The Change We Need: Race and Ethnicity in Theological Education

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ABSTRACT: The presence of people of color in significant numbers in predominately white theological institutions has placed a new set of dynamics in the midst of (1) academic theological conversation, (2) the teaching of the subject matter of theological education, and (3) the formation process of students. We are only beginning to assess the cost of adaptation both for theological institutions and for scholars of color. The question now is whether institutions will move beyond a facile management of diversity to a productive embodiment of diversity in their educational processes and their common life.

Introduction

Look at the photos. You can see the change in those yearly pictures. The bodies of racial and ethnic minorities and women now more heavily sprinkle the formerly monochromatic images of a graduating class and a learned faculty, both formerly comprised primarily and often exclusively of serious-looking white men. Fifty years is a long time in the life of an institution, but theological institutions count time slowly where recent (as in an idea, or a scholarly work, or an argument) can mean anywhere from 20 to 200 years. So this change in the bodies that inhabit theological institutions is truly a recent change and a painfully slow one for many institutions. The invasion of predominately white theological institutions by racial and ethnic minorities is one of the single most important changes in theological education in the latter half of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century. That change has had a profound effect on the ecologies of institutions, placing a new set of dynamics in the midst of (1) academic theological conversation, (2) the teaching life in the theological academy, and (3) the formation process of students.
New interlocutors in old conversations/old interlocutors in new conversations

Theological education is not a new thing for people of color, especially in the United States. For example, theological education has been going on in historically black institutions since before the turn of the last century, and there have been formally trained black and brown Christian intellectuals from the very beginning of the colonial moment. What constitutes the new in the last 50 years is the unanticipated presence of racial and ethnic minorities in places both spatial and conceptual where their voices had not been imagined. Conversation is the life blood of academic life, whether it is conversations scholars are having in the still silence of their research or through literary interaction with others in print or in face-to-face meetings. The blood of the theological academy has changed thanks to the presence of minorities, but this new blood does not yet circulate with ease through the body. Racial and ethnic voices emerged as an interruption within the scholarly conversations of the theological academy, and initially they made visible one dynamic that had always been present in the wider academy and society in America—the dynamic of intellectual assimilation and scholarly mimicry. That dynamic may be put crudely with a question: Was the nonwhite scholar to be seen as (for example) a New Testament scholar who just happens to be black or brown and/or female or was that scholar’s work marked by and defined through his or her race and gender?

This dynamic, which pivoted on the idea of authentic/inauthentic identities, had the unintended consequence of making visible the racial subject in theological work (that is, the identity of the scholars and not just their scholarship) and brought white identity into view, no longer concealed inside of claims to objectivity or universality. This dynamic blossomed into a wider set of issues that now highlight the troubled status of academic theological conversation. Racial and ethnic minorities have witnessed the fragmentation of conversation. That fragmentation is not due primarily to the explosion of knowledge, or the increased specialization within the theological disciplines, or the increased number of scholars entering the fields. That fragmentation is due to the disjointed lines of interlocutors now at play in the theological academy. Who is talking to whom? Who is listening? Under what conditions are people speaking? These have become very complicated questions in scholarly work, and scholars of color are caught
in very serious negotiation regarding the lines of communication. On one side you have scholars who are trying to think of the constitutive realities of their subject matter in relation to the constitutive realities of identities and of contemporary social structures, and on the other side you have scholars who resist such a concurrence, preferring to imagine their subject matter enclosed within its own internal logics and order of knowing that are only compromised by identity matters. Indeed, quite a few scholars on this latter side imagine a continuing decline in their scholarly fields because of such wrongheaded subjective inquiry. Both groups of scholars are concerned with the advancement and clarification of knowledge in their fields, but the kind of conversation necessary for the furtherance of knowledge is not clear to everyone. Even at this moment, there remains a racial/ethnic/gender divide in the conversations of the theological academy with people of color and their allies in one discursive orbit and significant numbers of white scholars in another discursive orbit. Each recognizes the existence of the other, sometimes in polite scholarly acknowledgment but rarely in shared intellectual exploration. The question now is whether there will emerge a generation of scholars that can embody new forms of interaction and intellectual exchange that mark a new reality of shared conversation and projects that enhances knowledge.

**Living in someone else’s house**

Teachers of color entering the theological academy entered curricular houses and institutional ecologies not built with them in mind, often asking the abiding question, When and where do I enter? The usefulness of the house or all its aesthetic pleasures was not in question. The real question was the status of the new occupants. The presenting question in regard to institutional ecologies and curricular structures was and is the
cost of adaptation. What does it cost the scholar of color and what does it cost the institution to adapt to this new life together? Making an old house fit new occupants is exhausting work with mixed results. Such has been the case with minority scholars in predominately white institutions. One of the untold stories of theological education in the last 60 years has been the painful struggle of scholars of color to thrive in these institutions. There is a trail of tears of minority faculty members that match a trail of missteps and backwards steps by institutions. At issue has been the willingness of institutions to receive fully the changes that minority faculty members bring to the articulation of their disciplines, to the teaching of their subject matter, and to administrative leadership. What comes along with those changes is the rearticulation of the mission of the school. What has also been at issue is the willingness of racial and ethnic minority faculty members to take on the missional trajectories of the institution in ways that announce deep continuity with its most cherished hopes.

What complicates further this new life together is the powerful inertia embedded in predominately white theological institutions toward recapitulating a centered white male subject as the abiding image of education being done well. Racial and ethnic faculty (and students) struggle against the phantasm of the white male in the classroom. That haunting presence of an authorial norm often invades faculty-student interactions and the way minority faculty members are positioned in relation to their discipline and their teaching. Many are pressed toward shadow boxing with an image they cannot defeat. Worse yet, faculty members in general are tempted toward a kind of phantom assimilation, a spirit possession through which they mimic the comportment and gestures of a mythical

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faculty and tempts some toward racial and gender mimicry.

What constitutes a discipline being presented well and teaching being
done well is an open question in the theological academy. That question
has now emerged with a new intensity in institutions with an increased
presence of nonwhite faculty. This new intensity is due in great measure
to the crumbling assumptions regarding both who guarantees excellent
teaching (a white male teacher) and what guarantees high quality theo-
logical education. That latter guarantee was rooted in the imperial position
that theological instruction enjoyed in Western educational systems. Gone
is the day when theological studies (broadly understood) enjoyed its foun-
dational status in the formation of a cultivated individual. Theological
studies was woven into liberal arts education in such a way as to make its
pedagogical justifications invisible and made it unnecessary to articulate
its goals in formation. But the form of excellence in scholarship and teach-
ning and student cultivation is now precisely what demands clarification
through a new conversation. However, not many theological faculties have
found their way toward sustaining a productive conversation regarding
the form of excellence in theological education. That conversation has not
gained significant traction because faculties have been slow to articulate
to themselves the lines of continuity and discontinuity of disciplinary and
pedagogical vision that are implicit and sometimes explicit with a diverse
faculty.

Racial and ethnic faculty members often find themselves in an inter-
rupted status. The real conversation about who they are and what their
work means for the very nature of the school’s educational endeavor is
not happening. The real conversation about the difference their scholar-
ship and presence make to the ecology of the classroom is not happening.
The necessary conversation about serious reform to the curricular vision
of the school because of their intellectual presence will not happen. And
the important conversation about how the faculty together must carry
forward the missional aspirations of the institution as new wine in new
wineskins is also not happening. A perennial symptom of this interrupted
status is the continuing practice of placing the teaching work of racial and
ethnic faculty members in ancillary roles in relation to the core pedagogical thrust of the curriculum. That ghettoized positioning shows poor institutional self-reflexivity in its thinking about how it transitions from its past to its future. It also marks the ambiguity that continues to cover minority presence in many institutions where it has not been made clear that their intellectual work and presence is a welcomed and celebrated good thing.

The issue here is related to but different from the resistance that many scholars of color experienced as the first generation of minority scholars at their institutions. The issue here has to do with their presence in relation to how an institution thinks of itself and understands its work in society and the world. In this regard, the intellectual presence of racial and ethnic faculty members has not penetrated to the core of institutional reflection on good scholarship, teaching, and student formation. The question now in this regard is, What real difference does racial and ethnic (and gender) difference make for how theological institutions do their reflective work especially with a view toward student formation?

**Forming students in which century?**

Many predominately white theological institutions have now had several generations of students of color move through their halls. Indeed most of the racial and ethnic faculty members of today were the minority students taught in many cases by those first generation minority faculty members. Together they share a powerful legacy of successful adaptation to their institutions in ways that allowed them to make productive use of their theological training. Adaptation, however, has not thus far meant the kind of transformation of institutional ethos that would create a deep collaboration of formation goals for diverse students. The weight that borders on being a burden of figuring out how to adapt the theological formation that takes place in the institution to preparing them to face the real needs of racial and ethnic communities remains on the shoulders of students. This burden is beyond the usual challenge of translating the world of theological discourse within common everyday language and merging the knowledge formed in the academy with the good wisdom of indigenous communities. This burden draws students of color into the exhausting task of trying to map the complexities of life in the racial world across the complexities of theological formation without enough help.
that exhausting task is made even more problematic by its fragmentation within the theological academy that aligns minority students with their own private labors, African American, Hispanic, Asian, African, and so forth—each invited to figure out the relevance of his or her theological formation for his or her own communities. Very few theological institutions have at this moment developed a strategic vision of deep collaboration that pulls the burden off the bodies of minority students and returns it to the shared work of the entire community. That work of helping minority students in this regard tends to fall heavily on racial and ethnic minority faculty members who are yet pulled into the relentless work of trying to establish the conditions for relevance. What are the conceptual conditions necessary for the work of the theological academy to be relevant to the communities that draw my concern? What are the conditions necessary for my scholarly work to be relevant to the concerns of my communities? The value of such questions is not at issue, only their reach. These should be the questions of the entire theological community, but they tend to be isolated to the faculty and students of color. That isolation penetrates many institutions, leaving untapped the potential to bring various minority students along with white students into a shared project of collaborative formation that might bring their communities together.

Ironically, this lack of collaborative formation continues to stunt the growth of white students, many of whom recognize that they must be able to function within the new multicultural realities of society and who don’t want to embody and perform a preferred homogeneity through their ministries and by their lives. Developing a vision of collaborative formation

The question now is whether theological schools can more deeply collaborate with racial and ethnic students concerning their formation needs and if they can envisage formation that cross-pollinates and interpenetrates spiritual visions so that all students are invited into a truly shared project of cultivation that is not assimilation into a white norm.
requires institutions to reflect on the foundational image(s) that drives their work of formation. Many institutions that are beginning to challenge the idea of a center/margin in the classroom have not begun to challenge that conceptual arrangement in the formation process of students. Many schools opt out of such work, preferring to leave to minority faculty members and students the strange work of creating a parallel universe of spiritual, ministerial, and intellectual formation that runs alongside the central work of the institution. The question now is whether theological schools can more deeply collaborate with racial and ethnic students concerning their formation needs and if they can envisage formation that cross-pollinates and interpenetrates spiritual visions so that all students are invited into a truly shared project of cultivation that is not assimilation into a white norm. The hope in this regard would be to cultivate in students an ability to foster such collaboration in and between faith communities.

Conclusion

What a prospective student of color will see if she visits a theological school today would be markedly different and better than what she would have seen five or six decades ago. Yet what she would see is a very serious work in progress. Theological institutions in North America (and the Western world) are still moving beyond their colonialist groundings. They are, however, yet to shake free from their segregationalist habits of mind. The question remains whether they can and will start to imagine with the multitude, that is, imagine a diverse church and diverse communities not to manage but to embody through their educational processes and their common life. Theological education in the Western world has entered a new stage where it must develop authentically decolonial habits of mind that transform theological schools into places that educate people toward one another and not simply beside one another.

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