

## **The Heart of Things**

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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.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> 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.

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 first hand, 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 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 world, we will greatly benefit the core mission of theological education as well as the wider causes it serves.

#### **Notes**

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

<sup>2</sup>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).