essay was written by Elizabeth Lynn and Barbara G. Wheeler. It is followed by responses from Wheeler, two presidents of theological schools and one former dean.

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BY ELIZABETH LYNN AND BARBARA G. WHEELER

What *does* the public think about theological education and the religious leaders that seminaries train? People interviewed for this study consider seminaries invisible institutions that produce leaders who offer little civic or public leadership. Most thought this lack of public involvement a missed opportunity, but we heard no consensus about what an increased religious presence in public life would mean.

These following are the words of a president of a mainline Protestant denominational seminary that has occupied its large and beautiful campus in a small city for the better part of this century. The names have been changed to protect the candid:

GREENHURST SEMINARY IS STILL *not as well known in this city as...we could... and should be known. A woman asked me what I did and I told her I was president of Greenhurst Seminary and she said, "Where is that?" and I told her, "On Greenhurst Drive," and she said, "Are you sure?" And I said, "Well, yes, I'm sure." And she said, "Well, I've driven by it twice a day for twenty years and never knew it was there."*

In a similar vein, from the rector of a Roman Catholic seminary that is the only one in its state:

I ONCE RAN INTO...OUR CONGRESSMAN... . *I was in the airport in Washington, D.C., and I bumped into him... . I introduced myself and he said, "Oh yes, St. Swithin's. You have a great nursing home."*

What does the public know about and think of theological education? If, as these comments suggest, many people do not know anything about seminaries, even those in their own front yards, what do they think of the so-called products of seminary education—religious leaders—and the training those leaders seem to have received?

Ten years ago, when Auburn Seminary established its Center for the Study of Theological Education, we asked groups of seminary leaders what they most wanted to know about their own enterprise. Heading a list of more predictable topics (how to raise money and spend it wisely, how to recruit good students and faculty, etc.) were some probing questions about public perceptions of theological education. Many of those seminary leaders reported feeling isolated, on the margin, cut off from other educational and social institutions, and not sufficiently connected even to their primary constituencies: the churches, leaders, and members of their own religious tradition.

It took us a decade to figure out how to begin to address those questions. We did not want to replicate the kinds of studies that have been done in the past, most of which are misleading because they rely on data gathered mainly from vocal critics of seminaries, a group that we suspect is both more interested in theological education and more negative in its evaluation than the public in general. But the alternative, a random sample survey of "public opinion," did not seem feasible either. From the limited surveys that have been conducted, from comments like those given above, and from personal experience (that blank look you get from an airplane seatmate when you say you work for a theological seminary), we surmised that most people know nothing about theological education, not even what it is or that it exists. You can't conduct a successful poll unless the people you reach can answer your questions.

Eventually, we happened upon a simple research model, one that the American Council on Education had used to gather opinions about college education.[1] Go to four cities in different parts of the country and talk to people. We picked cities that had different levels of seminary presence—two of the cities (Atlanta and Portland, Oregon) have several seminaries, one (Indianapolis) has just one, the other (Shreveport, Louisiana) has none. Among the sites there are different kinds of seminaries—Roman Catholic, mainline Protestant, and evangelical Protestant institutions, a university divinity school and a seminary linked to a college. The cities are also varied in size, prosperity, and religious climate. Shreveport, for instance, is located in the third

The Silent Seminary

You hear a lot more about other educational institutions, but very little about the seminaries, and that's surprising because they are the only kind of educational institutions that are sort of licensed—in a sense, obligated—to do good works and speak out. But you just don't hear it.
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH MEMBER

I would guess that the community generally does not have any idea what [the local seminary] is all about. CHAMBER OF COMMERCE OFFICIAL

It has become painfully obvious how unknown we are. SEMINARY PRESIDENT

In the city as a whole people probably know it's there, but if you asked them if it has ever made any difference in your life, the answer would be, no.
METHODIST CHURCH MEMBER

It's not as if people in my aerobics class are talking about the seminary.
COLLEGE CHAPLAIN

I frankly don't hear people talk about [the local seminary] as a source of real leadership for either seminarians or lay people. I've visited a couple of times out of curiosity more than anything, but I don't think much about it.
UNIVERSITY PRESIDENT

For the most part, most community sort of folks look at seminary as sort of just a marginal sort of institution that doesn't really have much. It's not a player in society in training people, or it's just not a player.
METHODIST CHURCH MEMBER

most-church-going state in the nation; Portland is at the opposite end of the salience-of-religion scale.

Two or three members of our five-person research team spent three to five days in each city.[2] While there, we interviewed persons whose opinions might matter to seminaries: church executives, clergy, business and non-profit leaders, elected and appointed government officials, community activists and volunteers, college and university presidents and student affairs officers, and the local religion reporter. We also talked to groups of lay church members in several congregations at each site. In the three cities that had seminaries, we interviewed groups of seminary faculty and trustees as well as the president. The local seminaries played another role as well: we had asked them earlier to suggest candidates for our other interviews. We got other suggestions of social leaders from non-seminary sources and tried to see some persons from all the lists. (Because

we used this method, it is likely that our so-called social leaders are more religiously-connected than social leaders in general; but as we think you will see, this anomaly turns out to strengthen rather than diminish the dependability of our findings.) Altogether, we conducted individual or group interviews with 254 persons; almost all of these interviews were taped and transcribed. We read and analyzed the transcripts; then the five of us met, formed our conclusions, and outlined a final report.[3]

What *does* the public in the church and beyond it think about theological education and the religious leaders that seminaries train? Below, we report, first, on what we heard **about seminaries;** second, on what we heard **about religious leaders and institutions;** and finally, what we heard **about the training of religious leaders.** Along the way we attempt, as much as possible, to let the voices of our interviewees deliver their own messages.

I. About Seminaries

The suppositions of those seminary leaders who stimulated this project in the first place, the hypotheses of the consultants who helped us design it, and our own hunches all proved to be true: Seminaries are virtually invisible to leaders of secular organizations and institutions, even those in the seminary's own city and region. "The seminaries don't appear often on people's radar screens," a community activist in a city with several seminaries told us. "I don't know that anyone in this town knows that [the seminaries] are there," said a businessman in the same city.

Most of the seminaries we studied are known to only a fairly small circle of insiders of their own religious tradition—denominational executives, clergy, and the members of some congregations that are either large or located close to the seminary's campus. But many members of the denomination a seminary serves simply do not know that it (or any other seminary) is there. We did not survey the church public systematically, so we can't say how high the invisibility quotient is in the church, but we have indications from the research of others. Twice the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), a seminary-saturated denomination, has tried to survey its randomly-selected panel of church members about theological education, only to have over half the questionnaires returned with the indication that respondents don't know enough about the subject to participate.

Seminary leaders and faculty tell us that what the outsiders say is true. A business leader had described his local seminary as a "go-to" sort of institution. A faculty member at the same school put the same thought more gently, saying, "The outreach we do involves people coming here, rather than us going to them." The trustees of a seminary in another city described the school's "quiet posture" and reported the continuing influence of a previous president who believed that it is unbiblical for a Christian institution to call attention to itself. At yet another seminary, the

president meditated at length on why his institution is so obscure in its city and region. There are few invitations to be part of public life, he reported; but neither he nor others from the seminary volunteer their efforts either. He added, "I don't feel good about that."

Whatever the reasons, seminaries are not viewed as *civic* assets in their communities or beyond. They are not part of the civic mix. When important decisions about social policies or community projects are at stake, seminaries and those who work in them are rarely asked to participate, even to comment, except by the occasional religion reporter who needs a quotation on a religiously-tinged issue. Media reporting on the seminaries' own activities, we were told, is equally rare. "You have a small institution like the college [here]," said a faculty member, "and they get all kinds of notice in the news... . Virtually nothing we do ever draws that kind of attention." Several seminary presidents reported getting the attention of reporters, but usually it was attention they would rather not have, focused on an embezzlement, a breach of sexual morality, or in one case a large bequest reported in such a way that it sounded as if the institution did not need any more money ever.

Nor are seminaries widely viewed as *educational* assets. We asked a number of our informants whether, if we were to stop people on the street and ask them what are the educational institutions in town, they would name the seminaries. We were told that that would be highly unlikely. In the three cities we visited that had seminaries, the best known theological institution seemed to be less well known than the least well known college.

The invisibility of these institutions extends to their inhabitants. Seminary leaders are seldom seen in civic life, and they themselves report rarely going there. From interviews for this project and from the larger study of faculty that we completed recently at Auburn, we learned that seminary faculty members' time outside the school is spent in scholarly and church activities. Except for a few young parents who participate in the PTA or the soccer league, almost no faculty members are involved in community or civic life. Seminary presidents are not much different: a few hold membership in groups like Rotary, but generally they are not visible beyond the school and its church constituency. Indeed, many of the secular social leaders we interviewed—even the college presidents—did not know the names of the presidents of the their town's seminaries.

We did find exceptions to the widespread civic absence of seminary leaders. African-American seminary presidents—if the two whose schools were part of this project are typical—are better known than others. They seem to consider it part of their job descriptions to be active and visible on the public scene. As a result, both they and their institutions are well-recognized in the black community, and the presidents themselves are known and respected more widely still.

Where are the Churches?

People in social services [say], "Where are the churches?" COMMUNITY ORGANIZER

I'm not seeing church leaders affecting the broader culture very effectively here. I'm not even sure if they're trying. RELIGION REPORTER

A lot of [religious leaders] are just focused on their own congregations and memberships. RELIGION REPORTER

We can have a good time on Sunday, everybody shout and get happy, and then we go out, and that's it. People who didn't come here on Sunday are still not being touched by us. BAPTIST MINISTER

[The churches] tend to be very territorial, very possessive, their people, their kind. I guess they're afraid that somehow the fold will see something else and wander away from their church. PRESBYTERIAN MINISTER

There is not a functional working relationship among the pastors in this town. All of our energy is taken under the incredible pressure to be a successful church. COMMUNITY ORGANIZER

We're across four lanes of traffic from the state capital building, but we might as well be in an outlying suburb for all the state building knows of [our church]. And I think that's true for most of the churches. PRESBYTERIAN MINISTER

I don't see—for the most part—religious leaders talking about everyday issues, and I never see them unless they represent some African American parishes or congregations. It just seems to me that if you want to impact people's lives, you need to be active in people's lives. CHAMBER OF COMMERCE OFFICIAL

Organized religion to some degree has lost sight of what I think is its primary role, which is caring for communities, and I think it has become focused on marketing to the flock. CHAMBER OF COMMERCE OFFICIAL

I don't always agree with [my parish priest], but I think it's neat that there's a letter to the editor about something that's not typically a religious topic. I'm excited to see him off the religion page, and why aren't we seeing more religious leaders off the religion page? ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH MEMBER

Some of the seminaries in our group are recognized for their cultural assets. They are noted for their architecture, bookstores, or the performing arts groups that rent space on the campus. Asked about the importance of religion in her city, one religion reporter immediately pointed out that the local seminary has a theater. "People may not be very devout," she offered, "and yet they'll get

season tickets to go to the theater." Alas, as the reporter's words inadvertently reveal, acclaim for these secondary features does not seem to lead to public awareness of the seminary's primary mission and program. The Catholic seminary that was mistaken by the Congressman for a nursing home is another good example. The school has a building designed by a famous architect, for which the campus is well known—but evidently not well enough known for the purpose of the institution to be clear to an official elected from its district.

Are seminaries and their inhabitants intentional about their civic quietness—strategically silent, so to speak? One Chamber of Commerce official wondered aloud to us whether this might be the case:

THERE IS A STRATEGY THAT SAYS *you don't want people to know who you are and where you are and stuff like that. Or, that you just want a targeted group of people to know who you are and then maybe you think you're opening yourself up for criticism or examination or scrutiny… . You could choose that strategy to be quiet,…or to select those people who you want to know you.*

Whether or not this strategy is intentional, it effectively characterizes the seminaries in each of the four cities we visited. Seminaries are quiet to the point of absence in their local communities. But then so, as we shall see, are the religious leaders they train.

II. About Religious Leaders and Institutions

As noted earlier, we anticipated that most of the people we interviewed would know very little about theological education *per se* and thus would decline to evaluate the work of seminaries. For this reason, while asking some questions about local seminaries, we also approached the subject obliquely, asking questions about the quality of local religious leadership and the roles that religious institutions seem to play in community life. *What are faith-based institutions contributing to the larger community? How effective are their leaders?* The answers we received to these questions strongly suggest that civic quietness is the rule rather than the exception for religious institutions of all kinds these days.

In all four communities, we were told that the focus of most faith-based institutions is on "taking good care of their own." Some also provide emergency aid to those who are not their members. A few invest heavily in such work. But beyond this, religious leaders and institutions are generally not involved in civic life. As the dean of a public university bluntly put it, "Clergy are not public leaders."

THEY DON'T CONVENE THE FORUMS *for public conversations, and they're not in the forefront of articulating issues... . Religious leaders in this town helped lead the civil rights movement... . I don't know what the issue is, but if it came up today, those religious leaders do not appear to be at the table, and they certainly are not leading the conversation.*

Great Expectations

Churches should try to help with the development of the moral fiber of the society... . I think that religious leaders have to stand out as that kind of moral cornerstone or bright light so that, you know, the message is clear. COMMUNITY ORGANIZER

The gap between the underclass and those persons who are privileged is getting wider and wider and somehow it's going to be left up to religious leaders to... make those persons who are privileged realize that they are privileged because of the blessing of God. POLITICAL LEADER

It will be the churches that save society because none of [the] other forces have any moral component. BUSINESS LEADER

In another city, a retired ambassador told us:

I CAN'T RECALL A TIME WHEN THE *church and the clergy are so little considered. I'm not sure they are disrespected; they just don't seem to matter. {In this city} there is a lot of church-going. But when you talk about affairs in the world, there doesn't seem to be that much relevance.*

Some observers suggested that religious leaders and institutions are victims of a social climate that is largely indifferent to religion. Religious leaders may not volunteer to participate, but neither are they invited to participate. One community foundation executive gave a telling illustration of widespread indifference toward religion in the civic arena:

THE LAST THREE CHAIRMEN OF MY *board were all active members of the same church... . It shows you that {despite wanting} diversity in your leadership..., religion wasn't considered. They came from different professions and different parts of the city, so I was thinking I was doing pretty good in terms of having different kinds of people with different expertise..., but it never occurred to me... that they came...all from the same church. {We would not have had} three people in a row that all ran construction companies.*

There are exceptions to the general pattern. African-American clergy carry clout, and liberal rabbis speak out in some civic arenas. We asked secular leaders to imagine a list of people who would have to be called to get some major new civic project or policy change underway and to tell us whether any religious leaders were on the list and, if so, who. The responses were remarkably similar from city to city. Always mentioned first were two or three African-American clergy, and that is where most of the responses stopped. A few speakers mentioned liberal rabbis who, despite the small size of the Jewish communities in all the cities we visited, were said to be articulate about public

issues. Once or twice an outspoken Catholic bishop was mentioned. And occasionally there would be a complaint about pressure from a paid, right-wing religious lobbyist.

But that's all. Most Roman Catholics and most evangelicals keep to themselves, and *no* mainline Protestants were on those lists of people to call, of leaders whose voices make a difference beyond their own organizations. We heard memorable stories of religious leaders and groups declining to enter the fray even when invited to support efforts they strongly approve or fight evils they traditionally deplore. A Chamber of Commerce official said that it was "like pulling teeth" to get any of his city's very liberal churches to fight a move to repeal a gay rights ordinance. Similarly, a city planner reported that evangelical clergy in his town would not join an effort to limit the spread of legalized gambling establishments. A number of the secular and church executives we interviewed reported that many clergy avoid religious as well as secular alliances. They are competitive and territorial, we were told, and often do not even know the other religious leaders in town. Congregational pressure to make "our" congregation succeed, even at the expense of others, was sometimes suggested as the cause of such behavior.

Many of the secular leaders we interviewed think that the lack of involvement of religious leaders and institutions in civic affairs is a missed opportunity. One foundation executive lamented the loss of "soul" in civic life. "What has happened by the lack of [religious] representation is that a lot of boards have lost their soul and have lost part of their conscience by not having these religious leaders at their table. And," he added, "they've lost somebody to ask the tough questions when decisions are being made."

It should be noted, though, that secular leaders are not always clear—and when they are clear often differ with each other—about what increased religious presence in public life would really mean. A minority of these leaders would welcome religious leaders taking specific positions on controversial issues. "There are some faith traditions, particularly my own, which are fairly vocal at times around public issues," said a state attorney general who is Catholic. "I have never found that offensive... . The First Amendment restrains government; it doesn't restrain private organizations or citizens." Another minority viewpoint, concentrated in a city whose current mayor is committed to privatization, would like religious institutions to take over specific public programs once run by government. But the majority of social leaders with whom we spoke want something a little less controversial, and a little more complicated. They want religious leaders to raise the moral tone, but not to push a particular morality—to remind us of the "tough questions,"

as the foundation executive said, but not to insist on specific answers to those questions.

Like social leaders, church members give religious leaders and institutions mixed ratings. All know some stellar clergy. Most appreciate the hard work and good intentions of their own church leaders. Yet inside the church, as out, we heard a tone of disappointment in the quality and reach of religious leaders today. Church leaders, we were told, have difficulty reaching the people they serve: "translating" theology into real life, "relating" their knowledge to the real world, "communicating" to congregants, "reaching people" where they live.

In short, inside church walls and out, we heard a story of *missed connections.* In the following section, we look at what social leaders and church members think theological schools might do to help religious leaders begin making—instead of missing—connections.

III. About the Training of Religious Leaders

WHEN I WAS TOLD THERE WAS *going to be a focus group on theological education, I had to realize it is not a subject that I really think about. I've always been more concerned with the output than the specifics of training... . I guess I have some thoughts about what makes a good policeman or what makes a good clergyperson... but I haven't really considered what goes on behind those doors—or even where those doors are.*

As these candid words from one church member suggest, social leaders and laity alike have given little thought to what "goes on behind the doors" of theological schools—or even where the doors are. "We don't know anything about the training," admitted a social leader in Atlanta. "We just know that they go to seminary school, and that they have to do internships, but we don't know how the process works." Some interviewees also expressed discomfort about "interfering" with how religious leaders are educated. "I mean, it's not my place to tell them how to run their seminary," one government official kept interjecting.

At the same time, leaders and laity genuinely welcomed the opportunity granted by these interviews to reflect on the training of religious leaders and (once past their discomfort) quickly came up with suggestions for changes in that training. In this vein, when asked what recommendations they would make to seminaries, social leaders first said that they knew too little about seminary education to comment. However, they often followed with extensive comments about the importance of orienting future clergy to community and public issues. Consider two such comments, both from business executives, in abridged form:

I ALWAYS THOUGHT [IT] WAS A *Presbyterian tenet: you weren't blind to the rest of the world around you... . I'm not certain...at all that Calvinist theology necessarily understands {that} today... . You have to look at {clergy} education and say that—similar to liberal arts—you have a major, and you're naturally focused on that, but a liberal arts degree demands*

Reach Out and Touch Someone

My wish is that as a part of the curriculum of seminaries there be a more intentional relationship with the world....It's important for seminaries to consistently seek intentional ways to get out of the [church] walls. EPISCOPAL CHURCH MEMBER

I would hope that seminaries would work to try to inculcate religious leaders with a sense that there is a civic dimension to the practice of religion in our country that is legitimate. [Clergy ought not just] be 'good girls and boys" and just minister to their communicants' needs and help them with their personal journeys through life... . If I have a message it would be, "Train civicly engaged leaders." ELECTED OFFICIAL

I think people who are about to become pastors need to be able to speak to a community broader than their own congregation... . They ought to be encouraged...to realize they have a voice, and I think an obligation, to speak out with and for a faith community in a broader community. PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH MEMBER

I would love to see this institution...not just teaching and encouraging and nurturing students on campus, but dealing with wider social issues in a way that appeals to the community to respond....There is no organization that does that. SEMINARY TRUSTEE

I think the [Roman Catholic] church, and churches in general, could be even more out in the community if their people were schooled more in how to reach out to the community, and how to be involved in it, and how to deliver their message. BUSINESS LEADER

Get out of those classrooms sometime, get out to meet the real people, talk to the people, and see what they need. RELIGION REPORTER

that you be rounded, and it forces you into other subject areas, and somewhat of more than just a survey of those subject areas—a minor if you will... . It would seem that given what we see about everywhere today that the community would certainly be a good minor in a seminary.

I think that the more exposure that clergy have to leaders in other communities the more comfortable they will become. The way the seminaries go is: all the good Baptists go to good Baptist seminaries, all the good Catholics..., everybody goes, and they flock around during their most formative intellectual years, they go and hang around themselves... . I think that if they were challenged more to stretch

themselves beyond their comfort levels, then they might be better able to lead others beyond their fields of comfort.

Lay members generally assume the academic education of clergy is adequate—if anything, more than adequate. The academic portion of seminary training was often summarized in a single phrase (one that, remarkably, was the same across the Catholic/ Protestant and mainline/evangelical divides): the phrase is "Greek," or "Greek and all that." But something else is missing, something that brings "Greek and all that" to life, and to the level of lay comprehension and interest.

What is missing? Laity suggested that perhaps it is life experience or communications and interpersonal skills ("Networking 101," as one Methodist church member put it). Some church executives emphatically agree: clergy get enough, or too much, theology and need more practical training.

But other executives and a number of clergy trace the problem to the way that theological material is now taught. Method and content are detached, they think, from real religious or theological seriousness. One Methodist district superintendent (who had just characterized the demands of some of his colleagues that seminaries teach more technical ecclesiastical stuff, like how to fill out charge reports, as "stupid"), described what he got from seminary training and what he thinks is needed now:

THE PROFESSORS...TENDED TO GET *me by the heels and hold me upside down and give me as good a shaking as they could until, when I came out of that school, I had {abandoned} the things that I couldn't defend and I could defend the things that I then stood on... . I came out...feeling like I had a gospel that people were dying to hear.*

A minister put it this way:

[WE NEED A THEOLOGY] FOR HOW *you live in mean times, when things are really pressing in, and still have a lively sense of the presence of God… . You know, when things are stressful, when you don't know exactly what's around the next corner, when financially you are living on the edge—lots of demands coming from lots of different places and wondering how are we called to be here and what are we called to do... . How do you use theological language and stories to understand that as opposed to remaining so much in the secular environment of worth and success and failure?*

On the surface, what our church-based respondents say about religious leaders and their training is very different from—nearly the opposite of—what the secular leaders say. Clergy, church members, and church executives focus almost exclusively on the need to "translate " theology or "Greek and all that," to connect it to the lives and personal concerns of the church's members. Among these respondents, the roles that clergy might play in community or civic life rarely came up, unless the setting was an African-American church. Secular leaders, by sharp contrast, talked almost exclusively about the parts that clergy should play, but do not play, beyond the congregation.

Greek and All That

They teach them Greek, and they teach them Hebrew, and all, but they are not socially motivated. DISCIPLES OF CHRIST CHURCH MEMBER

If all of the faculty are locked in little rooms making students memorize Greek, can they also bring people along to run these large, corporate parishes and also help the Church to have clear thinking about how to have a range of ways for ministry to unfold?
UNIVERSITY OFFICIAL

[In too many seminaries] emphasis is put on the Greek end of it and the study end of it, and not enough on the practical end of it. BAPTIST CHURCH MEMBER

There is only so much Greek you need to know, but you need the Holy Spirit to get up in that pulpit. DISCIPLES OF CHRIST CHURCH MEMBER

The theological and knowledge part is very very important: interpretation of the bible, that's extremely important, but I think even more important is how you relate that knowledge to the people you serve. ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH MEMBER

You'd have to have the theology and what you believe, because if you have marketing without substance it's nothing....But then add more of a practical component to the education, ranging from computers ...[to] small group dynamics. RELIGION REPORTER

I think [a seminary education] gives you discipline. But it certainly doesn't give you the Spirit of God that you should have. DISCIPLES OF CHRIST CHURCH MEMBER

I have the sense that there's an awful lot of philosophical theology coming out of the schools as opposed to practical applications. BUSINESS LEADER

If I had a choice, though, I would take the theological and biblical study over the practical. You can pick up the practical; you won't pick up the study.
METHODIST CHURCH MINISTER

There is, however, a kind of parallelism between these very different messages. Among social leaders and church respondents alike, the theme is one of *making connections*, helping people to see what difference religious values and commitments can make, whether in the lives of church members or in our lives together as a society. And, as we have seen, both groups blame the seminary for some kind of training or orientation that is not provided.

Recruitment Counts

[In the old days] only the best students were asked by their teachers, "What about seminary? What about religious life?" We drew from the very best, and it was considered a privilege and an honor to do something like that and to attend the seminary… . In the old days a person who was in a seminary could literally be anything else he chose. That would not be the case today.

SEMINARY PRESIDENT

Quality breeds quality; seminaries must do a better job of admitting students of talent and ability.

FOUNDATION EXECUTIVE

I would question the selection process—that the applicants the seminaries are taking in are weak to begin with. Are these people who are just looking for a job?

BUSINESS LEADER

Both groups also wonder whether part of the problem is the level of ability of at least some of those who choose the religious professions. Most of our respondents could name some exemplary church leaders, but most also see persons of limited maturity and intelligence entering the ministry. One church member states his concern this way:

I WAS A FLIGHT INSTRUCTOR AT *one time, and I recall very vividly that you find the greatest guy in the world—just a wonderful guy—but he couldn't find the ground, so you had to say to him, 'You're the nicest guy in the world, but…' and you just destroy the guy, but the alternative is that he goes out and kills himself, kills somebody else. So I think somewhere along the line the responsibility has got to be identified. I think that's a project for the seminaries, to solve that problem.*

Others argue that the seminaries are not so much to blame for the quality of their graduates as "society," which doesn't "make ordained ministry very attractive" or "going to seminary school very glamorous," and which focuses people's attention on making money to the exclusion of other values in life. As one young woman candidly said, "I don't know how to fix that."

IT'S LIKE HOW DO YOU GET THE *best teacher, you know? The pay's {bad}, you get no respect in society. It's the same for ministers in a lot of ways, you know, bad money,…just a lot of negatives, so the best people aren't going to do it. But I don't know how to fix that.*

Respondents also expressed concern that so few young people go into the ministry today. One university official commented wryly, "I don't think that there's anything wrong with a twenty-two year old going to seminary!"

However, when asked whether his own large public university encourages its students to consider ministry as a profession, he quickly shifted concerns. "We don't talk about values in the university anymore, and I think that people give real care in not proselytizing," he said. "We want to celebrate a diversity of points of view and not press any particular point of view."

At a church-related private university in the same town, a dean confirmed that her undergraduates seldom consider seminary as a next step. But here the problem is not fear of proselytizing so much as lack of information. She and her colleagues do not know enough about theological education to tell students how to get from college to seminary—or why they would want to go:

WE, AT LEAST, DO NOT HAVE VERY *good materials on what are the various routes to a theological education and then finally, what do you do…afterwards. I mean, people know what lawyers do, and they think they know what teachers and physicians and business people do—or accountants or whatever. But it's not as clear, I think, to young people, the multifaceted opportunities in the field of religious studies—that, in fact, there are various ways to contribute and the fact that having a theological degree may mean that you are in the pulpit, that you are in a support position—that you may even be out in the community or in a community service organization.*

But perhaps, she concludes, this lack of information is intentional:

[THE SEMINARIES] ARE MORE, *it seems to me, interested in [responding to] people drawn to them than recruiting people to them. Now, I may be mistaken in that, but it seems to me that they act more as magnets for people who have a strong commitment than going out and searching for people to be a part of that [commitment].*

In Closing

The findings presented above suggest a conundrum of sorts. **In the public mind, is civic quietness a problem—or a virtue—for theological education today?**

On the one hand, both leaders and laity seem to value the hiddenness and mystery of seminary education—an assurance that *this one place* remains otherworldly, uncorrupted, and a site of initiations that enable those who emerge to lead the rest of us spiritually. Among social leaders, there is even some apprehension about seminary involvement in local politics, perhaps in reaction to the divisiveness of "the sixties." Thus one business leader acknowledged that the seminary in his city doesn't "blow its own horn," but

warned that it may be "counterproductive for [the seminary] to get into the culture wars… . It's better to be a quiet leader, and do what it does well, and have the influence that it does by producing good people and interacting in ways that motivate good acts by people in the community."

On the other hand, social leaders and church respondents also express concern that seminary graduates are overly sequestered, out of touch with the real world, naive about the challenges of organizational leadership, and neglectful of community needs. The seminary may be a place apart, but its graduates labor in the real world. And much real-world work is expected of them by church members and community leaders alike.

These very different messages about the civic responsibilities of seminaries and their graduates (often mixed up together into a single confused perspective) are worth pondering. **What is the public saying here? And how might those of us in theological education respond?**

Notes

1. The results of the American Council on Education study are available in the form of three reports: James Harvey & Associates, "First Impressions and Second Thoughts: Public Support for Higher Education" (1994); James Harvey and John Immerwahr, "The Fragile Coalition: Public Support for Higher Education in the 1990s" (1995); James Harvey and John Immerwahr, "Goodwill and Growing Worry: Public Perceptions of American Higher Education" (1995). Copies are available from the American Council on Education, Department 36, Washington, DC 20055-0036.

2. The research team included Lisa Anderson, a doctoral candidate in theology at Union Theological Seminary in New York; Elizabeth Lynn, Director of the Project on Civic Reflection at Valparaiso University; Benton Johnson, a sociologist of religion recently retired from the University of Oregon; Barbara Wheeler, Director of the Auburn Center; and Mark Wilhelm, Associate Director of the Auburn Center. Wheeler visited all four cities; each of the other members studied one or two of them. All of us wrote one of the site reports.

3. At times, we distinguish between the answers we heard from "secular leaders" and "church-based respondents." It is worth noting that almost all the social leaders we interviewed told us that they are churchgoers. Indeed, many are active lay leaders in their church or denomination. However, when these social leaders spoke to us in their role "outside the church", they—and we—were careful to distinguish their remarks from what they might have said in their role "inside the church."

WHAT IS OUR BUSINESS?

BY RICHARD J. MOUW

FULLER THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY, PASADENA CALIFORNIA

I can think of several reasons why the Auburn report does not have to be taken seriously by those of us who bear responsibility for the direction of our seminaries. Some of the reasons are better than others. But none of them really holds up. Since we seminary types are skilled, though, at thinking of reasons why we need to look at all sides of an issue, it is necessary to name some of the excuses in order to lay them aside.

While I was thinking about what to say concerning this report, I received a call from the local Rotary Club—although I am inclined to think it was really a call from the Lord. The Rotary people wanted me to speak at one of their meetings. The requested topic: What is Fuller Seminary? The Rotary Club has its meetings in a private club right next to our campus, and in order to get there the members have to walk past the Fuller Seminary entrance sign. One day someone asked his friend, "What kind of place is that?" Neither of them knew, so they asked others at lunch. No one else had the answer. So they decided to ask the Fuller president to come and talk about his school.

There went one of my main reasons for not taking this report seriously. I hadn't thought that it applied to my seminary. But now I had to face an important fact: Fuller Seminary is, on any given weekday a community of well over 1500 souls carrying out our business at a two-block distance from City Hall, and not one person at a Rotary Club breakfast could give a decent account of what we are about. "Speak, Lord, for thy servant heareth."

But if the Rotary Club folks *were* to have a decent understanding of our mission, and if we *were* doing all we should be doing as a seminary that resides in the heart of Pasadena, what would they know about us? What do we owe the immediate community in which we find ourselves? Do we really want seminaries to be centers of community activism? Is that what theological schools should be about?

There are many ways to articulate the excuses that allow us to dismiss this

subject and get on with other things. Chastened Protestant liberals (and those evangelicals who are eager to keep chastening them) can point to the widely discussed defects associated with the influence of "the Social Gospel" on theological education. The danger of making too much of the social role of seminaries is that we create an elite corps of social activists who are poorly equipped for such important tasks as evangelism and pastoral care. To be sure, there was something noble about a time when State Department officials would call Reinhold Niebuhr for advice on foreign policy questions, or when the endorsement of clergy made a difference for candidates in municipal or state elections. But was that also a time when seminaries produced the kinds of pastors that we need today? Did mainline churches flourish under such leadership? Or, to focus on a phenomenon that is more contemporary, now that the patterns of Christian activism have shifted a bit, do we really want to produce evangelical pastors who are guided by the agenda of the Christian Right?

The underlying question, of course, is the role of the seminary as *seminary* in addressing issues of public life.

Obviously, we ought never to ignore the lessons of past or present for our understanding of the social role of theological schools. But neither do those examples give us legitimate grounds for refusing to think about how we can be more effective in our immediate communities. The fact that some people have pursued the task in the wrong manner—or in a way that produced excesses—does not mean that we should back away from the subject altogether.

The underlying question, of course, is the role of the seminary *as seminary* in addressing issues of public life. Back in the days when some of us in the evangelical world spent quite a bit of our time urging our fellow evangelicals to get more involved in "social concerns" (yes, there was such a day, only a few decades ago), some of the more sophisticated arguments that we ran up against—a refreshing change from the proof-texting references to "Render unto Caesar" and "My Kingdom is not of this world"—focused directly on what is properly included in the mission of the church. Sometimes the case was put in terms of the institutional church's *competence:* "The clergy are not experts on social problems; they are doctors of the soul." At other times the argument focused on the church's *authority:* "God calls the church to address the enduring issues of sin and salvation, and not topics having to do with social specifics."

It takes little imagination to transfer these arguments to the seminary context. It's not our "business" to try to influence the cities and towns in which we carry on our teaching ministries. And furthermore, we don't necessarily have that kind of competence. We are

already too burdened down with new practical areas of concern: singles ministries, youth ministries, church administration, counseling, gender sensitivities, spirituality. To be asked to add community activism to this ever-increasing agenda is simply too much.

My response is a pious one, but that does not count against it in my way of viewing things: if God is the one

I cannot avoid the conviction that God is the source of our obligation in the public arena.

issuing the mandate, then we have no excuses for not obeying. And I cannot avoid the conviction that God is precisely the source of our obligation in the public arena. The schools in the neighborhood of my seminary's campus are not doing an adequate job of educating the children of low-income families. I have to walk only a minute from my office to see a homeless person roaming the streets. City council meetings debate "culture wars" issues in tones that often lead to angry confrontations. Students in our New Testament classes have commuted from South Central Los Angeles communities where drive-by shootings have occurred the night before.

How can we *not* address those topics directly as a seminary community? I know, of course, that there are different ways of "addressing" issues of community life. But then, let us at least name the varying modes of address. And let us examine ourselves to be sure that the approaches we claim to be adopting have some match with the problems we claim to be addressing.

There is much room for pluralism in theological education as seminaries develop and pursue strategies for involvement in local communities. Let the pluralism flourish! But let the discussion of such concerns also flourish, lest our refusal to talk honestly to each other about such matters be the occasion for unfaithfulness. For those of us who know in our hearts that such a wide-ranging conversation is long overdue, this report is a gift we dare not file away.

THE HEART OF THINGS

BY BARBARA G. WHEELER

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What do we make of all this? Do the invisibility of seminaries and the disengagement of religious leaders and institutions constitute a problem? I think the answer is yes.

Before I say how and why, it is important to acknowledge that both this study and the situation it portrays should be ringed with qualifications. This study is limited; it is just a probe. We went to only four cities, and though we managed to build in quite a lot of religious, social, and theological education variety by our choice of sites, we had to exclude some very significant variations. We did not, for instance, study a city in Canada, or one in which Roman Catholicism is dominant, or one with a substantial Hispanic presence. Our focus was regional and local, though we did leave plenty of room for our respondents to tell us about seminaries and religious leaders with national reputations, and none did.

It is also the case that the method we chose made it more likely that we would find typical examples than best cases. No doubt there are individual exceptions and counterexamples to even the strongest, most uniform patterns we uncovered. There is a great deal to be learned from the exceptions—from, for instance, those theological schools that do better than the rest of us in making their presence known.

Further, there is no turning back to some golden age or an earlier set of arrangements. There was a time when the mainline Protestants ran almost everything except a few large cities—corporations, charities, universities, and the national government—and when, as a result, the leading Protestant clergy had permanent free passes to the settings in which social policy was hammered out. One of our advisers worried at the beginning of this study that it might be driven by a wistful longing to return to that time, which he calls the days of John Foster Dulles. That is not the motive. Everyone associated with this research knows that we can't go back and would not want to if we could. Pluralism,

along with a certain kind of secularism that levels the playing field, is here to stay—and it is a good thing, too.

It is true that the low visibility and involvement of religious leaders and institutions in civic life are part of larger trends. While we were conducting this research, articles were published that tracked similar developments in higher education.[1] Studies in a similar vein of society as a whole continue to appear. Recently, one group of liberals and conservatives working together under the auspices of The Pew Charitable Trusts issued a report labeling us a nation of spectators.[2] The patterns uncovered by our study are not unique to religion.

Last, before making judgments about the data this study presents and deciding what theological schools ought to do in response to them, we should remind ourselves that in general seminaries need to do less, not more. In another study, I have denounced "program sprawl, " the frenetic attempts in which many schools are currently engaged to please more constituencies and open more markets by trying to cover every possible programmatic base. If "public presence" becomes just another topic or special interest that requires the invention of programs that strain the budget and overtax the faculty and administration, this study will have done a disservice.

All the foregoing statements are true. But after all the limitations, qualifications, and disclaimers about the study have been recorded, I still think that what we found in four cities should trouble those of us who are responsible parties in theological education and leaders in Christian churches. At the very least, seminary leaders should recognize that their schools' obscurity is not in their best institutional interest. North American religion, along with the rest of social life, is increasingly local and particularistic: people trust and support particular institutions of which they have some personal knowledge, rather than remote organizations, however large and prestigious, that they know only by general report. This trend, combined with other developments, such as increasing amounts of religious switching, renders North American religion increasingly undenominational. Almost all established denominations, liberal and conservative, are getting weaker as organizations.

What we found in four cities should trouble those of us who are responsible parties in theological education and leaders in the Christian churches.

The cash value of these developments for seminaries is pretty clear: in the future, they will not be able to rely on denominational and old school ties to form their constituencies for them.

More and more, students and financial support will be drawn from churches and individuals who know the school firsthand, often because they are nearby. I have seen this in my own institution in the last twenty years, and perhaps you have in yours. If it hasn't happened to you, it will: increasingly you will look for support and students from those who know you personally, even if they are not members of your immediate religious family. If those acquaintances think your school is a civic, cultural and educational asset, they will help you stay in business.

Beyond institutional self-interest, the question of what seminaries should contribute directly to the civic mix is an ethical one. We exist not only because some churches and individual friends

We are not invited into public life because we have not succeeded in teaching and preaching the wisdom of our traditions in ways that make people want to hear more.

give us money but also because a much wider circle, the whole society, exempts us from paying taxes and in some cases offers support from public funds. Granted, cities, states/provinces and the national governments do this because they think our primary work, educating religious leaders, promotes the common good. But most other organizations, even commercial ones that do pay taxes, have recognized a special obligation to the area in which they are located and where their employees and clientele live—and often to the nation as well. If petrochemical companies are obligated, we probably are too: we use this society's services, and we don't pay for them or pay very much. In gratitude for what amounts to major support, we should be active, responsible civic contributors.

The primary reason that the findings of this study should trouble us, however, is more basic than self-interest or even ethics. It has to do with our identity and purposes as theological schools and religious communities. For all their diversity, each of our religious traditions is among other things a treasury of wisdom about what matters, about how we should live together under God. Some of that wisdom is reserved for the church, but more of it is given for the life of the world. Our study strongly suggests that neither we who teach theology nor those who regularly preach the Gospel articulate that wisdom with sufficient power. In the cases we studied, which I suspect are typical, religious leaders, including seminary leaders, have usually failed to connect with those who do not already know what our traditions have to say about how we might lead a good life in common. (Those "unreached" persons, as reported above, are inside our churches as well as beyond them.) We are not invited into civic life because we have not succeeded in teaching and preaching

the wisdom of our traditions in ways that make people want to hear more.

If this is true, then addressing the problem of theological education and religious presence in public life will not distract us from our core mission but focus us on it. The task is not to add some new initiative or program that will turn us, the theological educators and our students, into policy experts. That is not the job of seminaries. Our job is to teach and preach, with enough passion and power that other people want at least to engage if not to adopt the ideas and convictions and commitments that animate us. It is platitudinously said that there is nothing as practical as a good theory. Likewise, I think one could argue that there is nothing more compelling in public discourse than religious truth that is taught and proclaimed with power, integrity, true civility, and freedom.

In short, the *religious* success of theological and church institutions and their public presence are not separate or separable: *Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.* The questions this study raises about public visibility and effectiveness are not ancillary or optional to the renewal of theological education and religious life in this country. They are not side issues. They are right at the heart of things. If we make progress on the tough question of why our institutions and their graduates should and how they can more powerfully tell and show the public, the people, what God intends for the world, we will greatly benefit the core mission of theological education as well as the wider causes it serves.

The *religious* success of theological and church institutions and their public presence are not separate or separable.

Notes

1. David Greenberg, "Small Men on Campus," *The New Republic* 218, no. 22 (June 1, 1998): 16-21.

2. The National Commission on Civic Renewal, "A Nation of Spectators: How Civic Disengagement Weakens America and What We Can Do About It" (available from The National Commission on Civic Renewal, 3111 Van Munching Hall, University of Maryland, College Park, MD 20742).

PROPHECY AND PRESENCE

BY HAROLD DEAN TRULEAR

PUBLIC/PRIVATE VENTURES, PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA

If prophetic presence is part of the witness of faith communities, then that presence must be recognized and visible. Such visibility comes not merely through the undervalued role of the Spirit in bringing things to light, but also through the prophetic tradition of being properly engaged with society and culture. The prophetic platform takes seriously the fact that this is the Lord's world, and that God is rather well informed about how it is operating. Therefore, prophets must be similarly informed. It also rests on the premise that God takes context, culture, and people seriously; so too, then, must the prophet. The Auburn report speaks directly to this question of the possibility of real prophetic presence for religious leadership and institutions in general, and our theological seminaries in particular. It's hard to be prophetic when nobody's listening.

The Auburn report also comes during a season of heightened interest in the role of religious institutions in public life, expressed in two seemingly separate streams of inquiry. First, the public sector in general, and government and policy people in particular, are asking what role religious institutions (now known as "faith-based institutions" for a variety of reasons) can play in the strengthening of civil society. This line of investigation results from the honest search for real solutions to community and social problems and from a self-interested quest to reduce the role of government (and its revenue sources, i.e., taxes) in the resolution of the same. Second, religious institutions from a variety of faith traditions are reformulating their own sense of what it means to engage the larger society, whether that means a retreat from political process on the religious right, or the development of programs for mainline denominations suffering from declining and sometimes schismatic memberships.

In the first instance—that of the public sector—much attention has been paid to the capacity of religious organizations to deliver social services. Recent federal legislation concerning Charitable Choice reflects such thinking. Charitable Choice

was initially intended to enable religious organizations to compete for social services contracts as part of support for individuals and families moving from welfare to work, and it is now being debated as a viable public policy for a variety of other services as well. In the ongoing conversation about the role of volunteerism in social and community development, policy people point to churches as the largest repository of volunteer labor of any institutional configuration in the United States (and presumably in Canada). Politicians and policy analysts wonder aloud whether such a volunteer labor force can be mobilized to pick up some of the slack of social welfare programming. There have even been naive notions that churches can "do it all," literally taking on the former welfare caseload in the wake of the dismantling of the welfare safety net. One national columnist has gone so far as to suggest that each congregation in the United States should adopt one welfare family. More knowledgeable wags reply that many congregations could start with the pastor's family.

Simply put, there is an active conversation—as well as enacted legislation—that assumes religious institutions have a role to play in strengthening community life in general and delivering social services in particular. *Often absent from this conversation, however, is any notion that churches should adopt or continue a prophet posture or advocacy.* Rather, the dialogue assumes that church and state will be able to coexist without the checks and balances of moral authority. Stopping just short of calling for a return to the idyllic days of pristine partnership between home, school, and church, this model values churches more for what they can do than for what they essentially are. From a theological perspective, few religious insiders would quarrel with the notion that, in the best of all worlds, what religious institutions do is a product of what they are—i.e., that their outreach, their service delivery, their helping ministries flow from their very being as faith-based institutions. Yet, current political conversations do not attend to this faith dimension, and in so doing, manage to avoid many pressing public moral questions as well.

In the second kind of inquiry into the public role of religious institutions—that taking place within the churches themselves—religious institutions move between political disengagement on the one hand and public re-engagement aimed at "meeting the needs" of current congregational, jurisdictional, and denominational constituencies. These modes of public engagement and disengagement alike reflect the rapidly shifting tides of political reality, but the gravitational pull is toward a political center that can provide emotional and ethical respite for persons made dizzy by such changes. Some of the conversation here comes as a response to the public dialogue on the role of churches. But

The Auburn report comes during a season of heightened interest in the role of religious institutions in public life.

more of it reflects a need for institutional self-preservation. Public disengagement offers refuge from the failures of a particular political agenda under the slogan of "taking care of our own," while public engagement promises new ways to "take care of our own," in light of the fact that they are leaving us.

I find these two "streams of inquiry" on the role of religious institutions a helpful context within which to consider the Auburn report. As a former seminary dean, I am tempted to turn immediately to the second stream of inquiry and defend it as a necessary precursor to any public presence of religious institutions in general and seminaries in particular. But in my current role as a policy analyst, I am much more fascinated by the issues being raised in policy circles concerning the public role of churches and virtually scandalized by the notion that most of this conversation to which I have been privy has occurred without much participation of theological schools. Let me offer two instances of this "missed connection" at the national level. A recent issue of the *Brookings Review*, arguably one of the most widely read public policy journals in the world, carried the title, "What Does God Have to Do With the American Experiment?" Only one theological educator wrote for the issue. The Manhattan Institute has begun extensive inquiry into faith-based solutions to social problems. The list of fellows related to this enterprise includes two pastors, but no theological educators.

The Auburn report also notes that local politics seem unaffected by the presence of seminaries. The comments by local politicians and community leaders cited in the report raise the question of religious presence at precisely the time when policy discussions seem to call for that presence. It seems to me that if seminaries and religious leaders were prepared and positioned to do so, there would be ample opportunity for discussion of the public role of religious institutions that was actually informed by religious institutions themselves. But several things work against this happening.

First, while those initiating the conversation on religion and public life represent a mixture of the religious (liberal and conservative), areligious, and even antireligious, a critical mass of those involved clearly do not understand religious institutions. They are more comfortable hearing persons like themselves talk about churches than talking to someone from the churches themselves. They don't know the church world in general, nor its leadership in particular. Beyond that, they are even less likely to know the scholars of the church. Simply put, if we want to enter the conversation about religion and public life, we are going to have to invite ourselves to the party.

Second, because the interest in religion and public life owes much to the so-called social service function of religious institutions and much less to the churches as repositories of moral wisdom and insight, religious leaders will have to bring to the table their own brand of moral discourse, appropriately blended with a solid grasp of public issues and policy. Despite the well-known

moral lapses of some public religious figures, religious leaders bring rich traditions that make them well-equipped to raise value-laden questions concerning public life. Religious leaders, however, tend to have a poor grasp of policy issues, whether in contemporary debates about welfare reform, the role of race in domestic policy, school choice and school vouchers, or other issues that affect the lives of the people our churches are called to serve.

It would be foolish to expect theological seminaries to develop across-the-board expertise in policy matters, especially at the expense of the already dwindling core of tradition at the heart of seminary curricula. But neither is it acceptable for seminaries to serve as professional and research institutions without in some way accessing such expertise for faculties, students, and the general church. Interestingly, many of our denominations have people who do policy work almost in isolation from the world of congregations. If theological seminaries seek a closer link with congregational life, they will be better positioned to work on the interface of religion and policy than even denominational and jurisdictional officials.

If we want to enter the conversation about religion and public life, we are going to have to invite ourselves to the table.

Somewhere between preparing candidates for ministry in isolation from public policy concerns and turning seminaries into social policy research centers is an understanding of the seminary as a place where theological knowledge can be brought to bear on important questions of public policy and community well-being. Such a perspective both avoids the baptism of ideology in theological fonts and the false notion that seminaries can become schools of public policy. A major way to avoid these problems is to focus on the moral questions involved in public issues while being informed by good policy people and studies.

This leads to a third challenge: the development of partnerships between theological seminaries and professional research and/or learning institutions that concentrate on issues of public policy and community well-being. Some ready partners already exist: religion-friendly institutions whose full-time mission has been to inform and influence policy on issues that people of faith care about. These institutions include faith-based think tanks such as the Center for Public Justice (which assisted Senator John Ashcroft in the development of Charitable Choice legislation) and university-based research centers such as the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies (which advised Jesse Jackson during his presidential bids).

The challenge of developing such partnerships is heightened for theological seminaries. Free-standing seminaries can suffer from isolation, from not belonging to a larger intellectual community where such issues are part of the normal fare of discussion and research. These schools, after looking seriously at available resources, should identify

institutions of like persuasion, whether the match is the conservative heritage of Pepperdine University and its newly developed School of Public Policy, or the innovative faith-friendly work of Northwestern University's Center for Urban Affairs and Policy Research, which continues to inform definitions of community organizing, development, and building through its assets-based approach to community analysis. And while Conrad Cherry has rightly shown the tensions inherent in the attempt to maintain prophetic integrity in the university-based divinity school,[1] it still stands to reason that such institutions may be better poised to develop such partnerships with policy-wise thinkers who are part of this larger conversation. That said, free-standing seminaries should think about developing and strengthening conversations with professional and research institutions that can be appropriate partners in thinking through the role of religion and public life.

The final challenge concerns the role of African-American theological schools and seminary leadership. While the Auburn report rightly points to the historic role of public engagement by black theological leaders, the trends of the past twenty years bode a warning for those who believe that such leadership will continue unaffected through the new era of devolution and shifting policy. Black middle class churches increasingly find themselves in situations parallel to the white urban congregations of twenty or thirty years ago which struggled with the decline in their "neighborhood population" and made the choice to follow their members to the suburbs. If such a phenomenon persists in the black community today (and all indications are that it will), then it is a short jump from the current celebration of African-American public theological engagement to the same laments of invisibility that plague today's mainline schools and leadership, and threaten the rest. Cornel West has already demonstrated the bankruptcy of the black exceptionalist tradition which gives African-Americans a sort of "get out of jail free" card when it comes to such issues as prophetic witness, community engagement, and social critique. Black seminary leaders will probably always be expected to preach, speak, and be a part of the fabric of public leadership in the black community. But whether these leaders will continue as a prophetic presence may well be determined by the extent to which they can resist tendencies toward cultural assimilation that could render them as invisible as their white counterparts. Indeed, *the whole of this argument hinges on whether one accepts prophetic witness as part and parcel of a seminary's mission.* If not, the above is moot. But if so, Barbara Wheeler and her colleagues have spoken directly to the very real danger that theological seminaries could develop into non-prophet organizations.

Notes

1. *Hurrying Toward Zion: Universities, Divinity Schools, and American Protestantism* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995).

A DISTINCTIVE VOICE

BY JEREMIAH McCARTHY

ST JOHN'S SEMINARY, CAMARILLO, CALIFORNIA

The community of schools that comprises the Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada (ATS) is remarkable both for the diversity of confessional traditions that are represented, and for their common commitment to the vocation of preparing men and women for the church's mission. Within this singular task, the theological schools face an inevitable tension. Graduates are expected to have developed the professional and personal qualifications necessary not only to serve as leaders of various churches, but also to function in the broader context of the world outside the theological academy. For this reason, the ATS has engaged in a careful conversation among its constituencies to help articulate strategies that might enhance the "public" dimensions of a student's theological education.

The programs of Roman Catholic seminaries in the United States—the community of schools that I serve—must conform to *The Program of Priestly Formation* (PPF), the normative document developed and regularly revised by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, and approved by the Vatican. In this master "blueprint," the focus is on programs for training priests that integrate various dimensions of formation: intellectual, spiritual, pastoral, and human. All of these elements are seen as mutually supportive in a process that not only delivers intellectual content (in graduate degree programs) but also prepares men for ordination to the priesthood, distinctively understood within the tradition. This pattern of preparation retains a focus on the Eucharistic and sacramental responsibilities that are specific to priests in the Roman Catholic Church even as it increasingly emphasizes that a priest's ministry involves forms of collaborative leadership. Such collaboration requires respect for the gifts of all baptized persons, and inviting people to share the Church's ministry. This invitation is not a function of the current shortage of priests, but in fact represents distinctive pastoral and theological emphases of the Church documents from the Second

Vatican Council and subsequent Synods of the Holy See.

These documents make clear that in a priest's life—and a seminarian's preparation—public responsibilities beyond the leadership of worship are not add-ons. Action on behalf of justice and peace is understood as an imperative of the Gospel, with real implications for one's witness and exercise of ministry. Throughout his pontificate, John Paul II has directed priests and the Catholic faithful to engage their world: to develop greater ecumenical and interfaith awareness, to attend to the pastoral complexities of multi-cultural and global diversity, and to bring the message of the Gospel to bear on modern culture. With these mandates, seminaries are challenged to equip priests with the skills to respond collaboratively to the public dimensions of their ministry.

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However, overloading the curriculum with new courses is clearly not the answer to this challenge. Seminaries must, in my view, develop a multi-faceted and ongoing response, and enlist a broad array of resources and talents to assist them.

The Auburn report challenges Catholic theological educators to consider how these resources will be assembled to form priests properly for their collaborative responsibilities within the public dimensions of the Church's ministry. In this brief response, however, I want to focus my comments on another aspect of the Auburn report, namely, the lack of "public" engagement by theological faculties and what this might mean in the Catholic context.

Let me explain to the non-Roman Catholic reader that, most notably, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops represents the public face of the American Catholic community. The NCCB has brought outstanding public leadership to questions of the economy, human rights, war and peace, and a consistent ethic of life, and the administrative apparatus that the Bishops employ has served as the focus for outreach and teaching. Effective communication and action, however, require a network of many other interlocutors. Diocesan and parish structures are part of this mix, *but the seminaries themselves need more extensive involvement as well.*

While respecting the leadership of the Bishops and their authoritative voice on these matters, seminary faculties could be more creatively engaged by the Bishops in their work on theology and public policy. Seminary faculty should not be overly taxed, but the skills of particular faculty members could be more profitably utilized. Faculty most frequently consulted today are those with training in moral theology. There is a need to bring the faculty as a whole into reflection on public responsibilities of ministry and to identify their corporate voice as an important contributor. One creative opportunity is

for faculty members to assume an active role in diocesan theological commissions and to include within their agenda questions of "public theology." Rather than framing only ad hoc responses to the immediacy of pressing issues, structured and regular conversations would more substantively and effectively contribute to the public character of the theological enterprise. For example, structured conversations by a theological commission on macro-economic justice might yield strategies for educating local Catholic business leaders about practical ways their faith perspective can inform just economic decisions.

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While I believe that the particularity of the Catholic voice must be more forcefully articulated, let me also note my conviction that the Catholic voice must be spoken in collaboration with other theological voices if we are to have a genuine impact on the "naked public square," so aptly named by Richard John Neuhaus. Neuhaus analyzes the marginalization of the religious voice as a respected player in the marketplace of ideas. Stephen Carter amplifies this theme in his book, *The Culture of Disbelief,* in which he argues, among other things, that procedural safeguards enshrined in law are insufficient to sustain the values necessary for public order. There is no substitute for long-term, substantive, and critical dialogue within the theological academy to assure shared ownership of the fundamental values captured in the weave of the constitutive narratives and texts of our diverse theological traditions.

I believe this sustained conversation about theology's public character invites us to envision a new paradigm of the role of theology and theological faculty in the marketplace of ideas and action. The individual genius of a Martin Luther King, Jr. or a Reinhold Niebuhr, a Monsignor John A. Ryan or a Monsignor George Higgins, is essential to ongoing witness. Such charismatic figures are invaluable. We must also envision new patterns of collaborative discourse whereby the distinctive voice of the theological faculty can take its proper place in the crafting of public policy more coherently. Such a pattern, for example, might prompt ecclesiastical authorities to consult with theological faculties about adopting public policy questions as faculty research projects. I believe that endowment agencies and other funding sources would be attracted by such ventures. In any event, I am delighted that this conversation is underway, and I am excited by the prospect of many more fruitful discussions about enhancing theology's public voice.

About Auburn Theological Seminary

Auburn Seminary was founded in 1818 by the presbyteries of central New York State. Progressive theological ideas and ecumenical sensibilities guided Auburn's original work of preparing ministers for frontier churches and foreign missions. After the seminary relocated from Auburn, New York, to the campus of Union Theological Seminary in New York City in 1939, Auburn ceased to grant degrees, but its commitment to progressive and ecumenical theological education remained firm.

As a free-standing seminary working in close cooperation with other institutions, Auburn found new forms for its educational mission: programs of serious, sustained theological education for laity and practicing clergy; a course of denominational studies for Presbyterians enrolled at Union; and research into the history, aims and purposes of theological education.

In 1991, building on its national reputation for research, Auburn established the Center for the Study of Theological Education to foster research on current issues on theological education, an enterprise that Auburn believes is critical to the well-being of religious communities and the world that they serve.

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