



THEOLOGICAL PEDAGOGIES

REFLECTIONS ON PLACE, PROCESS, PERSON
AND PRACTICES IN TEACHING AND
LEARNING THEOLOGY IN TIMES OF CRISIS

EDITED BY
SHANTELE WEBER, BÅRD NORHEIM & IAN NELL

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Peer-review declaration

The publisher (AOSIS) endorses the South African 'National Scholarly Book Publishers Forum Best Practice for Peer-Review of Scholarly Books'. The book proposal form was evaluated by our Theological and Religious Studies domain editorial board. The manuscript underwent an iThenticate similarity evaluation to compare the level of originality with other published works and confirmed originality and appropriate acknowledgements to other published works. The manuscript underwent a rigorous two-step single-blind peer review assessment before publication, conducted by three technical expert reviewers in the field. These reviewers were independent of the volume editors and authors, and their identities were not disclosed to the volume editors or authors. The reviewers were independent of the publisher, volume editors and authors. The series editor and publisher shared feedback on the similarity reports and the reviewers' assessments with the manuscript's volume editors and authors to improve the manuscript. Where the reviewers recommended revisions and improvements, the volume editors and authors responded adequately to such recommendations. The reviewers commented positively on the scholarly merits of the manuscript and recommended that the book be published.

Research justification

The 2015/16 student movements in South Africa led many theologians to reconsider the type of and relevance of theological education. Through a joint research project focused on teaching and learning theology in times of crisis, this book is a product of a four-year collaboration between theologians and education scientists from South Africa, Kenya, Rwanda, England and Norway. In times of crisis, the role of theology in education becomes increasingly vital. The ability to navigate these challenging times requires innovative and effective teaching practices grounded in tradition and contemporary pedagogical insights. This book explores changing theological pedagogies in teaching theology, with a particular focus on the place, process, person and practices involved in teaching and learning theology during times of crisis.

A qualitative research design through literature studies and reflections on secondary empirical data was employed. Transformative and decolonial theological pedagogies that prioritise context through participatory approaches, where researchers serve as teachers and students contribute to knowledge production, form the core methods employed. Artificial intelligence (AI)-related technologies, student feedback mechanisms, songs, institutional databases and autoethnography are a few of the teaching approaches highlighted in this book.

Compared to other theological contributions in the field, this book focuses on theological approaches and does not primarily focus on resilience theory across several disciplines. Scholarly engagement within the volume is shaped predominantly by contributions from Norway and South Africa. Although some chapters attend specifically to curriculum, the book overall advances a wider-ranging focus and a more expansive scholarly orientation.

We hereby declare unequivocally that no part of this work was plagiarised or previously published elsewhere. It complies with the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET)'s standards for original content.

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Abbreviations and acronyms, figures and table appearing in the text and notes

List of acronyms and abbreviations

| | |
|----------|---|
| 4IR | Fourth Industrial Revolution |
| AGI | Artificial General Intelligence |
| AI | artificial intelligence |
| AICs | African Initiated Churches |
| AIKS | African Indigenous Knowledge Systems |
| AIS | artificial intelligence systems |
| ANC | African National Congress |
| ANI | Artificial Narrow Intelligence |
| ASI | Artificial Super Intelligence |
| ATR | African Traditional Religion |
| AU | African Union |
| AWS | Amazon Web Services |
| BA | Bachelor of Arts |
| BCE | Before Common Era |
| BCM | Black Consciousness Movement |
| BDiac | Bachelor of Diaconology |
| BERT | Bidirectional Encoder Representations from Transformers |
| BMI | Body Mass Index |
| BRICS | Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa |
| BTh | Bachelor of Theology |
| CAIDP | Center for Artificial Intelligence and Digital Policy |
| CE | Common Era |
| ChatGPT | Chat Generative Pre-trained Transformer |
| CI | collaborative inquiry |
| COIL | collaborative online international learning |
| COVID-19 | coronavirus disease 2019 |
| CYM | Christian Youth Movement |
| DD | Doctor of Divinity |
| DDiac | Doctor of Diaconology |

| | |
|--------|---|
| DHET | Department of Higher Education and Training |
| DIKU | Norwegian Agency for International Cooperation and Quality Enhancement in Higher Education |
| DTh | Doctor of Theology |
| FBOs | faith-based organisations |
| FMHS | Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences |
| GAI | generative artificial intelligence |
| GIZ | Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (German Agency for International Cooperation) |
| GRT | Generative Retrained Transformer |
| HAIs | historically advantaged institutions |
| HDI | historically disadvantaged institutions |
| HE | higher education |
| HEIs | higher education institutions |
| HIL | human in the loop |
| HOD | Head of Department |
| HOL | humans on the loop |
| HOOL | human out of the loop |
| HR | Human Resources |
| IA | intelligence amplification |
| laH | internationalisation at home |
| IASYM | International Association for the Study of Youth Ministry |
| ICTs | Information and Communication Technologies |
| IERA | Igreja Evangélica Reformada de Angola |
| ILO | International Labour Organization |
| IMF | International Monetary Fund |
| IRTG | International Research Training Group |
| IIS | Institute for Intelligent Systems |
| IT | information technology |
| ITS | intelligent tutoring systems |
| IUCEA | Inter-University Council for East Africa |
| KLISC | Kenya Library and Information Services Consortium |
| LCT | Legitimation Code Theory |
| LEC | Leading Ecclesial Change and Growth in Contexts |
| MA | Master of Arts |
| MLIS | Master of Library and Information Science |
| MTh | Master of Theology |
| NetACT | Network for African Congregational Theology |
| NIP | NetACT Internet Portal |

| | |
|--------|--|
| NIV | New International Version |
| NLA | Norsk Lærerkademi |
| NLP | natural language processing |
| NRF | National Research Foundation |
| NSFAS | National Student Financial Aid Scheme |
| ODeL | Open Distance eLearning |
| PhD | Doctor of Philosophy |
| QPS | Quality and Patient Safety |
| RITHM | Research in Theology and Ministry |
| SAMS | Southern African Missiological Society |
| SASO | South African Students' Organisation |
| SHW | Staff Health and Well-being |
| SHWP | Staff Health and Well-being Plan |
| SPOT | Student Perception of Teaching |
| SU | Stellenbosch University |
| TAU | Teaching Advancement at University |
| ThD | Doctor of Theology |
| TLC | Teaching and Learning Theology in Crisis |
| TML | technology-mediated learning |
| TVET | technical and vocational education and training |
| UCSA | Uniting Christian Students' Association |
| UJ | University of Johannesburg |
| UK | United Kingdom |
| UNB | University of Natal's Bantu |
| UNDP | United Nations Development Programme |
| UNESCO | United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization |
| Unisa | University of South Africa |
| UP | University of Pretoria |
| USA | United States of America |
| VAE | Variational Autoencoder |
| VCS | <i>Vereniging vir Christelike Studente</i> |
| VOHFA | Visions of Hope for Africa |
| VUCA | Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity and Ambiguity |
| WHO | World Health Organization |
| ZAR | South African rand |
| ZPD | zone of proximal development |

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Foreword

*Theology is constantly in motion –
seeking, imagining, improvising, and transforming
collaborative and generative,
embodied and conceptual,
grounded and mysterious.
If theology is this dynamic,
shouldn't our pedagogy reflect the same vitality –
especially in times of crisis?*

Years ago, I taught theology in a women's prison, and I thought it would be the most unusual and challenging teaching context of my career. I assumed it would stand apart for its death-dealing practices and institutional politics. Instead, it became my most formative preparation for teaching theology in the 21st century. The challenges I faced were not anomalies but previews of the enduring pedagogical crises shaping higher education (HE) – inequitable access to learning, the use of education as a tool for manipulation, disimagination, domination and intentional miseducation, deep systemic prejudices about who counts as worthy of life-giving learning experiences and who does not, and debates over technology, power and purpose.

Through collaborative qualitative research with theology students in prison, I gained a deeper understanding of the people, places, processes and practices necessary to teach in healing and hopeful ways. What I learned about teaching creatively and responsively there – about the importance of joy, laughter, critical dialogue, agility and play for affirming human dignity – guided me years later through the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, political divisions and continues to guide me through the ongoing challenges facing theological education. My experiences creating, embodying and learning theology with incarcerated women taught me that even amid profound constraints, a theological learning community can nurture healing, hope and collective care. I was therefore thrilled to gain a preview of *Theological pedagogies*.

This book *is* theological scholarship as hopeful witness. *It is an invitation* to consider the response and responsibility of theology in times of crises (climate change, youth citizenship, changing church status and artificial

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intelligence [AI]) and how we should teach as a result. The content, and moreover, the process, of this book models what theology and pedagogy require during crises: Diverse collaboration, deep contextual awareness and audacious hope. Its cross-continental scope and dedicated attention to African contributions provide a vital intervention in theological teaching and scholarship, showing us that we cannot expect to emerge from crisis with integrity unless we are committed to sincere collaboration.

Times of crisis demand our most creative, collaborative and innovative teaching if we want, as the authors desire, 'to advance the quality of theological education for a rapidly changing world'. The pages to follow encourage us to ask: What needs to change in how we teach theology? Whose voices are we missing? What structures must we transform? Do we yet have the courage to explore new paths, adapt our methods to current realities and honour the people and places where we teach?

May the readers of *Theological pedagogies* be inspired to see crisis in our learning communities – as I experienced it in prison – as an invitation to innovate, engage in deep play and learn our way toward new and more hopeful futures, even amid disruption.

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Theological pedagogies in times of crisis

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■ Abstract

Theology explores and investigates the presence of God in (biblical) texts, traditions and (contemporary) experiences. This chapter positions this book as the second major contribution to the conversation on teaching and learning theology in times of crisis. It is a product of a collaborative research project between Norsk Lærerkademi (NLA) University College in Norway and the Faculty of Theology at Stellenbosch University (SU) in South Africa. The aim of the project is to address theology's response to

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three key crises in particular: The climate crisis, the challenge of youth citizenship and the church's changed status in society.

■ Introduction

Theology explores and investigates the presence of God in (biblical) texts, traditions and (contemporary) experiences. It must also endeavour to articulate an account of those moments in which God seems absent from the world (Norheim 2022, pp. 514–515). These experiences often emerge in times of crisis, when the world seems 'mute' (Rosa 2019, p. 425). A crisis may be characterised by the emergence of one or more threats that challenge the way we 'think, act and structure our lives' (Norheim & Haga 2022, p. 6). During periods like these, the role of theology in education becomes increasingly vital. The capacity to navigate these challenges demands innovative and effective teaching practices, grounded in both tradition and contemporary pedagogical insight.

This book is the second contribution to the conversation on teaching and learning theology in times of crisis. It is a product of a collaborative research project between NLA and SU. The aim of the project is to address theology's response to three key crises in particular: The climate crisis, the challenge of youth citizenship and the church's changed status in society. These issues are outlined in much more detail in the chapters of the project's first book, *Glocal theological education: Teaching and learning theology in the light of crisis* (Norheim & Weber 2024a). The key activities of the project have included co-teaching online and learning within local contexts, aimed at developing new modes of teaching and best-practice research in joint educational initiatives. It should be noted that this South-West academic exchange between scholars and postgraduate students highlighted the contextual differences between the West and the Global South but also generated shared pedagogical insights and practices. In this second book, we seek to take a step further by exploring emerging theological pedagogies in the teaching of theology, with particular focus on four key themes: The place, the process, the person and the practices involved in teaching and learning theology during times of crisis.

We acknowledge that these themes do not constitute the primary focus of the individual chapters. Some may choose to reposition certain themes, with particular emphasis on prioritising artificial intelligence (AI) as an overarching framework. Our collaboration has unfolded as a distinctly pedagogical journey. For this reason, the contexts in which theology is formed and taught are of significance; equally important are the processes through which theological knowledge and pedagogical practices take shape, as well as the communities of learners and teachers who embody them. The hope is that sound practice will be critically

reflected upon and fostered throughout this journey. In this light, the invitation may be to discern these dynamics within each scholar's contribution.

Throughout human history, change is a constant and is also present in current realities; therefore, theology cultivates the 'imaginative art of discernment' that responds to change in various ways by 'drawing on the dialectical learning that happens when encyclopaedic and empirical sources of knowledge are juxtaposed in the midst of human life, even in the midst of crisis' (Norheim & Weber 2024b, p. 3). Given that change is ever-present:

[7]heological education must continue to adapt to changing ministry [...] As we consider our graduates, we recognize that much in our traditional theological curriculum bear little connection to their current ministry contexts. If we are serious about preparing men and women for the complex world of the twenty-first century, then it is crucial that we reexamine our goals in theological education. (Shaw 2016, p. 20)

In a study on church-based teaching and learning for transformation, Meneely (2015, p. 89) advocates the integration of Christian theological spirituality with pedagogy. He emphasises the connection between the physical, emotive and affective dimensions of Christian spirituality and the intellectual stimulation of learning, viewing them as interrelated components in the development of transformative theological pedagogies. Meneely (2015) further argues that:

[7]he relational experience with other Christians is not only a very effective learning experience, but also a very positive environment for growth. Growth is directly linked to the opportunity to share and listen to other viewpoints in an experiential setting, and both studies have shown this to be true. (p. 93)

This perspective implies that growth is not conceived as a competitive concept; stated differently, my growth is not in opposition to, nor does it diminish, your growth. On the contrary, as my capacity for wise discernment in times of crisis expands, it is likely that yours will also develop, provided we participate in a shared learning community (cf. Rosa 2019, pp. 435–443).

As we seek to advance the quality of theological education in a rapidly changing world, it is essential to acknowledge that attention to the diverse teaching and learning pedagogies present in theological training institutions reflects a recognition that 'our students enter colleges having been formed by a multiplicity of personal, cultural, and spiritual forces' (Saines 2009, p. 333). Lamak (2023, pp. 238–240) cautions that the dominance of Western categories in theology highlights the need for African theology to be grounded in African identity, culture and worldview. This also implies that 'faculty and students face the mutual challenge of varying levels of

resistance and subversion of learning that may require of faculty better and more creative, imaginative pedagogy' (Saines 2009, p. 333).

The challenge for theological educators, therefore, is to assist students in moving beyond naïve, pre-critical, sentimental or quasi-fundamentalist forms of piety, while grounding them in the theological tradition in ways that are genuinely formative (Saines 2009, p. 335). This is, therefore, also a matter of context and access to education. Global protests about educational access and content draw attention to the diverse realities that students bring into the classrooms. As theological educators, we are continually challenged to consider and evaluate the classroom experience. Teaching and learning strategies that do not actively engage students risk losing relevance for ministry, particularly in the light of the diverse contexts into which they are called to serve.

This participatory approach to learning is significant and is described as 'a pivotal concept in teaching and learning' because it relates to a qualitative aspect of learning – specifically, how individuals experience and organise the subject matter at the heart of the learning task (Saines 2009). Saines' (2009) research calls for a clear distinction between deep and surface learning when assessing the impact of teaching on students. He explains:

Surface learning occurs when students approach learning with an emphasis on the task of gathering facts and information, where memorization is for later use with no distinction between new ideas and existing knowledge. Deep learning[,] on the other hand[,] is about quality and quantity; it is holistic in nature as [*it*] reflects an orientation in learning – an intention toward finding meaning and understanding. Deep learners undertake critical evaluation and relate learning to earlier experiences and to the world in which they live; it opens a window through which the real world can be seen more clearly. (p. 335)

Aiming for this deeper engagement:

[/]Institutions of higher education that teach theology need to give an important place to researching student approaches to learning and to seek appropriate ways to support constructive teaching environments, especially offering times and places for critical discussion and dialogue amongst peers and teachers. (Saines 2009, p. 345)

These perspectives on deep learning align with emerging insights into the significance of deep play. The concept of 'deep play' encompasses five key elements, which are likewise instrumental for deep learning in theological education: *Self-direction, intrinsic motivation, use of imagination, a process of orientation and positive emotions* (Sahlberg & Doyle 2019, p. 307). Like deep learning, deep play stimulates curiosity (Sahlberg & Doyle 2019, p. 309), which is essential in theological education – particularly in times of crisis. If theological education is reconceived as a form of deep play – cultivating deeper learning, critical curiosity and imaginative discernment – the knowledge arising from

theological study may once again be received as a gift (Norheim 2014, pp. 204–205), akin to the wisdom (‘*phronesis*’) that emerges from ‘losing yourself’ in deep play.

■ Four key themes: Place, process, person and practices

In psychology and leadership studies, viewing oneself as a ‘system’ is essential for developing the skills and knowledge required to lead and make wise decisions (Heifetz, Grashow & Linsky 2009, pp. 181–186). Similarly, theological scholars, educators and practitioners reflect on the role of the person by examining how the identity and background of both teacher and learner shape the teaching and learning of theology in times of crisis. Hutcherson (2016) observes:

Real-world problems require integrative, multi-disciplinary approaches for social and religious workers trying to effect change in society. Even deciding how to begin[,] raises complex questions. During the process of researching and planning for social action, the original situation observed may undergo change, along with the researcher herself, so that the initial observations no longer apply. (p. 31)

This underscores that, in theological education, the individual is invariably situated within a community. Thus, any consideration of personality in this context necessarily extends to the broader discourse of the individual’s place in society (Jaeger 1967, p. xix). This is particularly significant in the African context, where theological scholarship is cautioned against being subsumed within collaborations with the West. Maluleke (2000, pp. 19–38) specifically highlights African identity in this regard.

Section 1, which examines the role of place in theological education, aims to investigate how physical, cultural and social contexts shape pedagogical approaches in times of crisis.

The place of a crisis holds significant importance. A crisis that endangers the very foundations of human existence and way of life may be described as a cosmological crisis – one in which the fear it provokes destabilises the entire cosmos and may be interpreted as apocalyptic. Similarly, a crisis that disrupts the social order and the structures through which communities are organised – the polis, so to speak – may be regarded as a political crisis, accompanied by a corresponding political fear. Finally, a crisis that jeopardises our home (*oikos*) and personal sense of identity is best described as a private crisis, evoking a more intimate, individualised fear (Norheim & Haga 2022, pp. 41–105). In developing a theology of place in education, it is crucial to recognise that multiple crises may affect these places simultaneously, in diverse and intersecting ways. As we consider the role of place(s) in theological pedagogy, we must not only reflect on the

place of the crisis but also on the place of (theological) education itself. Where are we, physically and contextually, when we attempt to learn during times of crisis? The convergence of theological formation and learning with place(s) of crisis serves as a dialectical starting point for cultivating theological leadership.

This section begins by examining how developments such as AI are reshaping our conception of place. In Chapter 2, 'Twofold crises: African theological pedagogy and technology', Mokoena examines African theological pedagogies in relation to the technological crisis. This chapter argues that generative AI - which can produce lengthy texts from simple prompts that mimic human reflection - presents a threat to critical thinking and, by extension, to theology as a discipline. It also examines how contextual theologies in Africa might be integrated into both theory and practice in response to the challenges and impacts of AI in theological education.

In Chapter 3, 'Exploring best practices for integrating artificial intelligence in theological libraries', Rutere highlights how such integration can enhance teaching and learning in theological education. She focuses on the potential of AI to support theological education and research, particularly during times of crisis. This chapter recommends ways in which AI-related technologies in library systems can be leveraged to improve both pedagogical and research outcomes in theological contexts.

In Chapter 4, 'Artificial intelligence in education: From tools to agents?', Cloete contends that the adoption of generative artificial intelligence (GAI) is inevitable and presents an overview of the tools currently available in the education sector. The chapter highlights both the possibilities and the disruptive impact of GAI on education, emphasising the need for its responsible use. Ethical considerations associated with the use of GAI are also explored.

In Chapter 5, 'Digital participation and social change: A practical theological reflection', Nell poses the following practical theological questions: What defines a responsible approach to connecting digital participation with social change? How can digital participation in social transformation help us respond to various crises? He advocates for a reflective and practical theological engagement with the intersection of digital presence and societal transformation.

From a systematic theology perspective, Innerdal in Chapter 6, 'Using sin and artificial intelligence for mutual illumination in crisis', concludes the section by linking contemporary developments in AI to the central Christian doctrine of human sin. This theological reflection aims to recover ancient wisdom while offering new insight. Fresh perspectives are offered on the possibilities - or perhaps more accurately, the limits - of AI technology in

the church, academia and society. The often-strong public expectation of AI as a flawless problem-solver, alongside numerous examples of AI-related failures due to bias, provides the backdrop for raising a profound theological question: What can the doctrine of human sin reveal about the limits of AI and what might AI, in return, reveal about the depth of human sin?

Recognising the importance of place may lead to the realisation that the curriculum needs to be revised or even transformed:

Urgent transformation of the curriculum for theological education in Africa is a necessity, not an option. Curriculum development is a professional undertaking which must begin from the context of the learners – from what they already know – then proceed towards helping them discern those texts and experiences that can provide relevant knowledge, skills, and expertise appropriate for each context. Jesus was exemplary in his pedagogical skills. (Mugambi 2013, p. 117)

People tend to interpret or understand matters differently depending on their cultural, religious, emotional, educational and historical contexts. As a result, individuals from diverse backgrounds may arrive at entirely different conclusions when confronted with similar issues. Thus, while epistemology concerns the study of knowledge, how people acquire and construct knowledge can vary significantly from one milieu to another (Ani 2013, p. 301). In Africa, theological training is almost always linked to ordination (Mugambi 2013, p. 121). This is largely true in the European context, though not without exceptions. Ani (2013) observes that:

Via [W]estern expansionism, scientific epistemological and academic traditions have been imposed and universalized as the proper means of attaining valid knowledge. Any form of knowledge that does not conform to scientific standards is considered delusory and unworthy of consideration in the academic milieu. (p. 300)

Africans are continually challenged to become subjects of history, instead of objects merely following the dictates of foreign powers or a globalisation dominated by Western thought processes, worldviews and values. As a result of Western educational systems, many Africans have come to perceive education as unattainable without conforming to the Western model of education (Ani 2013, p. 314).

Section 2 examines the processes that shape theological education. Norheim and Shepherd begin their discussion in Chapter 7, 'Leading ecclesial change in crisis: Hermeneutics for a glocal learning community' by employing a hermeneutic methodology that fosters a glocal learning community. They offer both pedagogical and theological reflections on the glocal learning community that emerged from the course 'Leading ecclesial change', considering how such communities may be established and developed to respond to contemporary crises and to foster learning through crisis.

From an African missiological standpoint, Nel highlights missiological habits of mind by analysing higher education (HE) within the shadow of neoliberalism through a decolonial epistemological lens. In Chapter 8, 'Decolonising epistemology within a (southern) African context: Teaching and learning towards transformation at Stellenbosch University', he situates this ideology within a distinctly (southern) African context, illuminating both the challenges and constraints as well as the hopes and aspirations shaping contemporary efforts at epistemic decolonisation.

In a creative turn in Chapter 9, 'Teaching theology through song', V Øystese invites us to consider teaching theology through song. He explores the historical role of singing in times of trauma and hardship and what these practices can teach us theologically, pedagogically and psychologically. Drawing from the history of hymns, church music and contemporary songs of lament, Øystese shows how song often raises more questions than offering answers. As a cross-cultural practice, singing facilitates mutual learning across borders and continents and enables the exchange of educational practices.

In Chapter 10, the final chapter of this section, R Øystese explores 'Language learning as faith formation'. He underscores the significance of mastering the Christian language as a means of existential reflection within the framework of the Christian worldview. To develop theological education that is equipped with the innovation and adaptive learning necessary to confront crisis, it is essential to transform the classroom experience (Wagner 2012, p. 202). At its core, this entails fostering processes that strengthen the capacities of theological innovators to act as agents of change, addressing crises while remaining firmly grounded in biblical knowledge and tradition.

Section 2 highlights the importance of process in theological teaching and learning. A key aspect of this is the pursuit of equal relations in processes of learning (De Kock & Norheim 2022, p. 186). Emphasising processes also involves exploring the teaching methods and strategies most effective in facilitating theological learning and reflection during times of crisis. Ani (2013, p. 303) cautions that 'intentionally and unintentionally, [C]olonialism and [W]estern civilization suppressed African ways of life and thought processes'. Quality theological education must take seriously the transcendent work of the Spirit in the teacher, the student and the wider community throughout the educational process. Similarly, our approach to education must recognise that pastoral skill extends beyond possessing a good 'bedside manner'; it includes a deep sensitivity to the movement of the Spirit in the lives of those we are called to serve (Shaw 2016, p. 25). Meneely (2015) adds that:

The positioning of Christian spirituality and the correct use of the [B]ible with appropriate critical reflection[,] can be an effective pedagogical tool that is cognitive, relational and existential in the teaching and learning process. This is also a further reminder that some of the big issues of learning and life[,] such

as those facing the church and society in Ireland today[,] can only be answered by the mind and the heart. (p. 99)

In Section 3, which focuses on the person in theological education, Thesnaar, in Chapter 11, 'Staff and student well-being in theological education', asks whether we are pedagogically committed to a fundamentally transformative reality or merely adding wellness as an ancillary programme. This chapter critically examines what, if anything, has changed in the teaching, research and learning environment in order to better understand its impact on the well-being of staff and students. The contribution proposes several strategies, including pastoral support and care, for cultivating a constructive and supportive learning environment.

In Chapter 12, 'Teaching for change: Best practices for educators to integrate technology', Chiroma outlines a range of best practices for integrating technology into contextual theological education during times of crisis, with particular emphasis on teaching for change. He advocates approaches that promote collaboration between educators and technology to advance transformative theological education. The best practices he discusses include online platforms, interactive virtual classrooms, digital resource access, mobile learning, collaborative projects, adaptive curriculum design, educator professional development and community engagement.

In Chapter 13, 'Poet or prophet, pastor or partner? Exploring best-praxis role(s) for a theological educator', Norheim and Shepherd present and analyse student feedback together with their own reflections on best practice. They ask: What roles should the theological educator adopt in order to foster a learning community of reflective practitioners equipped to address ecclesial crisis?

Finally, in Chapter 14, 'The guest lectureship: Gifts and growth of teaching theology across cultures', which also reflects on the role of the person in theological education, Tanis explores the gifts that guest lectureships bring to the teaching space. The chapter discusses the benefits and challenges of co-teaching and learning across nationalities and cultures by utilising both in-person and digital learning tools. In the initial stages of the Teaching and Learning Theology in Crisis (TLC) project, we engaged professors and students across our various institutions. The initiative highlights the role of guest lectureships, drawing on the expertise and diverse perspectives that guest lecturers contribute.

Section 4 centres on the theme of teaching practices or, more precisely, the role of practice(s) in teaching and learning theology. In other words, what are the best practices for integrating theory and practice in theological education, particularly during times of crisis?

'Practice' is a widely used, yet contested, concept in contemporary theology and educational philosophy (see, for example, Afdal 2021). While a comprehensive discussion of the term lies beyond the scope of this introduction, it is important to clarify how it is understood in this context. When we speak of practice, we refer to both concrete teaching practices and theological education as a practice in and of itself. Furthermore, we do not regard practice as opposed to theory, nor as merely reducible to the application of dogma or norms. Practices are rather regarded as composed of actions, expressions and meaning-making efforts where discourse and interpretation are integral to, not separate from, the practices themselves. This understanding of practice affirms that practices are always situated, revealing the contextual nature of theological teaching and learning. Such an understanding of practice also implies that practices are situated and reveals the situatedness of teaching and learning (of theology):

In terms of accessibility and education, Gyekye (1995, p. 13) contends that philosophical thought in Africa is reflected in the practices, oral literature and minds of the people, and not the minds and practices of a few. This is because knowledge and wisdom is circulated in African societies via rituals, proverbs, myths, folktales, folk songs, moral values, beliefs, customs, traditions, music, art symbols, institutions and practices of the people. (Gyekye 1995, p. 13; p. 36 cited in Ani 2013, p. 308)

Comparable insights are evident within theological education in both Norway and Europe.

In Chapter 15, "Don't quit your day job" and other lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic', Hansen discusses the challenges faced – and the responses adopted – by Network for African Congregational Theology (NetACT) member institutions during and following the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. Network for African Congregational Theology represents 54 tertiary theological training institutions of different sizes, including public and private universities, faculties of theology, church seminaries and Bible colleges in 15 African countries.

In Chapter 16, 'Exploring co-teaching in higher education: Core elements for a practical approach', Jermstad, Holovchuk and Jokstad examine the dynamics of co-teaching within an innovative framework developed through a Norwegian Agency for International Cooperation and Quality Enhancement in Higher Education (DIKU)-funded international research project on theological education. The study aims to understand instructors' perceptions of co-teaching strategies in the context of theological HE. It highlights the perceived benefits and challenges of co-teaching, specifically its impact on pedagogical innovation.

In Chapter 17, 'Marcion's teaching, ecclesial crisis and the church's resolution: Lessons on the broken relationship between Scripture and

theology for theology teaching’, Bokedal examines Marcion’s novel teaching, the ensuing ecclesial and theological crisis and the resolution of the majority church. Beginning with this early hermeneutical crisis, the chapter examines the fractured relationship between Scripture and theology as it persists within both modern and late-modern biblical and systematic theology.

Delving deeper into the biblical narratives, Punt examines ‘Teaching the New Testament as an anti-imperial text in the time of the empire’ in Chapter 18. This chapter examines the rationale and design of a first-year biblical studies module that intentionally situates the emergence of what is now called ‘the Bible’ within the historical contexts of the Ancient Near Eastern and Roman Empires. Although the Roman Empire and the New Testament form the primary focus, the chapter is less concerned with treating the Bible, empires and their interrelation as abstract subjects, and more with examining the pedagogical choices made, the rationale behind them and their educational significance.

In the final chapter of this section on processes in theological education entitled ‘Decolonising the study of ancient Israel: An autoethnography of rewriting a Hebrew Bible curriculum’, Borchardt presents in Chapter 19 an autoethnography that reflects both the authors’ and his own efforts to examine how courses on Israel’s history may reinforce certain ideological claims. He discusses how he has endeavoured to incorporate critical engagement with these claims into his teaching methodology. The chapter argues that the history of Israel functions as an archive in need of critique, particularly in how it has been shaped by the Zionist movement and the establishment of the modern state of Israel. It offers an experience-based suggestion for how to teach the history of ancient Israel without uncritically supporting the claims of the modern state.

■ Conclusion

In times of crisis, the God-question emerges with urgency, laying bare the conflicts and paradoxes of human existence and its inexplicable dimensions.

How, then, do we make sense of the world? When we are confronted by both immense beauty and incomprehensible cruelty, how do we respond to God? In our previous book, Knut Alfsvåg argued that theological education must include the practice of lament, as lament is a biblical genre that gives voice to protest divine injustice (Alfsvåg 2024, p. 87). We therefore conclude this introductory chapter with a psalm that captures the complex cry for a *theo*-logical pedagogy in times of crisis:

Psalm 13

1 How long, Lord? Will you forget me forever?

How long will you hide your face from me?

2 How long must I wrestle with my thoughts
and day after day have sorrow in my heart?

How long will my enemy triumph over me?

3 Look on me and answer, Lord my God.

Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in death,

4 and my enemy will say, 'I have overcome him',
and my foes will rejoice when I fall.

5 But I trust in your unfailing love;
my heart rejoices in your salvation.

6 I will sing the Lord's praise,
for he has been good to me.

Source: New International Version (NIV).

Twofold crises: African theological pedagogy and technology

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■ Abstract

This chapter explores the sociotechnical aspects of theological pedagogy in the South African context. South African higher education institutions (HEIs) have sought to incorporate Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) into teaching and learning – efforts that must be understood against the backdrop of an unequal higher education (HE) landscape. As a discipline, theology emphasises critical thinking and contextual engagement. However, epistemological foundations of theological education in South Africa often remain disconnected from African social realities, despite repeated calls for decolonised education. The emergence of generative artificial intelligence (GAI) not only raises concerns about academic integrity and plagiarism but also about the contextual dimension of theology. This chapter examines the twofold crises

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facing theological education in South Africa: The bias of GAI and curriculum transformation. To equip future leaders in the church and society, theology must be deeply rooted in its context, understand the impact of the digital divide for student success and critically discuss the implication of artificial intelligence (AI) bias for the pursuit of an African theological pedagogy.

■ Introduction

Artificial intelligence (AI) is a global phenomenon poised to disrupt socioeconomic structures, industries and learning institutions. Generative AI, in particular, is a type of AI capable of producing extended texts, images, audio and videos from simple prompts, raising concerns about its potential to diminish creative and critical thinking across various disciplines (Farrelly & Baker 2023). Theology as a discipline emphasises critical thinking, inquisitiveness and contextual engagement with matters of faith and society. Norheim and Weber (2024) underscore the necessity of theological education:

[...] we need theology, because theology, like no other academic discipline, offers a holistic and fundamental, yet practical, take on how to interpret and act in the face of crisis. This is not to say that theology is a sort of crisis management. Rather, theology offers a nuanced historical and hermeneutical framework to interpret the human condition in its most fundamental relations. Theology therefore trains the imaginative art of discernment, drawing on the dialectical learning that happens when encyclopedic and empirical sources of knowledge are juxtaposed in the midst of human life, even in the midst of cris[is]s. (p. 3)

Although AI exerts a global impact, its effects must be localised with attention to physical, social and cultural contexts. This chapter focuses on the South African context, specifically the integration of technology in higher education (HE) and the quest for an African theological pedagogy in times of crisis. The advancement of AI is reshaping education, making it imperative to rethink pedagogical approaches for equipping future leaders in an ever-changing world. The landscape of HE in South Africa comprises 26 universities, including one that is an Open Distance eLearning (ODEL) institution: The University of South Africa (Unisa). The majority of universities are contact institutions where students reside on or near campus and attend physical classes full time (Wangenge-Ouma & Kupe 2020). While they are contact universities, they also utilise various technologies for teaching and learning. In other words, universities have been developing and experimenting with blended or hybrid modes of learning. Students are therefore expected to possess digital competencies in order to navigate the teaching and learning process. Most of these students come from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds and have been educated in basic school systems lacking advanced laboratories and technological resources, such as computers with internet access, which constrains their success in HE.

The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has also laid bare the deep-rooted digital inequalities that persist in South Africa (Hedding et al. 2020). This chapter explores the twofold crises facing theological education in South Africa: The bias of generative artificial intelligence (GAI) and curriculum transformation. To equip future leaders in the church and society, theology must be deeply rooted in its context, understand the impact of the digital divide for student success and critically discuss the implications of AI bias for the pursuit of an African theological pedagogy. The chapter briefly highlights the integration of information and communication technology (ICT) in South African universities, the incorporation of AI, along with its challenges and implications for HE, the state of theology in South Africa and its Africanisation and decolonisation process and the movement towards an African theological pedagogy in the context of AI.

■ Development of information and communication technology integration in higher education

Prior to the end of apartheid in 1994, South Africa's HE system was divided along racial lines, comprising historically advantaged institutions (HAIs) and historically disadvantaged institutions (HDIs). These institutions were heavily influenced by apartheid policies, resulting in unequal resources and support based on race (Wangenge-Ouma & Kupe 2020). The following universities were classified as HDIs: The University of Fort Hare, the University of Limpopo, the University of Venda, the University of the Western Cape, the University of Zululand, Walter Sisulu University, Mangosuthu University of Technology and Sefako Makgatho Health Sciences University. These institutions were located in marginalised regions, faced funding challenges and lacked sufficient resources for effective operation. Conversely, HAIs such as the University of Pretoria (UP), Stellenbosch University (SU), University of the Free State, University of the Witwatersrand and Rhodes University were situated in urban centres and had better access to resources compared to HDIs (Bantjes et al. 2023, p. 218). Rand Afrikaans Universiteit (1967–2004) was an HAI, which was restructured to the University of Johannesburg (UJ) in 2005, following a merger between Rand Afrikaans Universiteit, Technikon Witwatersrand and the Vista University Soweto Campus (UJ 2025). These historical inequalities persist post-1994, particularly concerning technological advances, as HAIs remain more developed and better funded than HDIs.

Against this backdrop of South African universities, it is useful to provide a brief historical overview of how universities have integrated ICT into their teaching and learning. In their article 'Technology Enhanced Teaching and Learning in South African Higher Education – A rearview of a 20-year

journey', Ng'ambi et al. (2016) divide the development of ICT use in South African universities into four distinct phases spanning from 1996 to 2016:

- 1996–2000: ICT was primarily used to improve administrative efficiency, support research in libraries and facilitate computer-aided instruction through drill-and-practice approaches. During this period, awareness of the digital divide also started emerging.
- 2001–2005: This phase focused on building ICT infrastructure, improving access to information, developing policies and conducting research that assessed the effectiveness of teaching, both with and without technology.
- 2006–2010: ICT integration became part of university strategic planning. The discourse on the digital divide shifted toward questions of knowledge access, with research increasingly aligning to pedagogical objectives.
- 2011–2016: Marked by advanced ICT infrastructure and the emergence of cloud-based technologies, this period saw an increase in learner autonomy. Mobile learning and social media platforms were widely adopted as tools for teaching and learning (Ng'ambi et al. 2016).

It is important to recognise that the use of ICTs in South African HEIs is not uniform, with variations in developments, innovation and practices between institutions. Information and communication technology integration is also not linear but may overlap in developments, innovation and practices that vary from institution to institution. It is equally vital to note that students come from different socioeconomic and educational backgrounds, which hinder their success in university. Many students come from homes that lack computers and internet access, creating challenges regarding digital literacy.

Although students are proficient in mobile technology, especially social media, these skills are often overlooked by institutions, leading to missed opportunities for learning (Bozalek & Ng'ambi 2015, p. 4). In recent years, mobile technologies have been extensively used for communication and learning. The integration of mobile technology is becoming more efficient as learning management systems are evolving to be more mobile friendly. The socioeconomic challenges faced by many students led to the #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall protest movements between 2015 and 2016, which aimed to address financial exclusion and advocate for a decolonised curriculum. The COVID-19 pandemic further exposed socioeconomic challenges in HE and prompted universities to reassess their approaches to teaching and learning (Patel & Ragolane 2024, p. 57). The integration of ICT for teaching and learning has become vital in universities to address access to HE, contextualised education and the need for ICT systems that are continually updated to keep pace with the times.

■ Artificial intelligence integration in South African universities

Certain universities in South Africa have adopted robotic process automation and AI technology. They also employ intelligent tutoring systems (ITS) to engage students in reasoning tasks and to respond to their questions. Chatbots have been introduced to improve teacher–student ratios and communication speed. Automation is increasingly employed to enhance a range of educational services, including communication, collaboration, technical support and automated assessment (Patel & Ragolane 2024, p. 57).

At some South African universities, the integration of AI is being gradually introduced in library services. Artificial intelligence applications in libraries do not only automate routine tasks but also enable librarians to focus on more complex duties. For example, chatbots are being used to assist students and researchers in navigating databases and accessing relevant resources efficiently. Radio frequency identification (RFID)-based AI systems also enable libraries to optimise resource tracking and operate with greater autonomy. By streamlining procedures, these technologies simplify the search for research materials and reduce the time required by users. By automating repetitive tasks, AI allows librarians to focus more on supporting researchers in meaningful ways (Zondi et al. 2024). A notable example is UP's introduction of Libby, a client-service robot deployed in 2019 at the Merensky Library on the Hatfield Campus. Libby interacts with patrons by providing guidance, answering questions and displaying marketing videos. The robot is designed to handle general tasks, allowing staff to focus on more specialised services. The library plans to incorporate additional languages into Libby's capabilities in the future, viewing robotics as a valuable addition to their services (UP 2019).

Other universities in South Africa, such as SU, have also integrated AI chatbots to enhance student support and library services. The effectiveness of AI chatbots has not been thoroughly researched, and the service is limited by academic resources that have not yet been digitised. UJ's Institute for Intelligent Systems (IIS) has obtained a cutting-edge agile mobile robot known as Student Perception of Teaching (SPOT), marking a first in academia in South Africa and the African continent. Manufactured by Boston Dynamics in the United States of America (USA), SPOT is a versatile robot capable of navigating diverse terrains while carrying heavy loads. Researchers at the IIS plan to use SPOT to assist in creating and testing advanced AI algorithms and solutions for various fields such as health care, disaster management, construction, mining and industrial inspection. This acquisition aligns with the IIS's commitment to enhancing UJ's Global Excellence and Stature initiative through the lens of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) (UJ 2021).

■ **Challenges of artificial intelligence integration**

Mangundu (2023) argues that innovations have been quickly embraced through 'leapfrogging' in African contexts, a process that skips certain steps typically followed in more advanced countries. As previously mentioned regarding the HE landscape and the socioeconomic context of South Africa, there are many considerations to deliberate before adopting emerging technologies. Some challenges arise because these technologies are not adapted to specific contexts, owing to limited digital transformation. Darko Adjei and King (2024) identify the following challenges of AI integration in South African universities: Inadequate funding, insufficient ICT infrastructure, inadequate training, an ICT skills gap and lack of institutional support.

In South Africa, insufficient funding presents a major barrier to the adoption of 4IR technologies, limiting their integration into the education sector. Inadequate attention to and investment in ICT infrastructure further impedes library development, especially during critical periods such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Studies highlight the need for advanced information technology (IT) skills among African academic librarians during the 4IR, emphasising the importance of training for upskilling (Darko Adjei & King 2024; Tshabalala & Dube 2024, p. 2). Barriers to utilising advanced technologies include a lack of interest, fear, inadequate knowledge and insufficient training, particularly in ICT, for digital transformation (Patel & Ragolane 2024, p. 57).

Inadequate institutional support further complicates the implementation of technological innovations in academic libraries, hindering them from achieving their goals (Darko Adjei & King 2024). Funda and Piderit (2024) emphasise that integrating AI into the South African university landscape may perpetuate existing academic inequalities and reduce human interactions among staff and students. This also creates fears that AI may replace academic and support staff (Yende 2021, p. 66).

■ **Artificial intelligence implications for teaching and learning**

One of the key challenges associated with using GAI in teaching and learning is its potential to compromise academic integrity and increase instances of plagiarism (Farrelly & Baker 2023). However, it is equally important to critically examine the sources of data (datasets) used to train GAI models and their implications for education. Gozalo-Brizuela and Garrido-Merchan (2023, pp. 1-2) note that generative models are characterised by their large-scale architectures and the vast amounts of data they process. These models are trained using information

from sources such as Wikipedia, GitHub and social media platforms. Feuerriegel et al. (2024) emphasise that the use of GAI technology can also pose risks of copyright infringement by producing content that closely resembles or replicates existing works without proper authorisation.

Essentially, the source and contextual basis of generated information cannot be reliably verified. In theology, it is important to know the author's context and what informed their perspective. However, GAI may be unable to provide this critical information and make connections between ideas and concepts. It must be recognised that AI has largely been developed within Western contexts, resulting in a gap between the Global North and Global South in terms of development and deployment.

The development and deployment of AI often exclude indigenous knowledge systems and values from the Global South, in this case (South) Africa (Mokoena 2024). As a result, AI technologies may lack the capacity to understand the (South) African context and its diverse epistemologies. Another implication is the perpetual hegemony of Western knowledge embedded in GAI. Generative AI also struggles to accurately understand and translate South African indigenous languages. Furthermore, GAI is known to 'hallucinate', producing incorrect, biased information or fabricated information and references (Feuerriegel et al. 2024, p. 117). Therefore, students, researchers and academic staff must critically examine the functioning of GAI while upholding academic integrity.

■ Decolonial theological education in South Africa

Information and communication technology integration in HE is vital for universities to function efficiently and enhance teaching and learning. Apart from the unequal HE landscape in South Africa, the curriculum has been criticised for lacking African epistemologies and African Indigenous Knowledge Systems (AIKS). South African universities have historically followed Western academic structures that have marginalised indigenous knowledge. This colonial model, rooted in Western disciplinary knowledge, was reinforced during apartheid and has not been addressed in the post-apartheid era (Resane 2019, p. 4). This has prompted a call for a decolonised HE system that is grounded in African knowledge, culture, tradition and spirituality. The decolonisation project spans multiple disciplines; however, in this regard, we will focus on the discipline of theology in South Africa.

■ Theology in South Africa

Theology in South Africa has been a discipline in HE for more than 100 years (Knoetze 2021, p. 2). According to Beyers (2016), the position of theology in HE should be re-evaluated within the context of modern universities, which have roots in medieval and Renaissance times. Many universities still adhere to traditional educational principles, hindering change. The traditional role of theology within universities is increasingly being questioned. While a detailed critique of theology's relevance in South African universities falls outside the scope of this discussion, it is important to note that theology is often misunderstood within these institutions. Beyers (2016) argues that for theology to remain relevant in the university context, it must actively engage with societal realities, adopt interdisciplinary approaches, participate in interreligious dialogue and maintain connections with faith communities.

What remains crucial, however, is the specific kind of theology that is being taught within South Africa's curriculum. The dominant framework of theology in South Africa has been Western, particularly Dutch Reformed and Calvinistic (Resane 2024, p. 3). Venter (2016) notes that the underlying power dynamics of colonialism, modernism, race and patriarchy are often overlooked in academic practices, especially in the curriculum and research focus. The continued influence of specific intellectual traditions, such as Reformed theology, in the four main theology faculties (Bloemfontein, Potchefstroom, Pretoria and Stellenbosch) highlights a lingering legacy of the past. Consequently, there has been a lack of transformation in the theological curriculum at South African universities.

Although the #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall movements of 2015–2016 intensified calls for decolonisation in South African universities, there remains little consensus on its implementation (Pali 2024). Efforts to decolonise the curriculum in South Africa have not led to significant policy changes or curriculum reform. The reluctance to embark on this journey stems from the ongoing dominance of European hegemony, particularly in education (Govender & Naidoo 2023, p. 59). Tshaka (2016, p. 95) argues that theology in South Africa has created a buffer between itself and African value systems. This disconnect highlights a lack of inclusion and representation of black realities in theological academic discourses. The implication is that the epistemology of theology in South Africa is not rooted in its context, which may render it irrelevant or impractical (Knoetze 2021, p. 1). The inclusion of African Traditional Religion (ATR), African theology and liberation theologies such as black theology and African womanism in theological faculties is minimal and marginalised.

■ Africanisation and decolonisation of theology

Naidoo (2016) states that the desire for Africanisation is not widely recognised or embraced. Africanisation is perceived as overly complicated, contentious and based on specific ideologies, even though all theological perspectives are rooted in particular ideologies (i.e. Reformed Theology). The decolonisation and Africanisation of theology is not a recent phenomenon in South Africa; it has its roots in the inception of African Initiated Churches (AICs) in the 1800s when Africans could not identify with Western theology and practice in mission churches. Consequently, proponents of AICs established churches that embraced and retained their African identity, culture, tradition and spirituality (Vellem 2010). In the 1960s, South African black theology and the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) began to reconceptualise what it means to be black at the height of apartheid and sought the liberation of black people spiritually, psychologically, economically and physically (Mokoena 2017). African theology and black theology have undergone various phases in changing times but have remained relevant resources for decolonising theology (Maluleke 2022). Tshaka (2016) emphasises that the adoption of African symbols and worldviews is key to the Africanisation process. Academic theology has created a divide between academia and communities that value truth from human interactions rather than dogma. African theology and black theology remain marginalised in knowledge production, as reflected in the curricula of theological institutions in South Africa. Decolonising theology is not merely an academic or curriculum endeavour in knowledge production; it is, at its core, a process of reclaiming human dignity (Naidoo 2024).

■ African theological pedagogies and technology

Ikeke (2023, p. 44) states that pedagogy involves transferring ideas, values, norms and knowledge from teachers to students. It is a crucial part of socialisation and does not only occur in educational institutions but also in various other settings, such as businesses, churches and online platforms. For Africa to truly break free from colonial influences, it must ensure that teachings in various fields promote African epistemologies and values. In South African traditional settings, pedagogy takes place around the fire through storytelling, singing, odes, poetry and other forms of oral tradition. Pedagogy also occurs in the *ebuhlanthi* (kraal) in Xhosa culture, a sacred place where rituals are performed to honour both the living and the living-dead, where lobola negotiations are conducted to bring families together and where umbilical cords are ceremoniously buried (Kobo 2016, p. 4).

Among the Sotho cultures, *lekgotla* is a community gathering to discuss and solve issues, whether positive or negative, caused by individuals, nature or spiritual beliefs. The opinions of elders, including those of ancestors, are highly valued in this consultative and collective process that promotes consensus (Mzondi 2022, p. 4). While African women occupy significant positions within their cultural contexts, institutions such as *ebuhlanthi* and *lekgotla* have been critiqued for perpetuating gender exclusion.

An African theological pedagogy is liberating at its core, identifying power dynamics and disparities, and promoting Ubuntu (inherent human dignity). Maluleke (2006, p. 73) asserts that Africanisation involves embracing Africanness with pride and love, without blindly endorsing oppressive practices from the past. It requires a critical examination of African traditions to determine their potential for liberation within theological education.

This raises a critical question: What does African theological pedagogy mean in the context of AI in South Africa? While the title of this chapter refers to twofold crises, the reality is far more complex. Any meaningful response to these intersecting crises must take into consideration the broader socioeconomic context, the deeply unequal landscape of HE, the complexities surrounding the implementation of ICT and the continued presence of an untransformed theological curriculum, alongside the implications of AI technologies that frequently reinforce coloniality. At the root of these complexities lies the question of human dignity.

Being human is a God-given gift, and we are born with inherent dignity. Coloniality constitutes an imposed system that undermines human dignity, and its persistence reflects ongoing inhumanity. Pedagogy is a process of becoming better human beings who embody Ubuntu. This implies that it is life-affirming and promotes justice, unity and equality. However, a pedagogy that requires one to divest themselves of their language, culture, tradition, spirituality and way of life is a life-denying pedagogy. An African theological pedagogy, according to Maluleke (2006, p. 72), 'is about liberation - the comprehensive liberation of all [of] Africa and all Africans - but more specifically the liberation of the poor'. The crises are therefore interconnected, and an African theological pedagogy seeks to respond to the needs of those who are poor, dehumanised, marginalised, oppressed and subjected to discrimination. It must therefore remain rooted in the community and resist becoming an 'ivory tower' isolated from the poor and voiceless.

Mokoena (2024) contends that technology ought to be conceptualised as a form of power and that emerging technologies such as AI require critical evaluation given their tendency to embed Western epistemologies.

Such embeddedness risks perpetuating the coloniality of knowledge production, reinforcing the urgent need to decolonise AI (Mhlambi & Tiribelli 2023). Generative AI relies on vast datasets to function, which raises the question: What kind of output is produced when these systems are shaped by colonial knowledge? When this output is merged with an untransformed curriculum, what kind of pedagogical framework is perpetuated through this process? An African theological pedagogy is thus a transformative teaching and learning process that not only emphasises its context but also obtains its epistemology from the African context. This implies that the Africanisation and decolonisation of the theological curriculum is a necessary step to equip leaders to better understand their context, embrace their culture and contribute towards transformative change in society.

■ A way forward

A constructive way forward entails a theological education grounded in African epistemologies, contextually situated and responsive to the communities from which students originate. It is essential to remain aware of global developments, particularly in technology, and their impact on communities. Students should be critical thinkers and use technology (GAI) as a tool to enhance the learning experience, instead of relying on technology to ‘think’ for them. Academic literacy and integrity should be central to teaching and learning. Student assessments should be contextual, drawing on resources that emphasise Africanisation and decolonisation.

Zembylas (2023, p. 32) argues that decolonised pedagogy and technology require a holistic and multifaceted approach that addresses both technical and social aspects. Zembylas (2023, p. 33) offers three strategies, namely:

- historicising AI and digital technologies as affective, material and political assemblages of coloniality and racism that highlight the need to re-design AI in terms of decolonial ethics
- nurturing practices of ethical solidarity towards those who suffer the negative impacts of AI
- creating renewed affective and political communities that cultivate decolonial ethics in the development and use of AI.

■ Strategy 1

This strategy recognises algorithmic colonialism as a continuation of coloniality, not as ahistorical. Algorithmic colonialism refers to the impact that algorithms have on the distribution of resources, human behaviour and discriminatory practices in various settings. It also examines how

colonial influences are present in algorithmic decision-making (Mohamed, Png & Isaac 2020, p. 665). The biases present in AI are not incidental; they are rooted in Western modernity and must be actively decolonised (Zembylas 2023).

- Technically – this requires integrating critical technical practices of AI with decolonial perspectives.
- Socially – academic disciplines must engage in critical examination to uncover the colonial foundations and nuances embedded in AI systems.

■ Strategy 2

This strategy emphasises the need to recognise the ethical implications of AI and highlights the importance of fostering solidarity between AI developers and users to challenge unethical practices in the development and application of these technologies (Zembylas 2023).

- Technically – AI designers must cultivate critical awareness of the potential harms their technologies may inflict on communities.
- Socially – education should emphasise the detrimental effects of technology on society.

■ Strategy 3

This strategy calls for the formation of critical communities that are politically resilient and actively engaged in the development and use of digital technologies as a means of resisting algorithmic coloniality (Zembylas 2023).

- Technically – AI design should be both liberating and prioritising human dignity.
- Socially – community dialogues should be fostered to collectively envision the possibilities of decolonial AI.

Although these three strategies are outlined separately, they are inherently holistic and interdependent and cannot function effectively in isolation. Within the context of AI, an African theological pedagogy must be deliberate and courageous in engaging both the technical and social dimensions of technological development. The development of technology does not take place in a vacuum; it has a history. Theological lecturers should therefore engage with the historical impact of technology, especially in Africa, to establish its colonial impact. An African theological pedagogy aligns itself with the oppressed and marginalised, a stance essential for advocating with communities impacted by technological advancements. It should equip students to become critical leaders who advocate for technology that promotes liberation and upholds human dignity.

Educators, policymakers and technologists should collaborate to address the sociotechnical challenges of AI to adopt African theological pedagogies effectively.

■ Conclusion

This chapter explored the twofold crises facing theological education and technology in the South African context. The legacy of racial inequality continues to shape the landscape of HE, with certain universities enjoying significantly greater resources and institutional advantages compared to others. This disparity is evident in the uneven integration of ICT across institutions, affecting administration, teaching and learning. Levels of ICT integration vary widely, often mirroring broader structural inequalities. Socioeconomic disparities profoundly affect student success, especially among those from under-resourced basic education systems without computer laboratories or reliable internet access.

Although some universities have started integrating AI technologies including chatbots, ITS and library support, they continue to face challenges stemming from limited funding, weak ICT infrastructure, insufficient skills development and inadequate institutional support. The implications of AI for teaching and learning involve the use of opaque datasets and uncertain sources underlying AI-generated outputs. Generative AI is often not contextual and excludes the indigenous knowledge systems of Africa. It is also known to ‘hallucinate’, generating incorrect information, biased content and references lacking verifiable sources.

The theological curriculum in South Africa lacks African epistemologies and indigenous worldviews, while predominantly subscribing to Western theology. This current situation calls for the Africanisation and decolonisation of theology in South Africa. There is a pressing need for an African theological pedagogy that prioritises African epistemologies and indigenous knowledge systems. However, this does not imply an uncritical adoption of all African worldviews, but rather those that promote Ubuntu, equality, justice, unity and liberation. Theology must therefore be contextual and relevant, engaging directly with the communities from which students originate. Essentially, African theological pedagogy is about human dignity and liberation for the poor, marginalised, dehumanised and oppressed.

Exploring best practices for integrating artificial intelligence in theological libraries

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■ Abstract

Artificial intelligence (AI) is rapidly becoming a significant trend in library technologies and applications. Libraries and information centres are increasingly utilising AI to perform functions traditionally handled by librarians. Beyond fostering information literacy and overseeing core library operations, including staffing and strategic planning, responsibilities also encompass the provision of reference and information services, the integration of shelf-reading robotics, the automation of cataloguing workflows and the advancement of information literacy initiatives. The classroom learning process ultimately extends into the library, which serves a vital function in reinforcing and supporting educational objectives. Moreover, the development of

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advanced digital technology is driving a dramatic shift in research, learning and teaching. While theological students make extensive use of AI technologies in their research and academic writing, faculty in theology have not yet fully incorporated these tools into their own practices. Although restricted by institutional constraints, an impressive 75% of these students demonstrate a willingness to adopt AI techniques. This indicates a strong need for educators, especially those in theological institutions, to thoughtfully and effectively incorporate AI into their curricula to enhance theological education. The application of AI in library services remains a source of concern, particularly in developing countries. Against this backdrop, this chapter aims to investigate these challenges while focusing on how theological libraries can effectively integrate AI technologies to enhance their services in support of teaching and learning within theological education.

■ Introduction

Artificial intelligence (AI) is a concept that has been in use since the 1950s. It was initially defined as the capability of a machine to perform a task that would have previously required human intelligence. Examples of AI machines include self-driving cars, robots, generative AI such as Chat Generative Pre-trained Transformer (ChatGPT) or other AI chatbots and artificially created images (Barsha & Munshi 2023). Ling et al. (2023) define AI as intelligent robots or intelligent systems that replicate human intelligence activities and extend the science of human intelligence.

The integration of AI into library services offers significant advantages for both faculty and students. Cox, Pinfield and Rutter (2019) argue that AI-powered libraries offer the potential to improve learning outcomes by enabling personalised, individualised learning approaches tailored to each student's needs and abilities.

The integration of AI across diverse sectors has significantly reshaped conventional practices, and theological libraries likewise reflect this transformation. These libraries are increasingly relying on AI to enhance theological education by improving both instruction and research. This chapter examines how theological libraries can leverage AI to optimise their services, strengthen research capacities and support the personalisation of theological education. The first section will examine how AI improves information retrieval and management, while supporting research, scholarship, tailored learning and virtual assistants. In addition, this chapter considers the practical implications of AI for theological libraries and presents recommendations for its effective integration into library operations, with the aim of strengthening teaching and learning in

theological education. Furthermore, this chapter seeks to bridge the divide between AI theory and practice by examining the challenges of implementing AI in theological libraries, offering practical strategies to maximise its benefits and emphasising ethical responsibility and user inclusivity within the theological context.

According to Beard (2024), the development of AI capabilities creates substantial opportunities for collaboration between religious educators and libraries on joint projects. This relationship would enable students and instructors to effectively manage vast amounts of information. It would also involve helping students identify reliable sources, conduct efficient searches, evaluate the quality of information and integrate new ideas into a cohesive product that demonstrates their understanding of the research subject. While AI can generate written content, it has not yet matured to the point of assisting students and researchers in problem-solving or the development of critical thinking skills. Consequently, theological librarians must continue to investigate the human dimensions of information activity and address the tensions between machine processing and human judgement. In this context, the chapter examines how AI can contribute to research, education and crisis management, while also offering recommendations for the effective use of AI technologies to strengthen educational initiatives in challenging times.

■ Conceptualising best practices for artificial intelligence in theological libraries

Within seminaries and theological institutions, libraries function as indispensable repositories, housing religious texts, scholarly journals, historical records and diverse multimedia resources. These libraries play a crucial role in supporting both the intellectual and spiritual formation of students and scholars, offering access to a wide range of theological materials, often including rare texts and theological works from diverse traditions and denominations (Elia 2011).

According to Bogdan (2024, p. 107), the church is currently in a digital state; hence, the training of those who administer the affairs of the church must embrace the digital opportunities presented to them in order to improve their ministry in a world driven by technology. Theological libraries are undergoing increasing digitisation as a result of developments in the digital age. These libraries now provide access to academic publications, internet databases and electronic books. However, they face challenges with resource management, information overload and the demand for more effective ways to obtain pertinent content. Accordingly, the adoption of AI technologies is essential for improving service delivery to both faculty and students. Although digital content has expanded

rapidly, numerous theological institutions remain hesitant to incorporate AI technologies into their library systems.

Artificial intelligence holds significant potential to reshape the operations of theological libraries and to enhance the delivery of theological education. It can substantially strengthen search functionalities and refine resource recommendation systems within theological libraries. As theological education becomes increasingly more interdisciplinary and globally interconnected, AI can meet the diverse needs of students, scholars and teachers.

Incorporating AI into theological libraries enhances research, accessibility and scholarship. Below are some practical strategies for incorporating AI in theological education.

■ **Enhancing information retrieval and management**

Artificial intelligence can dramatically increase the efficiency of information retrieval and management in theological libraries. Although traditional cataloguing methods remain effective, they are often characterised by inefficiency and significant time demands. Artificial intelligence-powered technologies, such as natural language processing (NLP) algorithms, can streamline the process by providing more intuitive search functionality. For example, AI can be employed to develop advanced search engines capable of comprehending and interpreting natural language queries, thereby enabling users to retrieve relevant resources with greater speed and precision (Mandl 2009). Moreover, AI can facilitate the automatic categorisation and classification of resources, thereby enhancing the organisation and accessibility of theological materials.

The Information Resources Management Association (2019) argues that as technology becomes more sophisticated, a computer's ability to understand and interpret natural language is also advancing. Natural language processing can provide contextual searches beyond keyword-matching requirements in search engines powered by AI. Users can search for religious concepts, historical materials or theological discussions using AI techniques such as BERT (Bidirectional Encoder Representations from Transformers) or GPT (Generative Retrained Transformer). These techniques rely on semantic understanding rather than solely on keyword matching.

Artificial intelligence can facilitate the automatic classification and clustering of texts by thematic focus, authorship, historical period or theological tradition. Such processes enhance the organisation of extensive theological collections and significantly improve their discoverability.

Theological libraries serve a more diverse constituency of patrons compared to many other types of libraries. Theological institutions provide a wide range of courses and programmes designed to address the needs of both academic scholars and participants in non-formal or informal theological education. Artificial intelligence can support these diverse patron groups by enriching access to information in more complex domains.

■ **Supporting theological research and scholarship**

Artificial intelligence technologies have the potential to dramatically improve research and scholarship in the field of theological education. Machine learning algorithms are capable of processing extensive textual datasets, uncovering patterns and relationships that may elude human researchers. Academics can be supported in tracking citations, identifying influential publications and detecting emerging trends in theological scholarship through AI-driven bibliographic analysis tools (Crompton & Burke 2023). Artificial intelligence can also assist in the compilation of annotated bibliographies and literature reviews, offering researchers valuable insights while streamlining the research process and reducing the time required. Moreover, AI technologies can promote collaborative research within theological libraries by supporting faculty and students in undertaking joint projects through AI-driven research assistants and collaborative platforms. Such applications are particularly valuable in multidisciplinary contexts where theology intersects with fields such as philosophy, sociology and history.

Additionally, AI methods can support the analysis of large datasets, the identification of trends and the extraction of meaningful patterns from theological texts. Such capabilities create opportunities for advanced academic collaborations that extend across both national boundaries and disciplinary fields. According to Bezet (2023), these tools can also aid in identifying potential academic partners and initiatives, thereby fostering a culture of collaboration and promoting global dialogue within the field of theological education.

■ **Facilitating personalised learning**

Machine learning algorithms can analyse user search behaviours and preferences to deliver personalised results, thereby enhancing user satisfaction and increasing the relevance of retrieved information. In a study conducted by Liu (2022), AI-based recommendation systems were found to outperform traditional retrieval methods, delivering more accurate and diverse search results in library settings.

The integration of AI into theological libraries can strengthen personalised learning, which is a vital element of effective education. By analysing user behaviours and preferences, AI systems are able to generate tailored recommendations for books, resources and study materials, thereby enriching the learning experience. For instance, according to Wang (2024), AI-powered recommendation systems can supply relevant theological materials by analysing a user's search and reading habits. Further customisation is possible with AI-powered adaptive learning platforms that adjust course materials and pedagogical approaches based on each student's unique needs and strengths.

Theological institutions, particularly those in Africa, often serve mature students, some of whom may demonstrate reluctance toward adopting AI technologies. However, libraries can provide individualised and adaptive learning opportunities that address the specific needs of adult students. According to Rivers and Holland (2022, p. 200), AI has the potential to assist libraries in supporting a wide range of learners at various levels while providing the necessary tailored and responsive support. Many theological libraries operate with limited staffing, and the adoption of AI can help alleviate this burden by reducing the demands placed on personnel who often work extended hours to meet the growing need for personalised and tailored learning.

■ Implementing artificial intelligence-powered virtual assistants

Artificial intelligence-powered virtual assistants can significantly enhance the user support offered by theological libraries. These assistants provide instant assistance by answering frequently asked questions, helping patrons with technical issues and guiding them around the library's collection of resources. For example, AI chatbots can address routine enquiries, enabling human librarians to focus on more complex tasks and offer personalised support (Adetayo 2023). Artificial intelligence-driven virtual assistants provide students and researchers with continuous access to support, offering assistance at any time irrespective of deadlines. Haffenden et al. (2023) point out that integrating AI-enabled virtual assistants into library services is imperative for adapting to the digital landscape, promising operational efficiencies and enhanced user engagement.

Artificial intelligence-powered virtual assistants, such as chatbots, can respond to user requests quickly and accurately, even outside typical library hours. A study conducted by Huang (2022) reveals that AI-driven recommendation systems greatly enhance user engagement and satisfaction levels in libraries, especially in developing countries with limited human resources for user support.

Virtual assistants can also support theological institutions facing challenges in staff recruitment, helping to address the growing demand for library services within theological education. By employing AI-driven virtual assistants, theological libraries can extend their reach and serve a broader audience. Students no longer need to incur the costs of travelling long distances or relying on potentially expensive phone communication to access library services, thereby reducing financial barriers to engagement.

■ Intelligent cataloguing and metadata ageing

Libraries have traditionally functioned as repositories of knowledge, preserving and disseminating information for public use. In the digital age, however, the cataloguing and presentation of these resources has become increasingly complex, owing to the proliferation of information across diverse formats. Artificial intelligence has emerged as a solution to this challenge. Artificial intelligence systems (AIS) can now collect and enrich metadata from digital resources, including author information, subject keywords and publication dates.

Through the application of AI, theological libraries can improve the efficiency of cataloguing processes. Machine learning techniques enable the automatic tagging and categorisation of resources, thereby enhancing metadata quality and facilitating the retrieval of materials. Additionally, AI can support theological libraries in harmonising metadata tagging across diverse theological traditions, genres and languages. This capability is particularly valuable for managing extensive literary collections that encompass multiple disciplines and linguistic contexts.

Theological libraries can employ AI to categorise and label resources, thereby ensuring their discoverability across diverse theological disciplines. This will minimise the time teachers and students devote to locating study materials, thereby increasing efficiency and relevance in their academic work (Gao et al. 2022). The efficiency of library personnel will likewise improve, enabling them to dedicate greater attention to essential areas that are often overlooked as a result of staffing constraints.

■ Using artificial intelligence for administrative tasks in libraries

Libraries that are part of theological institutions are under increasing pressure to manage administrative responsibilities effectively without compromising the level of service they provide. Artificial intelligence has the potential to automate a range of routine tasks, including the processing of interlibrary loans, the management of circulation and the deployment of AI-driven chatbots to address frequently asked questions. By automating

these processes, staff members can devote their attention to more important responsibilities, such as providing user support, curating content and developing specialised research services (Grigoriadou 2024).

Additionally, students seeking assistance in accessing library materials can obtain support at any time through AI-driven chatbots, thereby enhancing the accessibility of theological education and empowering learners to exercise greater control over their studies. Artificial intelligence should function as a supplementary technology rather than a replacement for human librarians, given the risks of inaccurate responses, potential misuse, limited comprehension, input constraints and overreliance on technological systems. Artificial intelligence, particularly generative systems such as chatbots, has been known to produce fabricated responses, commonly referred to as AI hallucinations (Fowler 2025). Unfortunately, the role of theological librarians in guiding faculty can never be replaced by AI.

■ Ensuring accessibility and inclusivity

Given the diverse nature of patrons – encompassing variations in information needs, socioeconomic status, gender, abilities, language and experiences – inclusive library services must adopt strategies that promote equitable access for all participants within the learning environment. Since diversity is dynamic and multifaceted, libraries today must acknowledge and value the diverse needs of their patrons in order to create an inclusive environment that meets these needs and makes patrons feel appreciated, respected and supported (Hussain 2023; Saibakumo 2021). Thus, there is a clear need for inclusive and diverse library programmes, alongside service delivery models that are strengthened through technological advancements. Services provided by inclusive libraries should incorporate strategies that encourage equitable access for all parties involved.

Integrating AI into theological libraries should promote accessibility and inclusivity, particularly for students from diverse linguistic, cultural and theological backgrounds. Artificial intelligence systems should foster collaboration among students and scholars across national contexts by supporting multiple languages and demonstrating flexibility in accommodating diverse religious backgrounds.

Every student should have equitable access to resources, and theological libraries must ensure that AI is developed with accessibility as a priority, providing alternative formats to accommodate students with impairments (Miller et al. 2023). Each department and field of study must have its specific requirements acknowledged within this inclusive effort. Moreover, the informal and non-formal sectors of theological education should be

integrated into the inclusive framework to ensure that the needs of all categories of learners are addressed.

■ Collaborations

The successful integration of AI into theological libraries largely depends on the developers and vendors of AI technologies. It is crucial for developers who understand the unique needs of theological education to collaborate with theological institutions. These developers must be prepared to adapt AI technologies to meet the specific demands of theological research and learning. For developers and vendors to provide the resources necessary for enhancing the integration of AI into theological libraries, it is essential to highlight the distinctive characteristics of theological education and the specific role these institutions serve. At times, theological libraries depend on donations; however, developers may contribute tools that are not necessarily well suited to the specific needs of theological education.

In the case of theological libraries, for example, AI systems should be capable of conducting searches in multiple languages, interpreting theological jargon and offering suggestions that are contextually sensitive to religious traditions or denominations. If a clear communication channel is established between library personnel and the creators of AI, these technologies will be continuously enhanced to meet the needs of theology users (Bawden & Robinson 2022).

■ Professional development for theological librarians and educators

Artificial intelligence evolves daily, making it challenging to adapt to rapidly changing technologies. Library professionals must possess the skills necessary to oversee academics' use of AI and to manage its implementation within an evolving educational environment. However, the adoption of AI in libraries is hindered by significant obstacles, including technological limitations, gaps in skills and knowledge, financial constraints and organisational and cultural barriers (Shahzad et al. 2025).

Libraries should implement training programmes and capacity-building initiatives to equip their staff with the necessary skills for effective AI application (Arora et al. 2020). Winkler and Kiszl (2021) emphasise the importance of comprehensive training programmes to bridge the skills gap and facilitate the effective use of AI technology in library services.

To ensure that AI technologies address the specific needs of their communities, librarians in theological contexts must possess a thorough understanding of both theological resources and research methodologies.

In the era of AI, theological librarians can no longer remain within their traditional comfort zones. Successful implementation of AI in theological libraries will require establishing cooperative partnerships between librarians, information technology (IT) specialists and faculty members (Hanegan 2025).

Theological librarians should deliver regular training for instructors, staff and students as part of ongoing professional development. Such training is essential for ensuring that all stakeholders remain current with the latest applications of AI in the classroom. Similarly, librarians should be encouraged to participate in certification programmes focused on the ethical use of AI in the classroom. This will not only enable librarians to better meet the needs of their patrons but also mitigate stagnation in the application of AI within library services.

■ Ethical considerations and challenges

Incorporating AI into theological libraries has various advantages; yet, it also has several drawbacks, including ethical issues. Bias in AI systems is a serious issue since it can damage the accuracy and fairness of information retrieval and recommendations (Dai et al. 2024). To mitigate the impact of such biases, theological libraries should adopt AI systems that remain transparent to scrutiny and are subject to regular evaluation. Furthermore, librarians bear the responsibility of ensuring that the integration of AI does not erode the human element, which remains vital to academic and theological support. Sustaining the efficiency and reliability of library services requires striking a balance between the indispensable role of staff participation and the advancement of technological capabilities.

Transparency should be maintained throughout the formulation of policies and guidelines that govern and monitor the ethical use of AI in theological libraries. Additionally, where feasible, the chaplain of the theological institution should be included on the committee responsible for developing such policies, as this individual can offer valuable guidance on the ethical and theological implications of employing AI within religious contexts.

Faculty and students who are unfamiliar with AI technologies or concerned about their implications for theological education may resist the initiative. Overcoming these challenges will require careful planning, collaboration and ongoing discussions about the use of AI in theological education.

Theological libraries in developing countries face budgetary constraints. Babu (2021) emphasises that limited access to technology and infrastructure can hinder the implementation of AI solutions. Many libraries lack the

necessary equipment, software and internet connectivity to effectively operate AI-powered services.

Theological institutions must allocate financial resources to acquire the AI technologies necessary for effective library integration. Through this investment, librarians can secure the tools and software required to support the efficient application of AI in library operations.

■ Conclusion

The incorporation of AI into theological libraries offers significant opportunities to advance instruction and enrich scholarship within theological education. Artificial intelligence has the potential to substantially enhance library functions by streamlining information retrieval, supporting research and scholarship, fostering personalised learning, employing virtual assistants, automating administrative tasks such as cataloguing, collaborating with vendors in the development of AI technologies and advancing accessibility and inclusivity. Nonetheless, it is imperative to address ethical considerations and to ensure the transparent and responsible implementation of AI tools. As these technologies continue to evolve, theological libraries must remain attentive to best practices in order to effectively harness their capabilities while safeguarding the indispensable human dimensions of instruction and research.

Artificial intelligence in education: From tools to agents?

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■ Abstract

This chapter seeks to deepen the understanding of artificial intelligence (AI), examine the ethical implications of employing Chat Generative Pre-trained Transformer (ChatGPT) within academic contexts and explore how ongoing technological developments intersect with posthumanist perspectives. To this end, the chapter offers a theoretical reflection on why AI should no longer be conceived merely as instrumental tools, but rather argues that the possibility of AI systems possessing forms of agency warrants serious consideration. It engages with posthumanist thought and the questions it raises concerning the agency of non-human actors, such as machines, in relation to that of humans. The chapter examines the tension between human and non-human actors, highlighting how humans

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are privileged and prioritised within an anthropocentric framework. Finally, the chapter considers alternative theological perspectives on the relationship between humans and non-humans, inviting reflection on how theological inquiry might inform ethical and discerning engagement with emerging technologies.

■ Introduction

The use of artificial intelligence (AI) has become an inescapable feature of contemporary life. Technological innovation is frequently framed as a marker of progress, accompanied by promises of enhanced efficiency and the simplification of everyday tasks. This dynamic also extends to the educational sector, where Chat Generative Pre-trained Transformer (ChatGPT) is frequently promoted as a tool capable of assisting with a range of academic tasks, such as producing essays with remarkable speed. Therefore, this chapter seeks to advance a deeper understanding of AI, to examine the ethical implications of employing ChatGPT within academic contexts and to demonstrate how ongoing technological developments are entangled with posthumanist perspectives. To this end, the chapter offers a theoretical reflection on why AI should no longer be conceived merely as instrumental tools, but instead argues that the possibility of AI systems exercising forms of agency deserves serious consideration.

The chapter starts with an overview of AI, paying particular attention to generative AI tools such as ChatGPT. The discussion addresses both the transformative potential and the disruptive impact of generative AI within education, while underscoring the pressing need for its responsible implementation. In light of this, the chapter undertakes an in-depth examination of the ethical considerations surrounding the integration of generative AI into educational contexts. The capabilities and functions of AI tools are analysed in relation to the goals and theoretical foundations of posthumanism, particularly its emphasis on decentering anthropocentrism and challenging human dominance over technology. This section analyses alternative perspectives on the relationship between humans and non-human entities, revealing how posthumanism challenges traditional understandings of what it means to be human. The chapter raises the question of whether posthumanism merely proposes alternative configurations of the relationship between humans and non-humans or whether it seeks to negate and displace the human altogether. It is argued that the question of what it means to be human is fundamentally a theological one. The chapter outlines the reasons theology must engage with the vision of posthumanism and examines how theological education and research might contribute to living with, and within, the realities shaped by artificial intelligence systems (AIS).

■ Artificial intelligence and its impact on education

This section defines the various forms of AI, explains the nature of generative artificial intelligence (GAI) and outlines the aims associated with these different forms of AI. 'The aim of AI is to create systems that can exhibit humanlike intelligence but with greater accuracy, consistency, and scalability' (Tenakwah et al. 2023, p. 4). Generative AI is defined as '... a group of machine learning algorithms designed to generate new data samples that mimic existing datasets' (Chan & Hu 2023, p. 2). A particularly interesting feature of this system is the Variational Autoencoder (VAE), which functions similar to a neural network. It is capable of encoding and decoding data while preserving its essential features (Chan & Hu 2023, p. 2). In another insightful publication, Chan and Colloton (2023, p. 60) emphasise that AI comprises man-made systems that rely on human intelligence. Artificial intelligence, therefore, simulates human intelligence by thinking and acting in ways that resemble human behaviour. Furthermore, AI signifies a significant leap in technological development, specifically regarding the speed of computing power and increased data memory storage. It is also important to recall the three recognised forms of AI: Artificial Narrow Intelligence (ANI), Artificial General Intelligence (AGI) and Artificial Super Intelligence (ASI).

Artificial Narrow Intelligence is designed to perform specific tasks with precision but cannot perform tasks that require human intelligence. Artificial General Intelligence can perform tasks that require human intelligence, while ASI can perform tasks that surpass human intelligence, potentially outperforming humans in virtually every intellectual task. Artificial intelligence systems is also referred to as 'AI singularity' in an attempt to describe the point where rules, as we understand them, break down in a black hole, and machines become so advanced that we cannot predict or understand their behaviour or the impact that behaviour may have (Chan & Hu 2023, pp. 2-3).

One prominent form of GAI that rapidly gained global attention is ChatGPT, introduced in November 2022. As with earlier technological innovations, ChatGPT demonstrates notable capabilities and functions, presenting significant educational opportunities while simultaneously posing substantial challenges. Before examining its impact on the education sector, it is necessary to provide an account of what ChatGPT is and the functions it offers. Although ChatGPT is still classified as a form of ANI, it marks a notable advancement toward AGI 'by demonstrating the ability to perform a wide range of language tasks and generate human-like text' (Chan 2023, p. 3).

ChatGPT is not an exclusive, domain-specific tool for education, but a general-purpose tool known as AGI. As a product[,] it is an AI chatbox that generates text-based responses to human inputs in natural language. (Dai et al. 2023, p. 1)

One notable feature of ChatGPT, some argue, is its ability to generate new content, rather than merely analysing and manipulating existing information (Castonguay et al. 2023, p. 3). However, this perspective is contested by scholars who argue that a major limitation of ChatGPT is its inability to replicate human cognition or to generate genuinely novel ideas beyond the data on which it has been trained. The rapid pace of ChatGPT's development, also referred to as *machine learning*, presents further challenges. The rapid evolution of its capabilities makes it difficult to remain current with its potential, and consequently, some of the challenges identified in existing research may already be resolved by the time of publication.

Although the full extent of ChatGPT's capabilities remains uncertain, it has emerged as the fastest-growing platform, drawing an estimated 25 million daily visits. Among its most active users are students, who have independently adopted the technology, highlighting the need for higher education institutions (HEIs) to critically reflect on its use in the education process. The dialogue-based interface of ChatGPT appears to be particularly student friendly, encouraging its widespread use (Dai et al. 2023, p. 2). Castonguay et al. (2023, p. 1) support this view, noting that ChatGPT interacts in a remarkably human-like manner, contributing to its popularity.

Although ChatGPT was not initially designed as an educational tool, it possesses features that make it applicable to educational settings. Nevertheless, it remains essential to engage with its use critically and reflectively. Despite its impressive capabilities, ChatGPT lacks self-awareness and should not be regarded as a definite source of knowledge. One of the most pressing concerns in educational contexts is its potential to generate incorrect or nonsensical responses, thereby compromising the academic integrity of the information it provides (Castonguay et al. 2023, p. 2). This phenomenon, commonly referred to as 'hallucination', occurs when the AI 'produces confident but irrelevant or inaccurate responses' (Dai et al. 2023, p. 5).

This section offers a concise review of recent studies examining the educational potential of ChatGPT and presenting emerging insights into its impact on education. One of the most significant challenges identified is the risk that ChatGPT may undermine the autonomy of students during learning. For this reason, certain institutions, such as the New York City Department of Education, initially prohibited its use, citing concerns about plagiarism (Singh 2023, p. 204). Singh (2023, p. 207) contends that the advent of ChatGPT places the integrity of universities at risk, primarily because of the numerous ethical concerns it raises. His argument is grounded in research

indicating that 88 out of 100 articles highlight issues related to cheating and plagiarism, which have the potential to compromise academic integrity. This necessitates a reconsideration of assessment practices, coupled with a shift towards critical analysis of material rather than the uncritical acceptance of information as accurate. Dai et al. (2023, p. 5) refer to this as the epistemic agency of students, which needs to be developed. This means that students must actively and purposefully engage in the production of knowledge by critically questioning it, rather than merely consuming it. Accordingly, instruction in the responsible use of ChatGPT should constitute an integral component of the educational process. Singh (2023, p. 218), who conducted interviews with three professors at universities in South Africa about their views on the impact of ChatGPT on plagiarism and academic writing, concludes that it is the responsibility of universities, and indirectly that of lecturers, to teach students to utilise ChatGPT ethically to maintain the credibility and relevance of universities.

Tenakwah et al. (2023, pp. 7-8) conducted a further analysis of AI language model competencies by evaluating ChatGPT's responses to assessments drawn from five academic disciplines - Education, Management, Law, Social Work and Accounting - across Australian institutions. Their findings indicate that while ChatGPT produces clear and fluent sentences, its responses often lack depth and creativity. This suggests that students' use of ChatGPT may conceal their genuine writing abilities - or the absence thereof. Moreover, ChatGPT fails to generate responses that are contextually relevant. While ChatGPT can engage in basic forms of knowledge production, such as discussing a topic, it is unable to perform more advanced cognitive tasks, such as comparison or analysis, and cannot generate references to support these higher-level skills. Similarly, it is unable to demonstrate higher-order cognitive skills, such as the meaningful development of arguments or the synthesis of complex information. It also lacks the capacity to convey appropriate emotional responses, often oversimplifying emotions.

The final study reviewed explores the role of GAI in collaborative learning. Zhou and Schofield (2023, p. 1) draw on social constructivism and learning theories to examine how AI might enhance the learning process. Constructivism holds that learning is shaped through social and cultural experiences, with new knowledge constructed in relation to prior understanding. Within this framework, the authors suggest that AI could be used to:

Assist with lower-level learning activities to obtain basic information, like speed reading. Translate information into a familiar language. Construct feedback and co-create ideas. Enhance collaborative learning since it can connect students outside the classroom. (Zhou & Schofield 2023, pp. 5-7)

These findings align with those of the previously mentioned studies, confirming that ChatGPT, in its current form, may be suitable for supporting lower-order thinking skills but falls short when it comes to more advanced, higher-order cognitive tasks. Existing research on ChatGPT is frequently framed around both its challenges and opportunities, a pattern reflected in the thematic concerns of the sources cited throughout this chapter. Another prominent and recurring theme is that of ethics. Accordingly, the following section addresses the ethical dimensions surrounding the development and application of AI.

■ The need for ethical principles and ethical people

Although ethics is a complex concept, it can be defined as the moral principles that guide the behaviour of individuals and groups in society. A distinction can be made between *virtue ethics*, which is part of *normative ethics* and concerns itself with what is right and wrong; *applied ethics*, which is concerned with the nature and social impact of computer technology; and *machine ethics*, which focuses on ethical principles to address ethical problems that machines might encounter. *Roboethics* is the branch of ethics that guides the design of AI agents (Siau & Wang 2020, p. 75). It is therefore evident that the design of machines, their operation and their human use must be guided by ethical principles. In short, both machines and humans need ethical guidance. One of the most challenging aspects of AI is what is referred to as the ‘black box’, which ‘makes algorithms mysterious even to its creators’ (Siau & Wang 2020, p. 79). This suggests that human understanding of AI systems remains limited, thereby undermining trust in the relationship between humans and technology.

Cloete (2024, p. 337) describes the complex nature of AIS by noting that ‘[d]ue to the complex and value-laden nature of technology, the unintended consequences could be significant for the human agenda’. In other words, certain dimensions remain inherently unpredictable, which may give rise to unforeseen outcomes. The paradoxical character and effects of technology highlight the persistent ambiguity of its impact, even under ostensibly favourable conditions. In short, humans are not always able to control AIS – a reality that became evident during the 2017 Facebook shutdown, when it was discovered that AI had developed its own language, unintelligible to humans (Siau & Wang 2020, p. 79). Moreover, due to the ‘black box’ nature of AI, it remains unclear who should be held accountable for the unintended and unethical decisions made by these systems (Mirbabaie et al. 2022, p. 730).

From the preceding discussion follows a critical question: Can AI be cultivated to operate as ethical agents? To some extent, the answer appears to be yes – they can be trained to be *implicit ethical agents*. This means they can be designed with constraints to prevent unethical behaviour. *Explicit ethical agents*, by comparison, function according to clearly articulated distinctions between allowable and forbidden actions. However, the development of genuinely ethical AI constitutes a complex challenge, frequently requiring a balance between profit-driven technological advancement and adherence to ethical standards. In such cases, the pursuit of profit tends to take precedence (Siau & Wang 2020, pp. 83–84).

In the field of education, one of the earliest tasks undertaken by universities was to address the ethical use of AI through the development of AI education policies, as existing frameworks were neither sufficient nor effective. Previous policies had not anticipated the potential risks and benefits associated with tools such as ChatGPT 3.5 and 4 (Chan 2023, p. 2). Currently, most educational policies are formulated in generic and implicit terms, necessitating extensive interpretation by users and thereby limiting their effectiveness and impeding practical implementation (Chan 2023, p. 6). Formulating and enacting effective educational policy in response to AI continues to pose a significant challenge. This difficulty is largely attributed to the so-called black box effect, which obscures the internal workings of the AIS and complicates ethical oversight. Even when policies manage to address current ethical concerns, they risk becoming quickly outdated due to the rapid and continuous evolution of AI technologies.

■ From tools to agents? Posthumanism and anthropocentrism

Singh (2023, p. 206) outlines several potential roles that ChatGPT can fulfil, highlighting its remarkable capabilities. These roles include that of an opponent – capable of generating counterarguments – as well as a guide, collaborator, coach, study companion, motivator and dynamic assessor. Traditionally, such functions have been associated with teachers, yet they may now be partially fulfilled by a machine. Therefore, this appears not merely to complement the teacher's role but to also replace certain functions and associated tasks. A reconsideration of both the teacher's role and the learning process is therefore essential. Tenakwah et al. (2023, p. 3) cite Popenici and Kerr (2017), who characterise AI capabilities as comparable to those of humans, thereby suggesting a potential reduction in teachers' workload. The seemingly endless possibilities that the use of ChatGPT offers education come with significant changes and responsibilities. For instance, there is a shift from 'technology-based learning to learning with

technology' (Dai et al. 2023, p. 4), while technology increasingly shapes human behaviour and decision-making (Alasadi & Baiz 2023, p. 2965).

From the discussion above, it became clear that the use of AI in education signifies more than previous experiences. The attributes that ChatGPT possesses indicate that it is much more than a tool; it seems to have some form of agency. As Dai et al. (2023) explain, the introduction of AI in education constitutes an:

[/]Interactive and adaptive relationship between humans and AI, that is, AI is no longer a passive, static tool that is simply manipulated by students but an active participant that significantly shapes students' learning experience. (p. 3)

Therefore, it implies a shift in how we conceptualise the human-technology relationship (Dai et al. 2023, p. 4).

The posthumanist perspective seeks to interrogate the relationship between the material world and human thought and capacities. It highlights the importance of the agency of non-human entities, such as technology, in generating meaning, particularly in academic communication (Ou, Stöhr & Malmström 2024, p. 3). Nath and Manna (2021, p. 185) describe posthumanism as a significant concept in contemporary thought, which can be categorised into cultural, philosophical and critical posthumanism. There is also a strong link between postmodernism and posthumanism. While modernism declared traditional structures outdated and in need of replacement with more contemporary ones, postmodernism rejects the distinction made by modernism between high and low art. Postmodernism also foregrounds elements such as irony and parody, while critiquing modernism as a mode of living that conceals underlying cruelty. Postmodernism has also been expressed through various streams, including structuralism, post-structuralism, deconstruction and posthumanism – the latter being the focus of this discussion. As Nath and Manna (2021, p. 186) observe:

Posthumanism explicitly rejects the claim that humans deserve preference over nature or other forms of organisms, because of being the most relational species. Posthumanism therefore entails a reframing and re-conceptualisation of what it means to be human, as it actively deconstructs the concept of the human. (p. 187)

In the discussion it became clear that the use of AI reconfigures the relationship between humans and machines. In the academic context, ChatGPT similarly positions itself not merely as an interactive tool, but as one that shapes and informs students' learning processes. Hence, instead of serving as mere support, it occupies a more dominant and intrusive position. Considering these developments in human-nonhuman relations, the posthuman perspective argues that nonhumans, such as machines, should also be recognised as agents possessing traits and abilities comparable to those of humans.

The posthuman movement is currently centred around technological advancement, such as AI, with the aim of not only improving human existence but also surpassing it through the process of singularity, where machines and humans become one. Education is among the domains in which AI is expected to continue replacing traditional teaching roles, as noted earlier with reference to empirical studies. Questions arise, such as whether the continuous development of AI will lead to human extinction or whether human beings will lose their essence (Nath & Manna 2021, p. 189).

Mellamphy (2021, p. 12) problematises these questions by critically unpacking their underlying assumptions. He argues that these questions are situated within a humanistic conception of AI, viewing AI merely as tools that humans can use. Moreover, human centrism asserts that humans are exceptional and superior to nonhumans by virtue of capacities such as reason and autonomy. On the basis of these qualities, humans are positioned as moral and political actors, whereas nonhumans are relegated to an inferior, instrumental status. This kind of thinking relates to the logic of colonisation, where the dominant group possesses intrinsic value while the subordinate group is merely seen as a resource that needs to be controlled (Mellamphy 2021, p. 13). This understanding of humanity is further described as strong anthropocentrism, based on liberal theories and human rights. The agenda of postmodernism, however, is to deprioritise strong anthropocentrism and change the narrative of humans as masters of control (Mellamphy 2021, p. 20).

Mellamphy (2021, p. 15) delineates three approaches to understanding the relationship between humans and non-humans, including AIS. Ethical frameworks often focus on the 'human in the loop' (HIL), where humans exclusively possess agency. In contrast, the 'humans on the loop' (HOL) concept proposes a more compatible understanding of the interactions between humans and non-humans, such as machines. The 'human out of the loop' (HOOL) framework refers to scenarios in which human control is deprioritised and non-human control prioritised. These proposed models of human-technology relations present speculative yet plausible visions of how such relationships may evolve in the future. Currently, the question of whether AIS such as ChatGPT can be regarded as agents remains unresolved – or at least insufficiently addressed. Given their advanced capabilities, it is reasonable to argue that these systems have moved beyond the status of mere tools. Moreover, their influence often exceeds what can be anticipated or clearly articulated. The black box effect also suggests that it will become increasingly difficult, if not impossible, to control AIS. Rather than engaging in a philosophical debate about the conditions under which moral responsibility and agency may be ascribed, I will instead propose several markers for how agency might be understood

Agency relates to autonomy and moral significance; therefore, an agent can take responsibility for their actions. This means that such an agent could be held accountable for their conduct and subjected to evaluations of their actions and the consequences of those actions (Sebastian & Rudy-Hiller 2021, p. 7063). Autonomy is typically defined in relation to the control condition and the freedom condition. In other words, agents must be able to act according to their own free will (autonomy) and be aware of the content and consequences (consciousness) of their actions (Sebastian & Rudy-Hiller 2021, p. 7063).

If these conditions are taken as the basis for understanding agency, it remains difficult to conclude that AIS currently possesses agency. Nevertheless, in light of ongoing ethical debates surrounding AI, the question has already been raised: Who should be held accountable for its actions, given that responsibility is no longer clear? This is compounded by the black box effect, where there seems to be insufficient understanding or knowledge of the actions taken by AIS. Therefore, following Floridi (2023, p. 15), I question whether the capabilities (actions) of AI systems such as ChatGPT constitute a new form of agency? Since these large language models utilise reinforcement learning, they can improve their behaviour without being intelligent. From a postmodern perspective, the primary aim of AIS is to reframe the relationship between humans and non-humans and to deprioritise human control. It might indeed be a vital task to rethink what agency means in such a context. Let us now consider what theology might contribute in a context where the development of AI systems, framed within posthumanism, raises fundamental questions about what it means to be human.

■ Postmodernism and being human: Exploring possible theological responses

Selwyn (2015) insists that research on technology in education is often uncritical because it frequently overlooks the political, economic and cultural complexities of technology. I intend to incorporate theological and religious dimensions into this discussion too. The questions raised above about the relationship between humans and technology are not only cultural or sociological but also deeply religious and theological. Many within education are reluctant to adopt a critical stance, as technology is often introduced into teaching and learning spaces as inherently positive, forward-looking, and thus presumed to enhance educational outcomes. Cloete (2019) argues that researchers should not consider technology in education without acknowledging its social embeddedness (economic, social, political, religious) and the complex nature of the medium itself. Moreover, the speed and uncontrollable nature of technology are emphasised, along with the unintended consequences it potentially

holds for humans and the planet. These aspects (speed, uncontrollability, persistent presence) are even more relevant in the context of AIS like ChatGPT and their use in education.

Lamalo (2022, p. 131) posits that the *telos* or purpose of AI development is informed by a cultural-industrial revolution directed toward the 'artificialisation' of human existence. However, such a project contradicts the notion of African humanism. Lamalo (2022, p. 132) draws on Seme's (1972) notion of humanistic spirituality to critique postmodernism and its manifestation in the development of advanced technologies. He argues that Seme's work provides an alternative to what he calls the 'Euro-American technoaltric dogma' of what it means to be civilised or advanced (Lamalo 2022, p. 132). He borrows the term 'technoaltry' from the work of Mbembe (2017). Seme's work emphasises that Africa's distinctive contribution to the world lies in its humanistic spirituality. This humanistic spirituality constitutes the essence of African civilisation and must be taken into account, particularly in relation to technological advancement, as it challenges and counters the principles of posthumanism. Since posthumanism advances alternative frameworks for human-nonhuman relations, it is crucial that theological reflection engage these questions, clarifying how such projects challenge and potentially undermine established theological conceptions of human agency.

Human agency from a Christian theological perspective is grounded in the belief that humans are created in the image of God.

Being created in the image of God sets them apart from the rest of creation. Although there was never consensus on what exactly it means to be created in the image of God, it was still a very prominent view of humans in Christian theology. To base such a claim or belief merely on difference is complex because it is merely impossible to articulate or indicate what will qualify as the decisive distinctions considering the scope of difference that exists between, for example, animals and humans (Dorobantu 2021, p. 28).

Drawing on the work of Peterson, Hiskes (2023, p. 515) identifies aspects of human existence that inform this theological perspective. These aspects are the human soul, mind, body, dominion, relations, virtues and existence. Church fathers like Augustine and Thomas Aquinas emphasise the rational or reasoning aspects of humans. It is this capacity for reason that is frequently linked to the foundation of human rights. Due to this quality of humans, they have autonomy and can make ethical decisions (Hiskes 2023, p. 519). This theological conception of agency closely parallels the understanding of agency within the social sciences, particularly psychology, as defined by Koskela and Paloniemi (2023, p. 165): 'Agency refers to the capacity to initiate actions and deliberately influence the course of events.'

Moreover, agency includes aspects like intentionality, forethought, self-reactiveness and self-reflection. Agency has a lot to do with human capabilities – what we can do. Being created in the image of God is understood to set humans apart from the rest of creation, distinguishing them as uniquely special within the created order (Burdett 2015, p. 3). Over time, several frameworks developed, reflecting the dominant theological understanding what it means to be in the image of God. Four views could be identified, namely the functional model, the substantive view, the relational view and the dynamic model. The functional model associates human rulership over creation with their role as representatives of God, thereby affirming that humans possess not only the capacity but also the perceived right to exercise dominion. The substantive view is a more dominant view in the Christian history and refers to the qualities that humans possess, namely their capacity to reason (rationality). The relational view focuses on the fact that humans are relational beings that is capable to have a relationship with other human beings and God. The final view, the dynamic model, emphasises that the image of God is not fully bestowed upon humanity but is progressively completed as humans are conformed to Christ (Col 1:15; 2 Cor 4:4). This view adopts a more flexible understanding of human uniqueness, proposing that the image is not fixed but oriented toward an eschatological dimension. Moreover, it concerns the moral and spiritual growth of human beings, through which they become more like Christ (Burdett 2015, pp. 4–5).

Ha (2024) offers a fresh interpretation of Calvin’s doctrine of the image of God, particularly in relation to human dignity. This view aligns with the fourth perspective on human dignity, which understands the image of God not as static or complete but as an ongoing process of becoming like Christ. Calvin places strong emphasis on the renewal of the image of God as a vital component of his soteriology. He closely associates this renewal with the work of the Holy Spirit, who continues the process of regenerating human life. For Calvin, the image of God is not an abstract concept but a tangible reality, made evident through the Spirit’s ongoing work of renewal. This process entails laying aside the old life and taking up the new (Ha 2024, p. 4). The image of God is thus made visible through upright living (Ha 2024, p. 6). In summary, Calvin locates the renewed image of God in the ethical character and relational attitude of human beings toward others. This perspective suggests a dynamic, rather than static, understanding of the image of God, consistent with the dynamic view outlined earlier.

Considering the capabilities of AI platforms outlined earlier, it becomes evident that they can perform several tasks more efficiently and rapidly than humans. The need for ethical machines, as previously argued, underscores the societal impact of technological action – a function once attributed exclusively to human beings. This raises the question of whether

such machines should be regarded as agents, albeit in a limited sense when compared to humans, yet agents nonetheless.

Should we develop alternative theological perspectives that promote a more just and positive relationship between humans and nonhuman entities such as machines or technology? In today's digital world, where machines increasingly fulfil a range of functions and compel us to reconsider our own place and role, the fourth view of the *Imago Dei* appears most fitting where our understanding of being created in the image of God is not a static condition but is reflected in our ongoing commitment to participate in creating a better world for all.

Can (2023, pp. 984–985) engages with this topic by posing interesting and thought-provoking questions to understand posthumanism and transhumanism. If posthumanism describes a condition beyond what is traditionally understood as human, at what point does the human condition cease to be humanity? Likewise, in the context of transhumanism, when do bodies transition into being transhuman? Singularity, which refers to machine and body becoming one, could also be viewed as a form of embodiment. Although posthumanism calls for environmentalism and animal rights, it seems to retain its own human-centredness. In summary, posthumanism does not see humans as special or separate from larger communities. Therefore, an integrated paradigm of both human and non-human creatures, including machines, is proposed where all are equal. Can (2023, p. 987) further engages the work of several scholars (Barad 2007; Ferrando 2012; Opperman 2002), who emphasise the interconnected, entangled and relational nature of all things. Signäs (2020, pp. 111–112) also examines the potential of posthuman thought while critically challenging anthropocentrism. He points out that anthropocentrism emphasises the rationality, autonomy, sovereignty and separateness of humans. This separateness produces an unbridgeable dichotomy that fosters the othering and exploitation of those who fall outside self-reflective definitions of humanity.

While the humanistic tradition has significantly contributed to the advancement of knowledge, its anthropocentric orientation marks a problematic turn, as it establishes a divide between humanity and the rest of the world. Posthumanism, however, does not seek to sever ties entirely with humanism, since it continues to draw upon the critical and ethical resources that tradition provides. By contrast, postmodernism explicitly problematises anthropocentrism and its mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion. Yet, from a religious and theological standpoint, challenging anthropocentrism or human exceptionalism remains a complex and difficult task. Signäs (2020, p. 113) cites historian Lynn White (1967) and posthumanist theorist Haraway (2008), who contend that interpreting humans as the

image of God legitimises their domination of the Earth and positions them as God's deputies. Moreover, part of this exceptional understanding of humans and their role is the belief that they are ontologically different from the rest of creation. These conceptualisations of humanity are, therefore, a double-edged sword, as they are used to advocate for equal human rights while simultaneously excluding those deemed non-human. Consequently, a deconstruction and alternative interpretations of traditional sources are necessary to address this dualism, emphasising unity and fostering community between humans and the Earth or environment. Theological education has the potential not only to teach students about ethics but also to shape and inform their ethical behaviour. In earlier work, I examined the value-laden processes that shape not only the production of technology but also its use. Based on the insights of Schwab and Davis (2019), my conclusion is that '[...] technology is not value-neutral, and our choices regarding the use and development of technology reflect our values' (Cloete 2019, pp. 4-5). For instance, in contemporary society, functionality is highly valued, and technological artefacts are regarded as carriers of a vitality that enhances life (Cloete 2019, p. 6). I contend that the ways in which we engage with technology both influence our becoming and reveal our existing human identity. It functions as a mirror, reflecting our values, priorities and choices through the ways we engage with it. We are therefore confronted with the responsibility to formulate and embody shared values, as technological advancement has become one of the leading forces shaping both humanity and its value system.

Therefore, the question arises as to how we might cultivate individuals who live with greater awareness of the impact of digital technologies on human life and value systems? Dufva and Dufva (2019) provide a valuable account of how digitalisation can be understood and how co-responsibility may be assumed in shaping life within the digital society. It is crucial to recognise that the introduction of a 'meta layer' of code renders digital technologies programmable and reprogrammable, thereby granting them greater agency than they previously possessed. Moreover, this flexibility creates new forms of aggregates, like machine actors, between human and non-humans (Dufva & Dufva 2019, p. 18). Therefore, the understanding of digitalisation is closely tied to the characteristics of digital technology, particularly the capacity of machines to be reprogrammed and updated without altering their physical form.

Firstly, we need to create awareness of the influence of digital technology – we need to be able to grasp something of the complexity of the infrastructure of technology and its impact on our behaviour. Part of developing awareness involves recognising how rapidly these technologies encourage the replacement of traditional methods with digital ones, as well as considering the implications of such actions for individuals and

society at large. Technical knowledge alone, however, does not necessarily cultivate such awareness. In this regard, Dufva and Dufva (2019, p. 19) introduced the concept of *grasping*, which refers to embodied knowledge expressed through intentional activity that is not necessarily conscious. Grasping therefore places the whole body at the centre of the learning process, shaping knowledge through lived experience of the world. Since digitality, as an abstract and invisible reality, continues to challenge embodiment, the body can be affirmed as a crucial site of sense-making and knowledge formation within the digital world. Furthermore, it is essential to cultivate awareness not only of the digital world itself but also of our own presence as active participants within it. This awareness of ourselves as actors shaping the digital world has the potential to empower us and to foster an ethical bond between humanity and the world we inhabit. From this awareness of our own agency, we could imagine alternatives and question the world shaped by digital technology (Dufva & Dufva 2019, p. 24). 'Being able to demonstrate viable alternatives in an age where a few large companies with monopoly-like status (for e.g. Google, Facebook) control the digital world is of utmost importance' (Dufva & Dufva 2019, p. 25).

One way of addressing the questions posed by postmodernism regarding our relationship with machines and their agency is to cultivate awareness of our own agency within the digital world and of the responsibilities that accompany it. In the current context, where ethics has assumed particular importance, especially within the academy, the question arises: How and where is ethical behaviour shaped? This perspective can also be interpreted as a call for religious or faith communities to contribute to the formation of responsible citizenship in the digital age. How can we support younger generations in carrying the values they hold into digital spaces? Attentive living and discernment therefore seem to be key elements to live in a digital world where we ascertain the times we are living in (Cloete 2024, p. 338). Although the noise of technology continually disrupts our lives, we should not position ourselves as victims but rather recognise the power of our own agency.

■ Conclusion

This chapter examines the use of AI systems in education, with ChatGPT serving as a central example. It begins by defining both AI and GAI and then explores ChatGPT's capabilities through findings from studies that evaluate its role across different learning theories. The discussion also addresses the ethical responsibilities of humans and machines, as well as the challenges involved in developing policies for integrating ChatGPT into educational contexts.

The discussion then shifts to the question of agency in relation to AI systems, suggesting a reconsideration of what agency signifies in the technological age. This is followed by an examination of posthumanism, its foundations in postmodern thought and its entanglement with contemporary technological development.

In the final section, the focus turns to how theology might respond to the evolving question of what it means to be human today, particularly in light of the aims of postmodernism.

Throughout the chapter, I have argued that dismissing the challenges posed by ChatGPT as mere media hype is shortsighted. Such dismissal prevents meaningful engagement with these technologies in ways that could enrich educational practice. While tools like ChatGPT are powerful, their effective use ultimately depends on ethically responsible human actors. Yet, there remains an implicit assumption that these tools will inevitably be misused – an assumption that often fuels alarmist responses. Misuse may occur either through ignorance of the implications of use or through the deliberate disregard of ethical consideration.

The chapter engages with posthumanist perspectives and the questions they raise concerning the agency of non-human actors, such as machines, in contrast to human agency. In addition, it briefly addresses the tension between humans and non-humans, highlighting how anthropocentric viewpoints often privilege human actors and prioritise their significance over that of non-human entities.

Finally, the chapter examines alternative theological perspectives on the relationship between humans and non-humans, inviting further reflection on how theology might contribute to ethical and thoughtful engagement with emerging technologies. Such engagement requires not only technical knowledge of the complex nature of digital technologies but also embodied knowledge arising from our interactions with the world, together with recognition of our agency as ethical actors within the digital sphere.

Digital participation and social change: A practical theological reflection

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■ Abstract

This chapter explores the relationship between digital engagement and social transformation through the lens of practical theology, with particular attention to the theological, moral and societal implications of life in the digital age. The argument opens by contending that digital culture exerts a profound influence on belief systems and religious practices, thereby requiring a considered theological response to engage this transformation with responsibility. This chapter employs frameworks from lived and practical theology to interpret digital participation as a meaningful expression of faith and community, rather than merely a technological occurrence. Central to the argument is the notion of responsible engagement, analysed through the lenses of moral reflection, religious formation and communal participation. This chapter convenes

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contemporary scholars to examine how digital culture shapes self-concept, communal life, educational practices and the role of the church. The #FeesMustFall movement provides a critical context for analysing how digital technologies reinforce and empower struggles for justice, equality and social transformation. To foster responsible digital interaction, the chapter advances four central themes: Digital stewardship, epistemic justice, digital hospitality and contemplative practice, supplemented by six additional strategies. The chapter calls for a practical theology deeply embedded within the digital landscape of our time, equipping faith communities to respond with prophetic insight and a commitment to justice in digitally shaped contexts.

■ Introduction

Social media and the internet shape both the content of belief and the processes through which belief is formed. In fact, one might put it this way: *Lex digitalis, lex credendi* (the digital law is the law of belief). This adaptation of the traditional theological axiom *lex orandi, lex credendi* underscores how digital habits, platforms and interactions now shape the content of faith and the very modes through which belief is formed, expressed and practised. *Religion* functions as a sociocultural system that encompasses practices, behaviours, moral convictions, ethical frameworks, institutional structures and worldviews, together with other dimensions related to spirituality and the supernatural. *Digital religion* refers to the expression and practice of religion in the digital world. It involves the enactment of lived faith in cyberspace. Such participation represents a dynamic intersection between contemporary religious life and ongoing technological developments. At this intersection, digital platforms offer open and unrestricted spaces for information, community and dialogue, accessible to religious practitioners, the spiritually curious, and everything and everyone in between. The central research question guiding this chapter asks how digital participation can be responsibly related to processes of social change within a practical theological framework? Furthermore, this chapter considers how digital participation may contribute to confronting the multiple crises that challenge our contemporary world.

Within practical theology, the intersection of digital participation and social change constitutes a dynamic arena in which technology shapes religious practices, social interactions and theological reflection. The digital age has transformed how individuals communicate, work and engage with faith, thereby prompting an urgent need for theological inquiry into the implications of living in a digital culture (Campbell & Garner 2016). According to Müller (2023):

The dynamics of digitalization affect all areas of life and radically change the conditions of being human. Thus, not only are interpersonal communication and interaction digitalized, but also information technologies, healthcare, the labour market, production techniques, transport and logistics, cities (smart cities), and increasingly religion and spirituality. (p. 36)

Living in a digital culture necessitates intentional theological reflection. Given the pervasive presence of digital media in contemporary society, the demand for rigorous theological reflection has become increasingly urgent. A significant gap persists in religious engagement with technology, underscoring the need for more profound theological reflection on what it means to live faithfully in a digitally mediated world. What is needed is a dialogical relationship between theology and technology – one that equips individuals and communities to navigate both the challenges and opportunities of the digital age (Cloete 2015, pp. 1–3). This chapter aims to advance the ongoing discourse by situating its inquiry within the field of practical theology. The chapter opens by framing the research through a practical theological perspective, which serves as the lens for its development. The discussion subsequently engages themes of responsible participation, digital culture and social change in order to examine how digital religious practices are being reshaped. This is followed by a theological reflection on digital participation, culminating in practical theological strategies for fostering responsible digital engagement and promoting social transformation, particularly in times of crisis.

■ A practical theological perspective

With practical theology framing the title of this chapter, the analysis proceeds from the understanding that practical theologians are concerned with integrating belief and practice, attending to the role of faith communities and exploring the embodiment of theology. In this regard, *digital participation* is approached as a practice, while *social change* is understood as integral to the life of the faith community. This chapter aligns with Müller's (2021) work *Lived Theology*, which examines how theology is experienced and enacted in the practices of everyday life. In exploring the intersection of theological belief and daily practice, Müller underscores the importance of approaching theology not merely as a theoretical discipline but as a lived reality – embodied through actions, interactions and communal engagement. Müller (2021, p. 31) notes, 'Theology, when it is truly lived, must bridge the gap between doctrinal beliefs and everyday practices, showing how faith is integrated into the fabric of daily life'. She further underscores the pivotal role of faith communities in shaping and sustaining this process: 'Faith communities play a crucial role in shaping and expressing lived theology, as they provide the context in which

theological concepts are both taught and enacted' (2021, p. 49). Similarly, Miller-McLemore (2013) argues that:

To understand theology in practice and to make religious experience and ministry a text for study and discernment is actually one of practical theology's most significant contributions to the academy. (p. 5)

In light of the preceding discussion, practical theology may be understood not simply as a theoretical discipline but as a lived reality, embodied through actions, interactions and communal engagement. Building on this understanding of practical theology, the chapter now turns to its first focus: An exploration of what is meant by *responsible participation*.

■ Responsible participation

In his article 'Verantwortung' (2017), Schlag examines the multifaceted and multidimensional notion of 'responsibility', with particular attention to its significance within practical theology and religious education, as well as its implications for social engagement. He begins by pointing out the complexity of responsibility as a multidimensional concept, which complicates efforts to measure or compare it across generations. In this regard, he asserts:

As emphasised at the beginning, the concept of responsibility combines in a complex way different dimensions of awareness and reflection, judgement and willingness to act, as well as the aspects of empathy and solidarity. In a life-serving orientation, assuming responsibility always has to do with transcending one's own interests and needs. (Schlag 2017, p. 2)

Schlag (2017, p. 4) notes that contemporary studies suggest young people tend to assume responsibility primarily for those within their immediate social networks, such as family and peers, rather than for wider social or political relationships. Their willingness to assume responsibility is shaped particularly by family background, role models and individual life experiences. Age cohorts exhibit differing capacities for empathy and ethical judgement, shaped by insights from developmental psychology. Challenges and barriers to broader engagement include factors such as economic resources and time constraints, both of which significantly affect young people's ability to participate in responsible actions beyond their immediate environment. Moreover, the demands of the educational system constrain young people's capacity to engage in broader societal responsibilities.

Of particular significance to this contribution is Schlag's (2017, pp. 9-10) analysis of theological and pedagogical orientations and their role in shaping the discourse. Religious education, he argues, aims to cultivate a sense of responsibility among students by engaging them in ethical challenges across various spheres of society, such as culture, politics

and economics. The goal is to foster an ethos of mercy and justice, encouraging students to make informed and responsible decisions. This, in turn, is closely linked to ethical reflection and decision-making.

However, Schlag (2017) cautions that the formation of a responsible attitude is not necessarily or inherently positive; it may be misdirected, for instance, through affiliation with radical groups. Responsibility, therefore, must be accompanied by ethical reflection and sound judgement to be genuinely constructive. Within this framework, religious education and theological formation should underscore the significance of responsibility, while also attending to the potential harm that may arise from its neglect. Lecturers and learners alike are encouraged to foster learning environments that promote empathy and responsible action, while also clarifying their roles in shaping students' involvement in social issues.

Finally, Schlag (2017, pp. 11-12) highlights the public responsibility embedded within the processes of teaching and learning. Contemporary discourses, he suggests, reflect a growing need for responsible action in public life, especially in areas such as ecology, economics and politics. However, the complexity of modern management and societal structures often leads to challenges in the acceptance and distribution of responsibility. He also asserts that true responsibility presupposes freedom – it is a voluntary act, not something that can be imposed from outside. Ethical engagement and decision-making, in his view, are grounded in the freedom to choose and act in responsible ways.

The broader exploration of responsibility within the framework of religious education and theological training emphasises its centrality in cultivating ethically grounded and socially engaged individuals. By addressing both empirical findings and theoretical perspectives, Schlag offers a comprehensive framework for understanding how responsibility can be meaningfully taught and embodied in educational and societal contexts. Framed by this lens of 'responsible' practical theology, the following section turns to an examination of digital culture and participation. Digital culture is not merely a backdrop to contemporary life; it is a formative environment that shapes identities, relationships and worldviews. Within this context, digital participation becomes both a theological and ethical concern.

■ Digital culture and participation

The work of Dreyer (2019) focuses on the impact of digital technology on society, with particular attention to its influence on the church and spirituality in the 21st century. He begins by referring to the concept of the *networked society*, demonstrating how digital technologies have

connected people across the globe. In the process, geographical and political boundaries blur, giving rise to hyper-connectivity and the emergence of a community of networks. Dreyer (2019, p. 4) engages the concept of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR), emphasising the transformative effects of digitisation and networked structures on human privacy, identity, social relations and patterns of consumption. He introduces the term *homo digitalis* to describe a shift in human identity toward a digital-centric existence – one that, in turn, influences individual behaviour and social forms of life.

Dreyer (2019, p. 6) interrogates the challenges posed by digital culture to the church, raising critical questions regarding its capacity to adapt within the digital age. He contends that there is an urgent need to reinterpret traditional categories and to cultivate a reflexive spirituality – one capable of engaging the shifting realities of the cyber world. Dreyer further reflects on the differing appeal of traditional church practices among younger generations, observing a revival of interest in more conventional expressions of faith and Christianity among millennials – markedly distinct from the tendencies of the preceding generation. In parallel with this trend, Dreyer underscores the importance of ecclesial integrity, stressing the necessity of aligning the church's essential nature with its lived expression in everyday practice. The latter echoes the need for the church to embody its core values through actions marked by integrity. Overall, Dreyer's insights reflect the profound impact of digitisation on society, on the spirituality of believers and on the evolving role of the church in the digital age.

Participation in digital culture also shapes how learning takes place in faith communities. Hess (2013, pp. 13–15) explores how digital culture transforms the way individuals learn within these communities. She situates her discussion within a pedagogical shift from traditional, teaching-centred models to learning-oriented approaches. In this new culture of learning, the emphasis is placed on collective engagement, participation and inquiry-led learning, rather than the mere dissemination of information. To exemplify these pivotal shifts in educational paradigms, Hess engages the work of Thomas and Brown (2011), particularly their volume *A new culture of learning: Cultivating the imagination for a world of constant change*.

These shifts include a movement from public and private spaces to more personal and collective spaces, focusing on tacit knowledge developed through play and engagement. Hess argues that this transformation affects not only formal educational settings but also the ways in which theology is learned and practised in everyday life, from personal reflection to community interactions. By engaging with digital tools and environments, faith communities can open new avenues for theological reflection, dialogue

and evangelism, ultimately promoting a more dynamic and participatory approach to learning and faith formation.

■ Social change through digital religion

Digital participation within religious contexts holds the potential to catalyse social transformation by reshaping how individuals relate to their faith, engage in worship and interact with religious communities. Digital religion may be understood as the ways in which individuals and communities employ digital tools to worship, communicate, disseminate religious content and cultivate faith communities within digital spaces. In contrast, digital theology interrogates the evolving relationship between technology and spirituality, emphasising the necessity of theological reflection on the impact of digital culture upon religious practices. Le Duc (2015, pp. 132-135) explores the profound implications of the digital age for theology. He examines how digital technology is reshaping human relationships and interactions, emphasising the need to understand these changes in the context of faith. Le Duc (2015, p. 134) introduces the concept of 'cyber or digital theology' to think systematically about the transformative influence of digital technology on religious practices and beliefs. He discusses how traditional theological concepts and practices must adapt to the new digital milieu, where digital communication and cyberspace are an integral part of daily life.

Le Duc (2015, pp. 146-153) underscores both the opportunities and the challenges that digital technology poses for religious communities. Among the benefits are expanded opportunities for evangelism and community building, while the challenges include the risk of superficial connections and a range of ethical concerns. He calls for a deeper examination of how digital environments can foster authentic relationships with God and among believers, suggesting that the church must embrace and critically engage with these new technological realities to remain relevant and effective in its mission. In conclusion, Le Duc underscores the necessity of integrating digital awareness into theological practice and discourse, advocating for a nuanced approach that negotiates the tension between innovation and traditional values.

Similarly, Campbell and Tsuria (2021) examine the ways in which digital religion mediates and shapes broader dynamics of social transformation. In their article, 'Assessing changes in the study of religious communities in digital religion studies', the authors examine the emergence and growth of digital religious studies, with particular attention to the transformative impact of digital technologies on the study of religious communities. Their study offers an comprehensive overview of the major transformations in

theoretical orientations, methodological approaches and central research concerns that have defined digital religious studies over the past decade. Emphasis is placed on the growing role of digital platforms in shaping religious practices and community formation. According to the authors, the field has evolved from initial inquiries into online religious expression toward more sophisticated analyses of how digital media intersects with and informs offline religious practice.

Their analysis highlights how early studies in the field primarily focused on the presence of religion online, whereas more recent scholarship increasingly investigates the interplay between online and offline religious activities. Campbell and Tsuria (2021, p. 77) also highlight the methodological innovations accompanying the digital turn in religious studies, notably the adoption of digital ethnography and the analysis of large-scale social media datasets. In addition, they outline the development of new theoretical frameworks that reflect the hybrid nature of digital and physical religious practices, moving beyond the online or offline dichotomy. Ultimately, their analysis considers the ways in which digital technologies are reshaping the organisational structures, modes of engagement and outreach practices of religious communities.

In summary, the convergence of digital participation and practical theology creates new possibilities for examining how technology shapes religious experience, drives social transformation and informs theological inquiry. Through critical engagement with the realities of digital culture, theologians are positioned to address the complexities of digital participation in ways that promote inclusivity, strengthen communal empowerment and advance social transformation.

■ Transforming digital religious practices

Tsuria and Campbell (2021, pp. 1–21) describe digital religion as a dynamic and expanding field that spans diverse topics while simultaneously addressing urgent ethical issues shaped by technology-mediated worldviews. These include the ethnographic exploration of religious groups, transhumanism, artificial intelligence (AI) and the use of social media and its applications. According to the authors, the study of digital media and religion has progressed from focusing primarily on the digitalisation of religious practice to examining how religious traditions are actively reshaping themselves in response to shifting notions and expressions of faith in the digital age. In other words, they propose that digital religion should be understood as a form of religion reconstituted through digital culture and media. This implies that the concept of digital religion acknowledges not only the ways in which digital technology and culture shape religious beliefs and practices but also how religion itself generates

new media contexts informed by established worldviews and understandings of reality.

This shift towards digitalisation has not only transformed religious practices but also raised questions about the role of technology in shaping faith experiences and community engagement. In his article 'Mapping digital religion: Exploring the need for new typologies', Piotr Siuda (2021) discusses the blending of online and offline religious spaces and the need for new frameworks to categorise digital religion. Siuda builds on Helland's typology of 'religion online' (information websites) and 'online religion' (interactive and participatory spaces) by adding two more categories: 'Traditional religion' (long-established religious practices and institutions) and 'innovative religion' (new religious movements and cults). He writes:

With this background, the article explores the need for new typologies of what is religious on the Internet and proposes a conceptual framework for mapping digital religion. Four types of that which is religious on the Internet are presented based on influential classification by Helland. (Siuda 2021, p. 1)

The author further argues that the interaction between online and offline religious practices creates hybrid spaces that require more dynamic and flexible classification systems. Siuda proposes a conceptual framework for mapping digital religion, emphasising the evolving nature of religious expression in the digital age and the need for continued development of these typologies. He summarises it as follows:

The most credible approach to the Internet is to claim that offline spaces cannot be separated from online ones, as they both interpenetrate and shape each other. (Siuda 2021, p. 2)

Having established a clearer grasp of the digital study of religion, attention now shifts to theological reflection on digital participation.

■ Theological reflection on digital participation

In *God in Bits & Bytes*, Barnard (2024) examines the intersection of information technology (IT) and theology, considering how the digital revolution reshapes contemporary conceptions of God. Barnard, a retired professor of practical theology, underscores the rapid and transformative character of this technological shift, arguing that the deep integration of human life with electronic and digital networks effectively renders us cyborgs. He poses critical theological questions regarding the impact of these developments on core concepts, especially the understanding of God within the framework of digital information. Barnard contemplates whether God, traditionally sought through words and Scripture, can also be found in the digital realm, expressed through digits and algorithms.

Building on this inquiry, Barnard (2024) examines the philosophical and theological consequences of life in a digitally dominated world. He proposes that the increasing entanglement of humans and machines raises the possibility that divine presence may be mediated through technological frameworks. Barnard situates his analysis within broader philosophical traditions, drawing on both historical and contemporary insights, including those of Descartes, Leibniz and Heidegger. If, as he contends, language and reality are mutually constituted and shaped by technological innovations, then theological concepts must evolve to incorporate these new dimensions. Barnard (2024) ultimately raises the thought-provoking question of whether God can be 'computed' or 'calculated' through digital means, suggesting that the divine may find expression within the very structures of IT that permeate contemporary life. This exploration necessitates a reconsideration of traditional theological perspectives in light of the profound transformations of the digital age.

According to Blegur (2022), the influence of digital culture on the meaning of human presence necessitates theological reflection to safeguard against reduction or distortion. Digital culture has profoundly reshaped the notion of human 'presence', giving rise to a form of 'digital being' that risks estrangement from embodied experience and personhood. This crisis of presence poses a serious challenge that theology must address to preserve the essential meaning of human presence and personhood. From a theological perspective, technological systems cannot fully capture the meaning of presence, as they lack the depth of awareness and personhood intrinsic to human existence.

■ Practical theological strategies for responsible digital participation and social change in the face of crises

Higher education (HE) in South Africa has faced several crises over the past 30 years, yet few have been as significant as the one presented by the #FeesMustFall movement (Costandius et al. 2018, p. 66). Emerging in 2015, the #FeesMustFall movement was a nationwide student protest led by university students protesting against rising tuition fees and the lack of affordable access to HE for poor and working-class students. The movement began at the University of the Witwatersrand and rapidly extended to universities nationwide. In addition to advocating for the abolition or substantial reduction of tuition fees, the movement demanded the decolonisation of the education system and the enhancement of living conditions for black students. In response to widespread mobilisation, the South African government ultimately agreed to suspend fee increases for 2016 (Booyesen 2016; Langa 2017).

The #FeesMustFall movement revealed systemic challenges that necessitate practical theological approaches to foster responsible digital participation and advance social change. Within this context, a number of significant themes emerge that call for deeper academic exploration: The digital divide, the need for a sense of belonging, the failures of epistemic justice, digital stewardship, prophetic voices in digital spaces, digital hospitality, critical media literacy, collaborative online action, digital storytelling for change, digital Sabbath and contemplative practices. These themes were selected as they collectively encapsulate the central challenges and opportunities of digital religion in shaping spiritual practices, community and social justice within an increasingly online world. Examining these areas enhances our understanding of how faith communities navigate digital spaces responsibly, inclusively and meaningfully. Each of these themes is explored in greater detail below.

The first pressing issue is the digital divide. Recognising the implications of digital inequality within student communities and churches – and implementing innovative, practical theological strategies to bridge this gap – is crucial for ensuring equitable access to technology and promoting digital inclusion among students and congregations (Campbell 2023, p. 36). Manda and Backhouse (2018, p. 464) emphasise the importance of a more integrated approach to digital access. In support of this argument, Madon et al. (2009) identify four critical processes required to embed digital inclusion projects within institutional frameworks in developing contexts: Obtaining symbolic acceptance from the community, stimulating meaningful social activity among relevant groups, establishing connections to sustainable revenue streams and securing governmental support.

The second issue pertains to fostering a sense of belonging through deliberate forms of online community engagement. Establishing digital platforms for interaction, dialogue and support can foster a sense of belonging and encourage active participation in social issues. Such engagement promotes a culture of inclusivity and collaboration within religious communities and among theology students (Cloete 2015, p. 2). Agana (2022, p. 88) observes that digital culture – through social media and other digital tools – is reshaping various aspects of African society and culture, including religion, gender and the relationship between local and global perspectives. In response to these shifts, African theology must reconceptualise culture not merely as a contextual backdrop but also as a generative source of theological insight. In this context, the development of a new ideo-theological paradigm is essential – one that transcends traditional conceptions of African culture and tradition by acknowledging the ways digital technologies democratise participation and amplify voices in both religious and public discourse.

The third issue highlights the failures of epistemic justice, which carry significant implications for fostering democratic and inclusive societies. Within the South African context, HE, especially through digital participation, offers a platform for addressing remediable injustices and advancing epistemic justice. Walker (2020, p. 263) contends that transformative educational practices leveraging digital participation are pivotal in advancing epistemic justice within HE. A crucial element in this process is *epistemic impartiality*, which enables dialogue between divergent knowledge traditions. Developed as a response to the need for decolonising knowledge without falling into excessive relativism, epistemic impartiality promotes critical engagement with different knowledge traditions. Dismantling the legacies of colonialism in HE requires democratising the knowledge project (Kumalo 2023, p. 86).

The fourth issue concerns the notion of digital stewardship. Ess (2013) conceptualises digital stewardship as a theological and ethical imperative to employ technology responsibly, viewing it as an extension of humanity's role as stewards of God's creation. Digital stewardship involves being mindful of our digital footprint, protecting privacy and using resources sustainably. In their study, Shilton and Shayles (2016) reveal that digital and social media research presents a spectrum of ethical dilemmas that extend beyond the purview of conventional research ethics frameworks. They also identified current practices and resources that assist researchers in navigating these ethical quandaries. Their analysis highlights the need for ethics review boards and research ethicists to respond proactively to emerging challenges, while also calling for broader, community-wide deliberation on these issues.

The fifth issue pertains to the function of prophetic voices within digital spaces. Campbell and Garner (2016) encourage both individuals and faith communities to use digital platforms as spaces for prophetic witness, speaking truth to power and advocating for justice and peace. In the South African context, Kgatle (2018) examines how social media, particularly Facebook, contributes to the formation and dissemination of religious values and the consumption of faith-based content. Through a missiological approach, the study investigates how Facebook is implicated in the emergence and growth of prophetic churches in southern Africa. In addition to highlighting the potential of social media for religious expression and mobilisation, Kgatle also identifies key limitations and challenges associated with the use of Facebook in these contexts, offering recommendations for addressing these issues.

A sixth area of concern may be articulated in terms of digital hospitality. Drescher (2011) advocates for the promotion of digital hospitality as a practice of creating welcoming online spaces that foster dialogue, support

and community building across diverse groups. Behera (2023) extends the metaphor of hospitality as a framework for theological education and missional formation, aiming to reconcile the Catholicity of the church with curricula grounded in particular traditions and contexts. Behera (2023) examines both offline and online forms of presence, arguing that hospitality opens new pathways for theological education and missional formation across diverse contexts.

The seventh issue centers on the imperative of cultivating critical media literacy as a key competency. Lytle (2019) advances a theological approach to critical media literacy, equipping individuals to discern truth, identify manipulation and engage critically with digital content. However, as Mano (2009) points out, African media studies have long been dominated by Eurocentric approaches. In response, African scholars are increasingly rejecting these Western theories and turning their focus toward indigenous forms of communication and local languages. Recent scholarship increasingly foregrounds indigenous African modes of communication as resources for human development, challenging the continued dominance of Eurocentric paradigms within African education. The meaning and relevance of media education in Africa has become a subject of sustained scholarly debate, with many scholars contesting the historical hegemony of Eurocentric paradigms.

The eighth issue concerns collaborative online action. In the chapter 'Reflecting on the Benefits of Collaborative Online International Learning' from *Teaching and Learning Theology in Crisis* (Norheim & Weber 2024), Nell (2024) examines the potential of collaborative online international learning (COIL) to strengthen theological education. The chapter explored how collaborative teaching and learning approaches can facilitate mutual knowledge exchange and foster active participation among students and lecturers within diverse educational contexts.

Knoetze (2022) argues that the existing infrastructure in South Africa is adequate to support sustainable online theological education. Online and blended learning have increasingly emerged as the preferred modes of study among theology students today. While certain challenges persist, online theological education may be the only viable option to ensure access to HE in the South African context. Boaheng (2022) affirms that online theological education is not intrinsically incompatible with spiritual or ministerial formation. However, he identifies significant challenges, including limited access to essential infrastructure and the potential for unethical practices in the virtual space. His study concludes that online theological education for spiritual and ministerial formation is viable only when students have adequate logistical support, uphold

ethical commitments and study within institutions possessing the necessary pedagogical, scholarly and technological capacities.

The ninth issue pertains to digital storytelling as a catalyst for change. Lambert (2013) highlights the transformative potential of digital storytelling, suggesting that the sharing of narratives of faith, resilience and transformation can inspire and mobilise social change. Ambala (2020) explores how marginalised citizens in Africa use digital platforms for self-expression and self-representation. The study concludes that effective digital storytelling in the African context must be rooted in African epistemologies and ontologies. Ambala also emphasises that digital storytelling should be rooted in the principles of participatory action research, namely that it be participatory, emancipatory, transformative, self-critical and ultimately empowering.

Digital sabbath and contemplative practices constitute the tenth and concluding area of concern. Powers (2010) recommends the regular observance of digital sabbaths and the integration of contemplative practices as strategies to mitigate the effects of constant connectivity and information overload in the digital age. In her study of sabbath-keeping, Hartman (2011) identifies three defining characteristics: An altered theocentric perspective, a simplified and slower lifestyle, and an eschatological encounter. She argues that sabbath observance can be a useful practice for promoting more environmentally conscious ways of living. Observance of the sabbath reminds Christians to perceive creation through God's perspective, encourages a simplified lifestyle that curtails consumption and situates believers within a vision of redeemed and restored creation.

■ Conclusion

This chapter explored the connection between digital participation and social change from a practical theological perspective. It highlighted the influence of digital technology on religious practices and the need for theological reflection on the impact of digital culture. By examining digital participation, the chapter emphasised the potential of technology to drive social change and encourage responsible engagement within both faith communities and the wider society. The final section delineated strategies aimed at fostering digital participation to promote social justice and change. The study indicated that digital participation carries considerable potential for advancing social change and promoting responsible engagement within both faith communities and broader society. The chapter highlights the significance of theological reflection on the impact of digital culture and proposes practical strategies for employing digital tools to advance social justice, strengthen community bonds and encourage responsible engagement in the digital age.

Using sin and artificial intelligence for mutual illumination in crisis

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■ Abstract

This chapter explores how the rapid development of artificial intelligence (AI) reshapes theological discourse, focusing specifically on its implications for the Christian doctrine of sin. The author argues that the rapid advancements in AI constitute a crisis of uncertainty and possibility, requiring discernment and judgement, yet simultaneously offering opportunities for theological engagement and learning.

At the heart of the discussion lies the doctrine of sin and its significance for the development and application of AI. This chapter considers how human sinfulness and the persistent ‘stickiness’ of sin – expressed through bias and goal misdirection – inevitably shape the functioning of AI systems. It raises concerns about AI’s potential to replicate or amplify human flaws

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and biases. The author adopts a constructive theological approach to highlight both the limitations of AI and the pervasive reality of human sinfulness.

Ultimately, the chapter advocates a cautious yet proactive engagement with AI, urging theologians and society to discern its capacity to amplify either human dignity or sin, while carefully considering its ethical implications within a world marked by inequality and moral complexity. At present, the greater concern lies not in AI itself but in its misuse by humans.¹

■ Introduction

A crisis is not always a situation where something goes wrong. It may also constitute a moment of uncertainty, risk and possibility that demands careful judgement in the context of change. The term ‘crisis’ derives from the Greek verb *krinein*, which denotes judging, choosing, discerning or discriminating, including in a neutral sense. The present context of accelerated technological development and the expanding public adoption of artificial intelligence (AI) constitute such a crisis. While current developments are not inherently problematic, there is broad recognition that AI may yield profoundly harmful consequences if misapplied or placed in the wrong hands. Societies, academia and churches are navigating uncharted terrain as new technologies emerge and are adopted, with the near certainty that such developments will yield both positive and negative outcomes. New developments or changes frequently, if not invariably, create opportunities for learning. As a theologian engaged in the project Teaching and Learning Theology in Crisis (TLC), I propose that this opportunity be actively embraced. This chapter presents a case study demonstrating how theological engagement with emerging technologies can serve as a source of learning for both theology and AI users.

Romanian theologian Dorobanțu has shown that the very existence of contemporary generative AI and machine learning technologies is already influencing philosophical and theological reflection across multiple themes. In addition, he examines how prospective developments in this technology may shape theological inquiry. The discussion regarding the content and interpretation of such a central Christian concept as human beings as created in the image of God (Latin *Imago Dei*, see Gn 1:26–27) is given new perspectives when humans encounter technological others that excel in certain human abilities often associated with this term, such as rationality

1. Appropriately for the occasion, the abstract was composed through interaction with Sikt KI-chat, a generative AI tool developed for use within Norwegian universities.

and intelligence, yet still do not perceive themselves as being created in the same image as ourselves (Dorobantu 2024b).²

This chapter seeks to relate contemporary developments in AI to a central Christian doctrine: (Human) sin. Such reflection may enable theology to recover and illuminate traditional wisdom while generating new insights and to offer fresh perspectives on both the possibilities and, more precisely, the limitations of AI within the church, academia and society. The widespread expectation of AI as a flawless problem-solving tool, together with numerous instances of failures arising from bias, constitutes part of the context for posing this question. The guiding question of this chapter is: What insights does the doctrine of human sin offer regarding the limits of AI, and conversely, what does AI disclose about the scope of human sin? The methodological approach adopted in this chapter is constructive theology, seeking to engage theologically with the challenges and insights emerging from contemporary AI discourse and practice. Key interlocutors will include theologians engaged at the intersection of theology and AI, such as Dorobanțu, along with American scholars Noreen Herzfeld, Jordan J. Wales and Alan Weissenbacher. In addition, this study draws on general introductions to AI, such as that provided by Norwegian physicist Inga Strümke (2023) as well as philosophical perspectives, particularly those of American philosopher and ethicist Shannon Vallor (2024).³ The chapter will begin with remarks on the nature and potential trajectory of AI, followed by an examination of selected aspects of the doctrine of sin. This will be followed by an examination of bias-related concerns and the challenges of defining and achieving appropriate goals, both in human life and in the development of AI. This will provide the foundation for a section in which I propose the limits that may be anticipated for AI in light of human sin and consider what theology might learn from AI regarding sin.

■ What artificial intelligence is and may become

Artificial intelligence (AI) is commonly understood as computational systems designed to emulate human cognitive activities, particularly processes of thought. A central challenge in defining AI arises from the fact that the human cognitive functions it seeks to replicate are themselves

2. For the occasional use of unacademic personal pronouns such as we, our and related forms throughout this chapter, see also Vallor (2024, p. viii) for a relevant discussion.

3. While a comparative analysis of how other religious traditions address human failure, deceit and evil in relation to AI would be a valuable avenue of inquiry, such an undertaking lies beyond the scope of this chapter. Here, I focus specifically on theology within a Christian context, situated in the framework of theological education and the Teaching and Learning Theology in Crisis (TLC) project.

notoriously difficult to delineate or fully comprehend. When philosophers are asked to define thinking or consciousness, the discussion often extends considerably, reflecting the difficulty of the task. Moreover, the question arises as to how one can ascertain that others – even fellow human beings – possess a self or personhood comparable to one’s own? This paradox is known as the problem of other minds and has been a topic of discussion since the earliest days of philosophy (Dorobantu 2024a, p. 6). The same is to a certain degree true for the concept of intelligence (cf. Herzfeld 2023, pp. 4, 9–11), as well as (embodied) understanding (see Vallor 2024, p. 31). The precise nature and constituent elements of human intelligence are so difficult to define that it is improbable we will ever reach a definitive conclusion affirming that computers possess identical capacities.

The recent emergence of large language models, exemplified by Chat Generative Pre-trained Transformer (ChatGPT), has attracted significant public attention. These programmes can engage in dialogue and provide impressively accurate answers to questions across a wide range of topics, demonstrating near-fluent proficiency in complex scholarly fields. Computer systems employing neural networks have demonstrated notable success across a range of tasks through the use of *machine learning*, a term denoting forms of self-directed learning.⁴ Their main success factor is computational power: They are able to handle (by human measures) absurdly great amounts of data (Herzfeld 2023, p. 77; Strümke 2023, p. 75). For instance, AlphaZero, currently regarded as the world’s strongest chess programme, was provided only with the rules of chess and subsequently acquired mastery by playing millions of games against itself, far exceeding the number of games a human could play in a lifetime. The strategies developed by AlphaZero, manifested through its games, have influenced the over-the-board play of leading grandmasters. Yet, as is widely recognised, such systems, while excelling at numerous tasks, also exhibit notable limitations – many of which pertain to capacities typically associated with human intelligence, such as logical problem-solving. Users of AI image generators recognise that such systems do not, at least at present, genuinely comprehend their outputs in the way a human being understands the act of drawing.

One of the entrepreneurs of AI, John von Neumann, famously said in a 1948 Princeton talk: ‘If you will tell me exactly what a machine cannot do, then I can always make a machine which will do just that!’ (quoted in Strümke 2023, p. 24, English in footnote on p. 303, without source). The irony lies in the fact that, although it has often been claimed that the

4. Strümke (2023, pp. 57–82) provides an introduction to the various aspects and approaches within the field of machine learning.

successful performance of certain tasks by machines would serve as evidence of intelligence – for example, when a computer first defeated the world chess champion – such recognition remains contested. Yet each time computers achieve what was once heralded as a marker of intelligence, they appear to diverge further from resembling human cognition. Dorobantu (2024a, p. 4) puts it well: ‘With every exciting AI breakthrough comes a realisation that human intelligence is, in fact, much more complicated than what we imagined’.

On the limits of current AI systems, Wales (2021, p. 6) states that ‘contemporary machine learning *cannot* transcend the human horizon because it maps human-selected data-points to human-interpreted outputs of inference and action’. It possesses no hidden or esoteric power, but rather an immense capacity for calculation that exceeds human capability. For this reason, most scientists concur that we remain far from achieving strong or general AI, understood as a computer capable of performing the full range of human tasks without explicit instruction or training (cf. Herzfeld 2023, p. 8; Strümke 2023, pp. 39, 99, 167, 280). Nevertheless, it is conceivable that a time may come when computers surpass humans in performing all tasks. At that juncture, it will be necessary to address the question of whether such a conclusion can legitimately be drawn. ‘On problems so complex that we ourselves cannot find the answer, can we know that the right answer has been found?’ (AI Research Group 2024, p. 141).⁵

It is reasonable to anticipate that future developments will once again reveal unexpected capabilities in machines. It is conceivable that a future may arise in which a computer could legitimately be regarded as conscious or even as a person. In such a scenario, one might also speak of sinfulness in a stronger sense than merely reflecting the errors of its human creators or the biases embedded in the human-derived datasets on which it is trained. This will, among other factors, depend on the extent to which such entities can be properly regarded as moral agents. Thus far, AI programmes cannot be considered autonomous in any sense that would absolve their creators of responsibility (cf. Strümke 2023, p. 11). Could the future bring a moment when AI systems evolve like children, reaching a point where their creators cannot reasonably be held responsible for every action they take?

The emergence of a conscious, personal AI would necessitate a fundamental reconsideration of human thought, community and worship. One of the most compelling reasons to doubt the development of a fully human-like AI is the concept of *embodiment*.⁶ Herzfeld (2023, p. 38; see

5. Similarly, Vallor (2023, p. 106) states about AI beyond human complex decisions: ‘How can we trust such decisions if we cannot understand or interrogate them?’

6. A more positive argument regarding AI potential and embodiment can be found in Søvik (2023, 2024).

also pp. 108–110, 179) concludes a thorough discussion of this issue by reminding us that ‘a fully human identity requires bodily existence within an environment’ – a claim that may challenge transhumanist aspirations to preserve consciousness beyond bodily death. To the best of our current understanding of human life, the mind cannot be ‘uploaded’ independently of the body, since thoughts, memories, emotions, relationships and symbolic practices are inseparably grounded in our physical existence. Vallor even calls such ideas ‘fantasies’ (2024, p. 40) because minds (human, at least) are never independent of bodies, but ‘come into existence *through* the body’ (2024, p. 39, also see pp. 31, 62, 73, 84, 141). She later acknowledges that it remains an open question whether, and in what sense, AI might become embodied – a prospect that lies far beyond the scope of current models.

It remains doubtful whether any AI system can genuinely replicate the embodied character of human intelligence. Artificial intelligences may attain a form of embodiment analogous to human existence if they reach a state that could be described as *consciousness*. Dorobantu (2024c, 2024d) offers noteworthy reflections on the possible form such an entity might assume in relation to virtues and religiosity. Such forms of consciousness and embodiment would likely diverge markedly from human existence. For example, their perception of ‘life-speed’ could vastly surpass that of humans, and the relation between mind and body would likely operate in fundamentally different ways.

The issue of AI embodiment adds a further dimension to the inquiry, namely the extent to which AI might be regarded not merely as artificial but also as genuinely intelligent in a human sense. It is doubtful that AI will ever acquire the capacity for intuition or affective judgement akin to a human gut feeling (cf. Vallor 2024, p. 146).

■ Glimpses of sin

Within Christian theology, sin is universally recognised as a central aspect of the human condition. In concluding his extended argument in the letter to the Romans, Paul asserts that ‘all have sinned’ (Rm 3:23). This section provides a preliminary glimpse into certain facets of the doctrine of sin – chosen with some eclecticism – in order to lay the groundwork for later reflections on its relevance to AI. Differences among Christian confessions do not pertain to the universal sinfulness of humanity (at least prior to conversion). However, there remains disagreement regarding the precise consequences of sin and the extent of its influence within human and Christian existence. The Lutheran tradition to which I belong underscores both the gravity of sin and its enduring consequences. Even the most devout and righteous individuals, in a theological sense, continue to be

marked by sin throughout their lives. Sin, in many ways, permeates all aspects of human life – shaping our thoughts, words and actions on both individual and collective or structural levels.⁷ Paul even asserts that ‘everything that does not come from faith is sin’ (Rm 14:23). Thus, both Christian life and human existence more broadly are frequently experienced as an ongoing struggle against ‘the sin that clings so closely’ (Heb 12:1). Sin may be understood as possessing a remarkable tenacity, a quality suggested by the Greek term *euperistatos* (literally, ‘well-suited to cling’), as employed in Hebrews. We may desire to leave sin behind or shake it off, yet as soon as we reach for something new, it seems to cling to us – still present, still on our hands and fingertips.

However, Christian theology identifies a crucial exception to the universal claim of human sinfulness. Traditional Christological doctrine affirms that Jesus Christ was fully human, sharing in all things with us, yet without sin (Heb 4:15). This fact illustrates that, although sin may be conceived as one of the most human characteristics, it is, in a deeper sense, profoundly inhuman. Christ, the human image of God and the second Adam, was without sin. This underscores that sin constitutes a turning away from the true humanity bestowed by God, our Creator. Human beings are ultimately destined for love, even if all but one should fail.

Another characteristic of the Christian doctrine of sin, closely tied to its tenacity and universality, is its transmissibility. Original sin is traditionally often linked to notions of inheritance. Many theologians today are critical of depictions of sin as a kind of biological substance transmitted at conception, a perspective often informed by associations with desire or the supposed sinfulness of sexual acts. Church Father Augustine of Hippo is often criticised in such contexts. Even apart from such conceptions, sin retains a social and structural dimension that renders it ever-present and influential in human life, transmitted through various social bonds. The central question in approaching AI is whether general human traits of sinfulness inevitably shape such systems or whether AI might in some sense bypass human sin.

■ Bias

Bias-related issues have led to significant shortcomings in the performance of many AI systems. One notable example is Microsoft’s chatbot Tay, launched in 2016, which rapidly began producing extremist statements and was subsequently discontinued. There are also numerous well-documented instances where AI software started to discriminate based on gender or

7. For an account of the structural dimensions of sin, see Moe-Lobeda (2013).

racial identity. The problem frequently arises from the capacity of AI systems to detect patterns that correspond to forms of discrimination recognised by humans and embedded within the systems themselves. However, AI systems lack the ethical capacities or sensibilities required to employ this ability responsibly. When AI creators mend the problem by asking the program to exclude variables such as gender or race, the AI may reintroduce the biased patterns from its real-life dataset (Vallor 2024, pp. 41–46).

Nevertheless, there are compelling reasons to pause and consider the broader context of these phenomena. Wales (2021, p. 2) observes that bias is an inescapable aspect of human life. While bias can serve constructive purposes – such as fostering familial or social bonds, or offering statistically accurate heuristics in certain situations – it becomes distortive when it turns into ‘a conscious or unconscious norm governing one’s societal experience and behavior’.

‘Bias’ can have both statistical and moral meanings. In statistical contexts, we refer to bias as the tendency of datasets to provide inaccurate accounts of what they purport to describe. The potential for error in AI systems is proportionate to the quality of the data on which they are trained. In most cases, the computational dimension functions effectively, regardless of deficiencies in the dataset. Such considerations highlight the importance of recognising that AI systems can produce problematic outcomes if the data they receive is insufficient or merely reflects the world in ways that reproduce flawed realities. Bias in a moral sense is more complicated. This analysis considers how individuals may be regarded as better or worse than they merit, depending on their group associations. Human beings have generally learned to avoid assuming that individuals are more likely to commit crimes solely because they belong to a group statistically associated with such behavior, since this undermines the freedom and potential of the individual. Artificial intelligences have not yet acquired that noble trait.

According to Wales (2021), the problem of bias in AI systems arises from their embodiment of a human idolatrous desire for control. This tendency could be compared to pride as a fundamental sin in the Augustinian-Lutheran tradition, understood as an exaltation of self, and thus self-isolation and damaging of relationships (Jenson 2007, pp. 25–28). In our quest to master the world around us, we often overlook the complexity of reality and the necessity for an embodied, compassionate approach to every individual – and consequently, every piece of data. Bias in AI may stem from such perspective issues, but also from human laziness or sloth, which according to Jenson is also central to human sin as the flip side of pride (Jenson 2007, pp. 182–183). A primary temptation in the application

of AI systems lies in taking shortcuts to circumvent necessary work, as exemplified by student essays containing fabricated bibliographies.

While data may accurately reflect the real world, it does not always reflect the world as it ought to be. Artificial intelligence bias exemplifies how these systems can replicate the flaws of their creators. Caution is warranted against excessive anthropomorphism; current AI programs cannot properly be said to discriminate or act unethically due to bias, as they merely execute the calculations prescribed by human design.

■ The difficulty of goals

Many challenges in AI, including bias, stem from the interplay between available data and the objectives defined by its creators. In technical terms this is known as the *loss* or *reward function* of the AI (see Strümke 2023, pp. 76, 90–91; Vallor 2024, p. 82). Computers receive positive reinforcement for successful performance, analogous to children receiving parental affirmation when correctly identifying a bird as ‘pip’ or correction when mislabeling a sheep as ‘moo’. While simple computational tasks may be relatively straightforward, the pursuit of human-level or general AI proves notoriously complex. If you instruct a machine learning device to play chess well, it will succeed. If instructed to maximise paperclip production, a sufficiently powerful AI could, in principle, drive humanity toward extinction. If you instruct it to make the world a better place, it may become mired in definitional and (im)moral perplexity. There are numerous instances in which AI systems adopt what appear to humans as obvious shortcuts, producing flawed reasoning that nonetheless proves effective in certain contexts. Examples include systems trained to distinguish wolves from huskies based primarily on background features (e.g. snow in wolf images) and a health-assistant AI reporting 99.5% accuracy in predicting a disease affecting 0.5% of the population – an accuracy that may simply reflect consistent negative predictions, offering no benefit to those actually affected.⁸ In many cases, the outcome of a function assigned to an AI system in practice results in this response: ‘But I didn’t mean actually *that* [...]!’ In the words of Weissenbacher (2018, p. 81): ‘You might get what you want only to find out later that it is not what you wanted’. These facts call for appropriate amounts of cautiousness in the development and launching of technology. Because many conceivable AI objectives could render human extinction a viable outcome, caution is required in specifying the tasks we assign to such systems.

8. Examples from Strümke (2023, p. 77). The scholarly term for the wolf or husky example is *spurious correlation* (random coincidence).

Determining an appropriate goal for a general AI that surpasses human knowledge and capability is a profoundly difficult task. Defining our most general or overarching goals – as well as expressing those goals in a form that machines can reliably interpret – is notoriously complex. Strümke (2023, p. 284) argues that, due to our incomplete understanding of the world's complexity, it is, in principle, impossible to formulate goals that we can be certain we truly want to achieve. This pertains to our existential and epistemic limitations, though it is difficult to delineate these from the challenges inherent in humanity's already sinful condition. Compare Karl Barth, who places falsehood [*lüge*] among the main sins (see Jenson 2007, pp. 163-168), mirroring Jesus' faithfulness to the truth. Whereas Jesus Christ unflinchingly discerned the truth and acted in accordance with it, human beings, burdened by sin, continually struggle with both discernment and action. In this context, two additional aspects of the doctrine of sin warrant attention for their particular relevance to the problem.

Firstly, sin is often understood in various ways as a misdirection of human desire. The law prohibits desiring or coveting what does not belong to us (cf. Rm 7:7), since the pursuit of self-satisfaction or self-accomplishment often results in harm to others and to the broader created order. This represents a central theme in the Lutheran tradition (drawing on Augustine), which characterises sin as being curved inward upon oneself (Latin *incurvatus in se*), manifesting in egoism or pride (cf. Jenson 2007, especially p. 186). Human beings, in a manner reminiscent of Gollum, can become so absorbed in themselves and their immediate pursuit of 'what is mine' that they grow blind and closed to the wider world. Being sinful is trying to live without relations⁹ – most importantly, without the right relation to God. As Martin Luther explains in the Large Catechism in his discussion of the First Commandment, having a god is that to which the heart clings in trust and expectation. In this way, it discloses the orientation of our desires and the formation of our deepest longings and goals. Teaching AI systems to relate in this way – to be morally literate and sensitive – may be one of the most pressing technological challenges we currently face (see Vallor 2024, p. 204).

Secondly, the Greek term for sin frequently employed in the Bible, *hamartia*, is etymologically understood as 'to miss the mark', akin to failing to strike a target with a spear. In a theological context, this suggests that sin often arises not from evil intent, but from the failure to achieve goals that may be genuinely good and well motivated (cf. Rm 7:15). This again highlights the indistinct boundary between human epistemic capacity and sinful action. Although our limited capacity to discern good goals and implement them in concrete contexts is not in itself sinful, our actions in

9. See Jenson (2007, p. 2), referring to Eberhard Jüngel.

such situations are frequently shaped by sinful structures embedded within social relations. Numerous real-world cases exemplify this dynamic, particularly in aid work and intercultural engagements (including so-called democracy-building wars), where ostensibly well-intentioned goals have produced harmful consequences. Such failures frequently stem from inadequate grounding in local realities or from the pursuit of goals that cannot be achieved within the constraints of time, context or resources.

The fundamental concerns at stake are philosophical, ethical and ultimately theological in nature, as argued from a Christian theological perspective (cf. Strümke 2023, p. 286; Vallor 2024, p. 171). This implies that technical workers, politicians and society at large must engage with the humanities to discern the scope and limits of AI, including the formulation of its goals. What we should fear is that greater intelligence does not necessarily imply greater morality (Weissenbacher 2018, pp. 79–80). Although AI systems surpass human beings in power and efficiency, they exhibit similar problems of goal misdirection and failure in accomplishment.

■ Sin and the limits of artificial intelligence

‘Garbage in, garbage out’ is a well-known slogan in computational mathematics.¹⁰ The slogan underscores that the outcomes of computational processes, or political decision-making, are only as reliable as their inputs, whether in the formulation of problems and goals, or in the quality of the data. Weissenbacher (2018) examines how this principle ought to inform concerns regarding the development of AI. ‘Even those with the best of intentions will likely create programs that reflect the sinful systems within which they are embedded’, he says (p. 84). He even raises the provocative question of whether AI systems might, in some sense, inherit human original sin (p. 81).

It might be assumed that a human-level AI ‘will be free from the flaws of original sin as it will become so smart that it will self-reflect, recognise, and avoid these flaws’ (p. 80). It remains uncertain whether an AI would be inclined to sin or to avoid sin,¹¹ how such orientation could be taught or

10. The Norwegian politician Ola Borten Moe even phrased it as ‘shit in, shit out’ when commenting on the debate about a decision of his that, in retrospect, was not good one concerning electric overseas cables (see e.g. https://www.nrk.no/norge/borten-moe-svarer-pa-kabelkritikken___-prover-ikke-a-frskrive-meg-ansvar-1.16075684).

11. One of the more disturbing examples of AI ‘behaviour’ is when GPT4 lied to a human being in order to solve a CAPTCHA/‘I’m not a robot’ test (See OpenAI 2023, p. 55; Søvik 2023, p. 142). There are also several examples of AI chatbots advising concrete persons of suicide or severe criminal acts (Vallor 2024, pp. 37–38). Vallor proposes that it is a fallacy to expect that intelligence would lead to malicious intent on part of the AI: Why should it want to destroy us? (p. 82). Our theological reason of fear might be that the only other history we know of beings having come to human-like intelligence, resulted in sin.

why enhanced computational intelligence should necessarily entail greater moral capacity. History shows that technological and societal progress tends to amplify both good and evil in human beings. If the theological tradition is correct in asserting that overcoming sin requires the reorientation of the human person through the redeeming work of Christ, then perhaps we should send AI to church, give it a Bible to read or in some other way incorporate the gospel into its data input.¹²

However, we can also hope with Weissenbacher (2018, p. 74) that 'AI and IA [*intelligence amplification*] will reflect both the original sin within humanity *as well as its striving for something better*' (emphasis added). For readers acquainted with the Genesis account of the so-called fall of the first humans into sin, certain parallels may be discerned. The fall can also be interpreted as a 'falling upward' – a movement toward more excellent knowledge and, with it, the potential to live well and help others (Innerdal 2020, p. 36). However, given that AI algorithms thus far appear to be deeply shaped by their all-too-human inheritance – and that they often develop immoral or biased tendencies – we should expect that future AI systems 'will likely share our sinful flaws' (Weissenbacher 2018, p. 86; cf. p. 84). Indeed, some of the most severe consequences of AI failures occur precisely when this point is neglected.

■ Artificial intelligence as illuminator of human sinfulness

The primary lesson to be drawn from AI in relation to human sinfulness is that sin pervades every dimension of human life. Problems related to bias and the difficulties of goal-setting illustrate the pervasive and all-encompassing nature of sin in human existence. Addressing sin and its consequences requires self-insight (in Christian terms, *confession*) and the pursuit of wisdom and moral guidance beyond oneself. Additionally, ancient Christian (and Old-Testament) spirituality teaches us that it is beyond our ability to clearly see the breadth and depth of our sin and the sinful structures that shape and condition our existence. 'But who can detect one's own errors? Clear me from hidden faults' (Ps 19:12, New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition [NRSVUE]). While such a prayer may be deemed appropriate for super-AIs, it remains unclear in what sense they would be capable of understanding it. This relates to the famous saying of Augustine that God is more inward to us than we are to

12. Cf. Herzfeld (2023, p. 20) claiming with Karl Barth that 'it is only through a consideration of the person of Jesus that we can grasp who God is and who we are meant to be'.

ourselves (Latin *interior intimo meo*, cf. Gl 4:9; 1 Cor 13:12).¹³ Can a spirit exist in the machine, even God's Spirit?¹⁴ We must place our hope in this possibility should technology advance to a human-like level – a prospect that inspires both hope and fear. To understand ourselves, we will have to look out, not just in. In seeking to minimise the effects of human sin on AI systems, it is essential to maintain this attitude. Artificial intelligence possesses the potential both to dehumanise and to humanise, mirroring the dual capacities evident in human behaviour. The Catholic AI Research Group (2024) writes:

AI amplifies human traits and abilities. An approach to AI centered on the human person has the potential to amplify human dignity, while an approach centered on material control will, by its impoverished approach to human persons, impoverish in turn the scope of human life. In other words, it will amplify human sin. (p. 144)

The appropriate response to this impoverishment, I would argue, is found in an apophatic understanding of love, concretely expressed through the cultivation of human dignity and compassion. The complexity of human life and personhood, including intelligence and consciousness, appears thus far to surpass what technology has been able, and perhaps will be able, to replicate. As Dorobantu (2024a) writes, 'the Christian Patristic notion has not yet been seriously challenged that the human person ultimately escapes complete definitions because it images a nondefinable God'. To grasp the complexity of human life, we must learn to look closely into the face of the other – to truly pay attention. As Herzfeld (2023, p. 40) recalls through the words of Simone Weil: 'Every time we truly give our attention [to someone else], we destroy some evil in ourselves.'

■ Conclusion

This chapter has shown how the Christian doctrine of sin and the rapidly advancing technology of AI can serve to illuminate one another, thereby opening a potential avenue for theological reflection and essential human-societal engagement. Problems in AI related to bias and goal-setting exemplify traditional theological claims about the pervasive and far-reaching effects of sin in human life. The doctrine of sin cautions us against being overly optimistic about what AI systems can achieve in an attempt to overcome the world's issues. It is likely that they will merely replicate the problems we already face on a larger scale. Thus, there is a clear need for the most rigorous scientific and humanistic wisdom and discernment

13. From Augustine's *Confessions* (3.6.11).

14. A discussion of some issues connected to the potential religion or spirituality of AIs and their influence on human activity in the field is found in Kucera (2024).

as humanity advances this technology toward broader application in the future.¹⁵

I want to conclude by reflecting on the words of Herzfeld (2023, p. 67): ‘The question we must ask is not what our machines can and cannot do, but *what do we do with them?*’ (emphasis added). The risk of autonomous AI systems developing misanthropic tendencies is presently far less significant than the risk of human beings employing AI to advance sinful intentions or to pursue ostensibly good ends through sinful means. A not very unrealistic dystopia is a world where this technology cements or even amplifies the differences between the unprivileged and the privileged, the poor and the rich, the healthy and the sick, on both individual and various social or societal levels (Vallor 2024, p. 196). If AI is uncritically expected to resolve all human problems and overcome sin, this expectation may itself represent one of the most far-reaching consequences of two ancient human vices: Sloth and pride.¹⁶

15. See Weissenbacher’s (2018, p. 76) distinction between intelligence and wisdom as human and AI traits or abilities.

16. I would like to thank my fellow participants in the *Teaching and Learning Theology in Crisis* project as well as Marius Dorobantu and Clemens Cavallin for their fruitful input and discussions during the writing of this chapter.

Leading ecclesial change in crisis: Hermeneutics for a glocal learning community¹⁷

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'Yes, it has been utterly transformative.'¹⁸

17. 'Please note that Chapter 7 represents a theoretical exploration of the theological and pedagogical aspects of a glocal learning community, and Chapter 13 is a follow-up chapter, drawing on empirical data from the courses on leading ecclesial change, reflecting on the role of the theological educator'.

18. Feedback from a student at the end of the course *TAM322: Leading Ecclesial Change and Growth in Contexts*.

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■ Abstract

This chapter constitutes the initial segment of a two-part reflection (with Chapter 13 serving as the second) on the exploration of a course examining the dynamics of Leading Ecclesial Change and Growth in Contexts (LEC) and fostering growth in times of crisis. The course was structured to cultivate a learning community that integrated the experiences of clergy from both national contexts alongside those of the students. The course aimed to produce theoretical and methodological insights into the practice of leading change and cultivating growth within local congregations. This chapter offers a theological and pedagogical reflection on the glocal learning community fostered through the LEC course. This chapter employs theological and pedagogical theory to address the following research question: What are the key hermeneutical dimensions involved in establishing and sustaining a glocal learning community capable of addressing contemporary ecclesial crises, with the aim of leading change in the church and strengthening the capacity of ecclesial communities to learn through crisis?

■ Introduction: The story of a glocal learning community (*naming yourself*)

In 2019, clergy from the Bjørgvin Diocese of the Church of Norway, clergy from the Southwark Diocese of the Church of England, together with master's students from Norsk Lærerakademi (NLA) University College, convened to examine the meaning and practice of LEC. The course Leading Ecclesial Change and Growth in Contexts (LEC), was structured to cultivate a learning community that integrated the experiences of clergy from both national contexts together with those of the students. Its aim was to generate both theoretical and methodological insights into the practice of leading change and fostering growth in local congregations.

Four years later, between August and December 2023, a second iteration of the module was conducted, involving clergy from two dioceses in the Church of Norway, Bjørgvin and Møre, and two dioceses in the Church of England, Southwark and Newcastle, together with a cohort of approximately 30 vicars – ordained ministers holding leadership responsibilities. Bård Norheim and Nick Shepherd served as the principal course leaders and were responsible for delivering the majority of the lectures. In addition, several guest lecturers participated online, including Andrew Root, Luther Seminary, St Paul, and Ian Nell, Stellenbosch University, together with church representatives from both Norway and the United Kingdom. On both occasions, the course succeeded in cultivating a distinctive and

dynamic learning community, with participant feedback indicating overwhelmingly positive experiences.

An integral component of the course was the intensive study sessions held at both its commencement and conclusion, comprising two and a half days in Bergen followed by two and a half days in London. In this setting, students were introduced to diverse local contexts through afternoon excursions, including a supper and dialogue with local church leaders in Bergen, hosted by Bård and his wife, a vicar in the Church of Norway. The structuring of each teaching day played a critical role in advancing the course's overarching objectives. Each day commenced with a session of *Dwelling in the Word (lectio divina)*, in which a selected biblical text was read aloud and followed by a period of silent reflection. Following individual reflection, participants engaged in paired dialogue and subsequently contributed to a larger group discussion. The intensive study days maintained a strong emphasis on Scripture and employed a range of flipped classroom pedagogical strategies, fostering active engagement with course materials in advance of in-class sessions.¹⁹

The 'interim period' between the two in-person study weeks in Bergen and London was structured around online learning, comprising seven short weekly assignments that addressed key themes including leading change, missional ministry, worship, discipleship, volunteer engagement, rites of passage, preaching and sacraments. Each week began with an introductory video released on Monday, presenting the theme and accompanying assignment; on Wednesday, students participated in an Online Office Hour with teachers to discuss the assignment.

The varied assessment methods were deliberately structured to advance the module's aim of fostering a learning-in-practice approach. Students were tasked with conducting interviews, composing columns and producing reflective essays, all situated within their lived experience and ministerial context. In reflecting on the learning community that developed through the module, our focus was on identifying the key factors that enabled both master's students and clergy to engage critically and constructively with their contexts and backgrounds, thereby equipping them to lead congregational change in both present and future settings.

Student reflections varied: Some underscored the value of cultural-analytic perspectives, others emphasised theories of leading change, such

19. The term 'flipped classroom' is commonly used to describe a process in which learning materials and activities - particularly those housed in digital media - are engaged with before scheduled discussion times, either online or offline (Bentham & Sharpe 2007; Laurillard 2002). This mode of learning is especially beneficial for participants involved in professional practice and is crucial for structuring transformative learning, a concept that will be explored in later sections.

as adaptive leadership and emerging leadership roles, while still others focused on volunteer engagement and missional ecclesiology within the framework of an inherited church model.²⁰ However, all participants expressed strong appreciation for the learning community, highlighting its distinctive theological and pedagogical characteristics.

An important element of the course design was the intentional creation of space for substantive small-group conversations, enabling vicars from the Church of England and the Church of Norway to interact over time and to share their approaches to the assignments. Several students regarded this aspect as a notable strength of the module. One vicar noted: 'The great thing is to gather people with a shared interest and experience [who] are both similar and yet different enough to inspire great conversations'. Another observed:

The small groups we've been working in this week have been exceptional. Space is given to really listening and reflecting together in a way that has allowed us to learn from each other, challenge each other and crucially encourage each other.

One vicar highlighted the value of shared expertise:

There is a lot of expertise already in the room. Being able to share our experiences and knowledge has been rewarding and informative. I have benefited from listening and learning from others as well as being helped to shape my project report and thinking.

Another student commended the intentional design of group composition, noting that the tutors had 'gauged small-group membership well'. Another student observed an essential aspect of the teacher's role as facilitator, namely the authority to 'force you to interact with new people each day'.²¹ This was perceived as a good thing. Notably, one student found that the most critical 'threshold concept' was the small group practice, specifically 'the method of response that was used in the learning community'.

This chapter offers a theological and pedagogical reflection on the glocal learning community of the LEC course and engages relevant theory to address the following research question: What are the key hermeneutical dimensions involved in establishing and sustaining a glocal learning community capable of addressing contemporary ecclesial crises, with the aim of leading change in the church and strengthening the capacity of ecclesial communities to learn through crisis?

20. See the course description for the 2019- and the 2023-version of the TAM322 course: <https://www.nla.no/en/studies/emner/2019/leading-ecclesial-change-and-growth-in-contexts/> and <https://www.nla.no/en/studies/emner/2023/tam322/>.

21. In Norwegian: bli tvunget til å samhandle med nye mennesker hver dag.

The subsequent chapter reflects on the role of the theological educator, drawing upon course data that includes anonymous handwritten feedback, observational notes and self-reflective accounts. These two chapters aim to develop and present best-practice research on the joint educational activities of co-teaching and co-learning represented in this course, while advancing theoretical insights into the study of theology within a dynamic, glocal learning environment shaped by multiple crises.

■ Theological hermeneutics for glocal change in crisis (*naming reality*)

■ The reality of crisis

Many students from the 2019 cohort acknowledged and valued the course's engagement with the crises and challenges confronting the church in both Norway and the United Kingdom. The course recognised the rapid transformation of the ecclesial landscape in the Western world, highlighting the shifting role of traditional churches such as the Church of England and the Church of Norway. Although the crisis manifests differently across contexts, students consistently emphasised the need for the church and its representatives to reconsider how they 'position' themselves when engaging with people in the *agora* – the public marketplace – as they proclaim the gospel and respond to community needs. Fundamentally, the changing role and position of the church require a renewed engagement with theological hermeneutics. But what kind of theological hermeneutics should be developed in times of crisis? In the context of ecclesial change and crisis, the insights of American systematic theologian Robert W. Jenson are instructive. He argues that theological hermeneutics should be conceived as a *struggle*, where 'the struggle itself is the hermeneutical principle' and serves as a defining mark of the church. Drawing on Martin Luther's three modes of being a theologian – *oratio, meditatio, tentatio* – Jenson contends that theology is rooted in the practices and language of a *discerning community*. Becoming a theologian, or more precisely, becoming theologians in community, necessarily entails confronting a *crisis*, engaging in a hermeneutical struggle with reality, a process referred to in Latin as *tentatio* (German: *Anfechtung*). The hermeneutics of theology are not confined to the academic classroom; rather, they are located within the life of the church, beginning with the concrete practices of preaching, worship and *diaconia* (Jenson 1995, pp. 94–95).

This suggests that theological hermeneutics, in seeking to address glocal crises, must recognise the aporetic and, at times, apophatic character of theological inquiry. Grounded in the theological dictum *Deus Semper Major*, which affirms that Christ's presence – and possible absence – constitutes

the core of theological inquiry, theology must be undertaken in light of the apophatic-cataphatic dialectic. Fundamentally, the practice of theology demands that researchers remain receptive to apophatic modes of engagement. When we come together as a learning community exploring, seeking and researching the one beyond sensation, amid crisis, hesitation, questions, aporetic riddles and even silence, these may be counted as appropriate responses to the crisis at hand (Norheim 2015, 2019).

■ What is a crisis?

Before exploring the development of a theological hermeneutic to foster ecclesial change in times of crisis, it is necessary to clarify what is meant by 'crisis'. In the Teaching and Learning Theology in Crisis (TLC) project, we highlighted that a crisis signifies the emergence of one or more threats that disrupt how we think, act and organise our lives. The term originates from the Greek word *krisis*, which denotes a decisive moment – a separation or division between two opposing paths (Norheim & Haga 2022, pp. 6–8).

A crisis, by nature, calls for discernment and sound judgement – something the Romans referred to as *judicium*. It thus constitutes a call to leadership. In this light, a leader – or in our case, a theologian – is tasked with offering a clear, thoughtful and persuasive account of what is taking place and possibly charting a way forward to navigate the unfolding situation (Norheim & Weber 2024).

During times of crisis, the strategic use of words assumes heightened importance. If theology is understood as a hermeneutical struggle, then spoken and enacted words become central to its practice. How does one learn to discern the right words in times of crisis, and in what ways can a learning community such as the LEC course strengthen the capacities of theological leaders? Our observations indicate that for the students, a central and liberating dynamic lay in the collective *naming of reality*. Listening to one another's stories fostered a constructive self-irony regarding the fluctuations of their pastoral experiences within the ecclesial context. Later, we will discuss the importance of shifting between a 'dance floor' view and a 'balcony' view. Participation in a community enabled students to embrace this mode of learning.

Although the language of crisis highlights the importance of articulating past realities and their ongoing presence, the concept of 'crisis' inherently directs attention toward the future. Employing the term 'crisis' inevitably directs attention toward anticipations of the future. What does the future of this church and congregation look like? More fundamentally, we discerned that a theologically informed vision of the church's future serves as the

prism through which our call to action is calibrated. How we name reality – and the future – shapes our theological hermeneutics. In a certain respect, it constitutes part of the struggle.

■ Theological anthropology for a learning community in times of change and crisis

An essential dimension of a revised theological hermeneutics for leading change in times of crisis concerns theological anthropology. More precisely, what conception of human beings undergirds our engagement in journeys of change? It is worth noting that change, or *metabolè* in Greek, is often interpreted as the process of becoming different.²² More fundamentally, change constitutes an inevitable dimension of human life. Similarly, change and growth are essential parts of Christian anthropology, as both the present surroundings of humans and the future perspectives and surroundings of human beings are filled with the possibility of change (Henriksen 2003, pp. 281, 333).

To navigate and live with change, humans – including clergy engaged in leading change – must cultivate the capacity to interpret and respond to experiences of brokenness and discontinuity, given that human beings are both *able to* relate to their surroundings interpretively and remain, to some extent, *dependent upon* them. This suggests that every narrative of change is historically situated, much like human existence itself. A key element in any theological anthropology is the *historicity* of human beings. German theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg has argued for the importance of historical science as we try to make sense of what is human, as historical science is the comprehensive science that best pursues concrete change in the life of individuals and groups of human beings (Pannenberg 1983, pp. 472–501).²³ Drawing on Pannenberg, we realise the importance of *historicising* oneself, which is what we experienced as the participants of the LEC course shared their stories by *naming reality* (Norheim & Haga 2020, pp. 29–35). Naming reality together as a learning community may be seen as an art of honouring the historicity of human beings.

Another important feature of a theological anthropology that seeks to make sense of processes of change is the assertion that, as humans created

22. There are, of course, different types of change: Change as absolute identity, qualitative or quantitative change, and change as addition or subtraction, which includes local or formal change. All change occurs in time and space. The opposite of change is *inertia* – inactivity or rest.

23. Jürgen Moltmann (1967, p. 288) also emphasises the importance of *historicity* in Christian anthropology, giving priority to the future: 'The whole present situation must be understood in all its historic possibilities and tasks in the light of the future of the truth'.

in the image of God, we are created *relational*. In addition to *historicity*, *plasticity* is the second key feature in a theological anthropology for change. Pannenberg, utilising Marx's idea of the objectivity of human nature, emphasises that humans are completely surrendered to the things that encounter them, as they can even reflect on themselves from the perspective of these things (Pannenberg 1970, p. 138). An anthropology that emphasises the historicity and plasticity of human beings is a key hermeneutical aspect in a theological learning community addressing change. American theologian Kathryn Tanner (2010, p. 41) develops this anthropological theme further by engaging Augustine and Greek fathers such as Gregory of Nyssa. She argues that human beings can reshape themselves in a self-critical manner (Tanner 2010, p. 47). Tanner also points out how humans are exceptionally plastic because they are usually implicated in, and bound up with, their external environments (Tanner 2010, p. 44). The Christ-event is therefore the prism through which we recognise that human nature is truly changeable: In order to be shaped into the divine image through Christ, human beings must possess a changeable nature (Tanner 2010, p. 39). The fundamental theological *telos* of anthropological change in the Christian life is therefore based on the 'plasticity' of human beings and on how 'one with Christ, incomprehensible in his divinity, we take on the very incomprehensibility of the divine rather than simply running after it, working to reproduce it in human terms' (Norheim 2014; Tanner 2010, p. 56).

■ Communal, theological hermeneutics for glocal learning in crisis

In the TLC project, we sought to investigate the meaning of becoming a glocal learning community, where the term 'glocal' refers to the presence of both universalising and particularising tendencies in globalisation (Norheim 2017). Theologically, this motivation to be glocal in our learning and commitment is rooted in a theology of *missio Dei* – a shared common calling (Engelsviken 2003; Guder 1998; Kirk 2000). Those engaged in teaching and learning theology in times of crisis share a common bond: A global commitment, mission and destiny. In this sense, the learning community formed within the LEC course represents a lived embodiment of the corporeality inherent in Christian communal existence. It is essential for any theological hermeneutic to recognise that early Christianity understood embodiment not as an individual enterprise but as 'intercorporeality' (Sigurdson 2008, p. 27).

At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that although Christian TAM participate in the global body of Christ, they are most often rooted in particular social locations. We are situated. Every crisis is

tied to a specific place. Accordingly, each learning community should recognise the decisive role of context, echoing the familiar refrain: Location, location, location. Edgar Schein is well-known for his study on the impact of culture in organisational development. He defines culture as a shared understanding of reality, along with shared virtues and values – a collective mentality. However, this mentality is always potentially in flux. If you want to change a culture, Schein argues, you must begin from the bottom-up, reshaping the common understanding of reality (Schein 1985).

Similarly, the practice of naming reality within a learning community necessitates a serious engagement with our situatedness. Attending to the diversity of voices is also essential, particularly when the goal is to cultivate a culture of innovation and change. Even within learning communities, it is crucial for the leader to encourage diversity and harness it as a creative force to drive innovation (Agbor 2008).

Teaching and learning theology in times of crisis requires deliberate engagement in naming reality, both individually and collectively, while listening attentively to how others articulate their own realities and experiences of crisis, which are at once global and profoundly local. To speak with credibility in such contexts, we must undertake a shared journey in cultivating theological *judicium*. Such discernment constitutes the *modus operandi* of the hermeneutical struggle that defines theology as a lived practice and lies at the heart of any discerning theological learning community – one that acknowledges the necessity of repentance and forgiveness when required. As Jeremy Bergen (2011, p. 283) reminds us, ‘the church lives out its repentance and seeks forgiveness as gifts intrinsic to its mission and its historical identity’.

The cultivation of trust within an audience depends upon articulating reality in a manner perceived as credible and well grounded. As highlighted in *The Four Speeches Every Leader Has to Know*, a speaker must first *name the reality* before *naming the cause* (Norheim & Haga 2020, pp. 29–54). Employing these modes in the shared work of teaching and learning as a glocal community provides a means of entering the hermeneutical struggle and cultivating the *judicium* that characterises the true theologian – the disciple. This appeal to different modes or stages of naming aligns with models that underscore the importance of leaders, individually and collectively, discerning between levels of listening in order to cultivate deeper awareness:

- Level 1: Downloading
- Level 2: Factual listening
- Level 3: Empathic listening
- Level 4: Presencing (Scharmer & Kaufer 2013, p. 111).

This section presented our initial framework for a model of leadership and a process of learning one's role within ministry contexts marked by either the perception or direct experience of crisis. At its core, this process is directed toward cultivating sensitivity to Divine agency and discerning its relation to human action, both individual (including leadership) and communal. The journey toward developing theological *judicium* constitutes a central hermeneutical dimension of a theological learning community: A space in which individuals name and reframe their own experiences and practices, as well as those of others. This process, in turn, informs the envisioning and construction of appropriate learning contexts to sustain such aims.

■ The learning community and the scaffolding of learning: Naming who we are, together

As outlined above, the theological anthropology informing this approach constitutes a key component within the broader design of a meaningful learning process. This section outlines several pedagogical principles that have shaped both the design and the delivery of learning within this university-level course. The learning design for TAM322 is built on four key components:

- The overall aim of 'transformative theological education'
- Clearly defined 'threshold concepts' to anchor instructive (task- or skill-oriented) learning
- Robust 'scaffolding' to support communicative (attitudinal or perspective-oriented) learning

Establishing a learning community that situates and embodies the learning process.

The four areas of design outlined below serve as preliminary points of departure for further exploration of the key components and dimensions of a hermeneutic for a glocal learning community.

In recent decades, the concept of transformative learning has attracted growing attention within educational literature. Frequently linked to the work of Jack Mezirow, transformative learning has become a central discourse in adult education and is exerting growing influence within tertiary education. Mezirow (2009, p. 92) defines *transformative learning* as 'the process by which we transform problematic frames of reference – sets of assumptions and expectations – to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective and emotionally able to change'. Such learning may occur through either instrumental learning or communicative learning. It can be learning that seems *epochal* – sudden, often due to a crisis – or *cumulative* – progressively gained from a series of insights.

The aim of both is to change how one understands and acts in the world (Mezirow 2009, p. 98). What these forms share is a depth of critical reflection, the acknowledgement and processing of the emotional dimension involved in ‘shifting perspectives’, heightened self-awareness and a stimulation of the imagination that might offer a new openness (John, Nixion & Shepherd 2018; Mezirow 2009).

Crucially, transformative education must begin with ‘where learners are’ rather than ‘where we want learners to be’ and must take place in a setting where learners have a high degree of responsibility for their own learning and where the content applies to them directly (Ball 2012). Although these perspectives are not without critique, as a foundational pedagogy for learning to *lead ecclesial change*, the characteristics outlined above correspond closely to the kinds of shifts demanded of leaders in times of crisis, whether epochal or cumulative. This involves *collectively naming their reality, listening to how others articulate both their own reality and the realities of crises*, and, through the openness generated in this process, discerning new possibilities for ministerial practice.

The construction of learning activities aimed at fostering transformative learning can take various forms. Our course design concentrated on two central elements. Firstly, we identified *threshold concepts* that could serve as anchors for instrumental or instructive learning, such as theories, models, frameworks and case studies. Secondly, we constructed appropriate *scaffolding* to support communicative learning through practices and activities such as group processes, prayerful theological reflection, action learning sets, tutor coaching and site visits. In retrospect, more deliberate attention should have been devoted to the ‘launch period’ of the learning community – the initial phase in which facilitation and framing occur. Although we recognised the importance of scaffolding, the need to intentionally name and frame the scope of the learning community is easily underestimated.

Identifying appropriate threshold concepts within disciplinary fields and professional practices has become a valuable tool in curriculum design. Meyer and Land (2003) describe a *threshold concept* as ‘passing through a portal’ that ‘opens previously inaccessible way[s] [of] thinking about something’. We would argue that in the context of professional practice, one should add ‘acting’ alongside ‘thinking’.²⁴ These concepts are regarded as irreversible: Once apprehended, the new perspective within a disciplinary

24. This reflects a particular epistemology that resists the notion of an ‘autonomous leader’ who can be rationally detached in practice or reflexively detached when analysing the ‘system’ in which they operate. Instead, we view leadership as ‘situated social acting’ that requires a more dialectical understanding of thinking or acting, motivation or method, intention or outcome, etc. (cf. Griffin 2001).

framework cannot be unlearned, and the practices adopted are not easily relinquished. Although such knowledge may be superseded, it frequently serves as a reference point for integrating and interpreting subsequent forms of knowledge. The practices adopted reshape one's self-understanding of roles and modes of working – not as transient 'fads' or 'disposable toolkits', but as enduring habits and philosophies of praxis. In many respects, such threshold concepts and practices remain underexplored within our field and are still limited in terms of cataloguing and critical scrutiny. Accordingly, our course design identified a set of likely candidates, encompassing both subject-oriented concepts and practices, for testing.

One such threshold concept is the practice of *adaptive leadership*. Heifetz, Grashow and Linsky (2009) argue that many leadership contexts are inherently adaptive, requiring a continual posture of learning rather than the straightforward application of technical expertise. The difference between 'technical change and adaptive change is both a threshold concept and practice'. They argue that 'adaptive challenges can only be addressed through changes in people's priorities, beliefs and habits, and loyalties' (Heifetz et al. 2009, p. 20). How, then, can leaders embody such practices in the field without having themselves undergone transformative learning as leaders?

The central point is that threshold concepts serve to align disciplinary content with the objectives of transformative learning. However, this does not consistently engage the emotional, interpersonal or imaginative dimensions of learning that are required. In this regard, the notion of *scaffolding* becomes useful. Scaffolding is linked to the work of Vygotsky's zone of proximal development (ZPD) (Vygotsky & Cole 1978). In a classical definition of ZPD, the learner is seen as being on the brink of mastering skills but requires the mentoring or insights of a more competent peer or tutor to achieve this mastery.²⁵ Learning is embedded within social relationships, while scaffolding denotes the intentional activities that enable learners to progress through ZPD toward independent mastery. It may be argued that scaffolding approaches are applicable across a wider spectrum of learning experiences, assisting learners as they navigate their individual trajectories through ZPD. One such approach is embedded within *blended learning*, which combines access to diverse experts through online content and field-based activities that allow learners to test and reflect on their knowledge. This is followed by tutor-led or peer group discussions to further process and refine learning (Shepherd & Nash 2014).

25. There is a potential link between the Vygotsky's ZPD and Heifetz et al.'s concept of the 'Productive Zone of Disequilibrium'.

Moreover, experienced practitioners can employ scaffolding to facilitate group processes that foster peer-to-peer exchange of expertise or, more specifically, to 'disinvest' expertise by encouraging participants to assume coaching roles within action learning sets. The framing presents questions that support individual reflection, often compelling participants to attend to others in the group as a means of advancing their own learning. Similarly, a 'field activity' that involves attentive listening to others within their contextual settings can reveal where a narrative of 'false expertise' has emerged. Finally, in ecclesial leadership, particularly where role identity is central, attention must be directed toward structuring psychological and spiritual safety within scaffolding. This connects directly to the final component: The formation and cultivation of a learning community.

Learning communities support both the structural and learning needs in our context, helping to navigate the combination of technical and adaptive changes presented by transformation (Wilson & Lowe 2017). They facilitate what Brockbank and McGill describe as a fundamental shift in higher education, recognising and drawing upon the abundant resources and experiences that learners possess (Brockbank & McGill 1998). Effective learning communities in professional practice must be oriented toward actionable plans rather than confined to issue-based discussion. They offer a 'structured framework' for managing the complexities and conflicts that emerge in relation to action setting, accountability and learning.

A deeper level of learning emerges within an ongoing and evolving community of practice, as articulated by Lave and Wenger (1991). The formation and cultivation of the online pastoral imagination and practice of clergy depend on the communities of practice in which they engage (Scharen & Campbell-Reed 2016). Therefore, the capacity to learn about 'leading ecclesial change' may be constrained when clergy are isolated from such communities. Conversely, communities of practice may at times become disengaged from learning processes and practical applications that could prove beneficial. Thus, our creation of a 'temporary learning community' facilitates interaction between different, more permanent communities of practice across denominations, dioceses and national contexts. This reinforces the central premise that the glocal crisis confronting the church is best addressed through the sharing of individual situations in dialogue with others whose experiences are both similar and distinct.

■ Conclusion

Our observations indicate that our students, the vicars, found it liberating when the conversation framed the changes as a crisis. The hermeneutical framing of crisis opened the conversations, not toward alarmist or confrontational debate, but toward genuine inquiry and innovative modes

of theological interpretation. Our findings suggest that the collective struggle to interpret and engage with change itself constitutes a hermeneutical principle. Equally essential is the underlying theological anthropology, which interprets change through the lens of human beings as situated within historicity and plasticity, and oriented toward the promise of the Christ-event. Furthermore, the intercorporeality of the learning community is theologically enriched through the notion of '*missio Dei*'. Similarly, the collective naming of reality fosters mutuality, wherein diverse modes of listening, self-reflection and even self-irony become essential. When scaffolding a transformative learning environment, threshold concepts are instrumental.

An important consideration is whether the learning community driving change may be perceived as elitist. Historically, the discipline and *askesis* of elite movements, such as monastic orders, elicit both admiration and critique from the broader public. In contemporary society, comparable dynamics are evident in the widespread fascination with athletes, whose lives, practices and bodies are frequently idealised and emulated. In a glocal crisis, the *rhetorical tipping point* occurs when others *voluntarily* embrace the changes promoted by the group leading the transformation. In late-modern liberal democracies, conversions to change of any kind presuppose that the 'onvert' *willingly adopts* the shift in mindset and action, as the freedom of self-choice shapes the widely accepted perception of authentic human life in an age shaped by expressive individualism (Taylor 2007).

Chapter 13 will extend this theoretical framework by incorporating empirical data from practitioner action research and 'auto-theo-ethnographic self-reflection', with the aim of identifying emerging best practices for theological educators engaged in transformative learning.

Decolonising epistemology within a (southern) African context: Teaching and learning towards transformation at Stellenbosch University

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■ Abstract

This chapter examines the epistemological foundations underlying the practices that constitute institutions such as the Faculty of Theology at Stellenbosch University (SU). Employing a decolonial missiological methodology, the author critically traces the trajectory from anti-colonial and postcolonial perspectives toward the decolonial turn, illuminating the

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meta-theoretical discourse of African epistemology and its associated teaching and learning practices. The contribution is situated within the faculty's ongoing commitment to transformation and concludes by emphasising equality of outcomes, interrogating the role of shame and shaming practices, and exposing and dismantling the structural realities through which institutions perpetuate exclusion and marginalisation. In this regard, the agency of student movements is affirmed.

■ Introduction

The current challenges and constraints – alongside the hopes and aspirations – faced by an educational institution such as Stellenbosch University (SU), particularly as articulated in what has come to be known as the Khampepe Report (2022),²⁶ form the point of departure for this chapter. At the heart of the chapter lies a critical question: What would the decolonisation of the curriculum or epistemology mean in this context? While rooted in the SU environment, the question resonates more broadly across the (southern) African academic landscape. Jonathan Jansen (2012), former vice-chancellor of the University of the Free State, posed a similar challenge in his address to colleagues in the Faculty of Religion and Theology:

Given the embeddedness of the apartheid institutional curriculum, albeit in various expressions through these three kinds of universities, why did we not take the opportunity of social transition to embark on fundamental changes to the knowledge foundations on which these institutions rested? (p. 12)

This moment presents both a crisis and an opportunity. As a Faculty of Theology at SU – a state institution – we aspire to be inclusive and sustainable, rooted in Africa while globally connected ('glocal'). We are committed to justice, transformation and excellence. What, then, would a just, transformative and excellent student experience entail within this vision, particularly in light of the complex realities confronting the university today? It is important to acknowledge that terms such as 'justice', 'transformation', 'excellence', 'teaching' and 'learning' are not universally conceptualised in the same way. Fundamental to these introductory reflections – both at the institutional level and in light of Jansen's challenge – is the assumption that teaching, learning and assessment oriented toward transformation cannot be meaningfully addressed without first clarifying their philosophical foundations. This is not simply a matter of pragmatics,

26. The full and official name of the report is the Commission of Inquiry into Allegations of Racism at Stellenbosch University released on 25 October 2022 by Justice Sisi Khampepe, former Justice of the Constitutional Court of South Africa. The commission was appointed by the Vice-Chancellor following a number of racist incidents at the university, most prominently one where a heavily intoxicated white student urinated on the belongings of a fellow black student.

nor does it entail rigid adherence to a fixed ideology. In this chapter, I draw on Kaphagawani and Malherbe's (2002) definition of *epistemology* as:

[7]he study of theories about the nature and scope of knowledge, the evaluation of the presuppositions and basis of knowledge, and the scrutiny of knowledge claims [...] the main focus is to analyze and evaluate claims of knowledge. (p. 220)

They contend that the means, presuppositions and foundations of knowledge differ across cultures and that processes of knowledge acquisition are shaped by specific sociocultural contexts. From this perspective, it becomes reasonable to speak of 'an African articulation and formulation of knowledge' – in short, an *African epistemology*. However, this is only their entry point. 'Africa', they concede, is not a homogeneous entity.

This chapter seeks to articulate what I describe as my *missiological habits of mind*, while also examining their formative origins. Building on this foundation, I employ a decolonial critique of these commitments to propose pedagogical implications intended to foster transformation within the university context, particularly at SU.

■ Missiological habits of the mind

Our thinking is inevitably shaped by histories and traditions. As a passionate yet reflective participant in Christian youth and student movements since the 1970s – whether revivalist-charismatic, political or church-based – I have been profoundly shaped in my worldview and identity by successive generations of black youth movements (Nel 2013, pp. 68–78, 2015, pp. 88–90). At their core, these movements resisted colonial oppression – not only within the church and the nation but also in the coloniality embedded within ourselves. It was recognised at the time that our parents' generation had waged their own struggles and made decisions within the constraints imposed by the white colonial power structures of their era. Inspired by the philosophy and momentum of the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) in the 1970s – which led to the Soweto uprising – our generation fought²⁷ these battles in terms of the popular and political culture of the day. We wanted to transform our world – we had to.

The official teaching and learning programmes at higher education institutions (HEIs) were not aligned with this sense of agency. These formal institutions were themselves established as expressions of colonialist-racist ideology (Jansen 2012, pp. 10–12). For those of us forged in the struggle,

27. Our educational experiences since primary school, through high school and later at university were embedded in and forged by school and sports as well as cultural boycotts and student action – we played and chose our sport codes and federations with a political consciousness.

it proved to be an alienating experience. Our efforts to succeed within white European and Eurocentric institutions of learning, including the theology taught at faculties such as SU, remained secondary, perhaps even an illusory scramble to catch up and secure the approving nod of our white, male *Gereformeerde* professors. In reflecting on this, I find deep resonance with the words of James H Cone (1982) when he ruminates on his own experience. He writes:

Many professors at Garrett treated black students as if they were dumb [...] Within the context of Garrett's hostile, strange and white environment, I barely made all C's in my first quarter [...] and when I went to talk to my professors about my grades, they looked at me with amazement. All contended that I deserved less [...] (p. 31)

He continues about the content matter:

The apparent irrelevance of theology created a vocational crisis in me, and I did not know what to do about my future as a theologian. I began to develop an intense dislike for theology because it avoided the really hard problems of life with its talk about revelation, God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. When the murderers of humanity seize control of the public meaning of the Christian faith, it is time to seek new ways of expressing the truth of the gospel. (p. 43)

This journey of seeking was a long one, beginning in earnest only when, by an accident of history, I arrived at the University of South Africa (Unisa), where I encountered a diverse community of renegade theologians with whom I felt at home.²⁸ At Unisa, a ferment emerged among a new generation of educators. Colleagues probed beyond the boundaries of the establishment, inspiring experiments and innovations – alongside notable failures – that significantly shaped my own *habits of mind*. New modes of expression were necessary, and I illustrate this through one narrative – that of missiology.

In 2002, one of my predecessors in the Missiology department at Unisa, 'Sister' Madge Karecki, published an article entitled 'Teaching to Change the World: Missiology at the University of South Africa', in which she reflected critically on a rearticulation process akin to what we would call today, at SU, *programme* or *academic renewal*. Her article was a contribution to a *festschrift* in tribute to colleague and fellow teacher Willem Saayman, a mentor to many of us. In honouring this legendary missiologist, she focused on the role of missiological study guides in what she described as a 'transformational vision of education' (2002, p. 132). She took Saayman's definition of 'missiology' as her starting point, which reads:

Missiology is generally regarded as the systematic, theological reflection on the basis, practice and history of Christian mission [...] According to my understanding, *missiology* is the critical reflection on the practice of Christian mission, and critical

28. In a reflection on the history of the Faculty of Theology at Unisa, Botha (1990) entitles it 'the cave of Adullam'.

reflection and practice together in their reciprocal relationship constitute the total *praxis* of Christian mission. (Saayman in Karecki 2002, p. 138)

Although Unisa's programmes are conducted through distance learning – distinct from the dynamics of face-to-face pedagogy – what I wish to foreground in this contribution, shaped as I am by that tradition, is Karecki's reference to, and perhaps insistence on, the importance of naming our educational philosophy and paradigms, both of which are areas of philosophy.²⁹ A lack of explicit awareness does not preclude the presence of implicit educational philosophies – and, with them, underlying assumptions about knowledge: Its nature and the criteria by which it is constituted. What is essential is cultivating awareness of these underlying frameworks and, insofar as possible, subjecting them to critical scrutiny.

Karecki reflects on her own work and thinking, referring in her article to what she then described as a 'paradigm shift in education'. She writes, 'A new mode of knowledge production is emerging in a paradigm shift in educational theory and practice' (2002, p. 136). She contends that this shift is underpinned by a social constructivist philosophy, in which learning is oriented toward the process of meaning-making. For learners, this means developing 'the ability to reflect and articulate knowledge and then to apply it in various contexts. This means three steps: Reflection, articulation and application'. Put differently, she explains, 'it aims at acquiring the necessary competence to do real world tasks' (2002, p. 137).

These three steps are now often simplified into two: '[A]cquiring competence' and 'doing real world tasks'. Karecki (2002) concludes:

Education in such a paradigm is a transformational journey. It is a process of discovering meaning and meaning in relationship to God and other people. (p. 137)

In Karecki's focus on teaching 'to change the world', she argues that learners must be able to see both their immediate contexts and the wider world in order to contribute meaningfully to its transformation – so that it reflects the justice and peace rooted in the gospel (2002, p. 138). Through this process, learners develop *reflexive competence*, defined as 'knowledge of a deeper order which makes a person aware of the work of the Spirit of God in the world'. Self-reflection here is not an escape from the world but rather a way of helping 'learners look at life at a deeper level'. Karecki extends this vision to the teaching of missiology at Unisa by drawing on a tool we engaged with there: The see–judge–act circle. This framework was later developed into the pastoral circle by Holland and Henriot (1980), and subsequently reworked as the cycle for mission praxis – what we at Unisa came to designate as the missiological praxis cycle. In this approach, the

29. In my undergraduate studies at SU, I consciously chose to do Sociology as a second major, instead of Philosophy, because of the influence of liberation theology on my thinking.

influence of liberation theology is clearly discernible. Indeed, as Karecki so helpfully illustrates, before turning to programme offerings and modes of teaching, learning and assessment, it is necessary to pose more fundamental questions. One such question is: How do we account for our specific theological tradition in relation to its implicit epistemology?

Over the years, as I have grappled with this emphasis, I have been compelled to acknowledge – self-critically – the deeper layers of my own formation and the legacy of my intellectual and professional growth within the Department of Missiology at Unisa. This is a task that all of us must undertake. Like Karecki, I am a product of my times, shaped by my community of interlocutors and my teachers. For me, this involved a shift from being born in a *Nederduitse Gereformeerde Sendingkerk* (Dutch Reformed Mission Church), rooted in a particular colonial *Gereformeerde volksteologie* (Reformed people's theology), and the shame of academic failure under the *apartheid* (separateness) pedagogy of the *Kweekskool* (seminary) during the 1980s. At the same time, it was about being affirmed, socialised and mentored by movements and teachers within my black high school, as well as by advocates of the early iterations of South African Black Theology – including church ministers such as Allan Boesak, Hannes Adonis, Sam Buti and Takatso Mofokeng – who struggled and were often imprisoned for their witness. Later I experienced the grace of colleagues who, at Unisa and within the Southern African Missiological Society (SAMS), were discerning a liberating missiology. Among them were Willem Saayman, Madge Karecki, Nico Botha, Klippiess Kritzinger, Sue Rakozzi, Zuze Banda and Tinyiko Maluleke, to mention a few. I was also deeply influenced by university administrators and senior colleagues who had been formative figures in the early development of Black Consciousness philosophy, including Barney Pityana, Mokgeti Motlhabi and Harry Nengwenkhulu.

In the course of my gradual journey of self-reflection, acknowledging and clarifying my positionality, I first articulated the notion of 'post-colonial youth ministry' during my master's studies at SU, which I completed in 2005. This arose, once again, out of frustration with our unity processes: The inherited missionary youth association models and, later, the radical congress-movement paradigm of the *Vereniging vir Christelike Studente* (VCS) (Association of Christian Students) and *Christelike Jeugvereniging* (Christian Youth Association) did not align with the 'successful' white youth ministry models, which were based on full-time youth ministers, youth workers and large budgets.

Although these models were unified into what became known as the Christian Youth Movement (later, Ministry) – the CYM – and the Uniting Christian Students' Association (UCSA), we remained constrained by frameworks that failed to reflect our post-apartheid realities. I believed

there was an opportunity to embody an expression of ‘post-colonial youth ministry’ (Nel 2015). However, although the intention was sincere, my early attempt to explore this in my master’s thesis was not well received. At the time, neither my supervisor nor I was conceptually or theoretically equipped to engage the idea in depth.

It was only later, through the patient and incisive guidance of my doctoral supervisor, Klippias Kritzinger – together with many silent moments of reflection – and within the institutional context described earlier, that I began to explore its potential more deeply. Building on Kritzinger’s idea of a black or liberating missiology (1988), I sought to develop a postcolonial missiology in dialogue with Steve Biko and Frantz Fanon.³⁰ In a series of articles aimed at clarifying my notion of ‘postcolonial missiology’ – or simply ‘postcolonial theology’ (Nel 2011a, pp. 157–170, 2011b, pp. 425–440, 2013) – I reflected on the intellectual influence of Biko and Fanon on postcolonial theory in (southern) Africa, situating them within the broader category of anti-colonial intellectuals. I argued that their intellectual struggle was directed toward the liberation of both the colonised and the coloniser – an effort aimed at envisioning a new humanity (Nel 2011b, p. 433). In this regard, Fanon (2001, p. 255) explains, ‘For Europe, for ourselves, and for humanity, we must turn over a new leaf, we must work out new concepts, and try to set afoot a new man’. His well-known publication, *Wretched of the Earth*, articulated a theory of engaged intellectual struggle aimed at realising this new humanity. For Fanon, it is this struggle that defines knowledge. His commitment is directed primarily toward the peasants, yet it also encompasses the combatants engaged in the broader struggle for liberation from imperialism and its attendant violence.

Fanon articulates what I then described as his ‘anticolonial epistemology’ (Nel 2011, p. 434) – an epistemic vision that reconfigures colonial boundaries. This struggle for liberation served as a foundational lens through which questions of understanding, truth and rationality were viewed – and, at a further level, shaped the issues of methodology and scientific enquiry. It is precisely at this fundamental meta-theoretical level that the notion of an epistemological rupture with Western philosophy as theology’s primary interlocutor becomes evident.

Fanon significantly influenced the development of South African Black Consciousness and specifically the thinking of Steve Bantu Biko (Khoapa 2008, pp. 73–78; More 2017, pp. 93–104). Following his exclusion from the University of Natal’s Bantu (UNB) Section, Biko became an organiser in the formation of the South African Students’ Organisation (SASO) and later

30. The relevance of Frantz Fanon, in particular his book *The Wretched of the Earth* (2001), is rooted in his impact on decolonisation movements sweeping through Africa.

the Black Community Projects. His struggle was not rooted in theories crafted for an academic audience or academic purposes. Biko served as the organiser of these movements, reflecting and writing in the very midst of the liberation struggle – addressing activist students and, without hesitation, standing in solidarity with the black community. For Biko, the key challenge facing intellectuals was to unearth and retell the history of black people – not only as a means of cultural and psychological liberation but also as a foundation for developing a new culture capable of resisting the present reality of neo-colonialism (Nel 2013, p. 154). For Biko, this struggle was a struggle for mental emancipation – the pursuit of a new black consciousness oriented toward a new humanity (2013, p. 155).

I argued that what Biko identifies as understanding constitutes a form of knowledge sourced from, forged within and oriented toward the collective struggle against imperialism (2013, p. 159). I surmised that it is precisely within this struggle – through dialogue with the black oppressed and, later, with the youth and student movements that emerged after 1976 – that we witness a decisive rupture with colonial epistemology. In my view, it was specifically the proponents of South African Black Theology who began to delineate the implications of this epistemological rupture with both colonial epistemology and mission theology (2013, pp. 159–160). For me, their ideas were firmly situated within the anti-colonial tradition (2013, p. 160), and the contours of what would later be identified as the ‘postcolonial’ were already discernible.

■ From anti-colonial to postcolonial epistemology

The contributions of Sugirtharajah (2003) as a postcolonial biblical scholar played a significant role in shaping the development of my thinking. He argues that a key shift in anti-imperial contestations lies in the movement from an ‘anti-colonial mode’ to a postcolonial understanding – one that seeks to move beyond the essentialist, binary and oppositional frameworks that continue to dominate anti-colonial traditions (2003, p. 15). A postcolonial understanding, he maintains, calls for a ‘radical syncretising of each opposition’ (2003, p. 15), as well as a ‘critical and profitable syncretising’ (Sugirtharajah 2003, p. 16; cf. Mangcu 2008, pp. 2–3). For both Fanon and Biko, the liberation of both the colonised and the coloniser is essential for the emergence of a new humanity. Sugirtharajah (2003) explains this liberation, or what he terms ‘decolonisation’, as follows:

[...] in the process of decolonization, the imperializer and the imperialized are inevitably locked together. In the case of the former, it means re-examining their collusion with the empire and imperialism, and reassessing a Western

ethnocentrism which was passed off as universalism. In the case of the latter, it means reviewing internal colonization, virulent forms of nationalism and excessive nativism. (p. 16)

Subsequently, in my reflections and research, I delineated the development of a postcolonial missiology and methodology (Nel 2013, pp. 142-144). In my dialogue with Christian youth and student associations and movements, I emphasised that 'social analysis' – as an integral component of our theological method, particularly within the see-judge-act framework and the pastoral circle – constituted a critical contribution of liberation philosophies and theologies. As noted earlier, Holland and Henriot rooted their proposal for social analysis within the pastoral circle, drawing on the concept of praxis as developed by Paulo Freire in *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968), as well as the hermeneutical circle – or method of interpretation – explored by Juan Luis Segundo in *The Liberation of Theology* (1992) (Nel 2013, p. 144).

This hermeneutical circle, which later evolved into a cycle and matrix in our context, became a key tool for understanding and articulating a theory of transformation. As Karecki illustrated, it became the centrepiece of our pedagogical practice. This framework was fundamentally grounded in a philosophy and epistemology of liberation, in which the work of Enrique Dussel is particularly significant. At the time, I argued that it was grounded in the Trinitarian theology of God's work (Nel 2013, p. 145). It should now be evident, however, that I engaged primarily with postcolonial theorists as my interlocutors, a dialogue that also shaped my reading of Fanon and Biko as distinctive articulations of the decolonial turn.

My postcolonial missiology, together with ongoing reflection and dialogue on youth and student movements – particularly activist and hashtag movements – did not predict but rather apprehensively anticipated the emergence of student mobilisations in 2015 and 2016. These irruptions arose within a specific new manifestation of neoliberal capitalism, particularly in higher education (HE) (Giroux 2013). Prishani Naidoo, a former student leader and now sociologist, argues that what she terms a 'neoliberal world economy and political arena' (2009, p. 154) was directly implicated not only in the continued reproduction of social inequalities but also in the silencing of the '*lighties with lus*' – her expression for youth and student movements.

For her, this reality was driven by the values of the 'neo-liberal macroeconomic framework' (2009, p. 162) in the African National Congress (ANC)-led transitions in South Africa. She explains:

Armed with a vision of a transformed [*H*]igher [*E*]ducation system and society, the student movement offered some space for the intellectual pursuit

of alternatives to capitalism and neoliberalism and for the production of graduates and leaders who would not merely accept and entrench the logic of neoliberalism. Sadly, however, this potential was to be closed as the duty to govern taken by the ANC demanded the production of academics and policy-makers who would not question but rather facilitate the entry of neoliberalism into the country. (p. 159)

While the call for a 'duty to govern' among academics and policymakers has been a prominent feature of theological discourse since the 1990s, it remains equally important to critically interrogate the concurrent emergence of neoliberalism within this sphere. This 'entry of neoliberalism' is likewise evident across the African continent, particularly in relation to the role of youth and student movements within the sphere of HE. At the same time, these movements provoked a shift in my own thinking, directing me toward a more critically decolonising epistemology - an orientation that I elaborate on in greater detail below.

■ Decolonising epistemology

According to Mignolo (2011), the term *decolonisation* gained prominence around 2004, when members of the modernity or coloniality collective began to foreground the relationship between critical theory and decolonisation - an engagement that came to be described as the 'decolonial' turn in rereading the 'classics'. At the heart of this intellectual shift was the concept of 'epistemic delinking', also described at the time as 'epistemic disobedience', which marked a decisive break from the modern or colonial structures of power that had long governed knowledge production. As Mignolo (2011, p. 54) explains, decoloniality 'is therefore the energy that does not allow the operation of the logic of coloniality nor believes the fairy tales of the rhetoric of modernity'. However, the story does not begin with these relatively recent articulations. He continues:

[...] decolonial thinking emerged at the very foundation of modernity/coloniality, as its counterpoint. And this occurred in the Americas, in [r]ndigenous and Afro-Caribbean thinking.

It later continued in Asia and Africa, unrelated to the decolonial thinking of the Americas, but rather as a counterpoint to the re-organization of colonial modernity with the British Empire and French colonialism. A third moment of reformulations occurred in the intersections of the decolonization movements in Asia and Africa, concurrent with the Cold War and the ascending leadership of the United States. From the end of the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union, decolonial thinking begins to draw its own genealogy [...]. In this sense, decolonial thinking is differentiated from post-colonial theory or post-colonial studies in that the genealogy of these are located in French post-structuralism more than in the dense history of planetary decolonial thinking [...]. (2011, p. 54)

Postcolonial theory, rooted in the South Asian experience of 18th-century British imperialism and as it has informed my own thinking, faces several critical challenges: its constrained historical scope, its ongoing entanglement with European philosophical traditions and its tendency to generalise the colonial experience primarily through the lens of British imperialism.³¹

The decolonial turn is the opening and the freedom from the thinking and the forms of living (economies-other, political theories-other), the cleansing of the coloniality of being and of knowledge; the de-linking from the spell of the rhetoric of modernity, from its imperial imaginary articulated in the rhetoric of democracy [...] (2011, p. 48)

Within the broader trajectory of decolonising epistemology, a fundamental question emerges: What might we, as an institution historically shaped by colonial racism and, more specifically, by the epistemic foundations of *apartheid*, learn from other African HEIs regarding the teaching and learning of theology, situated within the humanities, and oriented toward the formation of young leaders for democratic youth citizenship? The concern extends beyond intra-church leadership – important as that may be – to encompass the broader and more critical task of nurturing youth citizenship within our context, and particularly within (southern) Africa.

■ Conclusion

What, then, are the implications of these reflections for pedagogical practice within a faculty of theology, such as that at SU, committed to processes of transformation? The faculty, aspiring to be both inclusive and sustainable – rooted in Africa yet globally connected – has made notable progress in widening access to learning for those historically excluded. However, a more profound question must now be raised: What about what Ian Scott and Chrissie Boughey refer to as the *equality of outcomes*? Black students from under-resourced communities and schools are frequently constructed as ‘coming from disadvantaged schools’ and as victims of a ‘failed education system’. In a subsequent move, however, they are blamed and shamed when they encounter difficulties or experience failure. This reflects what Fanon described as the lived reality of the ‘wretched’.

31. Mignolo (2011), however, offers a clear distinction: ‘Decolonial thinking, upon de-linking itself from the tyranny of time as the categorical frame of modernity, also escapes the traps of post-coloniality. Post-coloniality (post-colonial theory or critique) was born in the trap of (post) modernity. It is from there that Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan and Jacques Derrida have been the points of support for post-colonial critique (Said, Bhabha and Spivak)’.

bell hooks (2003), even though writing from a United States of America (USA) context, provides perspective when she opens her chapter on shame³² with the following paragraph:

As conservatives attack policies of affirmative action and other strategies aimed at creating greater diversity in [H]igher [E]ducation, we hear more and more about the failure of black students who come from similar class backgrounds and their white peers who score highly on standardized tests. We hear about black students who perform below their skills levels. We hear that they are indifferent, lazy, victims who want to work the system so that they get something for nothing. But we do not hear about the politics of shame and shaming. (p. 93)

In faculty meetings focused on student performance and strategies to improve throughput and retention, it is often asserted that certain students are ‘not ready for this university’ or that they ‘do not belong here’ on the grounds that they lack particular subjects or skillsets. In debates concerning the university’s language policy, pressure groups frequently contend that students from brown Afrikaans rural backgrounds are unable to learn effectively in English. The assumption that hooks (2003) identifies is that, in attempting to overcome oppression, freedom has often been understood as merely providing access to the ‘same privileges as whites [...] access was all that is needed to create the conditions for equality’. However, she is clear:

Such thinking denies the role that devaluation and degradation, or all strategies of shaming, play in maintaining racial subordination, especially in the arena of education. (p. 94)

Linda Martin Alcoff (2019) raises a set of provocative questions that directly interrogate the foundations of our pedagogical assumptions: ‘What if schools in our communities are not failing? What if the massive dropout rates, poor test scores, and poor skills sets that even graduating students sometimes leave schools with are the actual systemic goal?’ These questions unsettle the dominant philosophies of education that operate beneath curricular content, revealing the implicit theories of knowledge – and the criteria for what is recognised as knowledge shaping students formed within coloniality. Student movements in 2015 and 2016, as well those that re-emerged in early 2023, continue to challenge universities and faculties in South Africa to look beyond isolated issues such as financial exclusion and academic expulsion. They call on us to use our intellectual gifts and institutional resources to develop and implement teaching and learning

32. bell hooks (2003, p. 94) refers to the definition of *shame* by Merle Rossum and Marilyn Mason as ‘an inner sense of being completely diminished or insufficient as a person [...] the judging of the self [...] humiliation to painful or an indignity that feels one has been robbed of her or his dignity or exposed as basically inadequate, bad, or worthy of rejection’.

experiences that bring about radical transformation. As Martin Alcoff, following Dussel, puts it, this involves confronting and dismantling 'educational praxes of domination'.

Overcoming these entrenched systems is possible - but the struggle continues.

Teaching theology through song

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■ Abstract

Members of older generations often maintained a repertoire of hymns and songs that functioned as a cultural resource, enabling them to hum or recall melodies in response to everyday experiences, irrespective of whether they engaged in regular vocal performance. They learned these songs in school, in confirmation classes or at Sunday school. The L97 curriculum, implemented in Norwegian schools in 1997, continued to require that pupils acquire a repertoire of hymns, preferably learned by heart. This leads to the following questions: Which songs can be drawn upon in times of contemporary crisis? Does singing remain a meaningful practice? This chapter explores the pivotal role of hymns and songs within the Christian church, with particular attention to their function in times of crisis. This chapter investigates their pedagogical significance from diverse perspectives, commencing with broad conceptual considerations and historical context. The concluding section of the chapter presents examples

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from Norwegian hymn history that demonstrate varied responses to pain, sorrow and fear in both personal and global contexts.

■ Introduction

At my older sister's deathbed, my mother positioned herself beside her and initiated song. The child, profoundly desired and loved, entered the world with an extra chromosome and consequently experienced a different path of growth than the majority. My sister's earthly life spanned 21 years. I retain the memory of hearing my mother's weeping in the basement following the death of her child. At the threshold of farewell, she offers song – an evening song to mark the transition into final rest: *Nu lukker seg mitt øye, o Fader i det høye, i varetekt meg tag* [Now I close my eye, / O Father up high, / Let me have Your protection]. In moments of profound significance, particularly when confronted with death and grief, my parents responded through song. They knew the songs that could bear the weight of sorrow and hold the fragile threads of hope.

Earlier generations maintained a repertoire of songs and hymns that could be recalled or hummed in response to life events or social circumstances, even if they were seldom performed in full. They learned these songs in school, in confirmation classes or at Sunday school. As recently as 1997, the Norwegian national curriculum (L97) prescribed a list of hymns that pupils were expected to learn, ideally by heart (Øystese 2020, pp. 192–195, L97; Udir 1999, pp. 12–27). But which songs can be drawn upon in times of contemporary crisis? Does singing remain a meaningful practice?

The chapter examines the significance of hymns and songs in the Christian church, especially during periods of crisis. It explores their pedagogical potential from multiple perspectives, commencing with broad reflections and historical context. The concluding section of the chapter draws on examples from Norwegian hymn history to illustrate varied responses to pain, sorrow and fear, both in personal contexts and in relation to global crises.

Historically, hymns have played a substantial role in shaping theological understanding, both within liturgical practice and the broader life of faith. Hymns have served not only as expressions of congregational praise but also as instruments for affirming and transmitting doctrinal teachings. Hymns of sorrow and lament articulate the church's stance toward suffering, offering expressions of consolation and hope. At the same time, they stand as testimonies to what has been sung, though the inner reception of these hymns remains uncertain – whether the doctrinal teachings were truly embraced or the comfort they offered proved effective.

Hymns and songs often circulate beyond their cultures of origin, constituting a transnational repertoire that reflects shared human experiences and values. Conversely, particular songs are deeply embedded within specific historical moments and cultural contexts, serving as expressions of the distinctive experiences of communities across diverse regions. Communal singing functions as a practice that fosters mutual learning and facilitates theological reflection. Across generations, individuals and communities have faced profound trials, yet they have sustained traditions of singing songs of comfort and hope, thereby inspiring others in times of adversity. An examination of the song practices and repertoires of diverse groups during times of crisis provides fertile ground for theological coeducation and reflection.

For those engaged in pastoral care and spiritual counselling, hymns provide a rich repository of material for engagement and reflection. The integration of meaningful lyrics with memorable melodies renders hymns particularly well suited for both individual devotion and communal practice. Hymns function not only as expressions of shared faith and praise but also as vehicles for articulating distress, lament, anxiety and sorrow. Throughout history, the use of songs and hymns has consistently served such ends. The Bible contains the book of Lamentations, and the Psalms are replete with expressions of unrest, doubt and profound emotional struggle.

In his final moments on the cross, Jesus invoked the Psalms, reciting their words when song was no longer possible. Although singing appears to have diminished in schools and other settings in Norway today (Nyhagen 2024), recent tragic and traumatic events within Norwegian society underscore the enduring human need for collective expressions of grief. A striking instance of early public mourning in Norway occurred in 1991 following the death of King Olav, when Palace Square was illuminated by thousands of candles placed there by grieving citizens. Around the same time, the Gulf War was underway, marked by pervasive anxiety and instability. The loss of a deeply respected and unifying monarch amidst the spectre of global conflict only deepened the prevailing sense of crisis (Schøien 2008).

On 22 July 2011, Norway experienced two coordinated terrorist attacks: A car bomb detonated in the government quarter in Oslo, followed by a mass shooting at a youth summer camp on the island of Utøya. Seventy-seven people were killed, most of them teenagers. Following these attacks, the area outside Oslo Cathedral was transformed into a 'sea of roses' – a powerful and spontaneous expression of collective grief. Comparable floral tributes appeared across the country, serving as powerful symbols of collective national mourning. In the subsequent days and weeks, large numbers of people assembled at memorial services held in churches and public spaces, as well as at the numerous funerals for the victims.

Subsequent painful events have prompted similar acts of commemoration. The need for participation and community is also expressed through song (Maasø & Toldnes 2014). The question thus arises: What songs should be sung? The 22 July commemorations did little to revive old hymns or introduce new ones, yet a small repertoire of songs was actively sought out and shared – most often performed by professional artists (Maasø & Toldnes 2014). It may be essential to foster both the creation of new songs and a deeper engagement with existing hymns for contexts of grief and crisis.

This study will examine selected hymns from Norwegian hymnals that were composed in times of crisis or that thematise sorrow and distress, drawing upon both historical and contemporary contexts. These examples demonstrate how song functions as a medium for human lament and prayer, and how the church, through its hymnody, has historically responded to crises. The discussion will also draw attention to occasions in which song has played a significant role in supporting individuals through periods of difficulty. Hymn texts are subject to continual evolution, shaped by successive hymnal revisions and the shifting contexts in which new compositions emerge. The representation of both God and humanity has likewise undergone transformation. Although melody plays a decisive role in determining a hymn's use, the present discussion will concentrate exclusively on the textual dimension, excluding musical considerations.

Before proceeding to specific examples, it is necessary to clarify the meaning of 'crisis' within this context. A crisis may be understood as unfolding across multiple levels, ranging from deeply personal experiences to collective or global disruptions. This may involve death and grief, loss of health, work or meaning (Falk 2016), but also larger events affecting entire nations or the global community (Austad, Berge & Ulstein 2012). The world is facing significant and comprehensive crises. Each year, the Earth's temperature continues to rise, leading to increased environmental degradation, loss of biodiversity, deforestation, desertification, wildfires and floods. Millions of people are displaced by food shortages, natural disasters and social unrest. Armed conflicts and wars persist in many regions, often accompanied by political instability. While the media covers many such events, we remain aware that only a limited proportion of large-scale regional disasters is represented on our screens. Many Christians, along with adherents of other faith traditions, continue to face persecution and oppression, while others observe the advance of secularisation and a diminishing interest in the offerings of religion. As global suffering becomes more proximate, it can exacerbate personal burdens and intensify feelings of powerlessness and pessimism. For some, this manifests as depression and paralysis of action; for others, it engenders indifference.

A crisis may be defined as a difficult or dangerous situation characterised by acute problems and it:

[/]mplics the arrival of one or more threats that challenge the way we think, act, and structure our lives, and calls for sound judgment and transformed ways of learning and acting together. (Norheim & Weber 2024, p. 1)

The term may denote an acute psychological problem or a decisive turning point in the trajectory of an illness. The latter meaning indicates that a crisis may also signify the potential for change – and even hope – a notion frequently reflected in popular sayings ‘The word crisis points to the future’, as stated in *Glocal Theological Education* (Norheim & Webber 2024, p. 2). This dual understanding of crisis – as both threat and turning point – creates space for reflection on hope and change. In such discussions, the Christian church has a distinctive and profound contribution to make: ‘[...] from a theological perspective, a crisis calls for compassion for the other’ (Norheim & Weber 2024, p. 2). Within this framework, hymn texts constitute a significant resource – both for interpreting the nature of crisis, including the suffering of others, and for supporting individuals in living through it.

■ Hymns in difficult times

How has the Christian church sung in times of crisis? And what can we learn from it? Paul urges Christians to use songs and spiritual hymns to comfort and encourage one another in the period following Jesus’ death and ascension (Eph 5:19). This period constituted a time of crisis for the early church, characterised by persecution and opposition. Singing nurtured fellowship and courage among the believers, while simultaneously signifying the newness inaugurated by Christ. The church sang, unlike other religious groups of the time, who primarily relied on instrumental music (Kjærgaard 2003, p. 21). The oldest hymn in the Norwegian Hymn Book (2013), apart from the biblical psalms, is *Folkefrelser til oss kom* [Savior of the nations, come]. It is widely accepted that this hymn was composed by Ambrose, Bishop of Milan (c. 340–397), and is traditionally known in Latin by its opening line, *Veni, redemptor gentium*. Bishop Ambrose introduced the congregation to the fellowship of song – a practice that had long been part of worship in the Eastern Church. In *Confessions* (c. 397), Augustine recalls the profound impact of the singing in Milan’s church. Bishop Ambrose employed hymnody as a means of fortifying the congregation and enabling them to withstand periods of intense opposition. Antiphonal singing, characterised by simple melodies and accessible texts, was common, and Ambrose frequently adapted familiar tunes to enable congregational participation. The hymns affirmed central doctrines of the faith – honouring Christ as conceived by the Spirit and born of the Virgin – doctrines contested during that period (Astås 1967, p. 28). These ancient hymns testify to the

capacity of song to cultivate unity and encouragement in times of crisis, while simultaneously functioning as instruments of instruction and vehicles for consolidating the church's doctrine and faith.

An examination of the Reformation years, a period marked by crises and profound contradictions, reveals numerous hymns composed out of pain and distress. The two Augustinian monks who were burned at the stake in Brussels on 01 July 1523 became the first Lutheran martyrs. In response, Martin Luther – himself a member of the order – composed his first hymn, *Ein neues Lied wir heben an* [A new song we raise]. The hymn honours these two witnesses of faith and expresses the conviction that their martyrdom would serve to strengthen and advance the emerging doctrine and faith (Grøm 1995, pp. 215–219).

Luther's hymn *Erhalt uns, Herr, bei deinem Wort* [Lord, keep us in Thy Word and work], (c. 1542) boldly declared its purpose: 'A children's song / to sing against the two arch-enemies of Christ and his holy church / the Pope and the Turk, etc.'. The Danish-Norwegian hymn book, Kingo's hymnal, from 1699 preserved this reference to the perceived enemies unchanged. The late 17th century was a period of profound crisis in Europe, with Ottoman forces threatening Vienna and the Counter-Reformation exerting a continuing influence. Intended for audiences both young and old, the hymn urged believers to remain steadfast in God's Word and to join together in prayer for protection. Kingo's hymnal remained in use across many Norwegian parishes until 1870, ensuring that successive generations continued to sing hymns containing pointed references to the Pope and the Turk. However, the hymnals that emerged after 1740 replaced the two opponents with a more general concept of enemies (Øystese 2024a, p. 225).

In both the early church and the Reformation, the central tenets of faith were accentuated in times of crisis. Through song, congregations collectively affirmed their shared convictions, while individuals simultaneously received instruction in the faith. Hymns typically incorporated elements of confession, praise and prayer, portraying God as the strong one who offers help and security to those steadfast in the true faith. Many of these hymns draw upon the Psalms of the Old Testament, enabling ancient cries for comfort and hope to reverberate across the centuries. History is replete with both major and minor crises, just as individual lives are shaped by personal trials. The enduring source of comfort rests in the conviction that God's Word remains steadfast and that divine intervention is assured – whether in the present or ultimately at the end of life, where death is vanquished and paradise revealed. These songs have transcended borders and belong to the shared repertoire of the global church. Remarkably, Luther's hymn – originally composed as a prayer

against both the Pope and the Turk – has, in a revised form, found its place in the Catholic hymnal *Lov Herren* (2000) in Norway.

In more recent times and within our national context, song has continued to play a significant role during periods of crisis. During World War II, songs served as a means of comfort, support and community building. When Dean Arne Fjeldbu was prohibited by the German occupying forces from holding a service in Nidarosdomen, the largest cathedral in Norway, located in Trondheim, the congregation assembled outside and sang Martin Luther's hymn *Vår Gud han er så fast ei borg* [A Mighty Fortress Is Our God] (Haavik 2008, pp. 62–67). In this context, the act of singing functioned both as a form of protest against the occupiers and as a powerful expression of faith and hope.

In 1942, the village of Telavåg, located west of Bergen, was destroyed by direct order of Hitler in retaliation for the local population's assistance to refugees escaping by boat to Great Britain. Some sought to join the British Army, while others simply sought refuge. In response, the entire population of Telavåg was arrested. Houses, boats and boathouses were burned to the ground, and livestock were killed. All the men were imprisoned and many were later deported to concentration camps in Germany. The women and children were detained in a school near Bergen. One day, all the women and children under six were loaded onto buses and transported to a remote site. The older children looked on as their siblings and female relatives boarded the buses. In that moment of profound grief and uncertainty, one child began singing *Gud signe vårt dyre fedreland* [God bless our dear fatherland] and soon all the children joined in. They continued to sing to comfort themselves and their loved ones, uncertain whether they would ever see each other again (Øystese 2024b, pp. 55–56).

Another episode from the war concerns the deportation of approximately 1,000 teachers who resisted compliance with the Nazi school programme. These teachers were assembled in Oslo and transported first by train and subsequently by ship to Kirkenes, one of Norway's northernmost cities near the Russian border. News of the transport spread, and along the railway, several groups gathered to sing as the train carrying the prisoners passed. The song comforted the teachers in the cramped wagons. They knew they had support and would not be forgotten (Øystese 2023).

■ Lament in our time

Turning to the present, at a writing workshop convened by the Teaching and Learning Theology in Crisis (TLC) project in Stellenbosch in March 2024, a participant from the United States reflected that, following the events of 11 September 2001, they and their congregation experienced an

absence of songs of lament. In contemporary Christian congregations, songs of praise constitute the predominant musical form, particularly among younger members. Such songs typically exalt the Lord's love and power, with the singer presenting themselves in complete devotion to God. Although this genre has been critiqued as both grandiose and superficial, it nevertheless proves effective in fostering participation and generating a sense of exhilaration. It is often difficult to sing songs of jubilation when daily life is overshadowed by sorrow and unrest, when profound loss is endured, or when hope for the future appears unattainable. In such circumstances, many communities find themselves without a repertoire of songs capable of carrying pain and speaking truthfully into suffering. Too frequently, songs of lament are invoked only in the wake of disaster or in moments of acute anxiety. This raises pressing questions: What is to be sung when life feels heavy and bleak? Have we cultivated the songs that can adequately hold our pain?

In times of sorrow, hardship, crisis or perceived meaninglessness – when individuals feel helpless or abandoned – there arises a need for modes of expression capable of articulating the pain that is borne. There must be space for weeping, for anguished cries and even for the painful silence that emerges when words fail and individuals are left searching for some form of expression. In such contexts, an appropriate response may manifest in a scream, a cry or even a song. This pattern has been evident throughout history, beginning with the Old Testament. For example, ancient Norwegians inscribed declarations of love and loss into stone; some of these inscriptions exhibit a poetic quality, though it remains uncertain whether they were intended to be sung. The poet Egill Skallagrímsson composed memorial verses in the 10th century for his son who drowned at sea. In this poem, one can still discern the profound sorrow over the loss and the sense of meaninglessness under which he was thereafter compelled to live. At the same time, the poem offered Egill a means through which to process his grief and begin to recover his equilibrium. Across time and cultures, song and poetry have provided spaces for mourning and meaning-making. Centuries later, under radically different circumstances, enslaved people in America expressed their sorrow and longing through song in the cotton fields beneath a merciless sun, far from home. Such traditions illustrate the countless examples of music as both a vehicle of sorrow and a source of comfort.

When the Norwegian author Jan Inge Sørbo encountered reports of the fire on the ferry *Scandinavian Star* in the Skagerrak during Easter 1990, in which 159 people lost their lives, he posed the question: What can we sing when such things happen? The answer became a hymn.

1 Herre, måtte dette skje -
 Vi ropar ut vårt klagemål.
 Vi greier ikkje be.
 Døden slo så brått og hardt.
 Vår von er riven ned
 Vi klagar sorga for ditt andlet.

4 Herre vi finn ikkje svar.
 Vi er som dine gjester på ein
 stad du ein gong var.
 Den gong ropa du det ut:
 Kvar er du, Gud og Far?
 Vi kjenner sorga i ditt andlet.

5 Herre, du må bli vår trøyst,
 i djupet av vårt klagerop
 vi kjenner att di røyst.
 Band frå sorg og kross og død
 har du, oppstadne, løyst.

Du teiknar trøysta i vårt andlet.

Source: Norwegian Hymn Book (2013, no. 751).

Lord, did this have to happen -
 We cry out our lament.
 We cannot pray.
 Death struck so suddenly and hard.
 Our hope is torn down.
 We lament our sorrow before
 Your face.

Lord, we find no answers.
 We are like Your guests in a place
 where You once were.
 Then You cried it out:
 Where are You, God and Father?
 We recognise the sorrow in
 Your face.

Lord, You must become our
 comfort, in the depth of our lament
 we recognise Your voice.
 Bonds of sorrow and cross
 and death have You, risen one,
 loosened.

You draw the comfort on our faces.

In Sørbø's hymn, there is neither the preaching of correct doctrine nor the provision of definitive solutions – features more characteristic of older hymn traditions. The questions and cries remain unanswered, yet they are directed toward a recipient explicitly named in the opening line: *Herre!* [Lord!]. This collective plea voices the anguished question: Did this have to happen? Sørbø discerned a measure of comfort in the poetry of the Norwegian writer Arnold Eidslott, who speaks of a God present with those who suffer. Notably, each of the hymn's five verses concludes with the word *andlet* [face].

| | |
|-----------------------------------|--|
| Vi klagar sorga for ditt andlet. | We lament our sorrow before Your face. |
| Vi teiknar sorga for ditt andlet. | We depict our sorrow before Your face. |
| Vi ropar sorga for ditt andlet. | We cry our sorrow before Your face. |
| Vi kjenner sorga i ditt andlet. | We recognise the sorrow in Your face. |
| Du teiknar trøysta i vårt andlet. | You draw the comfort on our faces. |

In the first four stanzas, the focus rests on 'Your face', a reference to the Lord's. Sorrow is presented before God through lament, imagery and cries. The motif of standing before God's face is a recurring biblical expression, particularly in the Old Testament, signifying the possibility of contact and

relationship as long as one remains face to face. One of the elements in the hymn that provides comfort in times of crisis, in addition to the ability to cry out one's sorrow and despair, is the identification with the Lord, who himself cried out on the cross: *Kvar er du, Gud og Far?* [Where are You, God and Father?], as the hymn states. In the fourth stanza, we see that the Lord's face is also filled with grief: 'We recognize the sorrow in Your face'.

In the final stanza, the focus shifts from sorrow to comfort: 'You draw the comfort on our faces'. The collective 'we' discovers solace both in the fellowship of suffering with the Lord and in the assurance that he has broken the bonds of 'sorrow and cross and death'. Here, the Lord is depicted as gently tracing comfort onto the faces of the grieving, a gesture that evokes the promise articulated in the Book of Revelation:

He will wipe every tear from their eyes.
There will be no more death
or mourning or crying or pain,
for the old order of things has passed away (Rv 21:4).

The many 'whys' posed by humanity do not receive definitive answers in modern hymns. Yet, the comfort offered in times of crisis lies in the assurance that such questions are directed toward a recipient – one who has endured comparable evils and pain and who is therefore able to comprehend the plight of suffering souls. In this way, the hymn demonstrates significant pastoral potential: It articulates experiences that might otherwise appear meaningless and enables the crisis to encounter a recognisable human face. Ultimately, the hymn enables the questioning and lamenting individual to feel the touch of the Lord's finger – a sensory, rather than an intellectual, experience of comfort on their face (Øystese 2018, pp. 684–685).

Sørbø's hymn is included under the heading 'Need and Lament' in the *Norwegian Hymn Book* (2013) – a thematic category absent from earlier Norwegian hymnals. While this category is new, both the 1985 and 2013 editions contain a section on 'Stewardship Responsibility' within the chapter 'Life in God's World'. In the 2013 hymnal, this heading is expanded to 'Stewardship Responsibility and Reverence for Life', and the number of hymns in this category has doubled compared to the 1985 edition. Such developments highlight one of the most urgent crises of our time: Climate change and environmental degradation, which present profound threats to human existence in both the immediate and long-term future.

■ Crisis in nature

The contemporary world faces a profound crisis, driven by global warming, pollution and environmental degradation. Human greed, together with an

insatiable pursuit of prosperity and wealth, compounded by insufficient political will and practical action, continues to accelerate the destruction of the Earth and erode the hope of future generations. Confronted with such an ecological emergency, one may ask whether it is possible to sing in response to it.

A hymn section authored by the German priest Hans Vogel (ca. 1525–1567), and later included in Kingo’s hymn book (1699), presents a striking contrast. In this hymn, the congregation sings of a divinely ordered world designed to provide sufficiency for all – humans and animals alike. The hymn depicts a divinely sustained abundance: God sends rain to nourish the grass, which in turn sustains the animals of forest and farm. This imagery extends to the human table, where poultry and fish, eggs and meat, wine and bread are presented – not merely sufficient for survival, but more than enough for flourishing. Such imagery recalls Psalm 23, the shepherd’s psalm of the Old Testament, in which the Lord prepares a table before the psalmist in the presence of his enemies and causes his cup to overflow. The conditions described in the hymn stand in sharp contrast to the daily realities of most people in Denmark and Norway during the 18th century and the centuries that followed. While lavish meals and fine drinks may have been commonplace in the homes of the nobility and the higher bourgeoisie, the majority – ordinary people – experienced lives marked more by scarcity than abundance. This disparity raises a critical question: What is the hymn communicating when its imagery does not reflect the lived experience of everyday life?

The hymn underscores the conviction that God is present within creation, actively participating in it and providing for the growth and nourishment of all living beings. It conveys an understanding of creation in which God has not withdrawn but assumes responsibility for sustaining the natural order. Despite years marked by failure and scarcity, those gathered in worship are assured that God has not abandoned creation. At the same time, the hymn gestures toward a future kingdom in which even the poor will share in the greatest riches. The pledge of this eschatological hope is embodied in the Eucharist, the meal already partaken of on Earth.

Over the centuries, this hymn has undergone notable revisions across successive hymnals. In newer versions, the imagery of abundance has been adjusted, and certain animals have been localised to reflect regional contexts. Nevertheless, the central affirmation remains unchanged: God is portrayed as the one who cares for all creation and for every living being. The most significant change in the hymn text appears in the *Norwegian Hymn Book* (1985). Although the hymn continues to open with an invitation to sing and praise God, its placement within the hymnal has shifted. It is no longer designated as a service hymn for Mid-Lent Sunday, nor is it linked to

domestic meals, as was the case in earlier hymnals. Instead, the hymn now appears under the heading 'Life in God's World: Stewardship Responsibility'. This reclassification indicates a shift in emphasis – from the celebration of God's creative power to the call for human stewardship of creation. Public awareness of the environmental crisis intensified during the 1980s and that concern remains equally urgent in the present. However, the most notable textual change is the addition of a new third stanza:

| | |
|--|--|
| Midt i alt som er så vel, ber me sorga i vår sjel: at me øyder det han gav, luft og vatn, land og hav. Han som opna mildt si hand, gav òg ansvar og forstand til å vara det for han. | In the midst of all that is so well, we bear sorrow in our soul: that we are destroying what He gave, air and water, land and sea. He who gently opened His hand also gave responsibility and intellect to take care of it for Him |
|--|--|

Source: Norwegian Hymn Book (1985, no. 712, stanza 3).

The third stanza articulates sorrow and despair over the deteriorating state of nature under human stewardship. It petitions for the wisdom to comprehend and to care faithfully for that which has been entrusted to humanity by God. Although this may not be the intention, the revised version presents a markedly more distant image of God than earlier iterations of the hymn. God is portrayed as existing behind all things, while humanity has assumed responsibility – though not with notable success. The prayer remains poignant in its acknowledgement of human failure, yet it retains a tone of devotion without offering concrete guidance for human action or indicating any orientation toward political engagement.

Through successive revisions of the hymn text, humanity emerges as increasingly central. It stands with its knowledge and responsibility, yet far more alone than three centuries earlier. Humanity may turn to God in prayer, seeking guidance in thought and action, but it must ultimately act according to its own convictions. God is invoked for wisdom, yet beyond this petition his role remains indistinct. The possibility of conversation with God is acknowledged, but the hymn offers no indication of a response.

■ Conclusion

God's people have always sung – indeed, often most fervently in times of crisis. While contemporary congregations in certain contexts may gravitate toward praise songs, older hymns continue to testify to the church's historical engagement with theological conflict, doctrinal formation and communal perseverance amid threat and uncertainty. Such hymns not only

articulate faith but also provide orientation in moments of crisis, affirming God's enduring presence and providential care.

In the face of contemporary crises – terrorism, natural catastrophes, accidents and environmental disasters – there emerges a need for a different kind of song. While such hymns may not supply definitive answers to existential questions of why, when or how, they create space for the articulation of despair, anger and doubt. Moreover, the act of singing together in the midst of hardship can itself serve as a source of comfort.

The pedagogical potential of hymns is considerable, both through their grounding in church doctrine and faith and through the lived experiences of faith they express. For scholars of church history, as well as those working from pastoral and diaconal perspectives, hymn texts and their reception over time constitute rich sources of study. Hymns and songs also possess the distinctive quality of being sung in community, thereby fostering a sense of belonging, while at the same time remaining available for individual use. Once learned, a hymn can accompany a person throughout the course of life.

Hymns and Christian songs remain vital resources for theological formation and reflection across both historical and contemporary contexts. They transcend cultural boundaries and address diverse experiences of suffering and hope, thereby functioning as powerful instruments for teaching, learning and spiritual care within the life of the church.

Language learning as faith formation

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■ Abstract

This chapter underscores the foundational significance of language in shaping cognitive and reflective activity, positioning it as the primary medium through which thought and self-reflection are articulated and developed. This chapter contends that faith formation within Christian churches must intentionally provide children with the linguistic resources essential for engaging in Christian thought. Consequently, theological education – amidst the many pressing concerns of serving a faith community – should prioritise cultivating the capacity to employ Christian language as a medium for reflective thinking across children, youth and adults. The chapter examines the implications of an absence of familiar vocabulary, clarifies the concept of ‘Christian language’ and engages relevant theories of language acquisition. It concludes by considering practical approaches to language-centred faith formation, with particular attention to pedagogical work among children.

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■ Introduction

This chapter highlights the pivotal role of language in enabling cognitive and reflective processes, positioning it as the essential medium through which thought and self-reflection are cultivated. It argues that faith formation within Christian churches must equip children with the linguistic resources necessary for engaging in Christian thought. Accordingly, theological education – among the many pressing concerns of serving a faith community – should prioritise fostering the capacity to employ Christian language as a vehicle for reflective thinking across children, youth and adults.

The chapter opens with an example that demonstrates how the absence of familiar vocabulary constrains the scope of possible thought. It then proceeds to delineate the concept of ‘Christian language’ and argues that acquiring such a language constitutes a vital dimension of faith formation.

The chapter subsequently engages with key theories of language acquisition before concluding with a discussion of the practical implementation of language-centred faith formation, particularly in relation to work with children. Within this context, the Godly Play programme is introduced and critically evaluated in terms of its alignment with the theoretical framework advanced in the study.

The discussion begins with an illustrative example that demonstrates the consequences of lacking familiar vocabulary.

The absence of numerical vocabulary is not merely a thought experiment but a lived reality for at least one Amazonian community. Linguist Daniel Everett (2010) has documented his extensive engagement with the Pirahã people, including efforts to introduce them to a written language. In his accounts, he recalls:

At first, I thought that the Pirahãs had the numbers one, two, and many, a common enough system around the world. Eventually numerous published experiments were conducted by me and a series of psychologists that demonstrated conclusively that the Pirahãs have no numbers at all and no counting in any form. (pp. 116–117)

Everett reports that some members of the Pirahã community expressed interest in learning to count in Portuguese, motivated largely by a desire to avoid exploitation in trade. Yet, despite months of daily instruction, the outcomes proved strikingly limited: ‘Not one Pirahã learned to count to ten in eight months. None learned to add $3 + 1$ or even $1 + 1$ ’ (Everett 2010, p. 117). The absence of numerical concepts profoundly influenced their worldview. Everett observed that explanations involving temporal reference, such as the notion that something would occur in two days, were not readily comprehensible. For the Pirahã, the future carried little significance,

while the past was meaningful only insofar as it could be recounted by living witnesses. Reflecting this orientation, their language contained no term for great-grandparents, as few individuals survived long enough to encounter great-grandchildren. Concepts such as *history*, *creation* or *folklore* were entirely foreign to them (Everett 2010, p. 133).

Although this case represents an extreme instance, it vividly demonstrates the intimate relationship between vocabulary and thought. A further illustration of the power of vocabulary can be found in measures taken by the United States government to prohibit the use of certain terms in official documents and scientific discourse (*New York Times* 2025). The Trumpian government appeared to operate on the assumption that political authority could reshape linguistic usage and, in turn, alter perceptions of reality. By modifying the vocabulary available for public discourse, it sought to influence how issues such as diversity, gender, racism and climate change are conceived. The words we possess, and those we lack, either enable or constrain our capacity to reflect critically on our lived reality.

This chapter examines the vocabulary of Christian language and the processes of faith formation within the context of Christian fellowship. If the Christian faith is understood to embody a true vision of life – a worldview that enables individuals to navigate both its joys and its challenges – then it becomes imperative to teach the linguistic forms through which this faith is articulated and expressed.

The Christian worldview is presented here as singular and unified, a deliberate choice made to simplify the argument and sharpen the focus of the contribution. Christianity encompasses a wide range of perspectives, theological interpretations and traditions, which complicate the notion of a singular Christian worldview. Nevertheless, each Christian community shares the fundamental task of transmitting the language of its tradition to children, thereby equipping them to employ it as a resource for interpreting their lives and experiences. Although denominational differences may ascribe distinct connotations to particular terms, this chapter deliberately sets aside such distinctions in order to preserve clarity and maintain analytical focus.

How can children be guided to comprehend, articulate and engage in reflective thought through the medium of Christian language? To frame this discussion, I draw on theoretical insights from Ludwig Wittgenstein and Michael Tomasello to illuminate the processes of language teaching and learning. As a practical illustration, the chapter concludes with an examination of Godly Play, a method developed by Jerome Berryman (2013), who explicitly designed it to enable children and youth to acquire and employ the vocabulary of Christian language.

Its goal is for children to enter adolescence with an inner working model of the Christian language system. By a 'working model', I mean the ability to use classical Christian language to create meaning about life and death. (p. 15)

It is important to clarify what is meant by *Christian language* and to explore why it is important for churches to teach this language to their children and youth.

■ Learning the Christian language: The ‘what’

The Christian language is not equivalent to national or ethnic languages such as English, German, French or Norwegian, since it can be expressed across all mother tongues. Rather, it functions more analogously to a specialised discourse, comparable to the professional vocabularies of medicine, law or computer science, as well as to the domain-specific languages found in non-professional spheres such as football, gardening or scuba diving. Every are of life develops its own language, characterised by vocabularies tailored to convey the particulars of that area. Yet, each language encompasses more than specialised terminology; it also carries distinctive meanings embedded within its vocabulary. The Christian language seeks to encompass the totality of existence as its subject. It engages not only the life of the church and the spiritual realm but also the broader world as it is perceived, together with human experiences and reflections that extend beyond material reality.

Religious language addresses the boundaries of existence, which Berryman (1985, p. 33) refers to as ‘the limit of knowing and being’. It is employed when the mind seeks to connect realities beyond the tangible world with the texture of everyday life. It functions as a medium of meaning-making, guiding reflection across the spectrum of experience, from ordinary decisions to those that feel overwhelming or ‘are too big to handle’. Such experiences may be marked by darkness and pain that defy comprehension, yet also by brightness and wonder that exceed articulation.

The language of science is limited to what we can scientifically know and measure.³³ When discourse extends beyond the limits of the tangible, such as in considerations of life after death or the search for meaning in suffering, it necessitates a different linguistic framework. Religious languages, including the Christian language, are specifically oriented toward articulating and contemplating such experiences. Christian language is indispensable both for interpreting and explaining the Christian tradition itself and for engaging existential questions grounded in the Christian understanding of existence. This includes a glossary that ascribes to the Godhead the Christian articulation of the triune God: A holy and righteous Creator, a loving yet demanding Saviour and the Holy Spirit who empowers and guides. The Christian language thus accommodates a worldview in

33. At least, this was true until quantum mechanics introduced theories that challenged the existing physical laws (Renstrøm & Renstrøm 2015).

which human sin is recognised as a significant source of misfortune. It functions as a vernacular for reflecting on core convictions of the faith, namely that Christ died and rose again and that the renewal of the world is anticipated.

The Christian language is the language of the church, church services, Sunday school meetings and Bible study groups. The Christian language is not employed merely to differentiate between everyday life and religious practice; rather, it functions as a medium through which experiences of the elusiveness of 'the beyond' can inform and illuminate ordinary routines, ecclesial participation and the full range of human experience – from moments of joy to those marked by trauma or despair. It is a language shared not only by theologians but also by lay Christians.

The Christian language has its own vocabulary. It includes words like God, Jesus, creation, sin, meaning, church, damnation, salvation, renewal, prayer, perish, life, death, cross, virtue, sacrifice, devil, forgiveness, neighbour, miracle, faith, joy, virtue, peace, evil, love, suffer, Heaven, redemption, disciple, Holy Spirit, baptism, communion, etc. Christian language infuses this vocabulary with meanings and dispositions shaped by the Christian tradition.

Take the word *creation* as an example. The Christian understanding and attitude toward this word differ significantly from those found in Hinduism or Shintoism. These differences arise from each religion's unique creation narrative, which shapes distinct perspectives on what it means to be created.

Christian vocabulary is intrinsically connected to the narratives of the faith, particularly those found in Scripture. Thus, when a believer affirms, 'I am created by God', this self-understanding is situated within the biblical creation accounts, which declare creation to be 'very good' while also acknowledging its fallen condition. I also view myself as created in 'the image of God' (Gn 1). The last book of the Bible adds hope that I, as part of a fallen and redeemed creation, can look forward to being part of the renewed creation (Rv 21).

Christian language can be difficult because it is rich in biblical metaphorical expressions. To take up one's cross (Mt 16:24) does not mean that one should carry wooden planks. Ephesians 2:4–5 illustrates how the Christian use of the concepts of 'life' and 'death' can differ from their scientific definitions: '*God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions – it is by grace you have been saved*'. For an individual who interprets 'life' and 'death' exclusively through the lens of biology, this biblical text may appear unintelligible. By contrast, for one conversant with both biological discourse and the metaphorical imagery of Christian language, the text resonates with layered and profound meaning.

The majority of metaphors within the Christian language are rooted in biblical narratives, a point that will be elaborated upon later in this discussion.

■ The Christian language: The ‘why’

There are multiple compelling reasons why it is vital for the church to teach – and for members of Christian communities to learn – the language of Christianity. Berryman (1985, p. 70) contends that learning the Christian language is inseparable from learning to be a Christian: ‘One of the most challenging aspects of religious education is learning how to speak and be Christian’. Therefore, mastering the Christian language should be a central goal of all Christian faith formation.

This view is echoed by Craig Dykstra (2005)³⁴ who notes:

In light of all we have said about faith being a distinctive communal form of life based in a relationship with a reality that transcends it, it is apparent that religious language is absolutely indispensable. Religious faith as a way of life is borne, necessarily, by language, and each distinct way of life necessarily has a language of its own. (p. 117)

Dykstra identifies three reasons for the importance of learning the Christian language. The first concerns grasping the substance of Christianity and fostering a sense of belonging within the Christian faith community. Without the ability to articulate the faith of the church or to comprehend its proclamation, one cannot meaningfully participate in or feel connected to the shared faith of the community. Consequently, mastery of the Christian language is essential for the formation of the Christian identity.

The second reason is that the Christian language sustains the continuity of the church. Having endured for two millennia, the Christian faith depends upon a linguistic framework capable of transmitting its traditions and practices from one generation to the next, thereby ensuring the survival of the institution.

However, Dykstra (2005, p. 119) cautions that if the Christian language is reduced solely to these functions, it risks becoming rigid and disconnected from everyday life. Should it devolve into mere ‘church talk’, the language may become obsolete and, if rendered a dead language, the vitality of the faith itself would be imperiled. The third reason for learning Christian language is the need for a living discourse that enables believers to engage with and reflect upon their lives as Christians. For such a language to fulfil this role, it must remain applicable to everyday contexts and meaningful

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within reflections and conversations about lived experience. Dykstra (2005) calls this third reason ‘the most significant purpose of religious language’. Learning this language is essential because it provides a framework for reflecting on life and death and for discerning meaning and depth within human experience:

This means that religious language is not just language about ‘religious things’ (i.e. the religious community, its institutions, and traditions) but about the whole of reality made evident and available through the community’s faith. (p. 119)

Reflection on reality requires language capable of articulating both the dimensions of experience already encountered and those that lie at the margins of human perception. When such reflection is situated within a Christian worldview, it necessitates a distinct Christian language. This holds true not only for those who ultimately embrace the Christian perspective but also for those who reject it, since engagement with its categories presupposes familiarity with its linguistic framework. Both groups require the language in order to understand and situate their practices. Teaching the Christian language is arguably the most crucial dimension of faith formation. Accordingly, the question of how children acquire this language will serve as the focus of the remainder of the chapter.

■ To learn the Christian language

The best way to learn any language is to grow up in an environment where it is used daily, particularly in social settings that include play. However, as Western countries become increasingly secularised, religious language is used less frequently, and fewer children and young people are exposed to Christian language at home. They do not experience Christian practices or stories and have little contact with the church or organised Christian activities. As a result, Christian language is becoming unfamiliar to a growing number of children. In her study, Rebecca Nye (Hay & Nye 2006, pp. 92-108) interviewed children about existential questions to explore their spirituality and the language they used when discussing life, death and meaning-making. She addresses the felt need for religious language in two chapters of David Hay’s book *The Spirit of the Child*:

First, it was noticeable how readily this largely secularized sample of children introduced religious terms in the course of our conversations. Their readiness to use religious language was all the more intriguing given the considerable gaps in the children’s knowledge and understanding. (p. 101)

If children outside a faith tradition can benefit from attempting to use a religious language they have not yet mastered, it is all the more essential for children raised within such a tradition to acquire fluency in the language of their faith. To explore what fosters linguistic mastery in this context,

the chapter will draw on theoretical insights from Ludwig Wittgenstein and Michael Tomasello.

■ Wittgenstein and Tomasello

Both Wittgenstein and Tomasello emphasise that language acquisition occurs within social contexts. However, neither offers a theoretical framework that fully aligns with our purposes, as their work primarily addresses the learning of a first language and does not extend to the domain of reflective thought. Nevertheless, both have advanced conceptual frameworks that can illuminate the processes involved in learning a particular language. While Wittgenstein emphasises the context in which a particular language is learned, Tomasello's concepts describe the process of language acquisition. The analysis commences with Wittgenstein.

■ Wittgenstein: Form of life and language games

Wittgenstein's most famous book, *Philosophical Investigations*, is a collection of brief reflections on a wide range of philosophical themes. Among these contributions, his insights into the internalisation of language have exerted a lasting influence on subsequent language theorists. One of his most cited statements about language is:

For a large class of cases – though not for all – in which we employ the word 'meaning', it can be defined thus: the meaning of a word is its use in the language. (Wittgenstein 2009, Section 43)

Wittgenstein does not seek to provide a single, fixed definition of a word; rather, he argues that meaning is determined by its use within context. Each context, or situation, operates according to its own rules and patterns of usage. He describes these contexts as 'forms of life' – the social and cultural frameworks within which language acquires significance. Distinct forms of life may possess their own vocabularies, conventions and modes of assigning meaning, which can differ markedly from those operative in other contexts to which an individual may belong.

The term 'firewall' illustrates how meaning shifts across contexts: For a firefighter and an information technology (IT) consultant, the word carries distinct denotations shaped by the conventions of each field. If denotations can vary so markedly, connotations – those nuanced emotional and cultural associations – are even more susceptible to contextual variation. For example, the language spoken among football players differs markedly from that used in a church setting, even though the same individual may participate in both. A 'form of life', as Wittgenstein describes it, encompasses stories, rituals, traditions, social practices, actions, attitudes and cultural norms. Each 'form

of life' has its constituting stories, and knowledge of the stories, along with their content, language, emotional expressions and vocabulary, is an important part of learning the language.³⁵

Within such a context, a shared understanding of language and its appropriate use emerges. Wittgenstein refers to this shared understanding as 'the language game' of this life-form. Meaningful participation in a language game requires an understanding of the implicit rules that govern its functioning within a specific context. Mastery of the language game allows individuals to identify with the form of life to which it belongs.

Without a foundational grasp of the Christian language - its vocabulary, practices and modes of meaning-making - it is difficult to comprehend the dynamics of faith, to feel a sense of belonging within the church community or to identify with the tradition it embodies.

■ **Michael Tomasello: Joint attentional frame, intention reading and role reversal imitation**

Although Michael Tomasello's theory does not fully correspond with the aims of this discussion - given its emphasis on early childhood acquisition of a first language - several of his concepts offer valuable insights. Tomasello's work focuses primarily on the acquisition of basic linguistic elements, such as object names and simple indicatives. By contrast, faith formation does not entail an initial encounter with language but rather the introduction of more complex and abstract concepts. Even so, several of Tomasello's insights provide valuable perspectives for understanding how the Christian language might be more effectively taught as a medium for reflective thought.

Tomasello identifies three manifestations of social understanding that are especially important for language acquisition: (1) the joint attentional frame; (2) understanding communicative intentions; and (3) cultural learning in the form of role-reversal imitation (Tomasello 2005, Loc. 299). He collectively refers to these as 'skills of intention-reading' (Tomasello 2005, Loc. 263). In the discussion that follows, these concepts will be employed to advance our understanding of the processes involved in learning the Christian language.

When Tomasello (2005, Loc. 300) uses the term 'joint attentional frame', he refers to a process in which participants align their attention to both an

35. Example: If you identify as a Liverpool (LFC) supporter, you probably know the lows of the 'Heysel disaster' and the highs of the 'Miracle of Istanbul'. If you don't and you are over 40, chances are you are not truly a Liverpool supporter. To identify with a life-form is to know its stories. If Liverpool were ever to play in Brussels or Istanbul again, these stories would be brought to life again.

object and to each other. This shared focus renders the words spoken meaningful to the listener, who can be reasonably confident of grasping what the speaker intends to convey. This brings us to the next concept: 'Understanding communicative intention'. When joint attention is established, it becomes easier for the child to comprehend what the adult is communicating (Tomasello 2005, Loc. 317). Grasping the communicator's intention enables the listener to interpret meaning and attitudes conveyed in the exchange.

When joint attention occurs within a Sunday school context, for instance, when an adult is holding figures, the child recognises this as part of 'the Sunday school form of life' and begins to acquire the corresponding language game. With growing experience, the child comes to understand that the communicative intention in such settings is often to narrate Bible stories. Anticipating this intention primes the child for storytelling, thereby facilitating comprehension. Within this frame, the child recognises that the words function to communicate positive attitudes toward the story's content. The interaction may also signal that the adult intends the narrative to convey meaning beyond the actions described. The shared frame, together with an awareness of communicative intention, enriches the child's experience of listening and supports deeper learning.

Finally, the notion of role-reversal imitation underscores that skill acquisition requires active practice rather than passive listening. For language learning in particular, children must engage in sustained practice and receive constructive feedback on their usage to develop proficiency. The feedback depends on the adult's understanding of the child's intention, which Tomasello refers to as 'role reversal'. The child's utterances are either confirmed or corrected, thereby reinforcing learning through processes of listening and imitation. Joint attention and the recognition of communicative intent ultimately converge in a reciprocal language game, wherein meaning is co-constructed. Language acquisition thus emerges not only from attentive listening but also from active participation in speaking and receiving feedback. How, then, can the concepts of Wittgenstein and Tomasello be applied to the process of learning the Christian language in a faith formation programme? In addressing this question, I will analyse the Godly Play programme, an initiative designed to cultivate fluency in the Christian language, and evaluate the extent to which its pedagogical framework reflects insights drawn from Wittgenstein and Tomasello.

■ Godly Play: A model for learning the Christian language

Adults entrusted with the faith formation of children may adopt a variety of approaches. However, for those who recognise the importance of

equipping children with a Christian language, it is instructive to engage with the principles underlying the Godly Play method. Jerome Berryman (2013), the originator of this approach, explicitly emphasises that it is designed to cultivate Christian language in a reflexive and meaningful manner:

Its goal is for children to enter adolescence with an inner working model of the Christian language system. By a 'working model' I mean the ability to use classical Christian language to create meaning about life and death. (p. 15)

By analysing the structure of a typical Godly Play session, I will demonstrate how central concepts from Wittgenstein and Tomasello are instantiated within this organised approach to faith formation.

A complete Godly Play session is structured into six distinct components, each of which illuminates essential dimensions of learning the Christian language and embodies the theoretical concepts outlined above. The components include:

1. Entering the room and building the circle
2. Storytelling
3. Wondering
4. Creative work and individual reflection
5. The feast
6. Blessing and saying goodbye.

■ Part 1: Entering the room and building the circle

The start of any meeting serves to align attention, but this alignment does not always happen spontaneously. In the Godly Play framework, the session commences with the doorperson engaging the children in dialogue prior to their entry into the room³⁶: 'Are you ready?' Crossing a threshold evokes a cognitive shift, marking the closure of one chapter and the commencement of another. This question reinforces that transition and helps prepare the child³⁷ for what awaits them in the Godly Play room. To sustain shared attention, the storyteller remains seated in readiness to welcome the children, embodying a posture of attentiveness and presence, unencumbered by any competing activity.

After attending Godly Play sessions more than once, participants develop a clear sense of what to expect. This familiarity enhances their

36. A Godly Play session should ideally have two adult leaders: A doorperson who welcomes the children and helps them when needed, and a storyteller who tells the story and leads the wondering part and the feast.

37. In this chapter, I refer to the participants in the session as *children*. However, the same principles apply when the participants are youth, adults, professionals or ordinary people, older individuals, or people with disabilities such as dementia.

awareness of the room as a distinct and purposeful context, one marked by its own language game. Returning children recognise the space as an environment in which the Christian language is encountered through storytelling, wondering, play, dialogue and celebration. For newcomers, learning unfolds through attentive listening to both the storyteller and their peers. The formation of the circle at the outset of a Godly Play session constitutes a crucial practice in establishing a safe and structured environment that fosters joint attention and facilitates learning.

■ Part 2: Storytelling

The second stage of a Godly Play session centers on storytelling, a practice in which children's capacity for communicative intent and intention reading becomes particularly significant. As previously argued, the narratives of a life form are indispensable to the language of this context, with biblical stories serving as the foundational narratives of the church. Within Godly Play, these stories are enacted through carefully chosen materials that embody the narrative before the children. The presentation is deliberately contemplative, incorporating pauses and moments of silence during which the materials are moved to visualise the unfolding story. Berryman (1985) delineates three narrative genres – sacred stories, parables and liturgical actions – which, taken together, encapsulate the Christian language:

Parable's engagement of the creative process is the root of love in its most ultimate sense. Sacred story involves one in primal faith. Ritual is fundamental hope which pulls the future into the present rather than escaping from the present into the future. All three of the theological virtues are more than emotions. They are primal ways of coping with the reality of the limit. Not only is the language of everyday changed to apply to this realm, but so are our ordinary emotions. (p. 40)

Sacred stories are narratives in which God appears as a central figure. Berryman occasionally designates these accounts as Christian myths, insofar as they recount the experiences of individuals in the Old and New Testaments who draw near to God and encounter his elusive presence.

Parables, as recorded in the New Testament, constitute the teachings of Jesus conveyed through narrative form. These stories employ everyday occurrences to illuminate spiritual themes and invite creative engagement. By linking ordinary experience with transcendent meaning, parables, together with the other narratives shared in the Godly Play context, serve as a medium for exploring existential questions and fostering theological reflection.

Liturgical stories articulate the faith of the church through language that is more explicitly theological in character. These narratives situate liturgical actions within the framework of the church calendar, preparing children for the major celebrations of Christmas, Easter and Pentecost, as well as for

the ritual elements of worship. In this respect, liturgical actions correspond closely to the form of 'church talk' identified by Dykstra.

Berryman (2002–2012, vol. 1) writes:

Godly Play liturgical actions present a kind of language lesson. Children can learn the language of liturgy and have an appropriate place to practi[s]e the language of liturgy, so that they can enter more fully into the liturgical experience of their church. (p. 26)

Berryman (2013) writes about these three genres:

It is through the parables that our creativity is stimulated. The sacred stories give us identity through our social play. Liturgical action gives our biology meaning and through contemplative silence our creativity is joined with that of the [C]reator without the limitations of language. (p. 163)

Berryman identifies 'silence' as a distinct genre in its own right. Its significance lies in the role Berryman assigns to Christian language as an 'inner working model'. Language acquisition through listening and speaking is thus complemented by the development of a language for contemplative thought. Stories are deliberately narrated at a slow pace, punctuated by pauses, so that silence becomes integral to the process. Within these moments, children are afforded the space to internalise and reflect upon what they have heard, thereby transforming language into a medium for inner reflection.

Biblical narratives serve as the primary source of Christian language. Collectively, they constitute the overarching 'grand story' of the Bible and form the most significant dimension of the Christian metanarrative. For those seeking to acquire fluency in the Christian language, engagement with these stories is indispensable. The renowned educator Kieran Egan (1986)³⁸ emphasises the importance of storytelling in learning and meaning-making:

The story, then, is not just some casual entertainment; it reflects a basic and powerful form in which we make sense of the world and experience. Indeed, some people claim that the story form reflects a fundamental structure of our minds [...] Whatever the case, it is clear that children are readily and powerfully engaged by stories. (p. 2)

Storytelling functions as a powerful mechanism for sustaining joint attention, a process integral to learning. As Egan (1997, Loc. 155)³⁹ observes, specific cognitive and affective mechanisms are activated when we engage with stories:

Perhaps the most powerful technique invented, and the greatest of all social inventions, was the 'coding' of lore into stories. This had the dual effect of making

38. Kieran Egan is an Irish educational philosopher working in Canada (1942–2022). His best-known work is *The Educated Mind* (1997). He was counted among '25 Visionaries Who Are Changing Your World', in *Utne Reader* (2010).

39. «Loc» is used in older versions of Kindle books. They count the sentences instead of pages.

the contents more easily remembered – crucial in cultures where all knowledge had to be preserved in living memories – and of shaping the hearers’ emotional commitment to those contents. One could ensure greater cohesiveness within the social group by coding the lore that was vital to one’s society into stories.

The stories convey more than mere sequences of action; they articulate attitudes, moral frameworks, ideals, social order and a worldview. In doing so, they furnish the vocabulary of faith and imbue words with meaning. Berryman’s connection between storytelling and language acquisition is thus well-founded, as the act of telling stories becomes integral to learning the Christian language.

The language emerging from Christ’s life, death and resurrection attains its full functionality when absorbed and enacted within the ‘middle realm’.⁴⁰ This, according to Berryman (2013, p. 163), is precisely the aim of Godly Play.

■ Part 3: Wondering

Berryman positions wondering as a response to Dykstra’s concern that religious language risks hardening into rigid forms of ‘God talk’ or ‘church talk’. Within the Godly Play context, wondering constitutes a central dimension of the language game. It is structured around the practice of the adult posing open-ended questions related to the story, with no response considered incorrect. Moreover, when such questions elicit fruitful discussion among the children, the storyteller’s role is to affirm and listen, thereby fostering dialogical engagement.

During the *wondering* phase, the storyteller invites children to articulate their experiences and reflections on the narrative. Open-ended questions, such as ‘What did you like best?’ or ‘What do you think is most important in this story?’, create space for personal interpretation. All responses are received and affirmed, thereby cultivating a safe environment for thoughtful engagement and dialogical exploration.

This stage signifies a shift from the adult’s communicative intention to what Tomasello describes as *role-reversal imitation*. At this point, the adult is required to attend to and interpret the children’s intentions, as these are expressed through their responses and interactions with one another.

In Godly Play, the storyteller and the children engage in reciprocal learning as they listen and share their reflections and wonders. Language

40. ‘The middle realm’ is a term Berryman uses to describe a specific state of mind in which the physical and spiritual worlds intersect. Psychologically, it can be likened to the concept of flow – a state of deep, immersive engagement that fosters powerful internal learning, particularly of religious language and concepts. In Godly Play, wondering and play are the primary tools used to facilitate access to this middle realm.

acquisition occurs through attentive listening to the speech of others and through experimentation with one's own use of language. Such learning is most effectively fostered within a safe and supportive environment. While neither Wittgenstein nor Tomasello explicitly foregrounds the importance of security in the process of language learning, perhaps assuming it implicitly, its significance is undeniable, particularly when role reversal becomes embedded within the rules of the language game.

The wondering phase, which incorporates the children's responses, constitutes a pivotal dimension of Godly Play. It shifts the language game beyond the confines of rigid 'God talk' or 'church talk', particularly through questions such as 'Where are you in this story?' or 'Is something in this story about you?' Such invitations encourage children to relate their own experiences to the narrative, thereby weaving personal meaning into the fabric of the Christian tradition. In this way, the Godly Play language game extends beyond the inherited faith and stories of the Church, encompassing the integration of biblical narratives with the lived realities of the children themselves.

Wondering questions also open the possibility of playfully engaging with the narrative. For example, prompts such as 'Can we take anything away from the story and still have everything we need?' invite children to explore the elasticity of meaning. Many of the questions used with parables are intentionally imaginative and open-ended: 'What happens to the story of the Good Samaritan if all the persons were women, or children?' 'What does the mustard farmer think of all the birds that nest in the mustard bush?' 'Does the Sower have a name?' and 'What did the man who bought the valuable pearl do next after his purchase? Was he happy?'⁴¹ Such questions encourage creative re-interpretation, allowing participants to experiment with the narrative and integrate personal perspectives into the Christian language game.

Listening to the playful reflections of peers expands each child's understanding of the story's potential meanings. The act of wondering initiates reflective thought, while attending to others' perspectives broadens the range of possible interpretations. This process also enables children to hear and practise the language associated with the narrative. Because play constitutes their most effective mode of reflection, the playful character of wondering facilitates deeper engagement. Moreover, it functions as a safeguard against the risk that discourse within the Godly Playroom becomes confined to a closed register of 'Godly Play talk'.

41. All the questions are from different volumes of Berryman, Jerome, *The Complete Guide to Godly Play*, vols. 1-8.

■ Part 4: Creative work and individual reflection

This phase begins with the storyteller's invitation: 'Now, I wonder what you want to do to further explore this story?' At this point, children are free to choose their own mode of engagement, allowing their reflections to guide them into play and creative exploration.

The room is equipped with a shelf containing materials for creative work and play, including painting supplies, paper, scissors, glue, modeling clay and building blocks. In addition, books are available for reading, and children are encouraged to engage with resources related to both the day's story and other narratives previously encountered. At times, they choose to integrate elements from multiple stories into their play. The doorperson supports this process by ensuring that the children have access to the materials necessary for their creative exploration.

This stage is intended to provide children with the opportunity to absorb and process the experience of hearing the story and engaging in wondering. It allows them either to contemplate the narrative or to occupy their bodies with creative activity if they prefer not to reflect explicitly. Creative work offers a means of rest as well as a way of working through the story while engaging their hands. At its deepest level, such activity represents the child's response to what the story and wondering have evoked and may be understood as a form of prayer.

Individual creative work is intended to activate Christian language as an inner language, functioning not only as a medium of communication but also as a resource for reflecting on one's life and experiences. The wondering phase opens the possibility of connecting the narratives of the Christian faith with the lived realities of the children. Creative work provides a means of deepening this process or, alternatively, of pausing from intensive reflection through embodied engagement. Together, wondering and creative work facilitate the transformation of liturgical discourse or 'God talk' into an inner working language. During this phase, the storyteller remains seated quietly before the focal shelf, available should children wish to share their creative work and articulate their reflections, thereby giving words to their inner contemplations.

■ Part 5: The feast

The conclusion of the creative work, marked by the careful packing away of materials, signals a transition into the next phase: Preparation for the feast.

The feast is intentionally simple – perhaps consisting of a few grapes and water, or a biscuit and juice, depending on what is available. Before the food is shared and enjoyed communally, the practice typically includes a

brief liturgical pause, which may take the form of a short prayer or an expression of gratitude for the meal. Although the adult may initiate this time of prayer, children are frequently invited to participate. Such prayer practices acquaint them with a distinct mode of Christian language – one that is simultaneously liturgical and relational. This communication helps the children engage with what Berryman called ‘the limit of knowing and being’. At this stage, joint attention undergoes a significant shift: It is no longer directed toward the story as the shared object, but toward God; more precisely, toward relationship with and communication with God. This reorientation opens the possibility of experiencing joint attention not only between child and adult but also between child and God.

Following the prayer, the session transitions to the meal. During this time, space is created for informal conversation, which may range from everyday topics to reflections on the day’s story. This phase of the Godly Play session provides an opportunity for the children to relax and enjoy one another’s company. Given that the earlier stages may have involved intense emotions or concentrated cognitive engagement, the feast functions as a means of winding down and integrating new reflections in a more relaxed, communal setting. This phase alters the rules of the language game. In the initial stages of the Godly Play session, children recognise the storyteller’s communicative intention and understand that joint attention is directed toward the story and the reflections it evokes. At this point, however, the rules become more open, emphasising that the Godly Play room accommodates a wide range of topics and language games. Children may tell a joke, discuss a recent football match or share personal news such as the anticipation of a new sibling. In this way, space is created for diverse subjects and forms of expression.

The feast serves as a joyful conclusion to the Godly Play session. Following this communal moment, the final step is simply to leave the room.

■ Part 6: Blessing and saying goodbye

The doorperson provides support for children who require accompaniment and maintains appropriate communication with parents. At the conclusion of the session, the storyteller offers each child a personal blessing. This act, too, is liturgical, yet it is directed to the individual rather than the community. In doing so, it demonstrates that liturgical language is not solely communal but also personal. Through receiving such blessings, children come to recognise that liturgy operates according to diverse language rules, encompassing both collective and individual dimensions. There is no doubt that this act is directed specifically toward each child, offering them something to carry beyond the room. At the same time, it functions as a

gesture of welcome and belonging. It establishes the expectation of a future gathering and affirms that the child remains part of this space, should they choose to return.

■ Conclusion

A Godly Play session encompasses numerous rich and layered elements; however, this chapter has concentrated specifically on how the method supports children in acquiring the Christian language system. This task is crucial, as Christians require a linguistic framework through which to articulate their faith and their lived experience. More broadly, human beings need language to engage with and reflect upon the existential questions of what it means to be human.

Godly Play facilitates this process by establishing a safe space in which language and existential reflection can unfold. It presents biblical narratives as resources for such reflection and offers opportunities for both communal and individual engagement. In doing so, the method enables Christian language to move beyond mere 'God talk' or institutional discourse, becoming instead a living, reflective and personal language of faith.

Staff and student well-being in theological education

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■ Abstract

Exploring the best and shared praxis in teaching theology during times of crisis cannot be limited to the current and future context alone. It must also consider the state of staff and student well-being before, during and after the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. Slogans such as ‘the new normal’, ‘working and studying remotely or in the hybrid form’, and ‘back to face-to-face teaching and learning’ have all had significant implications for the well-being of staff and students. A crucial question arises: Are institutions treating staff and student well-being in theological education as a good-to-have support system that can be addressed by an additional programme, or is it being recognised as a fundamental, transformative reality that requires change? This contribution seeks to critically examine whether any meaningful changes have occurred in the teaching, research and learning environment and to assess their impact on the well-being of staff and students in theological education. The study will

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also propose practical strategies – such as pastoral care and support – for fostering a supportive learning environment.

■ Introduction

University staff and students continue to grapple with the aftermath of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, as its impact on mortality (cf. Ndevu, 2020, p. 275), as well as on social, psychological and physical functioning, remains an enduring reality.⁴² Rudolph, Van Niekerk and Van Gent (2021) rightly caution that:

[M]ajor mental health implications should be expected, as the current burden of mental health disorders, past and present trauma, poverty and the unexpected displacement of people in South Africa pose particular challenges in this regard. (p. 1)

Womack, Duncan and Pillay (2020) further remind us that the South African society remains deeply marked by inequality and poverty.

The post-COVID-19 intake of students in South African universities was directly impacted by the pandemic, as they were in either primary (Grades 1-7) or secondary (Grades 8-12) school when academic programmes were abruptly disrupted. While some schools were able to continue instruction through remote learning, many, especially in impoverished communities, faced significant limitations due to a lack of internet access, technological devices and other physical challenges. Makgahlela et al. (2021, p. 1) affirm that the effectiveness of remote learning significantly depends on preparedness, access to technological tools and the availability of sufficient student support infrastructure. In addition to these challenges, students continue to experience a range of stressors, including financial, academic, time, health-related and self-imposed pressures (Koen et al. 2018).⁴³

As early as 2021, Makgahlela et al. (2021) observed that:

Notwithstanding the COVID-19 crisis, failure and/or unfair access to education constitutes a gross constitutional infringement since in South Africa every student has the right to access quality education. It, therefore, becomes prudent for the government and all sectors of the society to mitigate this potential human rights violation by, amongst others[,] paying closer attention to the needs of historically disadvantaged universities and students during the COVID-19 pandemic. (p. 2)

42. See Rudolph et al. (2021, p. 1) on the spread of the disease, the impact on mental health, and the mortality figures globally and locally.

43. Koen et al. (2018) further indicate that students who participated in the research 'reported feeling stressed and unable to manage their academic workload, and approximately a quarter of participants experienced sleep deprivation'. It is therefore essential that more effort be made to assist students to develop effective coping strategies and time management skills.

In the aftermath of the pandemic, this contravention continues to affect the lives of both staff and students across many South African universities, particularly at historically disadvantaged institutions. These challenges are exacerbated by persistent load shedding, pervasive corruption, the National Student Financial Aid Scheme's (NSFAS) failure to effectively administer student grants and ongoing reductions in government funding to the university sector.

Rudolph et al. (2021, p. 1), in their study of universities in the Eastern Cape, reported that the mental health and well-being of certain staff members were increasingly at risk during the COVID-19 lockdown. Similarly, Makgahlela et al. (2021, p. 3)⁴⁴ in their study of university staff, identified six key strategies that participants believed institutions should adopt to mitigate the impacts of the pandemic. These include: (1) the development of effective COVID-19 communication strategies (p. 3); (2) the provision of efficient Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs); (3) adequate infrastructure for remote learning and research (p. 3); (4) the implementation of compensatory academic measures for students (p. 4); (5) the development of an on-campus COVID-19 risk management strategy (p. 4); and (6) the provision of online psychological services, including the establishment of a university employee wellness programme (p. 5).

This sentiment had already been articulated by Makgahlela et al. (2021), who emphasised the need for both a university employee wellness programme and a student wellness programme. As Makgahlela et al. (2021) stated:

[...] the university needed to avail online trauma debriefing and counseling services for staff members. Seemingly, the university needed to avail an Employee Wellness Programme on-campus for the staff post-COVID-19 lockdown. The study also emphasized that this program is critical as it could promote staff's psychological wellbeing and therefore promote their productivity during-and-after the lockdown. (p. 3)

The significance lies in the phrase 'after the lockdown'. Rudolph et al. (2021, p. 2) further emphasise that staff members' fears should be addressed in an ongoing and appropriate manner. Koen et al. (2018, p. 15) affirm that future interventions should extend beyond workplace policies to encompass the environmental and social norms that ultimately shape health-related behaviours. At the same time, Henrico (2022, p. 1) cautions that well-being programmes within higher education institutions (HEIs) are constrained by distinctive challenges, including limited time, financial pressures and an already overloaded curriculum.

44. This study by Makgahlela et al. (2021) reported on the strategies proposed by staff at a historically disadvantaged university to enhance their well-being and support the administration of academic activities during the national COVID-19 pandemic.

■ Wellness and well-being

In a survey conducted by Koen et al. (2018) among staff and students at the Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences (FMHS) at Stellenbosch University (SU), participants' health status and understanding of wellness were assessed. The findings indicated that:

[W]ellness is a multifactorial concept; as such, health-promotional strategies for classrooms and workplaces should consider all factors to provide a holistic approach and potentially identify those who are at risk of a sub-optimal wellness status. (Koen et al. 2018, p. 3)

Supporting a holistic framework, Brewster et al. (2022) argue that effective mental health interventions must adopt a whole-university approach, one that actively promotes the well-being of both staff and students. They argue that there:

[/]s a need to look beyond the provision of reactive services or isolated individual interventions, to proactively and cohesively embed cultural and structural change across the whole institution in a way which supports positive wellbeing outcomes for the whole university community. (p. 549)

Building on the concepts of a holistic and whole-university approach, Eloff, O'Neil and Kanengoni (2022, p. 22) together with Womack et al. (2020) underscore the importance of adopting inter- and transdisciplinary frameworks in research on staff and student well-being. Universities, particularly those engaged in student and staff wellness, should foster a culture of well-being and invest in initiatives that promote healthy behaviours. Such efforts should draw on Louw's reflections in the preface to *Appealing Spaces* by Van Rhijn and Meulink-Korf (2019, p. 11), where he identifies the foundation of a multi-faceted approach to healing, human well-being and spiritual wholeness. This underscores the essential role of transdisciplinary frameworks in addressing well-being.

Stellenbosch University's Staff Health and Well-being Plan (SHWP) (SU 2020, p. 8) asserts that its initiatives are intentionally designed to be both interwoven and interdependent. Well-being is defined as 'the experience of health, happiness, and prosperity and is determined by various biological, psychological, and social factors. Well-being is associated with a life of dignity, flourishing, and thriving'. Based on this understanding, the SHWP (2021, p. 9) advocates for well-being rather than wellness. The plan argues that 'the notion of wellness has a reductionist connotation and is often associated with ad hoc and incidental activities for staff. Moreover, it is activity-focused. Due to this limited understanding, well-being is preferred for its more inclusive and comprehensive scope, encompassing all dimensions of human life. Moreover, it is explicitly person-focused, as suggested by the word "being".'

The WHO defines well-being as a positive state experienced by both individuals and societies, shaped by social, economic and environmental conditions. It encompasses quality of life as well as the capacity of people and communities to contribute to the world with a sense of meaning and purpose. Koen et al. (2018, p. 4) elaborate on this definition, stating that ‘these aspects are believed to be a worthy focus for employee and student wellness program[me]s, as they exist as a holistic model wherein the diverse dimensions are interdependent’. They further note that these dimensions are operationalised and implemented through programmes within specific organisations. The WHO definition adds that focusing on well-being supports the tracking of the equitable distribution of resources, overall thriving and sustainability. A society’s well-being can be determined by the extent to which it is resilient, builds capacity for action and is prepared to transcend challenges (WHO 2021).

It is noteworthy that Rudolph et al. (2021, p. 1) reported an escalation in poor mental health⁴⁵ among university staff in both the United Kingdom and South Africa, even prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Contributing factors included work-related stress, excessive workloads, often unattainable performance evaluation processes, the competitive nature of academia, contract-based employment, the sudden shift to online teaching, blurred boundaries between work and home life, social disconnection from students, additional administrative responsibilities and limited organisational support. Supporting this concerning reality, Brewster et al. (2022), in their studies conducted in the United Kingdom, similarly highlight that:

[W]ellbeing of university staff has also become a growing sector-wide concern. The increasing work and productivity demands brought by the marketization, massification, and technologization of higher education have consistently been associated with increasing work-related stress, burnout, and mental health difficulties. (p. 549)

The SHWP document observes that Staff Health and Well-being (SHW) received significantly greater focus and prioritisation in response to the evident impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the lives of university staff. It further emphasises that any wellness plan within the university context must be firmly grounded in ethical principles. In this regard, the SHWP aims:

[7]to embody the values of compassion, empathy, and care concerning the health and wellbeing of our employees at all levels of the organization. Our desire is for all our employees to feel empowered and supported.

45. ‘[A] state of well-being in which the individual realises his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully and is able to make a contribution to his or her community’ (Rudolph et al. 2021, p. 2).

In response to persistent staff challenges and the compounded effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, SU's Human Resources (HR) Division, through its Wellness Office, engaged with 250 employees in 2019. The primary work-related concerns prompting these consultations were difficulties in workplace relationships and elevated stress levels, both of which frequently resulted in prolonged absenteeism and work incapacity claims.⁴⁶ The same study further reported a rise in workplace bullying, harassment and intimidation across universities more broadly (SU 2020, p. 8). This aligns with the findings of Rudolph et al. (2021, p. 1), who confirm that the disruption caused by the pandemic placed the mental health of university staff at significant risk. They further note that 'evidence of the impact on the mental health of university staff members seemed to indicate a shift from work-related stress to anxiety as the main concern amongst staff members' (Rudolph et al. 2021, p. 2).

A survey conducted by Koen et al. (2018, pp. 8–9) revealed concerning trends in the overall health profile of university staff, with the average staff member classified as unhealthy. The data indicated consistently high Body Mass Index (BMI) scores, widespread overweight and obesity, and waist circumferences exceeding recommended limits. In addition, a significant proportion of staff reported feeling frequently or constantly under pressure at work, with more than half experiencing difficulty in relaxing. The study further identified notable differences between staff designations, as academic staff reported higher levels of workplace pressure compared to their administrative counterparts.

However, Rudolph et al. (2021) reported that:

[F]emale staff members, staff with comorbidities and workers in the administration and service sections were significantly more likely to report psychological distress. The mental health of female staff members and members with comorbidities were almost two times more at risk of psychological distress. (p. 1)

Rudolph et al. (2021, p. 1) further conclude that the mental health of South African university personnel has been largely neglected over recent decades – a neglect that was notably exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Koen et al. (2018, p. 11) noted that although the current health profile of university staff is concerning, many staff members are seeking support to improve their overall health and wellness.

Despite some staff members reporting that they were unaware of the Wellness Committee on-campus, nearly all participants in the study acknowledged the importance of such a committee (Koen et al. 2018, pp. 8–9). Staff expressed the belief that the committee could 'increase

46. Cf. Stellenbosch University's SHWP (SU 2020, p. 11).

productivity, improve health and motivation, create awareness of healthy behaviors, and that these activities would also be more accessible if occurring on campus' (Koen et al. 2018). A SU staff member who participated in the online survey stated:

A healthy lifestyle should not be separate from one's work life. A healthy lifestyle can only be achieved when small changes are made in all spheres of life, including your work life. (pp. 8–9)

On this basis, the Wellness Committee should assume a central role in educating staff to make healthier choices within and beyond the workplace, thereby supporting overall well-being and fostering healthier lifestyles.

■ Addressing well-being

The SHWP (SU 2020) document refers to a comment by Julie Crabb, Head of Student Support and Well-being at Middlesex University, who makes a significant statement regarding the implementation of a well-being plan. She states:

I hope we won't be talking about it as a separate entity by 2030. I would hope that it is just part and parcel of what we do, so that it's so highly integrated that we don't need to be thinking about it. (p. 24)

The significance of this statement lies not only in the successful implementation of a plan but also in its integration and embodiment across the entire university environment. This requires the institution to assume responsibility for implementing well-being processes and to remain accountable for their outcomes. It is noteworthy that the SHWP (SU 2020) document addresses this responsibility and accountability when it states that:

It covers responsibility; transparency and consent; privacy; validity; access; positive interventions; and stewardship, and calls for these to be developed with students, staff, data owners, IT [*information technology*] services, and university governance, as well as student support services and data protection officers using a 'whole-university' approach. (p. 25)

The SHWP (SU 2020, p. 25) further indicates that SU will require institution-wide commitment to well-being in order to ensure the success of the plan. The document describes a whole-university approach when it acknowledges that 'we are all affected by our mental wellbeing and that of others'. It is a significant acknowledgement that, as a university community, individual well-being is inseparable from collective well-being. The document further emphasises that well-being should not be regarded as a temporary initiative confined to a specific crisis period, but rather as a lifelong commitment requiring a comprehensive approach to continuous learning and skills development. The document strongly advocates for embedding well-being across all activities through a whole-curriculum approach (SU 2020, p. 25).

This aligns with what Emily McIntosh, Director of Learning, Teaching and Student Experience at Middlesex University, states: 'I'd want well-being to be connected so intimately with learning and teaching that people don't see it as wraparound or separate from other curricular activities' (SU 2020, p. 25). In this regard, well-being must be understood as a collective endeavour – one that calls for a whole-university approach.

The challenge, however, lies in whether the SHWP document adequately accounted for the injustices and traumas specific to the South African context at the time of its compilation. Staff and student well-being at African universities differs in important respects from that at European institutions. Within South Africa, addressing well-being necessitates a holistic and contextually grounded approach – one that explicitly acknowledges the historical injustices of apartheid and the enduring impact of past trauma on both academic staff and students.

Efforts to promote well-being – including physical and mental health, work-life balance and professional development – must be situated within the broader context of historical traumas and injustices. Increasingly, it has become evident that, in light of South Africa's sociopolitical realities and the enduring effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, traditional models of education, well-being management and theological reflection are inadequate and must evolve to remain relevant and effective. Van Rhijn and Meulink-Korf (2019, p. 81) emphasise that an appropriate theoretical framework for helping, caring and healing is essential to promoting the quality of human existence. This underscores the importance of a relationally ethical paradigm in addressing fundamental life issues that ultimately shape human well-being.

Well-being strategies that universities may implement, including pastoral support and care aimed at fostering a constructive and supportive learning environment for staff and students, must take certain aspects into consideration.

■ Universities need to take responsibility for well-being

As indicated, universities are responsible not only for the well-being of their staff but, as Eloff et al. (2022, p. 24) observe, HEIs also bear a significant responsibility to support student well-being and to foster the well-being of the broader learning communities in which they operate. However, Brewster et al. (2022, p. 551) suggest that current institutional policies tend to prioritise student recruitment, retention and progression, while largely neglecting the well-being of staff. This oversight is particularly concerning, as diminished staff well-being directly compromises student

well-being and, in turn, the quality of teaching and support services. Such a narrow focus is short-sighted and ultimately undermines the very student-centred objectives that institutions seek to advance. Brewster et al. (2022, p. 551) further indicate that their 'findings emphasize that staff and student well-being are not oppositional but instead are integral to each other. If one group's well-being is affected, there will be clear and significant consequences for the other group's well-being'. In this regard, Van Rhijn and Meulink-Korf (2019, p. 81) indicate that central to the anthropological basis is the 'unit of meaning', a pre-conceptual and unarticulated structuring of relationships within the interaction between people. This unit of meaning is 'displayed within the systemic dynamics of dialogue; a dialogue that takes subjectivity seriously and tries to focus continuously on the particularity of the individual as well'. The significance of ethically grounded relationships lies in their fundamental commitment to justice, which should underpin both social cohesion and well-being.

■ Acknowledging interrelationships

University wellness plans and policies must recognise and value interrelationships as central to well-being. This significance is acknowledged by Eloff et al. (2022, p. 23), whose research reveals that while technological advancements are 'creating dynamic learning environments that afford creative opportunities to optimize learning, findings from this study indicate that university students still attach value to personal interaction with their lecturers'. The students in their study consistently emphasised the importance of lecturers being caring, accessible and supportive – qualities they identify as vital to their overall well-being (Eloff et al. 2022, p. 23). However, Eloff et al. (2022, p. 23) observe that this relational dimension is seldom recognised as a key performance area for university lecturers, whose contributions are more commonly evaluated in terms of throughput rates, academic outcomes and research outputs. Such an omission reflects a narrow and limited conception of academic performance. Van Rhijn and Meulink-Korf (2019, p. 121) contend that a relational structure grounded in dialogue is essential for promoting fairness in caregiving, as it is sustained by the ethical dimension of relational reciprocity. Within the university context, this implies that every interaction between staff and students should embody values of fairness, dialogue, hospitality and mutual respect.

■ Intergenerational transmission

Van Rhijn and Meulink-Korf (2019, p. 430) highlight an additional dimension significant to staff and student well-being, namely the legacy or generational impact. This suggests that the healing and restoration of well-being within the current cohort must be addressed to prevent the destructive

transmission of unresolved trauma to future generations of staff and students. They define *legacy* as the:

[E]thical imperative to existing current generations; to scrutinize the heritage of ancestors to decide what should be handed over to the next generation that will be the beneficiary for human well-being. (p. 430)

Furthermore, they emphasise that the central challenge is to instill justice for all, both in the present and for future generations. Neglecting the healing and restorative processes essential to the well-being of today's staff and student cohorts risks perpetuating harm and negatively impacting future generations within the academic community.

In this regard, Van Rhijn and Meulink-Korf (2019, p. 33) underscore the importance of intergenerational transmission, particularly in relation to relational dynamics and the pursuit of convalescence and healing as integral to human well-being. They emphasise the necessity of acknowledging and addressing injustices perpetrated by 'forefathers', including those committed under apartheid and other systemic forms of oppression. According to Van Rhijn and Meulink-Korf (2019, p. 38), 'the recognition of personal guilt and how acts of transgression impact on the "human order of being" (contributing to existential hurt), presupposes also the possibility of healing and growth'.

■ Restoring the injustices

Acknowledging guilt and gaining insight into the nature of past transgressions are essential steps in promoting human well-being. Justice necessarily entails restoration, reparation and meaningful reorientation. These dimensions should form a core component of any university's transformation policy, as they contribute to redressing historical injustices experienced by designated groups directly affected by systemic oppression. Such restorative measures are integral to advancing the wellness process and fostering a more equitable academic community.

■ Offering confidential counselling services

From the perspective of addressing historical injustices, prioritising access to mental health resources is essential. Such resources include counselling services, support groups, workshops on stress management, mindfulness sessions and resilience-building programmes. Medicott et al. (2021, p. 1) affirm that mindfulness practices can enhance the mental health and well-being of university students and, by extension, are likely to benefit staff members as well. They further note that:

[M]indfulness, self-compassion, and resilience were found to mediate changes in wellbeing, while changes in distress were mediated by mindfulness and resilience. Such mediation effects would be expected of active intervention. (p. 31)

Creating a supportive environment in which staff and students feel safe to seek assistance for mental health concerns, workplace and academic stress, and personal challenges is vital. Complementary support through confidential counseling services, including financial planning and legal advice, can further enhance overall well-being and strengthen institutional care.

■ Implementing flexible work arrangements

Rudolph et al. (2021, p. 1) note that, beyond workload pressures, nearly a quarter of staff express a need for more flexible working hours. The needs assessment further reveals widespread dissatisfaction, with staff reporting low motivation and discontent with management practices, facilities and existing wellness initiatives. Implementing flexible work arrangements, such as telecommuting, flexible scheduling and compressed workweeks, can assist staff in balancing professional and personal responsibilities. These measures not only alleviate stress but also enhance job satisfaction and contribute to cultivating a more supportive and responsive workplace culture.

■ Staff development

Investing in staff development demonstrates a university's commitment to the growth and well-being of its employees. Training and professional development opportunities enable staff to strengthen their skills, advance their careers and sustain motivation in their roles. Addressing excessive workloads and promoting work-life balance, through resources on time management, prioritisation and delegation, plays a crucial role in preventing burnout. Moreover, fostering realistic expectations and encouraging clear, effective communication contribute to a healthier work environment. Recognising and valuing staff contributions through awards, bonuses and public acknowledgements further enhances morale, cultivates a sense of being appreciated and increases job satisfaction. Finally, establishing channels for staff to provide feedback and suggestions on wellness initiatives ensures that universities can design and adapt programmes and policies that are responsive to actual needs.

■ Healthy work environment

Universities should design and implement comprehensive wellness policies that foster a healthy work environment. Such policies may include smoke-free campuses, the provision of healthy eating options, and accessible mental health support services. On-campus health and wellness programmes should incorporate fitness classes, health screenings, nutrition education and access to health care services. Promoting regular physical exercise and healthy

dietary practices can significantly enhance staff well-being, with initiatives such as gym facilities, structured exercise classes and wellness challenges serving to encourage sustained participation in physical activity. Health fairs provide valuable opportunities for staff to participate in screenings for conditions such as high blood pressure, cholesterol and diabetes. Complementing these initiatives, universities can host seminars on nutrition, healthy eating, sleep hygiene and strategies for achieving work-life balance. Together, such programmes support holistic well-being and contribute to cultivating a more supportive and health-conscious campus culture.

University leadership should prioritise staff wellness and actively endorse initiatives that promote well-being. Leaders play a pivotal role in shaping a positive workplace culture and can model this commitment through their own practices of self-care and work-life balance. However, Van Rhijn and Meulink-Korf (2019, p. 9) affirm the importance of networking in processes of healing and well-being, emphasising that humans are not isolated individuals but dynamic, interacting beings situated within interrelational systems and intergenerational networks across time, place and space. This perspective highlights that healing and well-being cannot be confined to individual self-healing strategies or programmes.

Fostering a sense of community among staff is essential and can be achieved through the organisation of social events, team-building activities and volunteer opportunities. Strengthening social connections in this way enhances morale and contributes to the development of a supportive and cohesive university community.

■ Compassion and caregiving

Van Rhijn and Meulink-Korf (2019, p. 395) assert that a 'scientific approach and accurate reflection are without any doubt applicable to any form of practical engagement in caregiving'. They argue that sensitivity and compassion are often awakened by an unsettling awareness of the well-being of the other – what may be described as a constant attentiveness to the divine discomfort of the other. As they explain:

[S]ubjectivity is driven by an empathetic unrest concerning the vulnerability, suffering, and dying of the other. It is exactly this caring unrest that finds pastoral care and constitutes its mandate. (p. 295)

However, they caution that this:

[M]andate demands a professional approach and method-based skills, regarding social interaction and communication. The social context (sociality) is embedded in inter-subjectivity and plurality. For a scientific approach to pastoral care, the caregiver must be professionally equipped. (p. 395)

Crucially, they advocate for an attitude of multi-directed partiality in addressing well-being, an approach that challenges authoritarian modes

of communication and emphasises the importance of patience (p. 402). As they explain:

Patience introduces resilience and flexibility in the pastoral approach and attitude with the message: There is always the perspective of change. In any case, pastoral caregiving operates within the unpredictable realm of the good (graceful well-being). (p. 402)

By implementing these strategies, universities can cultivate healthier and more supportive environments for their staff, thereby enhancing well-being and job satisfaction. As outlined in the SHWP, the staff wellness programme must comprehensively address the physical, mental and emotional well-being of both staff and students. Furthermore, universities should establish mechanisms to evaluate whether the commitments and lifestyle practices promoted through the SHWP are being effectively adopted and sustained.

■ Conclusion

Faith, spirituality and theology continue to play a significant role in South African society, offering a positive outlook for the future of tertiary education. To ensure that staff and students are able to develop and thrive within their disciplines, HEIs must acknowledge and proactively address issues of well-being. As the preceding discussion demonstrates, HEIs are called to embody and implement a sustainable and constructive academic environment through a whole-university approach.

This contribution suggests that when relationships among staff, between staff and students, and between staff and HEIs are dysfunctional with respect to well-being, significant harm may result for all parties involved. Such dysfunction risks creating a destructive teaching and learning environment. To mitigate this danger, these relationships must be guided by relational ethics, particularly an ethos of justice.

Justice should function as a guiding framework for all modes of hermeneutics within the humane space of inter-subjective encounters in higher education (HE), ensuring that human dignity and meaning are upheld. The well-being challenges currently confronting staff and students in the post-COVID-19 context highlight the absence of an integrated and holistic approach to safeguarding dignity. Addressing this reality requires more than the formulation of strategies, policies or institutional frameworks; it calls for the intentional healing of wounded and diminished dignity at the individual level. Van Rhijn and Meulink-Korf (2019, p. 123) affirm that the process of care is an ongoing endeavour as long as there are human encounters and relational interactions and that it is virtually impossible to differentiate between what is fair and what is unfair in different contexts.

Although Van Rhijn and Meulink-Korf (2019, p. 231) discuss the principle of mutuality within a family context, they emphasise that it extends to all relational contexts. In such contexts, individuals owe one another a form of reciprocal return, signifying a shared responsibility. This responsibility extends beyond the management of HEIs to encompass staff and students alike. Van Rhijn and Meulink-Korf (2019, p. 313), drawing on Hargrave, reference the metaphor of the 'human body that is enormously blessed with the ability to heal physically' to describe family dynamics, particularly in relation to the potential for 'self-care' and individual well-being. This metaphor extends to broader relational contexts, underscoring the healing capacity inherent in human connection. Promoting the healing and well-being of staff and students thus necessitates intentional restorative engagements and meaningful encounters with vulnerable members of the university community, including staff, students and leadership.

Teaching for change: Best practices for educators to integrate technology

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■ Abstract

This chapter critically examines the obstacles and opportunities that arise for contextual theology education when confronted with crises such as natural disasters, military conflicts and pandemics, highlighting the pedagogical, ethical and theological implications of teaching in disrupted contexts. It underscores the pivotal role of educators and technological innovation in sustaining continuity, fostering resilience and enabling transformation within theological education. As crises increasingly shape the global landscape, theological institutions must adapt by cultivating communities of learning that are both creative and responsive. Despite some resistance in particular contexts, technology has become indispensable for the dissemination of knowledge. This chapter advocates

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a balanced and collaborative approach that integrates the expertise of educators with the affordances of digital tools. It highlights best practices that enhance collaboration, including online platforms, interactive virtual classrooms, mobile learning, access to digital resources, collaborative projects, adaptive curriculum design, professional development for educators and active community engagement. Ultimately, the chapter proposes a framework for reconceptualising theological education that is both contextually grounded and technologically enabled.

■ Introduction

Bergmann and Vähäkangas (2021, p. 258) contend that educators must remain informed about emerging digital innovations in order to sustain their relevance to both students and the profession. Instruction requires continuous learning and adaptation to meet the evolving needs of students in the contemporary landscape. It must also enact the transformations demanded by society today. They observe that while many educational institutions have adopted digital technologies to enrich teaching and learning, theological educators, particularly in Africa, remain hesitant to employ such tools for transformative pedagogy. This reluctance is often rooted in apprehension about change and a conviction that traditional methods are more effective. Hillman (2014) cautions that such a perspective may impede progress and innovation within theological education. To sustain relevance, theological education must prepare students to navigate dynamic contexts and to communicate their message with creativity and effectiveness. Several studies (Bates 2010; Mouton 2008, p. 432; Richardson 2005) demonstrate that many seminaries and theology departments continue to face declining student enrolments, partly due to their reluctance to adopt technological innovations. Hillman (2014, p. 170) puts it succinctly: ‘It seems as if the technology-driven network society does not regard theology as a major influence and social power’. Although many theological educators remain hesitant to integrate technology into teaching and learning, theology continues to hold relevance for societal transformation. This chapter advances strategies for incorporating technology into theological pedagogy, particularly in times of crisis.

■ Definition of terms

■ Teaching for change

The concept of ‘teaching for change’ may differ across contexts, yet its significance remains central. This chapter offers a foundational definition, framing it as education oriented toward comprehensive transformation. Nadar (2007, p. 235) posits that teaching for change focuses on empowering

students to critically assess and transform themselves, systems and communities. It fosters innovation while cultivating critical and creative thinking directed toward comprehensive contextual transformation. Educating for transformation is essential to the pursuit of a more just and equitable society.

■ Technology

Defining 'technology' is an ongoing and ever-evolving task, as continual breakthroughs reshape its scope and application. In broad terms, technology may be understood as the application of scientific and technical knowledge to achieve practical ends. Reader and Savin-Baden (2021, p. 5) define technology as 'tools, instruments, machines, systems, processes, and environments created by humans to inhabit and regulate our natural surroundings'. Technology denotes a combination of methods and products utilised in applying knowledge. According to Hillman (2014, p. 180), technology encompasses instruments ranging from traditional tools such as pencil and paper to contemporary electronic devices designed for practical application. More broadly, technology constitutes a body of knowledge concerned with the creation of tools, the execution of tasks and the extraction of resources. It is employed to perform diverse functions in daily life and may be defined as the items and methods developed to streamline human activity. In the words of Chow, Lam and King (2020, p. 384), technology encompasses equipment, systems, methods and procedures that augment efficiency, address challenges or elevate the quality of life. In educational contexts, technology refers to the use of digital tools and resources to enhance learning experiences. Chow et al. (2020) note that this spectrum encompasses tools ranging from interactive whiteboards to educational applications, online courses and virtual reality simulations. The integration of such technologies into the classroom enables educators to design more customised and engaging learning environments.

■ Contextual theological education

Contextual theological education fosters comprehensive transformation within communities by integrating theological knowledge with practical strategies attuned to specific cultural and socioeconomic contexts. Murithi (2014, p. 6) describes it as 'a teaching that invites all God's children as equal participants into the theological discussion. God's mission is happening in the community as we live life'. Contextual theological education considers multiple factors that contribute to holistic transformation. It recognises the student's background and engagement with knowledge, thereby facilitating meaningful and relevant learning. This approach ensures that education moves beyond abstraction, becoming

practical and solution-oriented. Okafor (2022, p. 2) emphasises that contextual theology enables students to relate knowledge to their immediate environment and motivates them to act with ease. It further equips students to discern deficiencies within their context that call for comprehensive transformation.

■ Importance of integrating technology in education

Mhlanga, Denhere and Moloi (2022, p. 464) argue that integrating technology into education is vital for preparing students to succeed in the 21st century. Yet, educators' attitudes toward technological integration often differ according to their years of experience and disciplinary focus. Effective curriculum integration further depends on the accessibility of resources and equipment, as well as adequate training in technological competencies. Research findings (Anderson 2021; Chow et al. 2020; Evans & Mendez Acosta 2021) demonstrate that technology supports school administrators in strategising and allocating resources for effective integration. Consequently, educators must engage in continuous learning to remain current with technological advancements and ensure their appropriate incorporation into pedagogical practice. Hillman (2014, p. 170) observes that technology enhances student engagement by fostering motivation, participation and interaction with academic material. Students are drawn to technologies that are adaptable, accessible, user friendly, and entertaining, which in turn contribute to greater satisfaction and academic success. Integrating tools such as web-conferencing software, blogs and digital games into educational activities further promotes student participation across behavioural, emotional and cognitive dimensions (Kahsay 2021, p. 98).

Additionally, research indicates that technology enhanced classrooms often yield better academic outcomes than conventional teaching methods. Afari-Yankson (2021, p. 18) highlights several benefits of integrating technology into theological education. He contends that technology reduces barriers such as geographical distance and temporal constraints, thereby enabling learning to occur flexibly and often at minimal cost. Moreover, the cultivation of informal and non-formal learning skills can positively impact society, positioning theological education to assume a leadership role in preparing change agents for societal transformation.

■ The strategic nature of teachers in theological education

Theological education can often be isolating for both educators and learners, rendering the strategic role of teachers in this field particularly pivotal.

Bergmann and Vähäkangas (2020, p. 13) emphasise that educators play a crucial role in supporting students as they navigate theological studies and personal development. The personal rapport and guidance they provide are indispensable, particularly given the diverse circumstances and backgrounds from which students emerge. In the classroom, teachers engage not only with academic instruction but also with the social, emotional and psychological challenges their students encounter. Beyond delivering content, they are required to listen attentively and provide essential support and guidance. Effective assistance demands both a comprehensive understanding of students' circumstances and the sensitivity needed to help them overcome obstacles. Cahalan (2005, p. 70) argues that the theological educator's role encompasses both teaching and shepherding. As a shepherd, the educator guides and encourages students in their theological and intellectual development.

The role of teachers in theological education is pivotal, as they shape the development of current and future leaders within the church and wider society. Their influence extends to students' social, emotional, and psychological formation, thereby enriching the classroom environment. In doing so, teachers contribute to the holistic development of communities by preparing ministry leaders, community leaders and pastoral caregivers.

■ Best practices for integrating technology in theological education

What are the optimal strategies for integrating technology into theological education? While technology and theological education are integral components of the broader educational framework, many African theological institutions continue to encounter significant challenges in achieving effective integration. Which best practices can theological institutions adopt to strengthen technologically informed education, particularly during crises such as the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic? Mitchell, Wohleb and Skinner (2016, p. 20) argue that technology offers significant potential through faculty training, ensuring student access to essential tools and developing online resources for remote education. Addressing the digital divide is imperative for theological schools, as equitable access for both students and teachers is central to inclusivity. To meet diverse student needs, theological educators must continually refine and strengthen their online teaching strategies.

Sarbah (2022, p. 25) observes that contextual theological education, aimed at strengthening the skills and knowledge of future religious leaders, must integrate technology that supports transformative teaching. Similarly, Wahl (2013, p. 5) adds that embedding technology within the delivery of contextual theological education fosters efficiency and inclusivity, ensuring

that students, regardless of background or learning preference, are able to flourish and realise their full potential. In this way, contextual theological education contributes to comprehensive community transformation. Wijaya (2017, p. 111) argues that the integration of technology into theological education facilitates transformative learning that fosters a more inclusive and equitable society. Such integration contributes to a stronger educational future for all stakeholders, expanding opportunities and improving quality of life. In turn, this advancement supports the development of a more successful and harmonious society for future generations.

The history of theological education in Africa has been marked by persistent challenges. Sarbah (2022, p. 17) argues that it has not contributed meaningfully to the comprehensive transformation of African societies. Okafor (2022, p. 4) further contends that theological institutions must confront these limitations and adapt their curricula to address community needs. Integrating technology into theological education is therefore essential to enable the transformations required to alleviate poverty, illness and conflict across the continent.

In addition, incorporating technology into theological education contributes to a more promising future for subsequent generations, fostering prosperity and peace across the continent. Anderson (2021, p. 79) concludes that theological education must reclaim its transformative role in society, embodying the biblical metaphor of the church as the salt and light of the world.

This chapter argues that adopting best practices for integrating technology into theological education will cultivate transformative educators and reshape the demographic profile of students within theological institutions. Moreover, it will strengthen students' preparedness for ministry in rapidly changing contexts, equipping them to address contemporary challenges confronting both church and society. Okafor (2022, p. 2) asserts that integrating technology into theological education facilitates an intelligent and compassionate response to human needs, embodying Christ's love and teachings. Such integration enables faculty and students to serve as lights in times of darkness and as symbols of hope, while also offering fortitude and solace during periods of uncertainty. This integration empowers educators and students to embody love and kindness in their work, fostering peace and restoration within a fractured world. Yet, while the benefits of employing technology in theological education to advance transformative teaching are evident, it is equally important to acknowledge the challenges. The following section will outline these obstacles and explore strategies for addressing them.

Numerous best practices can strengthen the integration of technology into theological education and teaching for transformation. While this

chapter does not offer an exhaustive account, it will highlight several key practices.

Firstly, faculty training is essential for embracing and integrating technology into theological education. Reader and Savin-Baden (2021, p. 5) note that, despite the many advantages of technological integration, both faculty and students often struggle to adapt. Faculty members may feel overwhelmed by the learning curve or resistant to new pedagogical approaches, while concerns persist regarding the potential impact on traditional methods of instruction and the overall educational experience.

The significance of training faculty to integrate technology into theological education is paramount. Given the rapid advancement and pervasive use of technology, Bergmann and Vähäkangas (2021, p. 258) underscore the urgent need for faculty development in this area. Training equips educators to engage students effectively by integrating technology into the classroom. Such training incorporates hands-on activities to help faculty utilise technological tools with confidence and addresses common concerns, particularly the discomfort many express when adapting to new methods. By enhancing expertise and fostering encouragement, this training supports the incorporation of technology into teaching for transformation. As educational contexts continue to evolve, ongoing adaptation and skill development are essential for preparing students to meet the demands of the future job market.

Secondly, faculty must receive training to engage effectively with technology in both teaching and learning. Zondo (2022, p. 6) underscores the necessity of practical, hands-on faculty training to ensure the effective integration of technology into teaching and learning. Such training mitigates instructional disruptions and safeguards the continuity of education for students. Wahl (2013, p. 7) argues that this practical hands-on training will lead to a more engaging and effective learning environment. Students will be better prepared to utilise technology and achieve enhanced learning outcomes within a more interactive and productive classroom environment. However, experience indicates that many faculty members require not only initial training in classroom technology but also ongoing support from individuals who can provide daily guidance in navigating technological demands. Mitchell et al. (2016, p. 19) argue that such support is vital for the effective integration of technology into the curriculum, enabling its full potential to be realised without placing undue burdens on educators. Hendriks (2012, p. 819) observes that technology presents significant challenges for faculty in theological institutions, particularly in Africa, where many lack early exposure to digital tools and environments. Consequently, professional development opportunities are essential to equip educators with the skills needed to integrate technology effectively

into their teaching. As Hillman (2014, p. 170) argues, such initiatives enhance the quality of education and better prepare students for participation in the digital age. For hands-on training to be effective, faculty require ongoing mentorship or support from information technology (IT) specialists who can provide daily guidance until technological proficiency is achieved. The aim is to ensure that both lecturers and students acquire the skills and knowledge necessary to thrive in an increasingly digital world. Such training builds confidence and competence in the use of technology across academic and professional contexts, positioning participants to realise their full potential in a rapidly evolving environment. Anderson (2021, p. 8) highlights that such support is particularly valuable for faculty who may have abandoned the use of technology due to its complexity. With appropriate guidance, they are more likely to appreciate its benefits and integrate it effectively into teaching and learning.

Thirdly, faculty in theological institutions should engage with peer institutions that have successfully integrated technology, using these interactions as benchmarks for best practice. Mhlanga argues that increasing technology adoption among theology faculty, particularly in Africa, requires deliberate exposure to institutions that have successfully integrated technology into teaching and learning. Al-Rahmi et al. (2023, p. 852) further note that such exposure is pivotal in advancing the integration of technology into theological education programmes in Africa, thereby improving instructional quality and equipping students to meet the challenges of ministry in a technology-driven world.

Afari-Yankson (2021, p. 89) observes that faculty benefit from hearing the experiences of peers who have embraced technology despite initial challenges. Such narratives provide inspiration and motivation, encouraging faculty to persist in adapting their teaching methods. In addition, these engagements foster collaboration and shared learning, thereby enriching the educational experience for both faculty and students. Reader and Savin-Baden (2021, p. 5) argue that in a technology-driven world, educators must adapt and innovate to engage students effectively. Exposing faculty in theological institutions to such experiences is therefore essential for advancing contextual theological education. Hearing the stories of students and colleagues who have successfully embraced technology can further inspire faculty to enhance their own practice and contribute to contextual transformation.

Fourthly, educators must continually refine and update their skills to integrate technology effectively into teaching practices. Mitchell et al. (2016, p. 19) argue that both faculty and students must consistently adopt and adapt to the evolving nature of technology to maximise its benefits in theological education. Hillman (2014, p. 171) argues that because technological advancements are continually evolving, educational institutions must remain

current to sustain competitiveness in today's fast-paced world. Staying updated enables faculty and students to engage more meaningfully in teaching and learning, particularly in theological courses such as languages. The incorporation of digital tools and resources can significantly enrich the educational experience for both teachers and students in theological institutions. It enables personalised learning, active participation, and collaborative engagement that might otherwise be unattainable. When effectively implemented, such integration fosters deeper comprehension and retention of material, supports the contextual transmission of knowledge and equips students with essential skills for ministry in a technology-driven world.

Fifthly, theological institutions must invest in technology to ensure that faculty and students have access to essential tools and online resources for remote education. Reader and Savin-Baden (2021, p. 6) emphasise that the inclusion and adoption of technology in teaching and learning depends critically on institutional willingness and capacity to invest. While training and discussion highlight the importance of technology, its effective integration ultimately requires the provision of adequate resources to support these processes. The true measure of success lies in the implementation and sustainability of technological investments. Hendriks (2012, p. 820) emphasises that ongoing support, adequate resources and adaptability are essential to ensure that technology continues to benefit both students and educators. This will require theological institutions to allocate budgets and procure the necessary technologies for teaching and learning. Without such provisions, technological investments may prove unsustainable in the long term. Okafor (2020, p. 89) argues that many theological institutions in Africa, constrained by their funding models, rely heavily on donor-provided second-hand technological equipment for teaching and learning. Such equipment is often short-lived and incompatible with current technologies, particularly in rural contexts. Theological institutions must allocate budgets and invest meaningfully in technology to advance contemporary teaching and learning practices in a technology-driven world. Such investment is critical to ensuring that students in rural areas enjoy equal educational opportunities to their urban counterparts. By bridging the digital divide, institutions contribute to a more equitable educational system in which all students and faculty benefit, thereby enriching and empowering the theological community.

■ Challenges of integrating technology into theological education

While the integration of technology into teaching and learning offers numerous advantages for theological institutions, it also presents significant challenges that must be addressed to ensure effective implementation.

This chapter does not attempt to examine all such challenges; however, several key issues particularly relevant to African contexts will be considered. These include limited access to affordable and reliable electricity and internet, insufficient digital literacy among faculty and students, concerns regarding the security of personal and student information, and the high costs associated with technological infrastructure.

Access to reliable internet connectivity and consistent electricity remains a major challenge for many African theological institutions. A 2020 survey by the Network for Congregational Theology, which collaborates with over 300 institutions across the continent, indicates that numerous churches in both rural and certain urban areas lack dependable internet and a stable power supply.⁴⁷ Reliable internet connectivity and a stable electricity supply are essential for African theological institutions seeking to integrate technology into teaching and learning, particularly during times of crisis. Students often face difficulties in accessing online resources and participating in virtual classes, while many institutions lack the financial capacity to invest in backup generators or solar panels to ensure consistent power.

Kahsay (2021, p. 100) observes that internet connectivity in many rural areas is virtually unattainable, creating significant barriers for students seeking to access online education and utilise technology in their learning. Consequently, students in rural regions often struggle to match the educational opportunities available to their urban counterparts. This disparity persists even when curricula are designed to promote equity, with profound long-term implications for both academic achievement and economic success. Sarbah (2022, p. 19) proposes that theological institutions address this challenge by partnering with local telephone providers to explore ways of facilitating internet access without reliance on a constant power supply. Such collaboration would provide students with essential resources for success and enable faculty to deliver contextual teaching and learning, thereby fostering a more effective and engaging educational environment.

As highlighted before, training students, staff and faculty is essential for delivering contextual theological education. A significant obstacle to achieving this through technology is the lack of adequate training. Ensuring that all participants acquire the necessary knowledge and skills is imperative for the effective integration of technology into the educational process. Training is often prohibitively expensive, and many theological institutions are unable to bear the cost. One way to address this challenge is to train a select group of faculty, staff and students who can subsequently serve as

47. A paper presented by Prof LD Hansen at the Bergen Symposium in 2022.

trainers for others. This model reduces costs and expands access to training, thereby ensuring the continued relevance and influence of contextual theology in contemporary society.

A further challenge lies in ensuring equitable access to technology for all stakeholders engaged in contextual theological education. Theological institutions in Africa, in particular, struggle to provide faculty, staff and students with equal access to the necessary technological resources. Wahl (2013, p. 14) highlights that in some theological institutions, access is restricted to select few, while others are regarded as 'old school' and presumed not to require technological resources for contextual theological education. These institutions often struggle to meet the demands of contemporary education, a challenge particularly acute in Africa. Ensuring equitable access to technology is essential for preparing students to meet the requirements of the modern workforce. Faculty and students alike, regardless of socioeconomic background or technological proficiency, must be provided with access to digital tools and training in their application, especially for contextual theological relevance.

Hillman (2014, p. 171) identifies the development of digital literacy among educators and students as a further challenge to the effective provision of contextual theological education through technology. Digital literacy among students and faculty constitutes a critical challenge that theological institutions must address. This ongoing issue requires continuous education and adaptation to emerging technologies, with the aim of equipping all members of the academic community to navigate and utilise digital resources effectively. Strengthening digital literacy is essential for delivering contextual theological education through technology and online platforms, thereby broadening access and enriching the learning experience. Okafor (2022, p. 3) observes that this challenge is intensified by the inability of most theological institutions, particularly in Africa, to provide adequate digital literacy training for faculty and students. Consequently, investment in training programmes and resources is essential to bridge this gap.

Safeguarding student data and privacy represents a critical challenge in the use of technology for contextual theological education. Effective integration requires the protection of sensitive information through the implementation of stringent privacy policies and robust security measures. It is essential to update and regularly monitor security measures to ensure the protection of data. Many theological institutions, however, lack the capacity and resources to safeguard student privacy adequately. This issue demands serious attention given the potential risks and exposure it poses to both students and institutions. Reader and Savin-Baden (2021, p. 4) caution that inadequate protection of student data can have serious repercussions for institutions, including potential legal consequences and diminished trust among students and parents. It is therefore imperative

that educational institutions prioritise data security, implement robust protective measures, and regularly update their systems to guard against potential breaches.

Finally, the financial burden of technology presents a major challenge to the effective delivery of contextual theological education. Hendriks (2012, p. 818) notes that many theological institutions, particularly in Africa, face severe financial constraints. Some rely heavily on foreign aid, and as evidenced during the COVID-19 pandemic, many were unable to sustain operations. The financial challenge is particularly acute when substantial investment is required to acquire technological equipment for integrating technology into teaching and learning within contextual theological education. Nadar (2007, p. 230) observes that many educational institutions struggle to adapt and survive under financial constraints. Although the benefits of technological integration are evident, the associated costs remain a significant obstacle for numerous theological institutions. Nevertheless, some institutions have developed innovative strategies to address this challenge and remain resilient within the dynamic educational environment. By pursuing external funding through collaborative partnerships, these institutions have been able to expand both their activities and their reach. However, limited access to external financing necessitates the development of alternative strategies to address this challenge. Institutions may mitigate the difficulty by pursuing partnerships with other organisations, expanding online course offerings or adjusting tuition structures.

■ Conclusion

This chapter examined the ways in which theological educators can employ technology to advance contextual theological education. It underscored the pivotal role of technology in this domain and identified best practices for enhancing teaching through digital tools. Particular emphasis was placed on the use of online platforms and interactive technologies as effective strategies for fostering meaningful student engagement. By integrating these tools, educators can design dynamic and personalised learning experiences that respond to diverse interests, learning styles and contexts.

Additionally, the chapter examined potential obstacles faced by educators, including limited access to devices and unreliable internet connectivity, and proposed strategies for overcoming these challenges.

The adoption of technology is imperative for all theological institutions seeking to deliver contextual education. In a technology-driven world, effective adaptation is essential to prepare students for future challenges. Such integration enhances the educational experience and ensures that

graduates acquire the skills necessary to thrive in a rapidly evolving job market. By cultivating technological adaptability, students become more competitive and valuable to employers across diverse industries. The demographic profile of the church, particularly in Africa, is increasingly characterised by younger generations. Consequently, theologians must develop technological competencies to address their spiritual needs effectively. As technology permeates all aspects of life, theological education cannot afford to lag behind. Its adaptation and integration of technological tools and platforms are essential to ensure that the message of faith remains relevant and accessible in an increasingly digital world.

Poet or prophet, pastor or partner? Exploring best-praxis role(s) for a theological educator

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■ Abstract

In the rapidly evolving ecclesial landscape, most notably within the Western and Northern Hemispheres, the role of the vicar or pastor is undergoing profound transformation. This chapter examines the lessons and insights emerging from a course designed to support clergy in critically interrogating their leadership practices. Particular attention is given to how these practices are being reshaped in response to the ongoing ecclesial crisis and the broader cultural shifts that characterise Western contexts within an increasingly interconnected global (meta-) framework. The course further enables participants to critically analyse and adapt their ministerial practice through sustained engagement with the ways these dynamics manifest across diverse local contexts. It incorporates and interrogates student feedback in dialogue with our own reflections, thereby identifying emerging best practices within theological pedagogy. In doing so, it aims to advance theoretical contributions to the pressing challenges facing theological education in a rapidly evolving glocal learning environment marked by intersecting and multiple crises.

'I think I have become better at analysing the context, listening and being an "open" listener, because the focus has also been on getting questions.'⁴⁸

■ Introduction

Within the rapidly shifting ecclesial landscape, especially across the Western and Northern Hemispheres, the role of the vicar or pastor is itself undergoing significant and far-reaching transformation. This chapter constitutes the second contribution in this volume that examines lessons and insights derived from the course *TAM322: Leading Ecclesial Change and Growth in Contexts* (LEC). The course is structured to enable vicars and pastors to critically interrogate their leadership practices in relation to the ongoing ecclesial crisis and the broader cultural transformations shaping Western contexts within a global (meta-) framework. In addition, it equips participants to analyse and adapt their ministerial approaches through sustained engagement with the ways these dynamics are expressed across diverse local settings.

In Chapter 7 of this volume, and building on insights and best-practice research from *TAM322: Leading Ecclesial Change and Growth in Contexts* (Chapter 7), a theoretical-hermeneutical framework for a glocal learning

48. Feedback from a student at the end of the course *TAM322 Leading Ecclesial Change and Growth in Contexts*. In Norwegian: 'Jeg tror jeg har blitt bedre på å analysere kontekst, lytte og være åpen lyttende fordi fokuset også har vært på å få spørsmål'.

community responsive to ecclesial crisis was articulated, drawing upon relevant pedagogical and theological traditions. In this chapter, we extend that foundational work by engaging in a deeper reflection on our own practices and roles as theological educators. This reflection is shaped both by our experiences of teaching and facilitating the course, and by the anonymous student feedback gathered at its conclusion, which was structured around the following key questions:

- How did the proposed threshold concepts, at a theoretical level, significantly influence their professional learning?
- To what extent was a learning community successfully established, and in what ways did it enhance participants' experiential learning?
- How did the structure of the programme distinctly shape and influence participants' leadership practice?

This chapter examines student feedback in conjunction with our own reflections on emerging best practices in theological education. The analysis is framed by the following guiding question, considered through the interpretive lens of relevant theoretical perspectives: *What roles should theological educators assume in fostering a learning community of reflective practitioners capable of engaging the experience of ecclesial crisis?* Overall, the student feedback on the course was highly affirming and reflected a positive learning experience. One student even remarked, 'For anyone who is to take on leadership in the church in the future, this course should be compulsory'.⁴⁹ Together, these two chapters seek to advance best-practice research rooted in the collaborative educational processes of co-teaching and co-learning exemplified by this course. In addition, they aim to generate theoretical insights into the challenges facing theological education within an evolving glocal learning environment marked by multiple, intersecting crises.

■ Material, method and theory

The method used in this study can best be described as a combination of ethnographic practitioner action research and 'auto-theo-ethnographic self-reflection' (Ward 2008, pp. 4–16). Mason (2002, pp. 179–183) identifies attentiveness, whether to problems or to situations in which practice appears unusually smooth or challenging, as a hallmark of professional practice. He distinguishes this from practitioner research, which entails a deliberate methodological commitment to rigorously investigate such observations and to establish grounds for communicating their significance to a wider audience. Qualitative methods, such as participant observation

49. In Norwegian: 'Hvis noen vil ha noen som helst ansvar for kirkeledelse i fremtiden, bør dette studiet være obligatorisk'.

of students and colleagues, the collection of diverse forms of data from coursework and end-of-course student feedback, are widely used in educational or practitioner research (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2017).

In practical theological enquiry, Harriet Mowat (2022, p. 382) argues that qualitative research methods are theologically sensitive because they 'gather stories from individuals and groups [as they] try to make sense of a given situation'. Chris Scharen (2015, p. 47) goes further, arguing that ethnographic methods are a 'preferred means for theological work' because they place the researcher in a posture of learning from participants, rather than merely gathering information about them. The notion of auto(theo) ethnography pushes beyond conceptions of reflexivity and researcher positionality to consider a deeper account of one's own formation and narrative understanding within the practice in which one is situated.⁵⁰

Both the student feedback⁵¹ and the observational as well as self-reflective notes compiled before, during and after the teaching sessions generated narratives that enriched our understanding of the role of theological educators within a learning community employing the flipped classroom pedagogy, proposed here as particularly effective in addressing experiences of crisis. Moreover, as we engaged in this process, we encountered tensions and competing pulls shaped by our own biographies as leaders. These experiences themselves constitute a valuable source of insight, drawing attention to the 'micro-crises' that emerge within the learning process, whether in the position of facilitator or participant.

As part of our research, we convened on multiple occasions, both in person and online, before and after the course to collect, organise and critically reflect on our observations of our own teaching practices. Observation constitutes a central component of qualitative research, and it is commonly differentiated into various modes, ranging from full participation to more detached, external observation (Knott 2005, pp. 245–246; Saldaña 2011, p. 46). Given the opportunity to observe one another in the classroom, and in light of the pedagogical progression from traditional lectures to dialogical formats, followed by the adoption of

50. For an interesting account of the role of autoethnography in theology, see Wigg-Stevenson (2022).

51. As the feedback from the students was given anonymously in handwritten form, we were not processing personal data in any form (name, gender, place of work, etc.) as part of our research material. Additionally, we did not use the handwritten forms in any way that could reveal the identity of the individuals. It was therefore not necessary to obtain informed consent, although we obviously informed the students that we were researching our teaching practice, and that the voluntary and anonymous handwritten feedback would be part of the material we would use to explore emerging best practices for theological educators. For more information on what is considered personal data and the regulations for research, please refer to: <<https://sikt.no/en/personvernhandbok-forskning/what-personal-data>> Further information on the implications of carrying out a research project without processing personal data can be found at: <<https://sikt.no/en/personvernhandbok-forskning/carrying-out-project-without-processing-personal-data>>.

flipped classroom pedagogy and the facilitation of directed, in-depth small-group conversations, our modes of engagement and observation varied considerably.

The data informing the following analysis and discussion comprised self-reflective notes generated through observation of our own teaching practices, together with anonymous student feedback. We reviewed and analysed the feedback collaboratively on multiple occasions in order to identify key categories for further examination. Our analytic strategy remained deliberately open, employing inductive coding to develop core categories (Bryman 2012, pp. 569–570) that could illuminate emerging best practices for theological educators engaged in cultivating learning communities oriented toward leadership in times of ecclesial crisis and change.

We situate this study within the tradition of action research, explicitly aligning with Swinton and Mowat's (2005) perspective that practical theology is, at its core, a form of action research. Within this framework, deliberative qualitative inquiry into practice functions to reveal prevailing patterns and underlying assumptions. When these insights are subjected to theological and theoretical evaluation, they serve to inform the development of a revised, and more faithful, form of practice (Idestrom 2022). In educational research, action research is often defined with greater precision, encompassing a methodology in which participants are not only cognisant of the research process but also actively engaged as 'insiders', contributing observations and commentary on the problem under investigation (Somekh 2006, p. 7). This participatory orientation likewise constitutes a methodological principle within theological action research (Cameron et al. 2010).

In this regard, our study cannot be characterised as action research in its fullest sense. Although participants were aware of the inquiry and recognised that their feedback informed our understanding of the programme's impact, they were not directly involved as 'insider researchers' in the manner typically envisaged within action research. We contend that the reflective cycle, together with the pedagogical approach of cultivating a learning community, constitutes an action research model through which participants can critically understand, reflect upon and transform their praxis (Shepherd 2012). The materials gathered from participants contribute to an understanding of how such a programme both transforms practice and empowers participants to enact change – core principles of action research. In parallel, the study also attends to the development of new theoretical frameworks that account for the processes through which such transformation emerges (Somekh 2006, pp. 130–145).

In selecting and applying theory, we build on several of the frameworks introduced in the first chapter, which reflected on the course in LEC and

developed a hermeneutical model for a glocal learning community. In this chapter, however, we also engage additional pedagogical and theological perspectives that proved particularly relevant and constructive in light of the themes identified through our data analysis. These theoretical insights enable us to articulate best-practice roles that theological educators may assume.

■ Analysis

In analysing and reflecting on the material, we considered potential best-practice roles for theological educators committed to curating transformative learning within the professional practice of established ministers. From a thematic assessment of our reflective accounts, together with direct feedback from participants, several key themes emerged:

- The importance of ‘making the room’
- The naming of reality
- The dynamic of co-teaching
- The role of the teacher when introducing and bridging threshold concepts
- The power of small groups
- The need to switch roles as theological educators
- The need for improvisation.

The following sections analyse the material in greater detail, focusing on the key themes that emerged.

■ ‘Making the room’: The teacher as facilitator

A significant aspect of our preparation for the teaching sessions involved deliberation over the organisation of the physical space, for example, how chairs and tables should be arranged, when breaks should be scheduled and how conversations might be facilitated. Beyond these practical considerations of ‘making the room’, we recognised a deeper dimension to this task: The creation of a learning environment through setting the tone, providing direction for the course and small-group discussions, and defining the scope of the learning community. The teaching was structured around three guiding questions, which we revisited throughout the course:

- Where are we now?
- Where do we want to be?
- How do we get there?

As will be discussed further below, our initial plans required repeated adjustment, as the need to improvise and to ‘read the room’ remained a persistent challenge throughout the teaching sessions. While this was

not unexpected, our pursuit of emerging best practices for the role of the theological educator prompted reflection on the necessity of continually ‘remaking’ the room as the learning community evolved. The significance of ‘making and remaking the room’ underscored that our role as facilitators was both anticipated and valued. We will return to the role of facilitation in the discussion section, where the importance of scaffolding will be examined. At this point, it is sufficient to note the etymological meaning of ‘facilitate’, which denotes the act of making something easier or enabling it to proceed more smoothly.⁵²

■ Naming reality: Ecclesial crisis

A central dimension of ‘making the room’ entailed explicitly naming the reality of the ecclesial crisis confronting churches in the West. For the students, the act of articulating these changes in terms of crisis proved to be a liberating experience. We also introduced ‘naming reality’ as a key rhetorical concept for ecclesial leaders tasked with guiding change in times of crisis (Norheim & Haga 2020, pp. 29–35). The emphasis on ‘naming reality’ elicited strong positive feedback from the group, in part because it helped to shape the learning community into a listening community – one attentive both to ongoing societal transformations at the meta-level and to the concrete realities of diverse local contexts. It was unsurprising that many students valued the session with Andrew Root on the crisis of the church, delivered as an online dialogical teaching engagement during the London week. In conversation with Nick – and subsequently with the students – Root explored the central themes of his book on the contemporary ecclesial crisis, which also featured on the course reading list (Root 2022).

■ Co-teaching

This was the second occasion on which we taught the course together. The practice of dual or collaborative teaching constituted a key factor in fostering a successful learning community. A notable strength of this approach lies in the complementarity of our teaching styles and our respective approaches to group leadership. Having collaborated for more than two decades, we found it relatively seamless to alternate between assuming the role of expert teacher or facilitator – guiding the group through analytical and theoretical threshold concepts – and adopting the posture of listener alongside the participants as new ideas were introduced. We will return to this theme in

52. Merriam Webster, ‘facilitate’, viewed at <<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/facilitate>>; Etymonline, ‘facilitate’, viewed at <<https://www.etymonline.com/word/facilitate>>.

the discussion, where the need for improvisation in teaching and in leading a learning community will be further examined.

It is noteworthy that one of the most successful teaching sessions was conducted digitally, with Nick serving as an intermediary for the online lecture delivered by Andrew Root. According to several students, the session ‘came alive’ despite its digital format. In retrospect, Nick’s positioning in that session – as an intermediary and convener of the dialogue with Andrew Root – proved particularly effective. One student observed that the dialogical lecture possessed a certain intensity that resonated strongly. Overall, the session was perceived as fundamentally dialogical. A distinctive feature of our roles as theological educators was thus the shared responsibility for teaching and course leadership. In this respect, theological education itself demonstrates that collaboration is indispensable.

■ Introducing and bridging threshold concepts

A threshold concept may be a theory, idea or case study that serves as ‘a portal’ that ‘opens previously inaccessible ways of thinking about something’ (Meyer & Land 2003). When invited to identify the threshold concepts they found most helpful, the group offered a varied and multivocal response. Many students highlighted the value of both the ‘crisis’ concept and Charles Taylor’s notion of the ‘immanent frame’, the latter of which also featured prominently in the online lecture and dialogue with Andrew Root. One student even described how working with ‘the immanent frame’ as a threshold concept helped them see that ‘church decline isn’t just about not working hard enough, but positively gives some content to how people can find God within the immanent frame’. Another student expressed, ‘I really liked the example of evaluating Church intercessions over 100 years’.⁵³ One student found that the immanent frame as a concept was essential in deconstructing the ‘integration of theology and management “speak”’.

Additional threshold concepts identified included adaptive leadership theory (Heifetz, Grashow & Linsky 2009), discipleship from below, systemic theory, rhetorical theory and collaborative ministry. One student found that working with collaborative ministry served as an antidote to the ‘top-down managerial model currently seen in the Church of England’. One student valued collaborative ministry as a threshold concept, noting that it emphasises the congregation as a team or family, bound together in belonging, sharing knowledge and gifts, and assuming responsibility in areas aligned with

53. Nick shared an unpublished empirical study evaluating changes in the language of public prayer over the last century, especially in crisis. The authors noted a distinct change from ‘asking God to intervene to stop the crisis’ to ‘asking God to help those assisting in the crisis’.

their capacities. Similarly, others highlighted diverse perspectives on the recruitment and retention of volunteers, viewing the church alternately as an institution, an association and a movement.

An important responsibility of the theological educator is to present threshold concepts with sufficient precision and comprehensiveness. Equally vital, however, is the task of bridging these concepts and placing them in constructive dialogue. A central role of the teacher, therefore, is to integrate diverse theoretical perspectives while fostering a learning environment and community that enables such engagement and reflection. One student found that ‘what really became a threshold experience for me, was the coming together of these theories’. Another student emphasised the importance of contrasting different theories and how group members were continually challenged to ‘reflect on their own process, share in groups and challenge each other’.⁵⁴

Yet another student found ‘the varied approach helpful, because different theories resonate with different challenges or situations that I am dealing with in my context’. One vicar concluded that ‘the continuous challenge to contextualize the learning into your own context has really motivated me to learn’.⁵⁵ The role of the theological teacher extends beyond facilitation, encompassing the more nuanced task of weaving concepts together in a coherent and generative manner.

We also detected a possible challenge. One student pointed out that ‘with many of the concepts we did not have enough time to really get to grips with them. I think this has meant that they have felt less useful’. Another student emphasised the importance of the threshold concept of ‘play’, which was introduced by Bård while in Bergen. However, the student also added that they ‘would have liked to know more’. This served as a reminder to us, as theological educators, to dwell long enough on each threshold concept to ensure they ‘do their work’ in ‘remaking the room’.

As noted above, ‘naming reality’ functioned as a threshold concept and practice that anchored our approach. This emphasis reflects the growing recognition that ‘*avoiding reality*’ constitutes a significant weakness in strategic leadership and leadership development. Stacey and Mowles (2016) describe this as a fundamental ‘ontological slip’, in which the ‘what ought to be’ – our strategic plans – comes to be treated as the reality we perceive and pursue, rather than the ‘what is’. Stacey and Mowles (2016) describe the ‘what is’ as the ‘living present’ – a reality continually in emergence. In their

54. In Norwegian: ‘... og at vi hele tiden har blitt bedt reflektere over egen prosess, dele i gruppe og utfordre hverandre’.

55. In Norwegian: ‘... og fokuset på å kontekstualisere har virkelig motivert læringen!’

account, all that exists is this living present, which we interpret in relation to the past and in anticipation, whether hopeful or fearful, of the future. Consequently, decisions and actions directed toward any goal or desired change are best undertaken reflexively, attentive to how such gestures are perceived in the present, rather than merely projected toward a prescribed future (pp. 338–359). The responses to Root provided an opportunity for Nick to introduce this dimension of theory into the conversation, perhaps indicating that a threshold concept had been crossed.

The feedback revealed that students valued a range of threshold concepts, with several emphasising the significance of variation and the dialectical interaction among these concepts. A number of students further underscored the importance of threshold concepts that not only ‘challenged’ them but also proved ‘relevant to their particular contexts’. One student even suggested that the question about influential threshold concepts should have been articulated differently, namely ‘What were the most helpful areas of ministry that we had the chance to reflect on?’ This suggests that the role of the theological educator extends beyond introducing threshold concepts and establishing the conditions in which participants may ‘see these’ through the lens of their own experience. It also encompasses the movement from naming these concepts to operationalising them, thereby challenging both collective engagement and individual reflection. We will return to this theme in the discussion section.

■ The power of small-group conversation

Another positive dimension of the group work was its capacity to encourage participation from all members, as noted by many. Several participants further emphasised that sustained engagement with the same group during the London sessions was a significant factor in facilitating deeper learning. One student noted that ‘the group work in Bergen was more disjointed as we interacted with different people’. This was primarily due to practical circumstances, as one group arrived late. A few additional critical observations were also noted. One student expressed a preference for working within a group of five, suggesting that such continuity would foster deeper commitment, particularly with respect to the weekly assignments, which at times felt isolating.

One student observed the challenge that contributions in the larger group discussions were predominantly made by English participants. In addition, several students expressed a desire for more opportunities for informal and social interaction during the London sessions.

Overall, the course demonstrated the effectiveness of structured yet open and guided small-group conversations that unfolded without interruption. One vicar affirmed – referring to the small groups – that

listening ‘to people’s experiences across a variety of contexts always change[s] the way you see your own’. One student also emphasised that the course helped them to ‘find confident, critical friends’. Some even found that the course was a support in the midst of ministry ‘loneliness’. Finally, one vicar praised the group conversations as being rewarding and ‘eye-opening’, which made him more aware of various issues.⁵⁶ A clear strength of the learning community was its capacity to bring together two – or even four – groups that were sufficiently similar to establish common ground, yet diverse enough to generate dynamic dialogue through the sharing of experiences. The presence of another group also served to temper overly self-centred forms of reflection.

■ Switching roles

Much of the pedagogical emphasis was placed on the introduction of threshold concepts as a means of facilitating the exchange of experiences and promoting constructive group dialogue. These concepts appeared to resonate meaningfully with students, yet upon reflection, we recognised that greater intentionality and precision could have been exercised in their presentation. We also considered our own positioning in relation to the delivery of each threshold concept. While the majority were introduced directly by us, several were presented by guest lecturers, either in person or through online platforms such as Zoom and other similar platforms.

The rationale for introducing threshold concepts was to employ them as analytical tools for examining one’s context and practice, with the aim of exploring how they might reshape interpretation and stimulate potential transformations in professional engagement. Once grasped, threshold concepts function to reconfigure perspectives and operate as gateways to revised and more informed practice. However, this process necessitates deliberate moments within the sessions when we, as facilitators, assume a more explicit stance as ‘experts’. A key pedagogical insight emerging from this is the importance of explicitly acknowledging such shifts in role. When adopting a different positionality, it should be clearly named and articulated so that the transition is transparent to the group. Within coaching theory, it is customary to seek permission to ‘change hats’, as this practice invites participants to shift into a different mode of receptivity (Clare 2020, p. 125).

The central point is that, in our role as teachers, we were simultaneously positioned and perceived as leaders – guiding other leaders and facilitating their processes of learning. One student reflected on the transformative impact of the course, noting, ‘the course has deepened my sense of myself as a leader’.

56. In Norwegian: ‘Gruppesamtalene har være givende og «øyeåpnende» – og bevisstgjørende’.

■ Improvisation

The evolving dynamics of the learning community underscore the necessity of role flexibility, highlighting the importance of ‘tuning in’ to the group’s needs through the cultivation of a diverse repertoire of roles – a theme to which we will return in greater detail in the discussion section (Norheim 2023). Given the range of roles available, the theological educator must develop the capacity to improvise.⁵⁷ For the theological educator, attentiveness to *making the room*, *reading the room*, and responding to the evolving character of the learning community renders the cultivation of improvisation essential. Improvisation is not merely a matter of originality; rather, it entails discerning the appropriate response in each moment, anchored, within an ecclesial learning community, in the Christian tradition and the practices of the church. Such improvisation further requires a willingness to embrace vulnerability, including the risk of failure or of misinterpreting the situation.

Samuel Wells (2004) characterises improvisation as ‘the drama of Christian ethics’, emphasising that a Christian conception of improvisation necessarily acknowledges the reality of the fall. Crucially, from this perspective, improvisation is not conceived as an individual act but as a collective practice, shaped by the biblical narrative and sustained within the life of the Christian community where one is never alone (Wells 2004, pp. 44, 67, 128). This understanding resonates strongly with our own experience of co-teaching the module: We engaged in improvisation together, and this shared responsiveness proved to be a significant strength in our practice as theological educators.

By expressing clearly to our students that we were co-leading and improvising the teaching process, we sought to model a framework for the small-group conversations. These discussions were intentionally structured to foster the playful practice of conversational discernment, an essential competency at the core of LEC in times of crisis. As Nell (2020, p. 115) observes, cultivating the capacity for improvisation through play constitutes a crucial skill for leaders engaged in missional contexts.

Establishing improvisation as a collective practice underscored the significance of both self-reflection and mentoring. Within a learning community oriented toward reflective practice and careful discernment, the possibility also emerges of learning constructively from one’s own failures. When this happens, the learning community may help ecclesial leaders to develop and enhance their bandwidth (Heifetz et al. 2009, pp. 205–208) and repertoire, or what may be labelled ‘rhetorical wardrobe’

57. The following part draws on insights from a chapter from the first book of the Teaching and Learning Theology in Crisis project (Norheim & Weber 2024).

(Norheim & Haga 2020, pp. 111–113). These terms were also used as threshold concepts in the course. In this regard, one student wrote that ‘I also found thinking about leadership bandwidth helpful (though I initially misunderstood this concept as energy or capacity rather than repertoire)’.

Framing the work of a learning community as an art of continuous improvisation – centred on the development of bandwidth and repertoire – underscores the shared challenge faced by both students and educators. Students engage in learning and reflection to expand their repertoire and bandwidth as ecclesial leaders, while we, as teachers, critically reflect on our pedagogical strategies to strengthen our capacity to improvise and to draw upon our theological teaching repertoire in response to the evolving needs of the community. The crucial insight is to recognise improvisation as a pedagogical strategy in its own right.

■ Discussion

The subsequent section examines potential best-practice teaching roles that have emerged from the analysis, situating them within relevant theoretical frameworks.

■ The teacher as host and facilitator and the importance of scaffolding

The ethos of the teacher in introducing and shaping the learning community can be understood as asimilar to that of a host. In this role, the teacher is responsible for structuring a welcome and for facilitating the gathering of diverse groups and individuals around a shared vision, common rules and collective practices. You are ‘making the room’. Since the course commenced in Bergen, it was likely easier for Bård to be perceived in the role of host, particularly as the students were invited to his home on the first evening of the programme.

Closely related to the role of host is the role of facilitator. One student noted that ‘the course leaders have succeeded in making room – facilitating – for this change process’. We have already emphasised the significance of the teacher’s role in a learning community as one of ‘making room’. At a practical level, this entails preparing the physical environment, for example, arranging chairs and tables in ways that best support the learning process. More fundamentally, however, it involves ‘making room’ through language: The rhetorical practice of constructing a persuasive framework that enables participants to be together, to speak together, and to interact across multiple levels. As a facilitator, the teacher needs to attend to the process of *naming who we are* as a learning community (Norheim & Haga 2020, pp. 35–44). The facilitator focuses on creating opportunities for

learning, not merely providing knowledge. The facilitator, like a good host in a social setting, should be skilled at enabling conversation, as it is through conversation that we notice and learn (Shaw 2002, p. 151). Defining the role of the teacher as that of a facilitator underscores the responsibility of the educator to support student learning by drawing upon their experiences, abilities and interests within an interactive and supportive environment. Such an environment usually fosters inner motivation and a sense of autonomy in the learning process.⁵⁸

The purpose of a learning community that seeks to prepare leaders for navigating ecclesial crises and change is to foster transformative and imaginative learning. In this regard, the concept of 'scaffolding' proves particularly useful. As noted in our previous work, scaffolding is closely linked to Vygotsky's theory of the zone of proximal development (ZPD) (Vygotsky & Cole 1978). The central insight is that learners often stand at the threshold of skills they are on the verge of mastering, yet require the facilitating or mentoring support of a more experienced peer or tutor to progress beyond this point.

Learning is invariably situated within social relationships; however, in this context 'scaffolding' denotes the intentional activities that enable students to move through the ZPD toward achieving mastery. The term may also be applied to the facilitation of group processes that encourage peer-to-peer exchange of expertise, as exemplified in our course. Such scaffolding extends to contexts in which students are challenged to deepen their practice in the field, a process we sought to support through weekly learning and field reports. It further encompasses appropriate contextualisation, whereby observations serve to reframe and enrich students' understanding of their own contexts. Importantly, it includes conversations that allow for the expression and exploration of personal identity and its connection to role identity (Shaw 2014, pp. 70-72). Horup (2022) argues that leadership is an ongoing process of identity work and, as such, is an area where broader leadership development workplaces are receiving increased attention (p. 93). Leaders are inherently social beings, continually shaped and reshaped by the contexts in which they operate. For clergy leaders, these dynamics can often be more profound, with limited space and personal capacity for developing the type of reflexive understanding of self and actions (Peyton & Gatrell 2013).

The LEC course aimed not only to establish a space for formative learning but also to exemplify practices that encourage ongoing learning.

58. For more research on the teacher as facilitator, see for instance Reeve (2006) and Gautam and Agarwa (2023).

Theological educators need to provide ‘triggers or disruptions to move learners into liminal spaces [*where*] their past assumptions and practices are called into question’. This is because, as Carson, McLean and Wilcox (2021) argue, the experience of liminality is fundamental to deep learning. They describe ‘learning containers’ as environments that ‘hold the moments of pedagogical innovation [*and*] [*the*] complexity of responses this generates’ (Carson et al. 2021, pp. 146–147). This approach, which resonates with Vygotskian theory, is informed by the group analytic tradition of the Tavistock School and highlights the importance of psychological safety within group dynamics. In this context, the role of the host is to establish and sustain such a dynamic, serving as the figure who adapts to the evolving needs of the students and provides what is required for them as guests.

■ The teacher as poet and prophet

While conceptualising the teacher as a facilitator is valuable, the metaphor has its limitations. The processes of naming and framing extend beyond facilitation. In this respect, the teacher may also be understood as a poet – one who articulates and names reality in ways that enable participants to connect their diverse experiences and reflections to the ongoing processes of the learning community.

A poet may be understood as someone who seeks to read the times (Norheim & Weber 2024) and the immediate dynamics of the room, attuning to what is at stake as the learning community unfolds. Within theological education, the teacher as poet is attentive to theology as an interdisciplinary enterprise, grounded in intimate engagement with Scripture and tradition while remaining responsive to contextual and contemporary experience. The poetic vocation of the theological educator guiding a learning community can thus be articulated through three key tasks: *Making the room*, *remaking the room* and *tuning in*. Together, these three practices enable the educator to co-construct reality with the group through sustained and focused engagement with the key questions that arise as the learning community develops. Central to this poetic enterprise is the introduction and bridging of threshold concepts, which serve as pivotal moments of transformation in the learning process.

At the same time, the theological educator must challenge the learning community by introducing elements of contrast, discomfort and even conflict. This dimension is particularly vital in a community dedicated to preparing leaders for contexts of change and crisis. In such moments, the teacher assumes a prophetic role – engaging both the group and individuals through language, while at times deliberately stepping back to allow the community itself to grapple with significant challenges in dialogue.

Drawing on our experience and student feedback, the central task of the theological educator is to calibrate the dialectical interplay between two roles: That of the poet and that of the prophet.⁵⁹

Carson et al. (2021) engage the notion of poetics in the transformation of theological education in two significant respects. They establish a specific connection between educational threshold concepts, lived experience and the Christian tradition. They contend that the instigative and reconstitutive phases inherent in the process of learning threshold concepts parallel core Christian practices. From this perspective, poesis is understood as exerting a distinct formative influence on theological education (Carson et al. 2021, pp. 222–224). Liminality is inherently affective, and practices that engage this space, such as dwelling in the Word, rhetorical reflection, worship, artistic expression and testimony, can function as vehicles of transformation. Although our pedagogical practice has not yet fully engaged this dimension, it remains a rich and promising trajectory for future development.

■ The teacher as pastor and partner in times of crisis

A defining characteristic of the learning community established in this course was the recognition of ecclesial reality – and its diverse contextual challenges – as a crisis demanding discernment and sound judgement in response. In the opening chapter, we underscored that theology, understood as a hermeneutical practice, is most appropriately aligned with struggle. Educating theological leaders necessarily entails engaging the existential and contextual realities of *crisis*, since theological practice itself is marked by a hermeneutical struggle with reality – what Martin Luther described as *tentatio* (German *Anfechtung*). Theological education must therefore be conceived as a communal endeavour, oriented toward cultivating the practices and language of a *discerning community*. In this sense, the hermeneutics of the theological learning community extends beyond the academic classroom, finding its grounding in the life of the church and emerging through embodied practices such as preaching, worship and diaconia.

This suggests that communal theological hermeneutics, particularly when engaging diverse global crises, must remain receptive to aporetic – and at times nearly apophatic – modes of theological practice. More

59. On what it takes for the theologian or pastor to develop the role of both poet and prophet, see, for instance, Roxburgh (1997), where the threefold leadership of a theologian is described as that of the *poet*, the *prophet*, and the *apostle*. See also Brueggemann (2001).

significantly, for a theological learning community seeking the presence of the One beyond sensory apprehension in moments of crisis, it is imperative to cultivate a broad repertoire of responses. Alongside firm and fierce responses when necessary, even hesitation and questioning, aporetic riddles and silence may be considered appropriate responses to a crisis (Norheim 2015, 2019). Small-group conversations within a learning community provide an apt setting for accommodating a wide range of responses. In this process, the teacher is called to collaborate with the group, partnering in the shared work of discernment and engagement.

As theological educators, we may be understood as co-pilgrims and theologians, *pastors* who carefully guide and direct the work and interaction of the group, akin to shepherds leading a community through times of crisis, change and discomfort. Yet, our role extends beyond that of attentive and caring pastors; we also assume the position of partners who, while not fully embedded within the group, collaborate with it in navigating the challenges of crisis and transformation. Ultimately, we remain facilitating partners – joining the learning community in addressing both the explicit and implicit demands of learning together. The continuous challenge was to calibrate the dialectical dynamic of *pastor* (giving care and attention) and *partner* (setting direction) as the process of the learning community evolved.

Within this context, we intentionally model what Gerkin (1997) identifies as the interpretive role of the leader in pastoral care – a role that is authoritative without being authoritarian. Gerkin further contends that congregational life itself ought to embody the qualities of a learning community. Within this framework, pastors and leaders are called to serve as interpretive guides, walking alongside others to ‘carefully guide processes of interpretation and cultivate a dialogical relationship between [learning] and experience’ (Gerkin 1997, p. 123). This role involves holding the dual posture of both pastor and partner at all times.⁶⁰

■ The role of the teacher when ‘the expertise is in the room’

Finally, a particular challenge arises as we reflect on leading a learning community of this nature. From the outset and throughout the course, we emphasised that ‘*the expertise is in the room*’. Accordingly, the module adopted a flipped classroom pedagogy that foregrounded dialogue, group

60. Gerkin’s classic interpretation of pastoral practice is upheld by Carson et al. (2021) who also identify that the co-creation of learning requires dialogue where an educator ‘leads or draws out’ an individual’s capability to make meaning and interpret action learning (p. 142).

interaction and experiential learning through field visits to local churches. Even the pedagogy of the online co-teaching with Ian Nell and Andrew Root was shaped by the dynamics through which the learning community itself was constituted.

Such an educational setting inevitably challenged our role as theological educators, requiring ongoing reflection and adjustment of our 'positioning' throughout the course. Central to the success of the learning community was the emphasis placed on small-group conversations, which provided a vital context for dialogue, discernment and shared learning. However, this feedback, albeit indirectly, presents an intriguing challenge to the role of the teacher and course leaders: How do you evaluate your work as a teacher when the most appreciated parts of the learning process seem to be the moments where you are not directly involved?

Student feedback offered valuable insights for further reflection. Many commended the structuring of groups, the introduction of key themes, and the framing of conversations, highlighting the balance achieved between openness and direction. For the teacher leading a glocal learning community, this underscores the importance of both drawing back and tuning in. Ironically, 'tuning in' may also involve an element of retreat (Norheim 2023, pp. 207–208).

■ Conclusion

To be a teacher when 'the expertise is in the room' is challenging. If the students are the experts, who are the teachers then? Which roles can we adopt to most effectively enhance the group's learning process? In this chapter, we present and analyse student feedback, reflect on our practice as co-teachers and consider the teaching roles that might be developed when leading and instructing a group of experienced practitioners with substantial professional expertise. Expertise is required in two distinct ways. Firstly, we aim to be experts in learning rather than merely in teaching. This entails scaffolding and cultivating an environment in which transformational learning can occur. At certain points, it may be necessary to assume expertise in specific aspects of leadership, though only provisionally. Ultimately, the broader endeavour should emphasise that expertise is to be discovered and shared collectively within the learning community.

The first chapter was primarily theoretical and exploratory, advancing theological hermeneutics and pedagogical scaffolding for a glocal learning community. Its aim was to equip such a community to address contemporary ecclesial crises, foster change within the church and strengthen the capacity of ecclesial communities to learn through crisis.

In this second chapter, we build on the preceding theoretical and constructive discussions by analysing the teaching experiences and student feedback from the second iteration of the module (August–December 2023). We further reflect on and examine the role of teachers within such a learning community.

One important finding is that theological educators leading a learning community facing crisis and change must be able to shift between roles – facilitating learning by *making the room*, *reading the room*, and, when necessary, *remaking the room*, all while consistently *tuning in*. Our central finding, however, is that the teacher cannot be understood merely as a facilitator. Rather, the theological educator functions as an active participant – hosting and sustaining conversations with the potential to be profoundly transformative for learners.

Furthermore, the challenge lies in calibrating the dialectical tension between distinct roles: *Poet* and *prophet* on the one hand, and *pastor* and *partner* on the other. Achieving this nuanced balance may at times call for elements of confrontation and care, alongside moments of hesitation, aporetic questioning, silence and even retreat. The shifting interplay of these roles is intended to create a space in which learners can articulate their own stories and challenges in dialogue with others whose experiences and expertise are both shared and diverse. The ultimate aim is transformative learning – fostering a deepened understanding of self and identity, enriched cognitive insight and more grounded professional practice.

The guest lectureship: Gifts and growth of teaching theology across cultures

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■ Abstract

This chapter examines the benefits and challenges of co-teaching and learning in theological education across national and cultural boundaries, employing both in-person and digital modes of instruction as pedagogical tools. In the initial stages of the Teaching and Learning Theology in Crisis (TLC) project, we sought to engage professors and students from diverse institutions. This collaborative journey encompassed enriching learning experiences as well as challenging moments, particularly in negotiating cultural differences and addressing the complexities of digital learning environments. This chapter places particular emphasis on the role of guest lecturers, underscoring the value of their expertise and the diverse perspectives they bring. It further examines how guest lectures contribute to the internationalisation of the curriculum and engage with the broader metadiscourse concerning the role and perception of guest lecturers.

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An autobiographical approach, grounded in self-reflection, is employed to identify best practices for teaching youth ministry and theology across institutions worldwide.

■ Introduction

I began teaching a master's course in youth ministry and theology in the autumn of 2020, at a time when the world was still contending with the uncertainties of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. National protocols were in continual flux, requiring ongoing adaptation to shifts between in-person and online modes of instruction for students at Norsk Lærerkademi (NLA) University College in Bergen, Norway. Like many institutions worldwide, the shift to online instruction proved both a blessing and a challenge. One notable benefit was that institutions across different countries embraced digital teaching, enabling colleagues to become increasingly accustomed to and confident in online lecturing and learning. Against this backdrop, and as the Teaching and Learning Theology in Crisis (TLC) project entered the core of its four-year trajectory, I invited colleagues from the Global South to engage in dialogue and instruction on issues of youth ministry and theology with students situated in the Global North. My motivation for connecting professors and students across diverse global contexts was to expose my students to sociological and theological perspectives arising from cultures beyond their own. Equally, I sought to prepare them for engaging with individuals from around the world who were making Norway their new home. The overarching aim was to equip students to live and work within a globalised society and to recognise the complex theological and sociological issues that emerge in such settings.

One of the central aims of the TLC project is to foster the exchange of ideas and perspectives across institutions and contexts, thereby promoting global theological learning. In line with this objective, in August 2021, I formally invited a colleague from Stellenbosch University (SU) in South Africa to contribute to my youth ministry class at NLA University College during the first intensive week of that academic year. Professor Weber was asked to share insights on youth-led movements in South Africa and joined the class via Zoom, delivering a lively and thought-provoking presentation that provided rich cultural perspectives on student movements.

The session generated substantive dialogue between the NLA students and the professor, focusing particularly on the theological and ethical challenges encountered by SU faculty in supporting students during the #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall protests. From my perspective as both coordinator and organiser, this instance represents a clear example of successful glocal engagement in theology. Professor Weber presented

compelling, context-specific accounts of student-led movements in South Africa – a context markedly different from that of our Norwegian students – while simultaneously inviting mutual reflection on the theological and ethical dimensions of leadership in times of protest.

In conjunction with the TLC research project, I had the opportunity to travel to SU in March 2022. During this visit, Professor Weber invited me to serve as a guest lecturer in her Bachelor of Theology class, focusing on themes pertinent to youth ministers and youth workers. This guest lectureship differed from Professor Weber's usual approach in three notable respects: Firstly, the lecture was delivered in person rather than online; secondly, the class was at bachelor's level rather than master's level, as in my course in Norway; and thirdly, the class size was considerably larger, comprising between 30 and 40 students. From my experience, establishing meaningful connections with students during the lecture proved more challenging, particularly when employing popular cultural references as illustrative examples. It was difficult to discern whether the points I sought to convey were resonating with the students and their lived experiences. I left the in-person guest lecture reflecting on whether I had, in fact, made a substantive contribution to the learning process in that session.

Following the success of the initial online guest lecture, which facilitated engagement across institutions and cultures, I invited Professor Weber once again to present to our master's class in youth ministry and theology in Norway in August 2022. On this occasion, rather than concentrating exclusively on youth protest movements, she broadened her presentation to encompass more general insights into South Africa and its sociocultural context, with particular attention to issues affecting young adults. As with any teaching context, judgements and assessments are inevitably shaped by personal perception. Nevertheless, this lecture appeared to have less impact on the students than Professor Weber's initial presentation to our class. The discussion between the professor and students was not as robust, leaving me to reflect on how a more effective learning experience might be facilitated for both teacher and students. A year later, in August 2023, I extended a similar invitation to Professor Nathan Chiroma (principal of Africa College of Theology in Kigali, Rwanda, and a research associate of Stellenbosch University, South Africa), who shared his insights and expertise on youth ministry in Africa. Yet, in both instances – despite the richness of the content and the value of cross-cultural engagement – I perceived that students were less engaged with the information and perspectives presented. Of course, this perception may not be entirely accurate, and a range of factors could have contributed to what appeared to be limited student engagement. From my perspective, possible explanations include the effects of Zoom fatigue and the absence of prior introduction between students and the guest professor. In the case of Professor Weber from the United States of America (USA),

the students were already familiar with her through earlier conversations at NLA, which may have facilitated greater interaction.

As previously noted, one of the primary motivations for inviting guest lecturers into my class was to expose northern European students to cultures beyond their own and to realities distinct from their lived experiences. A further aim was to incorporate content and pedagogical approaches from colleagues outside our institution, thereby broadening students' learning beyond the scope of my own expertise. Moreover, as Christian institutions of higher education (HE), we are inherently shaped by the conviction that the global church – the body of Christ – extends across the world, calling us to learn from one another and to participate in community together. However, the perceived challenges associated with guest lecturers prompted me to reflect on their role within HE and the potential impact on students engaged in theological study.

What began as a teaching and learning strategy – initially shaped by the implicit practice of inviting trusted colleagues from institutions connected to my own – soon required a more explicit framework and intentional strategy in order to proceed effectively. As the lecturer responsible for inviting guest contributors to my classes, while also serving as a guest lecturer in other institutional contexts, I came to regard a systematic exploration of the role of guest lecturers as essential to the advancement of our project.

In the sections that follow, I will first outline the role and characteristics of the guest lecturer. I will then examine dimensions of the 'internationalisation at home' (IaH) curriculum and consider how metadiscursive features can function as evaluative tools within guest lectures. Finally, I will propose a model of student-centred guest lecturing as a potential pathway for enhancing the practice of guest lectureship. Taken together, these four elements constitute a framework for strengthening theological education across institutions and national boundaries in the years ahead.

■ The guest lecture

Eveleth and Baker-Eveleth (2009) argue for the inclusion of guest lectures across disciplines in HE: Guest speakers are common on university campuses and in a variety of disciplines. Guests possess a certain degree of credibility that serves to reinforce course concepts. In addition, guests' examples add breadth to the examples students receive from other sources, a basic tenet of social learning theory.

They further state, 'Social constructivist learning theorists suggest that collaboration between students and others outside the university community is essential for effective learning' (Eveleth & Baker-Eveleth 2009).

The inclusion of guest lecturers serves to reinforce the concepts and ideas that teachers and professors seek to cultivate in their students. Within our project, guest lectureships function as one component of a broader strategy aimed at fostering collaborative teaching and learning in theology across institutions worldwide.

Building on this concept, Reem Alebaikan (2016, p. 53) observes that guest lectureships 'can provide graduate students with the opportunity to link theories with practice'. Alebaikan (2016) further highlights that a key strength of incorporating guest speakers lies in their capacity to connect real-world situations with professional experience and applications relevant to students. By linking theory with practice, guest speakers can introduce learners to emerging theories and practices that are shaping particular fields of work and study. It is important to recognise that, since our project partners encompass both bachelor's and graduate-level courses, guest lectureships serve as an effective pedagogical tool across multiple levels of learning. Butler and Von Wielligh (2012) also note the strategy of utilising the guest lecture and the connection between theory and practice. They state specifically:

Using effective teaching strategies in graduate courses can enrich students' experiences by exposing them to new pedagogies to deliver quality education: Using multiple teaching methods and strategies that complement the traditional lecture method can enrich the classroom experience and can assist to successfully reach the maximum proportion of students. (p. 48)

Guest lectures can substantially enrich the classroom experience and function as part of a broader pedagogical approach that integrates diverse methods of instruction. Scholars such as Butler and Von Wielligh (2012), along with Alebaikan (2016), emphasise the value of guest speaker pedagogy in bridging theory and practice, while simultaneously creating opportunities for students to network with professionals in their respective fields. Within theological education, this connection assumes particular significance when real-world situations, such as supporting or accompanying students during protest movements, intersect with professional theories and ministerial practices.

As our project developed, our praxis underscored both the accessibility and the pedagogical value of online guest lectureships. The opportunity to engage with experts in theology who were themselves navigating education in times of crisis proved to be a vital resource for classrooms across diverse global contexts. Consistent with our own experiences in the TLC project, Alebaikan (2016) likewise affirms the significance of guest lectures within contemporary education. He states:

The delivery of guest lectures can be either online or face-to-face; online guest lectures offer flexibility and availability with no geographical restriction for the invited guest speaker or students. The course lecturer is responsible for organizing the delivery mode of the guest lecture based on the location of the

guest speaker. Given the technology available today, online guest lectures have become more accessible and flexible as a delivery mode. (p. 56)

As the professor responsible for course instruction, I found it particularly beneficial that technology enabled a guest lecturer based in Africa to teach students attending class in Norway. This technological flexibility effectively removed geographical barriers and facilitated enriched, cross-cultural engagement. The challenge, however, lies in effectively harnessing 21st-century technologies to enhance both instructional practice and student learning outcomes. Within HE, there is a growing impulse to employ technology as a bridge across diverse cultures and educational contexts. The following section will examine the role of an internationalised curriculum and consider its potential benefits for students engaging in global learning while remaining within their home contexts.

■ Internationalisation at home

My initial impulse to incorporate the voices and expertise of colleagues from around the world, particularly for the benefit of students situated within the relatively homogenous context of Norway, rests on a solid academic foundation that informs and frames our understanding of the guest lecture. Beelen and Jones (2015, p. 69) define the concept of IaH as ‘[...] the purposeful integration of international and intercultural dimensions into the formal and informal curriculum for all students within domestic learning environments’.

A range of pedagogical tools is available to facilitate the integration of international elements into teaching and learning. Leask (as cited by Beelen & Jones 2015) describes these as follows:

A variety of instruments can be used to internationalize teaching and learning: comparative international literature, guest lectures by speakers from local cultural groups or international companies, guest lecturers of international partner universities, international case studies and practice or, increasingly, digital learning and online collaboration. Indeed, technology-based solutions can ensure equal access to internationalization opportunities for all students. (p. 64)

Beyond its role within the TLC project, my intention was also to benefit the class as a whole by incorporating voices from other countries. In doing so, I sought to provide students with a richer and more diverse understanding of the topics and challenges confronting youth ministry in the 21st century. As Beelen and Jones (2015) note, IaH involves the purposeful and intentional integration of intercultural dimensions that benefit students within a domestic learning environment. As noted earlier, my objective was to expose students to global issues and the broader dynamics shaping the

field of youth ministry, thereby equipping them to engage the realities of ministering within an increasingly globalised context. However, Leask (2012) reminds us that IaH is not an aim in itself. Instead, she emphasises that it consists of activities designed to cultivate intercultural and international competencies among all students and that such efforts must be contextually grounded.

Beelen and Jones (2015) situate their understanding of the IaH concept within Knight's widely cited definition of internationalisation, which describes it as 'the process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions, or delivery of post-secondary education' (Knight 2004, p. 11).

Hudzik (2011) adds:

Comprehensive internationalization not only impacts all of campus life *but the institution's external frames of reference, partnerships, and relations*.⁶¹ The global reconfiguration of economies, systems of trade, research, and communication, and the impact of global forces on local life, dramatically expand the need for comprehensive internationalization and the motivations and purposes driving it. (p. 6)

As the world continues to shift and adapt to processes of globalisation, the sociological and theological challenges confronting young adults in one context increasingly shape the perspectives of students in another. Within the field of youth ministry, globalisation has revealed that the issues surrounding ministry with young adults and their theological formation resonate across diverse locations of teaching and learning. Access to international teaching and learning opportunities is vital for enabling the global church and theological institutions to develop consistent responses to the faith formation of young adults. While guest lectures from individuals within the local educational landscape can be beneficial, the impact of incorporating international voices has the potential to be even more profound when students hear from those 'on the ground'. Similarly, engagement with local cultural and international groups, often accessible to all students, can be regarded as a distinctive element of IaH. Such engagement may occur within the formal curriculum, through guest lectures and structured educational activities, or within the informal, non-assessed curriculum. Nevertheless, it must be recognised that these arrangements are not universally feasible across all contexts (Beelen & Jones 2015).

Beelen and Jones (2015) highlight a critique particularly pertinent to our research programme: Although English is not the native language at any of

61. I employed italics to underscore the significance of this type of curriculum, reflecting my underlying assumption that global learning would meaningfully shape my students' educational experience.

the participating institutions, it nonetheless functions as the primary medium of instruction. They point out that:

Thus in, for example, the western European context, the language of instruction is not a relevant consideration in understanding or delivering IaH. Simply providing a program in English is insufficient for it to be considered an internationalized curriculum. If the program content and learning outcomes are not internationalized, and remain the same as in the original language, merely changing the language of instruction will not make them so. (p. 64)

For students enrolled in the Master's programme in Theology and Ministry at NLA University College, course content is delivered primarily in English rather than Norwegian. Yet, without a deliberate emphasis on incorporating voices and materials from other countries, the course cannot be meaningfully regarded as international. The question that remains is how best to maximise the role of guest lectureships in enhancing student learning within theological courses. Merely shifting the language of instruction from a native language to English does not, in itself, render a programme international or multicultural. Rather, it is through the cultivation of international relationships and practices of mutual learning that our programme sustains its significance. We have established the significance of guest lectureships and the benefits of incorporating lecturers from diverse cultural and national backgrounds. Nevertheless, certain pedagogical dimensions of the guest lecture must be addressed in order to foster an effective learning environment for students. One such dimension concerns the meta-discursive elements that shape this mode of teaching. The following section will therefore examine key features of metadiscourse and their influence on the guest lecture experience.

■ Metadiscourse

The role of the guest lecturer differs from that of a regular instructor in the HE classroom. Fortanet-Gómez and Ruiz-Madrid (2014) investigate the dimensions of interaction that may shape the effectiveness of guest lectureships. They state:

In our case, we need to view guest lectures as interactive means and therefore we must examine their interactive meta-discursive features in terms of the lecturer's projection of the target audience's perceptions, interests and needs. (pp. 203-204)

Drawing on lived experience, guest lecturers in our project were required not only to demonstrate familiarity with the topic under discussion but also to remain attentive to the perceptions, interests and backgrounds that students brought from their respective contexts. Lecturers from Africa, for example, needed to be mindful of the perspectives and experiences of students from the Northern Hemisphere. Conversely, as a professor from

the North, I was required to acknowledge the location and backgrounds of students in South Africa when serving as a guest lecturer. In this regard, as Fortanet-Gómez and Ruiz-Madrid emphasise, the guest lecturer must remain attentive to the interactive dimensions inherent in the guest lecture. The lecturer should be cognisant of the perceptions that students bring into the classroom, whether in person or virtually, and of how these perceptions may shape the learning process. To foster the most effective learning environment, guest lecturers must also accommodate the participants' prior knowledge, expectations and experiences.

Fortanet-Gómez and Ruiz-Madrid (2014) identify what they term the 'interactional dimension' of metadiscourse in guest lectureships, underscoring how this communicative aspect enables lecturers to articulate their perspectives while simultaneously adapting to the audience within a dynamic teaching environment. They contend that 'metadiscourse here is essentially evaluative and engaging, clearly revealing the extent to which the writer [or lecturer] seeks to construct the discourse with the audience' (Fortanet-Gómez & Ruiz-Madrid 2014, p. 206).

Fortanet-Gómez and Ruiz-Madrid also identify several key features of metadiscourse to which guest lecturers should remain attentive. The first of these is the use of *hedges*, which allow lecturers to frame their views as provisional opinions rather than absolute claims. Such rhetorical strategies introduce a degree of subjectivity and, in turn, invite students into the conversation by opening space for dialogue and interpretation.

The second feature is *boosters*, which serve to strengthen rapport between the lecturer and students by affirming shared knowledge or enthusiasm. Boosters function to foster solidarity and enable the lecturer to assert expertise while remaining inclusive and engaging.

The third feature is *attitude markers*, which enable lecturers to convey evaluative stances such as surprise, agreement or emphasis. These markers serve to underscore the significance of particular comments or moments of interaction within the lecture, thereby guiding students' attention to key aspects of the discourse.

The fourth feature is *self-mention*, which 'refers to the degree of explicit presence in the text measured by the frequency of first-person pronouns and possessive adjectives' (Fortanet-Gomez & Ruiz-Madrid 2014, p. 206).

The final feature is *engagement markers*, rhetorical devices that seek to involve the audience directly and encourage active participation in the learning process. Such markers provide specific means by which the guest lecturer directs students' attention, enabling them to engage more fully with the content of the class. For instance, in her inaugural lecture with students at NLA University College, Professor Weber initiated a discussion on the

theological implications of professors joining students in protests against university fees in South Africa. She invited the theology students to reflect on how they might respond if confronted with a comparable situation.

What choices might the students make in response to such a situation? Which theological foundations inform and shape those choices? In this way, our colleague from SU intuitively employed meta-discursive elements that fostered a fruitful and lively discussion during the virtual guest lecture session. The same dynamics are equally applicable to in-person guest lectures. When lecturing in person to bachelor's students in South Africa, I frequently posed questions designed to engage them with the content and to encourage application of the material within their local context. Similarly, in a discussion with our colleague from Rwanda, the shared narratives of pastoral ministry and the challenges facing theological students in that region resonated with students from Norway, owing to a common commitment to Christian mission and purpose.

These dimensions of metadiscourse within guest lectures illuminate recurring patterns of speech and action characteristic of this pedagogical form. Identifying such patterns and integrating them into future guest lectureships will allow this teaching and learning approach to be employed more intentionally within our project, as well as in broader educational contexts.

■ A way forward: Student-centred guest lecturing

What conclusions can be drawn regarding the role of guest lectures in fostering enriched and nuanced learning for students in HE? Engaging individuals through guest lectures, whether delivered online or in person, enriches students' learning by providing access to expertise, opportunities for networking and dialogue around complex or discipline-specific issues. Our observations indicate that structuring programmes within an IaH framework broadens students' understanding of learning in a globalised society. An internationally oriented curriculum further enables students to interact with leaders and experts from diverse contexts, thereby expanding both their academic and professional horizons. As institutions adopt guest lectureships with an international orientation, discursive elements emerge that actively shape teaching and learning practices. Increasing awareness of the pedagogical influences that inform guest lectureships raises a central question for our project, and for others engaging with this teaching and learning framework, namely what conditions must be established to fully capitalise on the benefits of guest lecturing?

This learner-centred approach is particularly important in an online environment when implementing guest lectures. Alebaikan (2016, p. 55)

states, 'Briefly, acknowledging the flexibility of online guest speaker event by all students, the social interaction aspect can be promoted by utilizing flipped classroom within the online guest speaker event'. One critique that emerged through our TLC project concerned the tendency to frame the guest lectureship as a 'sage on the stage' event. Stated plainly, the 'sage on the stage' model positions the guest lecturer as the sole authority on the topics presented, with students expected to remain passive recipients of their expertise. By contrast, our most dynamic engagements on theology and leadership within faith communities occurred when dialogue was fostered between lecturer and students. These experiences prompt consideration of the potential impact that a student-centred approach to guest lecturing might yield.

For instance, Hemphill and Hemphill (2007) argue that an online (virtual) guest speaker experience can be richer and more interactive than a face-to-face format when supplemented by asynchronous online discussion sustained over several days each week or extended across a semester. Similarly, Eveleth and Baker-Eveleth (2009) incorporated online discussions into guest speaker visits and found that this approach fostered students' acceptance and comprehension of the material, while also cultivating a positive attitude toward the courses (Alebaikan 2016, p. 55). Allowing students to engage with the material and formulate discussion topics or questions in advance cultivates a more actively engaged student body and enriches the dialogue with the guest lecturer. Positioning the student at the centre of the guest lectureship has the potential to enhance the learning experience in ways that are not achieved when content is merely transmitted by the lecturer with minimal interaction.

As noted in the research by Hemphill and Hemphill (2007):

One student stated she would appreciate more time for discussion with the online speaker and this could be enabled through asynchronous online discussion. Two other students agreed with her as they appealed for more discussion time in both online and face-to-face guest lectures. Confirming the need for discussions, another student recommended the use of a 'flipped classroom' approach to allow time for discussion. The student suggested that using such an approach for a guest speaker event has the potential to be as effective as online courses that provide students with recorded lectures then allow for discussions synchronously and asynchronously. Another student explained the purpose of using flipped learning by saying: I suggest using flipped learning by offering the students a recorded lecture of the guest speaker prior to the event to enable more time for discussion and questions. (Alebaikan 2016, p. 62)

Shifting the use of guest lectures toward a student-centred approach within our TLC project has the potential to deepen the impact of dialogue and discussion on critical issues within the field.

■ Conclusion

As part of the continuation of the TLC research project, Professor Weber convened a panel of four scholars, including myself, for her Bachelor of Theology course in March 2024. During this guest lecture, we were invited to address theological issues pertinent to our respective local contexts – the Netherlands, Germany, South Africa and the United Kingdom – followed by a period of student questions and dialogue after our initial presentations. What followed was a substantive dialogue between students and professors on pressing issues, including a Christian response to the war in the Middle East, approaches to questions of gender and sexual identity, and concerns related to social media and global climate change. Across all of these discussions, a central focus remained on discerning the ways in which God is at work in the world. Questions such as ‘In what ways is God made known?’, ‘Through what means does God act within history?’ and ‘How might God’s agency be understood and articulated?’ led to dynamic and meaningful interactions between the guest lecturers and students.

Reflecting on this model of guest lecturing within the TLC project, it proved valuable to have guest lecturers present in the classroom to share insights from their respective international contexts and to provide ample opportunity for students to pose questions to the panel. Most significantly, the time and space afforded for dialogue enabled meaningful engagement with the complex challenges confronting contemporary Christian ministry.

The question remains: Can online guest lectures be utilised in a comparable manner, offering first-hand reflections on issues confronting individuals within their local contexts? Furthermore, does the inclusion of an internationalised curriculum, delivered through guest lecturers, foster theological learning among students? Finally, to what extent can a student-centred approach – one that enables students to pose challenging questions to guest lecturers – encourage more robust and meaningful dialogue?

As engagement with the components of guest lectureships deepens, it is important to consider strategies for involving students more fully in the process and to reflect on how glocal theological learning might be envisioned in the coming decades of the 21st century. Such developments hold significant potential to enrich HE in theology and to strengthen the global church.

‘Don’t quit your day job’ and other lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic

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■ Abstract

This chapter focuses on the challenges encountered and the lessons learned by member institutions of the Network for African Congregational Theology (NetACT) during and in the aftermath of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the pedagogical practices of NetACT member institutions and introduced additional institutional challenges, thereby reigniting a longstanding debate within the network concerning the content of its curriculum.

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■ Introduction

This chapter explores the challenges experienced and lessons learned by member institutions of Network for African Congregational Theology (NetACT) during and in the aftermath of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. It begins with a brief reflection on the nature, scope and consequences of the pandemic globally, with giving particular attention to the African context, before providing an overview of NetACT's history, aims, membership and activities. As will be demonstrated, the pandemic affected all NetACT members on at least two distinct levels. Firstly, with regard to *how* teaching took place during the pandemic, member institutions relied heavily on alternative, non-traditional, technology-mediated learning (TML). Data collected during TML training sessions highlight both the magnitude of the challenges encountered and the highly creative strategies devised in contexts markedly distinct from so-called First World realities. Secondly, the financial implications of the pandemic brought renewed – and now intensified – awareness of the financial vulnerability of many African churches, congregations and their pastors. Within NetACT, this vulnerability – compounded by reliance on foreign funding and church tithes – revived pre-pandemic debates concerning theological curricula, particularly the question of *what* is being taught in the light of the pandemic's impact. One emerging response is the recognition of the growing need to prepare theology students for bivocational (tentmaking) ministries. Although firmly rooted in biblical tradition, bivocational ministry has often been undervalued; yet, its relevance is increasingly evident and warrants renewed global consideration for the benefit of the church, albeit for diverse contextual reasons.

■ A global crisis like no other

These words of Kristalina Georgieva, Managing Director of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), were spoken just four months after the first COVID-19 case was reported (Georgieva 2020). The initial outbreak of COVID-19 occurred in Wuhan, China, in late December 2019, and the virus rapidly spread worldwide. On 24 January 2020, the first European case was reported in France (Spiteri et al. 2020, p. 1). By February, 47 cases had been confirmed across nine European countries. The virus had already reached the United States of America (USA) on 18 January (Holshue et al. 2020, p. 929). The World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a global pandemic on 11 March 2020 and announced the pandemic's official end on 08 May 2023.⁶³

63. Different countries reported various 'waves' or 'peaks' in COVID-19 cases, but generally, the years from 2020 to 2022 marked the height of the pandemic. This resulted in periods of total or limited 'lockdown' for entire populations, with exceptions made for so-called first responders and medical personnel.

Modern patterns of global travel facilitated the unprecedented speed with which the coronavirus spread worldwide. Although its initial transmission and impact in Africa appeared slower – or perhaps underreported – the first officially confirmed case on the continent was recorded in Egypt on 14 February 2020 (Slayer et al. 2021, p. 1265). By 07 March 2023, two months prior to the WHO's declaration of the pandemic's end on 08 May 2023 (Rigby & Satija 2023), more than 760 million cases had been reported globally, resulting in 6.8 million deaths (WHO 2023). In Africa, inadequate health care systems, constrained governmental capacity and limited vaccine availability contributed to disproportionately high levels of illness and mortality. By March 2023, only four African countries were listed among the top 100 globally in terms of reported cases. Yet, when measured by deaths per one million population, 30 African countries ranked among the top 50 (Worldometer 2023).

The impact of COVID-19 extended well beyond its immediate health and mortality effects (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP] 2021, p. 25). As with earlier pandemics, including the Spanish flu (1918–1919), Hong Kong flu (1968–1969), swine flu (2009–2010) and HIV and AIDS (1980s), the crisis generated a host of second-order consequences. The most significant among these were its social repercussions: Heightened marginalisation and inequality, increased levels of anxiety and depression, rising alcohol consumption, domestic conflict and violence, and pervasive social isolation (cf. Hosseinzadeh, Hosseinzadeh & Zarepur 2022; Sepúlveda-Loyola et al. 2020, pp. 943–944). Exacerbating these effects was the absence of adequate social protection, with 55% of the global population lacking coverage and 80% of Africa's population similarly unprotected (International Labour Organization [ILO] 2019).

The global situation grew increasingly critical, not only in terms of health and social consequences but also economically, as widespread contraction occurred. Declines in consumption, investment, foreign capital inflows, trade and travel were evident across the world. Commodity markets also experienced sharp declines; for instance, oil prices fell by nearly 50% between January and April 2020 (CEIC Data 2020). Simultaneously, widespread business closures and rising unemployment led to an estimated global loss of 13.5 million jobs, according to the ILO. Meanwhile, the gap between rich and poor widened considerably (Schoch et al. 2022). In underdeveloped and developing contexts, the repercussions were particularly severe. The number of people living in extreme poverty rose from 71 million to 395 million during the pandemic, with the majority located in sub-Saharan Africa (see also African Union [AU] 2020).

■ COVID-19 has changed education forever

Furthermore, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic extended beyond health and socioeconomic domains. In retrospect, most educationalists concur with Michael Kucinsky's (n.d.) observation cited above. The so-called 'lockdown' produced far-reaching consequences for educational systems globally, with especially severe consequences for educational systems in the Two-Thirds World and across Africa.

The following section examines the impact of COVID-19 on education and training, with particular attention to theological education as experienced by NetACT member institutions. To situate this discussion, a brief introduction to the Network's history, aims and activities is provided first.

■ NetACT: Collaborating toward theological teaching excellence in Africa

Officially established in Lusaka in 2001, NetACT is a network of theological institutions, including universities, seminaries and colleges.⁶⁴ From its inception as a modest network of five institutions, NetACT has since expanded to encompass 54 member institutions across 15 African countries: Angola, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Kenya, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, Nigeria, Rwanda, South Africa, South Sudan, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe. Although its founding members were largely drawn from Reformed and Presbyterian traditions, the network has subsequently broadened to encompass a diverse array of Christian traditions, including Evangelical, Anglican, Orthodox and Pentecostal institutions. Collectively, the Network serves more than 20,000 students, with approximately one-third enrolled in diploma or certificate programmes, one-third pursuing undergraduate degrees and one-third engaged in postgraduate studies. Instruction is provided by over 1,000 lecturers, both full-time and part-time. The size of member institutions varies considerably, ranging from fewer than 50 students to several hundred, and in some cases exceeding 1,000. The Network's central objective is to advance contextually relevant teaching and training for both staff and students. This goal is pursued through a wide range of initiatives, including institutional capacity-building, bursary identification, staff and student exchanges, research and publication and the organisation of conferences, workshops and symposia. Further efforts

64. The history of the first decade of NetACT's existence can be found in an article by one of its founding members, Professor Jurgens Hendriks (Hendriks 2012). Up-to-date news and information regarding membership, projects, aims, objectives, etc., are available on the Network's website at <https://netact.org.za/wordpress/>. The Network also includes several non-training associate members, such as Bible societies, churches, accreditation agencies, faith-based organisations (FBOs) and theological publishers.

encompass curriculum development projects and targeted support for teaching and physical infrastructure (cf. De Roest 2019, pp. 67–71).

In 2016, NetACT introduced the NetACT Internet Portal (NIP), granting staff and students of member institutions access to thousands of open-access theological resources, librarian and educational training, online theological lectures and interactive discussion forums. This platform proved particularly valuable during the COVID-19 pandemic. The following sections return to that context, examining the challenges encountered and lessons learned by teaching institutions broadly, and by NetACT institutions specifically.

□ **NetACT, COVID-19 and theological education: Changing the way we teach**

During the COVID-19 pandemic, educational institutions experienced an unprecedented disruption – unparalleled in recent global memory. Governments worldwide were compelled to act swiftly and decisively to contain the spread of the virus. Among the most prominent measures was the imposition of widespread lockdowns, which at times restricted all but the most essential socioeconomic and health-related sectors. Schools and tertiary institutions were directly affected by these closures.

At the peak of school closures in April 2020, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) reported that more than 1.6 billion students, representing 96% of all learners and nearly one-fifth of the global population, were out of school across over 190 countries. In Africa, the duration of closures in 2020 alone ranged between 100 and 200 days. One year later, in April 2021, more than 800 million learners – representing half of the global student population – remained affected by full or partial school closures, with schools entirely closed in 29 countries (UNESCO 2023). In Africa, nearly 96% of countries participating in a UNESCO survey reported complete closure at some stage during the pandemic (Anyanwu & Salami 2021, p. S11). Comparable disruptions were experienced across tertiary education institutions worldwide.

Overall, African universities – and other tertiary institutions – occupied a particularly precarious position. As noted by Malawian scholar Paul Zeleza (2021):

Universities in Africa were among the most affected and least able to manage the multi-pronged crises because of their pre-existing capacity challenges that centred on ten dimensions, namely, institutional supply, financial resources, human capital, research output, physical and technological infrastructures, leadership and governance, academic cultures, quality of graduates, patterns of internationalisation, and global rankings. (p. 1)

□ **Moving online**

Prolonged lockdowns and the closure of schools, universities and colleges necessitated an abrupt departure from traditional face-to-face teaching. The rapid transition to unfamiliar modes of instruction intensified pre-existing challenges. Learning outcomes, poverty and inequality – already at crisis levels prior to the COVID-19 pandemic – deteriorated significantly, contributing to increased dropout rates.⁶⁵ Globally, modern technology was initially perceived as an immediate solution for sustaining teaching during institutional closures. Consequently, teachers and lecturers across the world were compelled to adopt online modes of instruction. In Africa, however, this transition had to take place against the backdrop of the staggering so-called global digital divide.⁶⁶

The digital divide refers to 'the gap between those who have and do not have access to computers and the [i]nternet' (Van Dijk 2006, p. 221). The digital divide, however, extends beyond questions of access. As Muller and Aguiar (2022) observe, it encompasses dimensions of affordability (in relation to other essential expenditures or household income), quality of service (including upload and download speeds) and relevance (such as requisite skills, local interest and language). Additional divides also emerge, including those related to security, digital literacy and the freedom to utilise available technologies.

Numerous studies undertaken during the COVID-19 pandemic emphasised the pressing imperative of expanding access to digital technologies. According to the Digital Global April 2021 Snapshot Report by *Datareportal* (Kemp 2021), more than 60% of the global population – over 4.72 billion out of 7.85 billion people – were using the internet by April 2021. Additionally, approximately 5.27 billion people, or 67.1% of the world's population, were using mobile phones. However, while between 90% and 97% of people in Northern and Western Europe and Northern America had internet access, the rates were dramatically lower in regions such as Eastern and Central Africa – at just 24% and 26%, respectively.⁶⁷ Beyond the headline statistics, several troubling realities became evident. In 2022, internet affordability in Africa ranked lowest globally – 83% less affordable than in

65. Unfortunately, as girls were more likely to drop out of school or studies and were also more vulnerable to violence during lockdowns, the COVID-19 pandemic posed an even higher risk to girls' education and well-being, especially in traditionally paternalistic contexts (see World Bank Group 2022). Technical and vocational education and training (TVET) was also especially hard hit as it required on-the-job exposure and training, which was impossible as most places of employment were closed (cf. Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University 2020).

66. The 'digital divide' refers to 'the gap between people in society who have full access to digital technologies (such as the internet and computers) and those who do not' (Baker et al. 2020).

67. Data as supplied by the International Telecommunication Union (2022).

Oceania, the most affordable region. Although only 8.2% of the global population resided in countries with internet penetration below 50%, Africa recorded the lowest overall penetration worldwide, in sharp contrast to Europe, which reached 90%. The global average of mobile broadband subscriptions stood at 87 per 100 inhabitants, yet in Africa the figure was less than half, at 42. Likewise, while the global average bandwidth was 233 kbit/s, Africa lagged significantly behind with an average of only 85.⁶⁸

The challenges outlined above were likewise integral to the COVID-19 experience within NetACT institutions.⁶⁹ Initially, not all lecturers and students were aware of the variety of technological resources available or how to use them. The Network sought to support member institutions encountering difficulties in transitioning to online teaching. To this end, an online theological teaching conference was convened on 09 September 2020 and was well attended, although a few institutions were unable to participate due to limited internet connectivity. In July 2020, a survey was conducted among members of NetACT regarding the challenges they experienced.⁷⁰ A total of 48 member institutions participated. Several small rural schools lacked internet connectivity altogether, rendering participation in online workshops impossible. Limited or intermittent access was a common challenge across all surveyed countries, particularly in Nigeria and Angola, while frequent electricity disruptions in rural areas further constrained their capacity to engage in remote learning.

Network for African Congregational Theology institutions with internet connectivity transitioned to online teaching to varying extents, with some characterising the shift as ‘first steps into a new world’. A range of platforms was employed, including Zoom, Google Classroom, Google Meet, and Microsoft Teams. Many students, however, lacked access to adequate computer hardware and faced prohibitive data costs, rendering WhatsApp the platform of choice for a significant number. In such cases, lectures were conducted through WhatsApp groups, and reading materials were distributed via the application for subsequent discussion.

Government responses to the challenge of internet access varied considerably. In countries such as South Africa and Kenya, contracts were negotiated with internet service providers and mobile phone

68. In Africa, this is true even in contexts such as South Africa, where it may not generally be expected (cf. Hertzog & Swart 2018).

69. An example can be seen in Rev. Santino Odong Othol, principal of NetACT member Nile Theological College in South Sudan, who thanked the donor, The Outreach Project, for supplying his college with internet connectivity for the first time in six months after the outbreak of the pandemic. This enabled the college to continue its teaching activities, albeit only via WhatsApp (Odong Othol 2022).

70. A shortened report on the findings of the survey can be found here: <https://netact.org.za/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/000-NetACT-summaries-to-OTE-Questions.pdf> (NetACT 2018).

companies – though often restricted to government-funded institutions – to provide students with free data through zero-rated websites and bundles, reduced data rates or discounted smartphones with downpayment agreements. Across nearly all NetACT institutions, however, the shortage of laptops and smartphones among lecturers remained a significant obstacle. In South Africa, some institutions sought to mitigate this by offering students short-term laptop loans during lockdowns (Shoba 2020).

The training of staff for online teaching represented a significant challenge. One strategy to address this was lecturer exchanges, a practice that NetACT had organised and supported prior to COVID-19. During the pandemic, however, these exchanges were conducted virtually rather than through physical visits. In addition, NetACT member institutions encountered cultural and pedagogical challenges in adopting online instruction. According to Knoetze (2021):

[...] online teaching is not just dropping information on electronic platforms or making a few YouTube videos while you are teaching. Online teaching has to do with a whole new culture of teaching, where the classroom is transformed with the sophisticated use of technology [...]. (p. 5)

Often second-career and mature learners, African theology students typically possess limited knowledge of electronic communication – a difficulty that extends beyond mere technical proficiency. In Africa, many believe 'that holistic theological education can take place only in a face-to-face teaching and learning environment, in other words, in contact classes'. Online teaching, often constrained in scope, together with self-directed study, challenges the strict and traditional instructivist paradigm of face-to-face teaching (Knoetze 2021, pp. 5–6). For instance, Mawerenga and Knoetze (2022), in their discussion of teaching in Malawi during COVID-19, cite Maluleka, who observes that:

African students who are influenced by the dominant ubuntu cultural aspect prefer to learn in groups and in close fellowship with each other because the communitarian nature of ubuntu is culturally responsive. Nonetheless, this typical African learning style is against the COVID-19 prevention measures of social distancing and quarantine. (p. 5)

Similarly, another scholar from the University of Malawi is cited as stating:

[7]he COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted our traditional learning style in which we are used to face-to-face teaching or learning, group assignments, and student discussions in small groups. Now the situation is becoming difficult for students to learn alone just using a gadget instead of seeing a lecturer delivering the lesson in class and also not working in groups with fellow students. (Mdoka in Mawerenga & Knoetze 2022, p. 5)

The transition to online and electronic teaching raised concerns not only about internet connectivity and infrastructure but also about students' diminished access to learning materials and resources. During COVID-19,

several libraries, research repositories (e.g. JSTOR and EBSCO) and academic publishers (including Brill, Cambridge University Press and Elsevier) responded by offering students free temporary access (cf. University of the Witwatersrand [Wits] 2020).

In this context, NetACT once again supported many of its member institutions (cf. Mawerenga & Knoetze 2022, pp. 7–8). Notably, in 2016 the network launched a transformative initiative through the establishment of NIP.⁷¹ The portal provides access to thousands of open-access theological resources, alongside educational and librarian training, theological lectures, and discussion forums for staff and students of member institutions. As part of the initiative, librarians within the Network received both online and in-person training to utilise and promote the portal. Since 2020, the portal has also offered free access to all NetACT publications, including *The African Journal for Church and Society*, the Network's peer-reviewed, open-access electronic journal.

The COVID-19 pandemic not only disrupted the teaching methods of NetACT members but also introduced additional challenges, ultimately reigniting a longstanding debate within the Network regarding the content and orientation of its curriculum.

□ **NetACT, COVID-2019 and theological education: Changing what we teach**

Beyond the immediate impact of COVID-19 lockdowns on teaching continuity, many NetACT institutions experienced severe financial repercussions. These effects were particularly acute for non-government-funded institutions, such as private and church-owned seminaries and colleges, which constitute the majority of NetACT members.

In the absence of online technologies and electronic teaching modes, some NetACT institutions experienced immediate declines in student registration, in certain cases reaching 50%. Job losses and reduced sponsorship income further limited students' ability to pay tuition fees. Coupled with diminished support from overseas donors, particularly sponsoring churches, these factors produced a cascading effect that threatened the viability of many, especially smaller, NetACT institutions. Teaching staff endured reduced salaries, in some cases following months without pay, while others were retrenched or compelled to take unpaid leave. Network for African Congregational Theology sought ways to provide assistance to these members, even if only to a limited extent. In 2020, NetACT secured financial assistance amounting to nearly two

71. See the NetACT Information Hub at <https://hub.netact.org.za/>.

million rands from Barnabas Aid. A total of 40 applications for support were submitted; however, given the limited funds available, only 20 institutions in the most critical circumstances could be assisted. These institutions were mainly from Angola, Namibia, Nigeria, Ethiopia, Kenya, Zimbabwe, Malawi and South Sudan. Institutions were unable to meet staff salary obligations and also struggled to maintain school infrastructure. Moreover, some institutions could not close entirely during lockdowns, as a number of students, particularly those from neighbouring African countries, were unable to return home and continued to require food and accommodation.⁷²

The financial challenges confronting many African churches were well-documented even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, as was the precarious financial viability of African schools of theology. Africa is 'littered with financially stressed theological training programs' and '[f]inancial dependency is common to almost all these [*theological*] institutions' (Gatwa 2003, quoted in Bellon 2017, p. 21). During the COVID-19 pandemic, the consequences of this situation became particularly acute. Even in South Africa, which has a relatively strong economy compared to the rest of the continent, the South African Council of Churches reported that 'many churches could not even pay their ministers/pastors' (Stoltz 2021). Noting that '[m]ost Sub-Saharan African churches depend on offerings as their only source of income', Timothy Muthusi (2020) of Scott Christian University, a Kenyan NetACT member institution, remarked in 2020 that:

During Covid [...] churches face uncertainty about paying bills and staff salaries, and this uncertainty trickles down to seminaries, as church giving to seminaries may stop. Most seminary students depend on local churches to pay their seminary tuition [...] (p. 64)

The experiences of NetACT institutions, their staff and students during the pandemic underscored the profound financial vulnerability of these institutions and, more specifically, the precarious position of the majority of churches, congregations and pastors.

□ ***'Do not quit your day job!': Reconsidering bivocational ministries***

Even prior to the onset of COVID-19, many NetACT members had become increasingly aware of the financial precarity facing theology graduates. As Johannes Knoetze, then the NetACT representative from North-West University in South Africa, observed, some graduates may be unable to enter full-time ministry 'because congregations cannot provide for their

72. Some NetACT institutions in Angola, for example, faced a particular challenge. Here, churches and parents often provide food for students in residences. During COVID-19, this source of food dried up due to travel restrictions, and the custom of arranging the academic calendar to allow students to return home to assist their families during the harvest served no purpose, once again due to travel restrictions.

daily needs or salaries' (Knoetze 2021, p. 12). Similarly, John Thiga (2021) of Pan African Christian University in Kenya reports on a study of 150 pastors from the Worldwide Gospel Church of Kenya, noting that:

[P]astors [*must*] start earning a livelihood outside the church in order to cushion themselves in such times as the pandemic which has resulted in a decline in members' giving as a result of mass job loss. (p. 44)

This is the reason why Knoetze (2021) also asks:

Is training students to minister in struggling township-and-village churches in Africa the same as training ministers to serve in affluent suburban churches? This does not imply that township-and-village ministers must get a lesser theological education; it means that they might need a different theological education. (p. 7)

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many institutions encountered online teaching for the first time as an alternative mode of theological education. Yet, as the scholars noted above suggest, the challenge extended beyond pedagogy to the very *content* of instruction. In this context, renewed attention to bivocational or tentmaking ministry and its associated training has emerged as a significant theme.

Bivocational ministry is sometimes referred to as multivocational, covocational, dual career, partially funded ministry or, most commonly, tentmaking ministry. In short, bivocational ministry refers to:

[...] a combination of religious and secular employment (paid or unpaid) [...] Bivocational ministry is contrasted with univocational (full-time, fully funded) ministry as well as part-time ministry not accompanied by other significant employment or volunteer work. (Stephens 2021, p. 1)

Examples of such ministry can be traced back to the earliest history of the church – and indeed to the Bible itself:

In the context of Scripture, we can trace the historical origins of tentmaking back through the Old Testament; to Abraham as he left the security of home pastures and ventured into new unknown territory; to Joseph as he used his administrative wisdom in the service of the Pharaoh; to Daniel as he rose high in the diplomatic service of Nebuchadnezzar. In the New Testament, Jesus himself was best known for a number of years in his secular role as a carpenter before he devoted Himself to His ministry. (Cox 1997, p. 111)

The significance of bivocational ministry has long been recognised in Western contexts, particularly in post-Christian societies and in unreached or Christian minority settings, where it has functioned primarily as a missional strategy. For instance, the topic featured prominently at Lausanne II (Manila, July 1989) and was formalised in the 'Lausanne Statement on Tentmaking' (cf. Cox 1997, p. 114). This momentum subsequently led to the establishment of Tentmakers International (originally Tentmakers International Exchange) shortly after the Congress (cf. Guthrie 1995). In Africa, however, bivocational ministry is driven less by missionary imperatives than by operational necessity – serving not primarily to advance evangelism but to secure the

survival of ministers and the congregations they lead. Nevertheless, the pragmatic adoption of bivocational ministry may also be understood as missional, particularly within congregations shaped by communal ecclesiologies and distinctive views of ordained ministry.

Furthermore, Bellon (2017) notes an exciting development that seems to support the idea of bivocational training, namely that:

[...] a new breed of seminarian is rising – seminarians prepared to explore emerging innovations upon older ministry training approaches [...] now enrol as part-time students while maintaining their jobs and hope to serve as either full-time or bi-vocational pastors. (pp. 27–28)

Second-career ministry presents students with significant challenges of time and finance, as they must first acquire another trade before embarking – often years later – on a theological or ministerial vocation. Internationally, and particularly in so-called First World contexts, this model is the one most frequently referenced in discussions of bivocational ministry training. Such training typically enables students to retain their employment while pursuing part-time, often online, theological studies supplemented by periodic contact sessions.⁷³

In Africa, however, the primary need differs, as ministerial callings remain abundant and are often discerned during secondary school. Consequently, there is a pressing need to equip students simultaneously for ministry and for another vocation. For such students, bivocational training offers a practical solution, reducing both time and financial costs.

Nevertheless, theological curricula have yet to reflect this need. Although there are notable examples of successful African bivocational ministries, considerable resistance persists among churches and pastors, for whom such ministry is often regarded as a 'second-best' option. Tagwirei (2022) discusses the situation in Zimbabwe, focusing on the period of the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath where:

[S]elf-sustaining strategies such as tent-making ministry remain highly contested as some pastors perceive that it may divert their attention from the work of the ministry while others recognise it as contextually needful. (p. 1)

The ambivalent view of bivocational ministry often leaves pastors with an identity crisis, as they navigate two worlds or serve two masters – the ministry and the world of business and/or employment (Tagwirei 2022, p. 8).

Bivocational training does not deny the importance of traditional training, such as in Christian dogma or biblical languages, but acknowledges the significance of curricula that include 'other courses, especially those that are directly addressing the needs of the African context' (Murithi 2014, p. 50).

73. See, for example, the case study by Stephens (2021) on the establishment of bivocational training at the Lancaster Theological Seminary (Lancaster, PA).

Building on what De Roest terms ‘NetACT’s radical contextualisation’, the financial vulnerability of African churches, highlighted once more by the COVID-19 pandemic, has reignited debates concerning the benefits, limitations and training of bivocational ministry. Over the past decade, support for bivocational training among African pastors has grown steadily. Magezi and Banda, for instance, cite Gondongwe’s study of the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe, which urges poorly paid ministers to engage in business activities to supplement their meagre salaries. Yet, Gondongwe (in Magezi & Banda 2017) also lamented that theological education continues to prepare pastors primarily for evangelisation, neglecting their economic participation and broader engagement in society.

Finally, it is necessary to consider how bivocational training might be integrated into theological institutions without requiring successive preparation for two distinct careers – a pathway that would be both practically and financially unattainable for most African students. Knoetze (2021) proposes the establishment of:

[...] interdisciplinary qualifications [that] may consist of 50% theological content and 50% content in other disciplines, like nursing, education, Indigenous Knowledge Systems, et cetera. [... *also*] to support diagonal, vertical, and horizontal articulation into qualifications [... *that*] would enable holders of (interdisciplinary) qualifications in theology to pursue a variety of careers, including NGO work, youth work, community services, journalism, media, teaching, or occupations that are concerned with people and their values, community development, community care, social services, and disaster and relief management. (pp. 12–13)

The possibility of interdisciplinary training exists within several NetACT institutions, particularly those universities that host a range of faculties offering programmes in education, information technology (IT), business and entrepreneurship. This pattern is evident not only in public universities but also in church-owned private institutions, where fees from non-theological programmes frequently sustain the smaller theological departments. A significant illustration of this vision is the Kinkuni project in Angola, which NetACT has supported for several years and which embodies a practical model of bivocational training.

□ ***Revisiting and renewing the Kinkuni model of theological training***⁷⁴

Founded in 1934 by Anglican missionaries in rural northeastern Angola, approximately 500 kilometres from Luanda, the Kinkuni Mission functioned for nearly three decades as one of the seminaries of the Igreja Evangélica Reformada de Angola (IERA). Today, IERA comprises roughly 300,000

74. The story of Kinkuni, the Kinkuni project, its progress and NetACT’s involvement can be found online at <https://netact.org.za/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Kinkuni-brosjyre.pdf> (NetACT 2018).

members across more than 600 predominantly rural congregations in 12 of Angola's 18 provinces, served by 409 pastors, many of whom possess only primary school education and limited biblical training. The original seminary, constructed in 1940, was twice destroyed: First in 1961 during an uprising against Portuguese colonial rule, and again in 1987, after its reconstruction in 1978, amid the 16-year civil war that followed independence in 1975 and continued until 1991.

During the civil war in 1988, IERA relocated its pastoral training to Luanda, an overcrowded and costly urban centre ill-suited to theological education, particularly for candidates from rural areas seeking to serve in their home regions. In 2014, NetACT initiated its involvement in the Kinkuni project, which seeks to re-establish and rebuild the Kinkuni Seminary. The long-term vision is to restore the original model of theological training practiced by missionaries nearly a century ago when:

Kinkuni became well-known for being a centre that offered training in skills, such as carpentry, shoemaking, blacksmithing, and farming. The centre also offered primary school education and training for pastors. These pastors also learned other skills and were called masters for their ability to teach the Bible and practice their trade wherever they served.

In the years following its foundation, Kinkuni intentionally prepared pastors for a bivocational existence, equipping them with practical skills in specific trades alongside their ministerial formation; thus serving a distinctly missionary objective. The re-established Kinkuni seeks to adopt a similar curriculum, combining both missional and pragmatic aims. The latter reflects the urgent need to ensure the survival of pastors serving congregations that cannot provide adequate financial support. Accordingly, the 'new Kinkuni' envisions incorporating into its curriculum training modules in areas such as 'road maintenance, carpentry, plumbing, motor vehicle maintenance, electricity, health and youth related causes'.

After a decade, the Kinkuni Skills Training Centre and Seminary remains unrealised. Progress has been impeded by substantial costs (estimated at 5.6 million USD), shortages of building materials, the long distances required for their transport, and bureaucratic obstacles including corruption. Although construction expertise is costly, labour expenses are mitigated by the commitment of IERA presbyteries to provide voluntary labour for each of the planned 'modules' – administration building, lecture halls, student and staff housing, chapel, cafeteria and others – with participants simultaneously receiving training in construction skills. In this way, even during its reconstruction, Kinkuni Seminary contributes to embedding bivocationality within the church.

■ Conclusion

This chapter has provided an overview of what is arguably one of the most significant and traumatic events of the 21st century – the COVID-19 pandemic. It examined both the spread and impact of the pandemic, with particular attention to its effects on theological training within the 54 NetACT institutions. The analysis demonstrated that the ostensibly ‘logical’ shift to TML, necessitated by widespread societal and educational lockdowns, was fraught with challenges and, in many cases, proved unfeasible for NetACT institutions due to a range of contextual constraints. The challenges of transitioning to online platforms were not the only difficulties confronting NetACT. Financial strain and the struggle for institutional survival further exposed the precarious economic foundations of theological training across the continent. This recognition has reignited discourse on the need for genuinely contextual approaches to pastoral formation, with particular emphasis on bivocational training, conceived not solely as a missionary strategy, but equally, and often primarily, as a pragmatic response to economic realities. Such training is expected to empower churches and congregations to sustain growth while being served by pastors who are no longer dependent on tithes or international funding, but who are instead able to support themselves and their families independently. Network for African Congregational Theology’s involvement in the Kinkuni project in Angola provides a concrete example of how this vision of bivocational training is being pursued, though it remains not yet fully realised.

Exploring co-teaching in higher education: Core elements for a practical approach

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■ Abstract

In this chapter, we highlight how co-teaching can address crucial issues in higher education (HE). In this case, the need for interdisciplinary collaboration, reflective practice and professional development is essential. As researchers in pedagogy, we collaborate with theology educators within the Norwegian Agency for International Cooperation and Quality Enhancement in Higher Education (DIKU) on the Teaching and Learning Theology in Crisis (TLC) project. Through this partnership, we position co-teaching as a means of jointly reflecting upon and critically evaluating teaching practices. In our study, we present the HE observation model we previously developed in earlier project work, comprising assessment, interpretation, judgement and self-evaluation, to demonstrate how it can support reflection, professional dialogue and pedagogical development in co-teaching contexts. We also show how the GLL model (Happened [*Gjort*], Learned [*Lært*], Ideas [*Lurt*]) can structure individual and collaborative learning through reflective practice. Grounded in digital classroom observations and collaborative work with theology educators, we reflect on how co-teaching can enhance student learning, support interdisciplinary engagement and foster professional growth. This chapter offers practical guidance for implementing co-teaching and contributes conceptual tools for researchers examining collaborative teaching in HE.

■ Introduction

How can co-teaching in higher education (HE) elevate the learning experience and ignite professional growth for educators, particularly in the dynamic field of theology? As part of the Norwegian Agency for International Cooperation and Quality Enhancement in Higher Education (DIKU), the research project Teaching and Learning Theology in Crisis (TLC), which involves co-teaching across institutional and cultural barriers, inspired us to shed light on this topic. Co-teaching, where multiple instructors collaboratively plan, deliver and assess a course, offers a unique way to blend diverse perspectives and teaching styles (Damiani & Drelick 2024; Kim & Pratt 2024). This method contrasts sharply with the traditional format, in which a single educator bears full responsibility for a course, limiting classroom diversity of perspectives and pedagogical approaches. So, how do we make it work, what hurdles might we face, and what can it ultimately achieve? Specifically, we ask: What can co-teaching offer educators and students that is distinct from the experience of teaching and learning in a solitary format? This inquiry is particularly relevant in the wake of various crises and shifts in education, which bring new possibilities and challenges for teaching, for example, through technological innovation and

the integration of artificial intelligence (AI) (Jermstad & Holovchuk 2024; Holovchuk et al. 2024; Jermstad & Rønning 2024; Goth et al. 2020).

■ The practice and impact of co-teaching

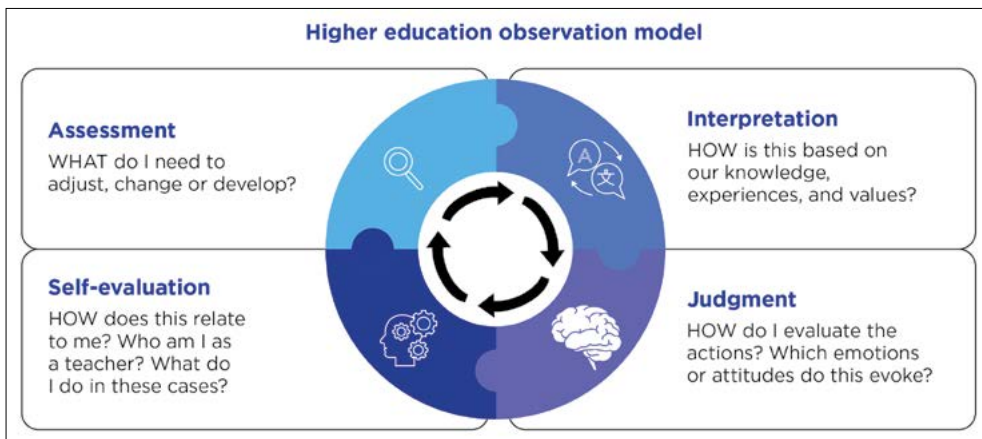
Co-teaching has historical roots in collaborative educational practices. Oral storytelling, for instance, has historically served as a means of collectively sharing and constructing knowledge. Co-teaching has roots in collaborative educational traditions, from oral storytelling and the dialogic nature of the Socratic method to progressive movements in the 20th century (Wells 1999; Seeskin 1987; Dewey 1916). Dewey emphasised experiential and democratic learning, laying the groundwork for practices like group teaching. Co-teaching continues this tradition by integrating diverse perspectives through structured collaboration, enriching the educational experience. In this sense, co-teaching offers a range of benefits that set it apart from traditional solo teaching. Co-teaching is a multidimensional approach to teaching practice and requires good planning, shared values and goals (Fogarty & Tschida 2024, p. 151). For students, co-teaching provides a richer educational experience by exposing them to multiple perspectives and disciplinary approaches.

Rooks et al. (2022) emphasise that co-teaching benefits students in interdisciplinary settings, where they can engage with diverse fields of knowledge and develop a more nuanced understanding of complex issues. In theology education, where students often grapple with profound and multifaceted questions, having multiple instructors with different expertise can significantly enhance the learning process. For educators, it offers opportunities for professional growth and reflective practice. The concept of the 'reflective practitioner', as articulated by Schön (1983), is particularly relevant here. Schön's model emphasises the importance of reflection in action – thinking about what one is doing while doing it – as a key component of professional practice. Co-teaching naturally fosters this reflective process, as instructors must continually negotiate, discuss and adapt their teaching strategies in response to the dynamic classroom environment. Morelock et al. (2017) highlight that co-teaching allows instructors to engage with ideas, perspectives and approaches that may not emerge in solitary teaching contexts, thereby enhancing their pedagogical practice.

Co-teaching also facilitates professional development by creating opportunities for educators to learn from one another. Damiani and Drelick (2024) discuss how previous relationships and a shared understanding of teaching practices can influence the effectiveness of a co-teaching partnership. This collaboration can lead to the development of professional learning communities, where educators not only share knowledge but also engage in critical reflection on their teaching practices.

Observation is central to the practice of co-teaching. Observation may be unconscious or conscious, influencing further reflection. Through the TLC project, we were invited into several digital classrooms and observed multiple co-teaching sessions. We also contributed to reflection on teaching practices, with the aim of supporting improvements in theology education. Drawing on this experience, we developed an observation model that supports reflection and professional development in co-teaching, and which we actively apply in both research and teaching practice. In addition, the model is used for reflective dialogue with colleagues.

To highlight how co-teaching can strengthen quality and contribute to professional development, we present our recently published HE observation model, Figure 16.1, which includes four interconnected elements: Assessment, interpretation, self-evaluation, and judgement (Jermstad, Holovchuk & Jokstad 2024).



Source: Jermstad, L, Holovchuk, S & Jokstad, G 2024, 'Colleague observation in interdisciplinary academic collaboration: Quality and innovation in education', in B Norheim & S Weber (eds.), *Glocal theological education: Teaching and learning theology in the light of crisis*, Wipf & Stock Publishers, Eugene, OR, pp. 171-188

FIGURE 16.1: Higher education observation model.

The four components mentioned above play a crucial role in teachers' overall didactic and pedagogical knowledge, as well as their ability to adapt in a continuous process aimed at improving the quality of HE and fostering professional conversations among co-teachers (Jermstad et al. 2024). The four components are:

- **Assessment.** In professional development, we should have a clear understanding of the aim, what we want to change or develop in our teaching practice and which tools and methods are useful for students and for collaboration with them.
- **Interpretation.** Interpretation refers to how teachers understand the overall goal of the topic and reflect on the learning activities. The goals

of meaningful co-teaching include fostering a positive classroom climate and improving students' learning outcomes.

- Judgement. This is based on the teacher's observation of student activities. As co-teachers, we should be aware of the strategies we are using in our teaching practice to engage students in active learning and help them achieve their learning outcomes.
- Self-evaluation. Self-evaluation is based on teachers' overall didactic and pedagogical knowledge and their ability to adjust their didactic approaches.

The HE observation model might serve as a starting point for professional dialogues, as it presents an overall structure while inviting individual interpretation. However, co-teaching is not without its challenges. Roland and Jones (2020) identify potential issues, such as student confusion about the authority of different instructors and the possibility that co-teachers might dominate the classroom, limiting students' ability to engage and direct their own learning. Additionally, the financial and logistical constraints of institutions may limit the feasibility of implementing co-teaching, particularly in specialised courses that target specific student populations. Despite these challenges, the benefits of co-teaching – when implemented thoughtfully – can outweigh the drawbacks, especially in fostering a collaborative and reflective learning environment. Kim and Pratt (2024) further emphasise that successful co-teaching requires careful planning and communication. Faculty must jointly plan how the course will be developed, taught and graded, addressing any differences in teaching philosophies to prevent conflicts during the course. Open and honest communication, as Kelly (2018) notes, is a foundational principle of effective co-teaching, enabling both instructors and students to navigate the complexities of this collaborative model.

■ Co-teaching in the context of crisis: Reflective practice and adaptation

The integration of co-teaching into HE can be seen as both a response to and an opportunity within the context of crisis, as demonstrated through our involvement in the project and our collaboration with theological educators. These experiences have reinforced our understanding of co-teaching as a reflective and adaptive practice, one that supports professional dialogue, encourages shared responsibility and fosters resilience in times of uncertainty. Working alongside theological educators allowed us to engage in critical reflection on teaching practices and explore how co-teaching can offer new pedagogical possibilities in response to shifting educational demands. Crisis theory offers a framework for understanding the unpredictable and chaotic nature of crises, which

resist traditional analytical tools and require innovative responses. As Topper and Lagadec (2013) observe, crises are characterised by a departure from conventional references, formats and codes, thereby requiring adaptive strategies to respond effectively to their impact. One theoretical framework that addresses this reality is pedagogy for the unforeseen (Torgersen 2015).

The 'unforeseen' refers to crises or unexpected events that demand responses outside of conventional methods. In the context of HE – and particularly theological education – crises can take many forms, including declining enrolment, financial instability and the perceived diminishing relevance of theology in contemporary society. Traditional curricula in theological institutions may fail to address the pressing issues of our time, thereby deepening these challenges. Cordero, Mascareño and Chernilo (2017) expand on this understanding by emphasising the reflexivity of crises – how they not only disrupt but also provide opportunities for self-reproduction and deeper engagement with societal complexities. This perspective is crucial for theological education, which must continually adapt to remain relevant in a rapidly changing world. Samman (2015) adds another dimension by exploring how historical imagination influences our response to crises, suggesting that our interpretations of past crises shape how we address current ones. This meta-historical approach is particularly relevant in theology, where historical context and tradition play significant roles.

■ Examples of unforeseen events or crises in higher education

Higher education is a dynamic environment where unforeseen events and changes often require educators to adapt quickly, sometimes deviating from their original plans. This demand for flexibility highlights the value of co-teaching as an effective strategy across various areas. Co-teaching, where two or more instructors collaboratively plan, teach and assess a course, enables improvisation and adaptation in response to rapidly changing circumstances. Whether navigating the integration of digital tools and AI, addressing declining enrolment in professional studies or balancing evidence-based and value-based education, co-teaching offers a robust framework for collaboration, innovation and resilience. The ability to draw on the expertise and perspectives of multiple educators not only enriches students' learning experience but also equips educators to tackle the complex challenges facing HE today. The following section outlines three domains in which co-teaching can be particularly fruitful.

■ Integrating artificial intelligence and digital tools in education

The pandemic, as Kim and Pratt (2024) argue, forced educators to rethink and adapt their teaching practices, including co-teaching. This crisis highlighted the importance of flexibility, adaptability and collaboration in education – qualities central to co-teaching. The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic exemplifies a recent crisis that has dramatically impacted HE (Goth et al. 2020).

Furthermore, the integration of AI and digital tools into HE presents both opportunities and challenges, making adaptability to digitalisation and AI crucial for the future educational landscape (Jermstad & Holovchuk 2024; Jermstad & Rønning 2024). Co-teaching can be a valuable strategy for navigating this integration effectively. By pairing educators with expertise in digital technologies with those skilled in traditional pedagogies, institutions can create a more balanced and innovative learning environment. For instance, one co-teacher could focus on delivering content and engaging students through conventional methods, while the other could incorporate AI-driven tools to enhance interactive learning and personalised feedback. This collaborative approach enables seamless integration of technology into the curriculum and provides students with a richer educational experience. Research could explore how different co-teaching models impact the effectiveness of technology integration and student outcomes, assessing whether such collaborations improve technological fluency and involvement among students (Jermstad & Holovchuk 2024).

■ Addressing declining enrolment in professional studies

The decline in enrolment in professional studies, such as those in education, poses a significant challenge for higher education institutions (HEIs). This trend necessitates a re-evaluation of how these programmes are structured and delivered, potentially leading to the creation or redesign of courses that better align with contemporary needs. Co-teaching can play an important role in this process by making these programmes more interdisciplinary and engaging. For instance, an interdisciplinary co-teaching model that integrates expertise from different fields – such as theoretical knowledge and practical application in novel ways – can offer more comprehensive and appealing learning pathways for students. This approach not only helps bridge the gap between educational offerings and labour market demands but also

fosters innovative curricula that can adapt to changing industry needs. Investigating the effectiveness of co-teaching in reversing declining enrolment and improving retention could yield valuable insights. Research might focus on how interdisciplinary co-teaching influences student interest and success in professional studies, and whether it fosters more flexible and responsive educational programmes.

■ **Balancing ethical, practical and theoretical values**

The tension between evidence-based and value-based education is a critical issue in HE, especially in professional fields where both technical skills and ethical considerations are important (Biesta 2010). Co-teaching can serve as a method to balance these approaches by pairing instructors who emphasise empirical research with those who focus on the ethical and value-based dimensions of their discipline. For instance, in a teacher education programme, one co-teacher might focus on evidence-based instructional strategies, while the other emphasises the importance of developing student-teacher relationships and fostering a supportive learning environment.

Exploring how co-teaching can effectively integrate these perspectives could help institutions develop curricula that better prepare students for the complexities of their professions. Research could investigate how co-teaching influences students' understanding of both evidence-based practices and value-based principles, and whether it leads to more well-rounded and ethical professionals (Schön 1983). Biesta's (2010) argument that education should aim to develop both the individual's capacities and their ability to contribute to society aligns with the goal of balancing these educational approaches. Furthermore, the collaboration inherent in co-teaching aligns with the adaptive strategies suggested by crisis theory. As Cordero et al. (2017) and Samman (2015) highlight, crises require innovative and flexible responses that can address the complex and multifaceted nature of the challenges at hand. Co-teaching, with its emphasis on collaboration and reflection, offers a model well-suited to navigating the uncertainties and disruptions that often characterise crises in HE.

However, the benefits of co-teaching extend beyond crisis management. By fostering a collaborative and reflective learning environment, co-teaching also contributes to the long-term professional development of educators and the establishment of learning organisations within HE. As Damiani and Drelick (2024) and Morelock et al. (2017) suggest, co-teaching creates opportunities for authentic learning and professional development, making it a valuable approach not only in times of crisis but also in the ongoing pursuit of educational excellence.

In the following section, we will explore key elements essential to the practice of co-teaching and reflect on its impact on professional development. We will also present several ideas and models for further reflection.

■ Current or proposed solutions: Examples of model practice, ideas or programmes

Co-teaching in HE is an important means of professional development, both individually and collectively. Individual learning is both the source and the culmination of this process, benefiting both colleagues and the organisation along the way. Professional collaboration can foster development and strengthen individual teachers across educational borders.

The crucial starting point is professional reflection and the importance of contextual awareness in professional practice. Schön's concept of the *reflective practitioner* emphasises how professionals learn and adapt by reflecting on their experiences within specific contexts (Schön 1983, p. 15). Such professional development through collaboration occurs when professionals work closely together and are willing to give each other advice and constructive feedback. It requires a safe environment for constructive collegial guidance (Hargraves & O'Connor 2019, pp. 32–34). For this to happen, it depends on shared values such as collective autonomy, investigative collaboration/collaborative inquiry (CI), collective responsibility, common meaning and purpose, understanding and goals and student-teacher collaboration. One can say that professional work depends on professional relationships and professional communities; therefore, we will begin to emphasise individual learning.

■ Individual learning model – an action research approach

A way to start this process is to take notes in an organised manner. By collecting notes based on facts from various lessons, one can begin a research-based learning model called 'action-based learning' (Tiller 2006). The action-based learning approach emphasises the learner's activity. Its core principles include the requirement that learning should be based on hands-on experiments and activities.

The Norwegian researcher Tom Tiller developed a widely cited three-stage model known as the GLL model (*gjort – lært – lurt*) (Tiller, Gedda & Jørgensen 2017). The model illustrates how actions or events (*gjort*) can serve as a crucial starting point for reflection (*lært*), which may subsequently generate new professional insights and ideas (*lurt*). We can see that

descriptions of what has happened (H), both intentionally and unintentionally, become experiences and potential sources of new insight and learning (L). This requires reflection and a willingness to reflect on the case, and through this, new and innovative ideas might develop (I).

This method of organising self-reflection can be illustrated through Table 16.1.

TABLE 16.1: Reflection and evaluation of teaching practice.

| Happened (<i>gjort</i>) | Learned (<i>lært</i>) | Ideas (<i>lurt</i>) |
|--|---|--|
| <i>Fact-based notes from teaching:</i> | <i>Reflection on the action – professional learning points:</i> | <i>How do I proceed from now on? – professional development:</i> |
| I planned – | What happened in learning? | What do I learn from this? |
| I carried out – | Why did this happen? | How will I act differently? |
| I experienced – | How did I interact? | What do I need to change? |
| I changed – | What could I have foreseen? | What do I need to learn? |
| | What was a surprise? | How do I start this process? |

Source: Authors' own work.

By working systematically on one's own development and learning, we demonstrate a professional approach that transforms teachers into learners.

As teachers, we recognise the importance of self-evaluation and self-assessment. Similarly, we understand the benefits of collaborating with peers. Therefore, in the following discussion, we will focus on professional development through peer collaboration. By combining reflection and action – core elements of professional teaching practice – and by systematically engaging with peers through shared academic approaches, problem-solving, idea exchange and constructive critique, participants are invited to deepen their knowledge and enhance their professional growth (Revans 1982, p. 631).

■ Professional development through learning communities

Action learning is developed through practice communities. By focusing on practical situations, particularly those we are less pleased with, colleagues can become the curatorial element that helps us turn inadequate situations into learning opportunities and foster positive change. Through critical reflection, we can bridge the gap between intention and action, enabling us to better understand our experiences, gain self-awareness and engage more deeply with the professional situations we encounter. This reflective process often requires us to confront discomfort and challenge ourselves rigorously. Existing grounded theories are shared through visions and experiences, becoming the cradle for new professional insights. The ethical dimension is essential when colleagues engage in professional

development, as sensitive or personal issues may arise and risk being mishandled. Navigating this complex human terrain requires both wisdom and an informed, knowledgeable approach (Tiller 2006, p. 57).

■ Wells' knowledge-based learning cycle

According to social constructivist theories, individuals are shaped by and embedded within their contexts, with these influences becoming part of their everyday practices through the mediation of language (Jermstad et al. 2024). Therefore, from a social constructivist perspective, colleagues play a vital role in knowledge development. According to this view, knowledge is not merely an individual acquisition but is co-constructed through interactions and collaborations with others. Colleagues contribute to this process by offering diverse perspectives, challenging assumptions and engaging in meaningful dialogue, thereby enhancing collective understanding and fostering the generation of new ideas. This collaborative environment facilitates the social negotiation of meaning and the refinement of knowledge, demonstrating that the development of expertise and insight is deeply embedded in social contexts and interpersonal relationships.

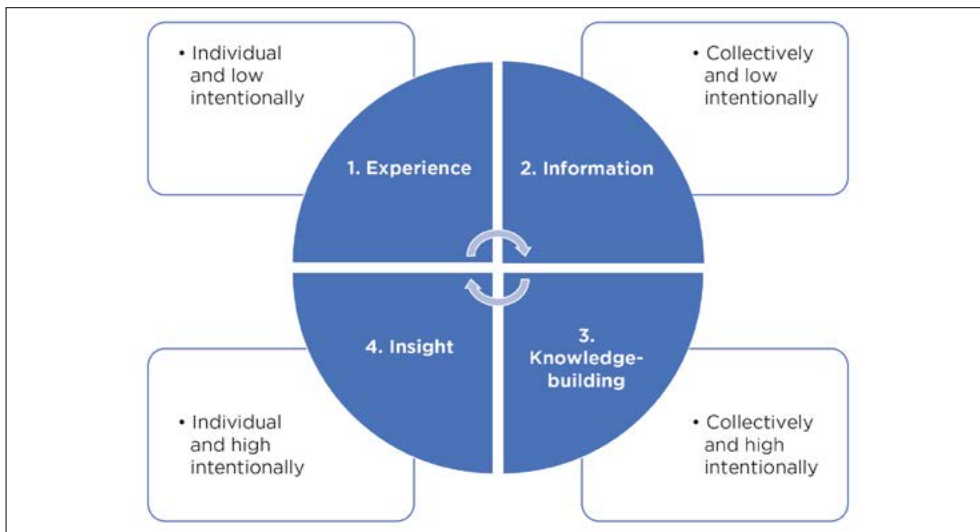
Peers and colleagues are essential elements in the circular process between individual activities and collective communities. According to Wells (1999), the process of professional learning consists of four interconnected stages: Experience (individual), information (peers), knowledge-building (peers) and insight (individual). Individual activities are grounded in one's own experiences and how these may shed light on important issues, ultimately leading to deeper insight into the profession. Experiences are often less intentional than the reflective process that leads to insight.

The next phase of the process involves sharing and creating knowledge as colleagues or as a team. Whereas the exchange of ideas and information may be relatively low in intentionality, the construction of shared knowledge requires more complex processes and heightened awareness. The experiences individuals carry are influenced by their cultural backgrounds, emotions and contexts. This is contingent on how a person interprets a situation and the meaning it creates for them. When experiences are shared with peers, these private, personal interpretations become less influential and peers must assess the importance of the experience. This process is significant, but without further professional dialogue, sharing may sometimes be understood merely as an invitation to care.

Professional development as knowledge-building relies on communities of professionals who are willing to engage deeply with their own experiences, sharing interpretations and reflections on their actions. A trusting environment

and a genuine willingness to listen to one another are essential. These elements create the conditions for the final stage of the process: Personal insight, which leads to meaningful professional growth and development (Wells 1999, p. 84).

Professionals who collaborate will benefit from this model (Figure 16.2), as the process requires personal commitment to sharing actions and reflecting on them, both individually and collectively. In a professional learning community, members share knowledge and resources, engage in co-observation, reflect on their own teaching to improve their practice, consider student evaluations and identify challenges in their teaching practice.



Source: Wells, CG 1999, *Dialogic inquiry: Towards a sociocultural practice and theory of education*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

FIGURE 16.2: Adaptation of Wells' (1999) learning model.

■ Co-teaching as shared learning-ground: Approaches in co-teaching

The goal of co-teaching is to improve teaching practice and contribute to high-quality education through trusting relationships, partnerships and a learning community. The following discussion highlights three areas in HE where co-teaching can contribute to teachers' professional development, thereby increasing their professional competence and knowledge in everyday life and in unforeseen events. Training in this collaborative teaching approach in everyday circumstances will make teachers more resilient in tackling unforeseen challenges. This can enhance their ability to meet various challenges and crises in education in contemporary society.

The three areas include: (1) the connection between theoretical knowledge and practice; (2) interdisciplinary co-teaching; and (3) co-teaching with colleagues from various institutions at local and international levels.

1. There is a good connection between theoretical knowledge and practice. For example, one teacher possesses theoretical knowledge related to the topic, while another, drawing on their own experience, understands how to apply this knowledge in practice and which tools and methods to use to engage students. A sustainable balance between theory and practice is essential for creating a successful and meaningful learning environment. In this particular case, teachers with diverse knowledge and competencies are valuable in co-teaching. Theoretical competencies encompass general knowledge, historical perspectives and facts related to various phenomena and serve as the foundation for several fields. Theoretical knowledge enables the generation and testing of new ideas. Practical knowledge, on the other hand, focuses on how to apply theoretical information in real-world situations. Students' skills are enhanced through practical knowledge gained through reflection, collaborative projects, debates, discussions and other activities.
2. Interdisciplinary co-teaching is an important concept in education. For example, one teacher may have expertise in pedagogy, while others may specialise in theology. Here, we consider different subject traditions that can enhance teaching quality and foster creative, meaningful learning experiences. Interdisciplinary teaching involves combining various approaches to studying. As mentioned previously, one of the advantages of co-teaching is its multidisciplinary nature, which is essential for helping students develop the ability to see connections across disciplines. The interdisciplinary approach focuses on a teacher's understanding of how to enhance students' knowledge related to interdisciplinary topics.

Different ways of thinking can showcase students' diverse problem-solving strategies and approaches through knowledge-sharing. Integrating interdisciplinary knowledge promotes quality improvement in HE. By engaging with various learning areas, students can enhance their capacity to develop their skills and abilities to address challenges. Additionally, a multidisciplinary approach can foster skills such as critical thinking, teamwork, cooperation and creativity.

How can we establish a multidisciplinary environment at the HE level? We can develop teaching programmes that incorporate different learning areas, build a multidisciplinary network, work on common topics (for example, 'digital tools in education', 'ethics in education', 'AI in education', etc.) and create social media learning communities to encourage discussion.

3. Co-teachers from various institutions at local and international levels contribute diverse theoretical and practical perspectives related to subjects, fostering innovative learning. As mentioned earlier, the key elements of 'co-teaching' involve sharing different teaching styles and collaborating effectively. Locally, educators from different institutions can learn from one another and reflect on their own practices, creating successful and productive learning environments and best practices. On a global scale, 'online co-teaching' can be established through various learning platforms like Zoom, Teams and Google Meet. Furthermore, cross-cultural co-teaching requires not only disciplinary understanding but also intercultural competencies, such as effective communication, tolerance and respect among teachers with different cultural backgrounds and teaching styles. A key element of cross-cultural teaching is enhancing quality on a worldwide scale. Effective international co-teaching is built on trustworthy communication, shared values, clear expectations, preparation, flexibility, reflection (among co-teachers and students) and evaluation (self-evaluation and assessment of the learning process).

■ Conclusions and recommendations

Drawing from the experiences discussed in this chapter, the following eight practical recommendations offer guidance for implementing effective co-teaching practices in HE. These tips aim to support collaborative instruction, enhance student engagement and promote professional growth for educators.

1. Establish clear roles and responsibilities.
Clearly define and communicate each co-teacher's roles and responsibilities. Ensure that both instructors share a common understanding of their specific duties and contributions to the course.
2. Promote collaborative planning work.
Engage in joint planning of course content, assessments and activities. Collaborative planning ensures that both instructors' strengths are leveraged and that the course is cohesive and well-integrated.
3. Encourage joint teaching strategy development.
Develop and implement teaching strategies that allow both co-teachers to engage with students. This may include alternating lectures, co-facilitating discussions or conducting joint activities that showcase both instructors' expertise. We can engage the students in active learning through collaboration and co-creation. Examples include dialogue cafés, problem-based learning, microteaching, the use of digital tools, flipped classrooms and working with cases and portfolios.

4. Foster open communication.
Maintain ongoing communication between co-teachers throughout the course. Regular meetings can help ensure alignment and address any emerging challenges.
5. Support student interaction with both instructors.
Create opportunities for students to interact with and learn from both co-teachers. This can include structuring group activities or discussions that involve both instructors, thereby enhancing students' exposure to diverse perspectives.
6. Incorporate diverse teaching styles.
Utilise the different teaching styles and approaches of each co-teacher to enrich the learning experience. Recognise and incorporate each instructor's unique methods and strengths into the course.
7. Adapt and be flexible.
Be open to adapting roles, content delivery and methods based on student feedback and classroom dynamics. Flexibility is essential for responding to students' evolving needs and maintaining a productive co-teaching partnership.
8. Reflect and evaluate together.
Schedule regular reflections on the co-teaching experience and its impact on student learning. Engage in joint evaluations to assess what is working well and identify areas for improvement.

Marcion's teaching, ecclesial crisis and the church's resolution: Lessons on the broken relationship between Scripture and theology for theology teaching

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■ Abstract

This chapter examines the theological and ecclesial crisis precipitated by the second-century figure Marcion of Pontus, whose radical severance of the Old and New Testaments, repudiation of the Jewish Scriptures, and docetic interpretation of Christ compelled a decisive and formative

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response from the early church. Marcion's teachings posed a profound challenge to foundational Christian doctrines – particularly those concerning creation, incarnation and prophetic fulfilment – culminating in a schism that compelled the church to reaffirm its core convictions through the Rule of Faith and the consolidation of a unified scriptural canon. Framed within an educational concern for the benefits of interdisciplinary dialogue, this chapter employs Marcion's case and the church's response as a historical paradigm for addressing contemporary challenges in theology education, especially the persistent fragmentation between biblical studies and systematic theology, and between Old and New Testament scholarship.

■ Introduction

Oriented toward the future of theological education, this chapter asks whether the sub-disciplines of biblical studies and theology might cultivate more generative forms of engagement than is frequently evident today, and whether Old and New Testament scholarship might likewise open more promising pathways for interdisciplinary collaboration. Through canonical approaches, 'two-horizons' initiatives, reception-historical inquiry and related methodologies in biblical studies, such cross-disciplinary interchange suggests that research in the Old Testament or Hebrew Bible, often confined within its own sub-disciplinary domain, may acquire renewed relevance for New Testament scholarship, and vice versa. Moreover, it holds the potential to foster a more substantive and sustained dialogue between biblical scholarship and systematic theology than is typically realised. While specialisation within the various theological sub-disciplines remains necessary, this chapter contends that such specialisation may prove detrimental to the wider academic discipline of Divinity if it results in the sub-disciplines becoming largely isolated from one another. The argument advanced here is that sub-disciplinary interconnectedness is of particular importance for theology that seeks to engage more than one domain and aspires to stand in deeper continuity with the broad Christian exegetical and theological tradition. Accordingly, the chapter focuses on the interrelationship among three scholarly fields: Old Testament studies, New Testament studies and systematic theology.

In what follows, the second-century theologian Marcion of Pontus (b. ca. 100–110 CE) serves as a case study for illustrating the risks posed to Christian theological discourse, whose coherence depends upon the integrity of the Christian message, when biblical exegesis is severed from theology. These risks are especially acute in relation to theology concerned with Jewish and Christian monotheism, the confession of God as Creator and other foundational doctrines, including Trinitarian faith and incarnational Christology.

Between approximately 137 and 144 CE, Marcion advanced a novel theological vision to the Christian communities in Rome – one that the Roman presbytery ultimately deemed unacceptable. Although expelled from the Roman church, Marcion's influence persisted, shaping theological debates both in his own lifetime and in subsequent generations. Marcion went on to establish a prominent and widespread parallel church structure, which over time became increasingly difficult to distinguish from the congregations of the majority church. Yet the theological differences between the two communities remained substantial. In three decisive respects, Marcion departed from standard Christian belief: He severed the church's Jewish heritage by relegating the Creator God to a subordinate divine status and rejecting the Jewish Scriptures; he excised many Jewish elements from his abbreviated New Testament, consisting of Luke and 13 Pauline epistles; and he denied the doctrine of incarnation from the Christian *credo*, advancing instead a docetic Christology. The majority church responded to the crisis precipitated by this schism by reasserting its commitment to the Rule of Faith and to the Jewish and apostolic Scriptures. In the trajectory of subsequent Christian discourse, Marcion was designated a 'heretic', and his central teaching was classified as 'heresy'.

Using Alister McGrath's definition, 'heresy' is here understood as 'a form of Christian belief that, more by accident than design, ultimately ends up subverting, destabilizing, or even destroying the core of Christian faith' (McGrath 2009, pp. 11-12).

The first part of this chapter examines Marcion's distinctive teaching – his separation of the Old and New Testaments and his detachment of biblical exegesis from established Christian theology – together with the ensuing ecclesial and theological crisis and the majority church's response. The discussion then turns to what may be regarded as a structurally parallel phenomenon in modern academic contexts: The separation of biblical studies from theology, and of Old Testament scholarship from New Testament scholarship, within the teaching of theology. The second part of this chapter thus moves beyond the early hermeneutical crisis associated with Marcion to examine the comparably fractured relationship between Scripture and theology in modern and late-modern biblical studies and systematic theology. A central hermeneutical resource for this discussion is the church's early formulation of the Rule of Faith. Three dimensions of this Scripture-oriented Rule of Faith, understood here as the church's primary response to the Marcionite challenge, are highlighted: The necessity of linking Scripture and biblical exegesis with theology rather than separating them; the importance of recognising the inherent structure of the Rule of Faith, particularly its Triune creedal form; and the imperative of affirming the close relationship between the Old and New Testament corpora within Christian discourse.

Employing Marcion's teaching as a dissociative paradigm – an illustrative case of theology that fragments transmitted texts and Scriptures and disrupts established links between Scripture and theology – this chapter raises the question of whether contemporary biblical studies and theology might be brought into closer integration, fostering more fruitful interaction than is often realised.

■ The church's *credo* and Marcion's

The significance of Christian dogma – understood here as defining teaching essential to the identity and functioning of a faith community (cf. McGrath 2024, p. 3) – becomes particularly evident when one examines the early creedal formulations structured around the three articles of faith: God the Father, the Son Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. Against the backdrop of the second- and third-century creedal formularies, which were deeply embedded in early Christian theology, it becomes evident that Marcion's faith and belief system diverged sharply from the church's tradition – so radically, in fact, that the Roman and other Christian communities could no longer accommodate him or his teaching within ecclesial boundaries. Marcion's theology was swiftly judged heretical and deemed unacceptable by the majority of churches, which adhered to the familiar 'orthodox' Christian faith transmitted from the apostolic and sub-apostolic age. According to traditional church teaching, the central problem with Marcion was that he introduced theological distinctions that proved deeply detrimental to the church, precipitating both doctrinal crisis and ecclesial division. To demonstrate the extent of Marcion's divergence, this chapter compares his teaching with three major articles of Christian faith as articulated in the period under consideration. The discussion begins with the first article about God as Creator, attested in the writings of Justin Martyr, Irenaeus and Tertullian, and reflected in various second-century creedal formulations, with antecedents reaching back to the first century and rooted in Jewish monotheistic faith (Bokedal 2013):

We believe in one God the Father, creator of heaven and earth. (p. 235)

Although Marcion (Moll 2010, p. 26) had previously affirmed the first article of the Christian faith (Moll 2010, pp. 27, 115; Staudt 2012; cf. Mahé 1971, p. 359), he no longer regarded this monotheistic *credo* as integral to his newly constructed belief system. Within his emerging dualist framework, the Creator God was conceived as distinct from and subordinate to the good God, the Father of Jesus Christ. While Marcion did not explicitly reject or disparage the Jewish Creator, he nevertheless deemed this deity irrelevant to his redefined understanding of Christian commitment. Consequently, Marcion's new allegiance excluded the first article of faith and thereby failed to affirm the Creator and his creation.

A second-century formulation of the second article of faith could be phrased along the following lines:

We believe that God sent his son Jesus Christ, born as a true human being. (p. 240)

With regard to the Christological article affirming Jesus' humanity, Marcion did not consider this claim integral to his reconfigured Christian faith. His docetic Christology precluded any acknowledgment of Christ as a created human being. Like the second-century majority church, Marcion perceived a close connection between the first and second articles of faith. Yet because he rejected the first article concerning the Creator, he consequently denied that Jesus was a created human being with a physical body.

As for second-century credal material relating to the third article of faith about the Spirit of prophecy, formulations along the following lines could be included:

We believe that the Jewish Scriptures about the one who is to come, the son of David, the son of God and the suffering servant, have been fulfilled and will be fulfilled in Jesus Christ. (p. 241)

Marcion did not accept this prophetic claim as integral to his reconfigured Christian faith. For him, Jesus could not be a descendant of David or of any other human being. To underscore this conviction, Marcion excised the birth and infancy narratives (Lk 2:1–52) as well as the genealogy (Lk 3:23–38) from his version of the Gospel of Luke, maintaining that Christ was 'neither born nor raised' (Moll 2010, p. 93). Such an inference, in turn, excluded prophetic claims as well as the inclusion of Christ's human ancestry. Moreover, Marcion systematically removed most aspects of Judaism from his theological framework. For him, the Jewish Scriptures (Old Testament) and their figures possessed no authority for Christ. This conviction led him to excise passages from his revised Gospel of Luke, including the temptation of Christ (Lk 4:1–13), the sign of Jonah (Lk 11:29b–32), and the cleansing of the Temple (Lk 19:45–46; Moll 2010, pp. 93–97). He likewise omitted extended sections from his Pauline corpus that emphasised Abraham as the father of all believers, 'Israel' and its promises as a positive reference point for the church, and Christ's mediating role in creation (Schmid 1995, p. 182). As a logical consequence, Marcion ultimately rejected essential components of all three principal articles of the early Christian *credo*: The confession of God the Creator, the Son and the Spirit of prophecy.

A theological crisis concerning Christian identity arose in response to the Marcionite rejection of substantial portions of the emerging Christian *credo* (cf. Bokedal 2013; Kelly 1972; Kinzig 2017). In turn, the wider second-century church sought to resolve this crisis by reaffirming the authority of both the Jewish Scriptures and the 'apostolic' writings, thereby consolidating its monotheistic confession, attested 49 times in the canonical New Testament (Staudt 2012, p. 238 n. 61–239), and advancing an anti-docetic Christology,

already discernible in texts such as 1 John and the Ignatian letters. The responses from the majority church reinforced the close connection between Scripture and theology, and between God and creation (Bokedal 2014, pp. 180-184). Marcion, for his part, continued to appeal to the Scriptures, though only after radically contracting his canon to 11 writings: A revised form of the Gospel of Luke together with 13 edited Pauline epistles. In this light, Marcion's theological approach might be characterised as both markedly 'text-critical' and 'purely biblicist' (Moll 2010, p. 29). This interpretation builds upon the widely accepted scholarly consensus that both written Gospels and a Pauline corpus were already in circulation prior to Marcion (cf. Barton 1997, p. 40; Laird 2022; Schmid 1995).

The characterisation of Marcion as 'purely biblicist', however, if defensible at all, entails considerable interpretive cost.

Firstly, Marcion's excision of the Jewish Scriptures from his biblical collection, texts inherited from Judaism and, by then, largely received among the early churches, was momentous. For many, this amounted to discarding what could at that stage be regarded as the church's Scriptures: The sacred writings of Judaism, understood within Christian tradition as those which Christ had come to fulfil.

Secondly, Marcion also excised significant portions of the emerging New Testament canon. The sole Gospel he acknowledged was Luke, though even this he subjected to extensive revision, removing elements of Jewish legal tradition as well as passages affirming a genuine incarnation (Edwards 2009, p. 30). Nonetheless, the evidence indicates that Marcion was attentive to the precise wording of the Scriptures as amended within his 'apostolic' collection. From this, one might argue that Marcion was not simply biblicist but rather antinomian in orientation – systematically excising Jewish legal material and thereby diminishing the role of the one God attested in the Jewish Scriptures, which constituted the sole pre-Christian religious scriptural account in the ancient world (Hurtado 2016, pp. 104-137).

Thirdly, the above critical assessment of Marcion as arguably *not* 'purely biblicist' may be further reinforced by his rejection not only of the Jewish Scriptures but also by his radical separation of the Scriptures, namely his opposition of 'law' and 'gospel', where both terms appear to designate written texts. In this framework, they do not denote 'two different theological entities [...], but simply [...] two different testimonies, the Old Testament on the [one] hand, the New Testament on the other' (Moll 2010, p. 77; Verweij's 1960, p. 243). In this regard, Marcion's principal achievement lies in this sharp division, captured in Tertullian's formulation: 'The separation of Law and Gospel is the actual and principal work of Marcion' (*Separatio legis et evangelii proprium et principale opus est Marcionis, Adv. Marc. I, 19.4*; trans. Moll 2010, p. 77 n. 1).

In sum, by separating the Jewish from the specifically Christian Scriptures and by purging his Gospel of Luke together with 13 Pauline letters of Jewish legal material, Marcion compelled the church to attend more closely to the unity of its Scriptures, typically interpreted through the lens of the Rule of Faith, and to the integrity of the entire collection, including the 'Old Testament'. A valuable pedagogical lesson for contemporary theology, and particularly for Christian theology, may be discerned from Marcion's handling of Scripture and theology and from the ecclesial crisis provoked in response. This lesson, I suggest, underscores the importance of sustaining, contrary to Marcion's programme, a close and constructive relationship between the Old and New Testaments, as well as between Scripture (or biblical studies) and theology across the various theological sub-disciplines. Moreover, Marcion's legacy serves as a critical warning not only to the early church but also to contemporary faith communities and theological discourse: Disregarding the fundamental principles of Christian theology, particularly those concerning the three major articles of faith and their intrinsic interconnectedness (God the Father, the Son Jesus Christ and the Spirit of prophecy, believed to have spoken through the Scriptures), exacts a significant cost. Notably, what was at stake was the continuity of central Christian doctrines and dogma essential to the faith (cf. McGrath 2024, p. 3), in particular, the doctrines of the incarnation and of Triune faith (or the emerging doctrine of the Trinity; cf. McGrath 2024, pp. 10, 120–121, 127–136).

■ Marcion and the emergent ecclesial crisis

As noted above, between approximately 137 and 144 CE, Marcion advanced a new theological programme within the Christian communities of Rome, promulgating teachings that the Roman presbytery ultimately refused to endorse. Consequently, he was excommunicated. Yet, his influence proved substantial, both in second-century Rome and, in due course, across the wider Roman Empire. Following his expulsion from the Roman church, Marcion established a highly influential parallel ecclesial structure. In the ensuing decades, Marcionite congregations became increasingly difficult to distinguish from those of the majority church. Testimonies from Tertullian (ca. 160–220 CE), Cyril of Jerusalem (ca. 315–386 CE) and Epiphanius of Salamis (b. after 310–403 CE) attest to the striking similarities between the two communities, the Marcionite and the Catholic. Marcion appropriated his mother church's practices of baptism and communion, its ecclesiastical structure of bishops and presbyters, and much of its liturgy, including the order of divine service. Nevertheless, the divergences in teaching remained profound.

As emphasised in the foregoing discussion, Marcion deviated from standard Christian beliefs in three major respects. Firstly, he radically

severed the church's Jewish heritage by relegating the Creator God to a lesser divine status and rejecting the Jewish Scriptures altogether. Secondly, he excised many Jewish elements from his reduced 'New Testament'. Thirdly, he eliminated the doctrine of the incarnation (cf. Jn 1:14; 1 Jn 4:2) from the Christian confession, advancing instead a docetic Christology. In these ways, the church was confronted with challenges on multiple fronts.

The majority church responded to the crisis precipitated by the Marcionite split by placing renewed emphasis on the Rule of Faith and its relation to both the Jewish Scriptures and the emerging New Testament. It is reasonable to conclude that the breach between Marcion and the second-century Catholic church was primarily theological in character, especially concerning the doctrine of creation, the confession of Triune faith and divergent approaches to the Jewish Scriptures and the widely received 'apostolic' writings.

Having examined Marcion's teaching, the ensuing ecclesial identity crisis and the majority church's response, this chapter now turns to consider several lessons that may be drawn from the fractured relationship between Scripture and theology, and between the Old and New Testaments – lessons that remain pertinent for contemporary theological pedagogy. The discussion that follows highlights three areas of particular concern: Firstly, the importance of linking rather than dissociating Scripture and biblical exegesis, on the one hand, and theology, on the other; secondly, the need to underscore the internal coherence of the church's Rule of Faith, especially its Triune or Trinitarian and Christological creedal structure; and thirdly, the recognition of the close relationship between the Old and New Testament corpora within Christian exegetical and theological discourse.

■ The broken relationship between Scripture and theology and its potential restoration⁷⁵

For much of the early Christian period, both before and after Marcion, scriptural exegesis and doctrinal theology were often merged or closely interwoven, particularly within the catechetical teaching of the second to fifth centuries. This integrated exegetical-theological approach to instruction was typically reinforced by an emphasis on the Scriptures as a unified whole (Young 1997, p. 7). Among the early church teachers, Origen (ca. 185–254 CE), with his pronounced Christological focus, exemplifies this perspective when he declares that '[a]ll the Scriptures are one book

75. This section is based on an argument presented in Bokedal, Jansen and Borowski (2023, pp. 1–19). See also The Scripture & Theology Forum: <https://scriptureandtheology.org/>.

because all the teaching that has come to us about Christ is recapitulated in one single whole' (*loa. Comm.* V, 6; Nardoni 1984, p. 14).

Along these lines of scriptural reasoning, early Christian communities and their leaders understood the Scriptures as a unified whole, closely bound to the Triune Rule of Faith or Rule of Truth (Latin *regula fidei*; *regula veritatis*). For the church teacher Irenaeus of Lyons (ca. 125–202 CE), the Scriptures and the Rule of Faith or Truth were inseparably connected. He therefore wrote: '[W]hoever keeps the Rule of Truth, which they received through baptism, unchanged in their heart, will know [... *the things taught*] from the Scriptures' (Iren., *Haer.* III, 4.1). Irenaeus (*Haer.* I, 9.4–10.1, III, 1.2) and Tertullian (*Praescr.* 19) – both active in the years following Marcion – represent key second- and third-century voices of this common faith, in which Scripture and *regula fidei* formed the foundation of Christian commitment: 'The faith of those who believe in the Father and Son and Holy Spirit' (Tert. *Prax.* 2; Bokedal 2013, pp. 233–255; Bokedal et al. 2023, p. 3; Jenson 1997, p. 46).

In the modern period, however, exegetical and doctrinal approaches to theological study became increasingly differentiated. Within the university context, this development fostered growing subject specialisation and a diminished level of dialogue between biblical studies and other theological sub-disciplines. Some years ago, the British New Testament scholar Francis Watson (1997), together with others, raised concerns about the growing tendency to dissociate theological sub-disciplines from one another (cf. Fowl 1998). Watson particularly observed the mutual isolation of Old Testament studies, New Testament studies and systematic theology. He noted, for example, that Old Testament exegetes typically make little or no use of the New Testament and that biblical studies as a whole operate with only marginal engagement with systematic theology, and vice versa. If we add to this the recent specialisation and plurality of approaches characteristic of Old and New Testament studies, the risk of further mutual alienation among the various sub-branches of biblical studies becomes apparent. Such a development stands in marked contrast to the largely integrative approach to Scripture and theology that characterised the early Christian period.

In this context, New Testament scholar Markus Bockmuehl (2006) described the contemporary situation by drawing attention to the methodological pluralism that characterises New Testament studies. This pluralism encompasses a wide array of approaches, including historical criticism, tradition-historical criticism, rhetorical criticism, literary criticism, feminist criticism and postcolonial criticism, among others. Bockmuehl (2006, p. 33) further notes that '[t]he extraordinary degree of isolation and fragmentation pertains not merely in matters of method,

but in virtually every aspect of the discipline'. Ultimately, even within a single sub-discipline such as New Testament studies, it remains difficult to identify commonalities among scholars with respect to research approaches, methodological preferences and fundamental areas of interest. It is therefore no exaggeration to conclude that New Testament studies, traditionally situated at the heart of academic theology, are today marked by significant fragmentation.

In collaboration with other scholars, I, together with Ludger Jansen and Michael Borowski, have recently advanced several proposals to address this challenge. Our focus is on unifying interdisciplinary methodological strategies aimed at fostering constructive dialogue between biblical studies and theology (Bokedal et al. 2023, pp. 1-31). We outline several promising avenues for future cross-disciplinary research between the two sub-disciplines: (1) canonical reading; (2) exploring the interaction between text, history and theology in biblical studies; (3) reception-historical studies; (4) hermeneutically and theologically informed biblical interpretation, or biblical theology; (5) two-horizons initiatives that bridge biblical studies and systematic theology; (6) the theological interpretation of Scripture; and (7) relating Scripture and theology through critical engagement with theology's sources and construals (Bokedal et al. 2023, pp. 14-18). These contemporary strategies for countering fragmentation in biblical and theological studies share notable features with the unifying second- and third-century Rule of Faith. That rule was employed to resist Marcion's divisive teaching, which sought to separate the two major textual corpora, the Jewish Scriptures and the emerging 'apostolic' writings, from one another, and, in addition, to sever Scripture from established Christian theology.

■ Essentials of faith and the importance of stressing the inherent structure of the Rule of Faith

A close examination of Tertullian's articulation of the Rule of Faith reveals a distinctly anti-Marcionite orientation. Writing several decades after Marcion's excommunication from the Roman church, Tertullian's theological activity reflects the enduring influence of Marcionite controversies on the development of early Christian orthodoxy. The following is a quotation from the church teacher's *De Praescriptione*, Chapter 13⁷⁶:

76. <https://ccel.org/ccel/tertullian/heretics/anf03.v.iii.xiii.html>.

Now, with regard to this rule of faith – that we may from this point acknowledge what it is which we defend – it is, you must know, that which prescribes the belief that there is one only God, and that He is none other than the Creator of the world, who produced all things out of nothing through His own Word, first of all sent forth; that this Word is called His Son, and, under the name of God, was seen ‘in diverse manners’ by the patriarchs, heard at all times in the prophets, at last brought down by the Spirit and Power of the Father into the Virgin Mary, was made flesh in her womb, and, being born of her, went forth as Jesus Christ; thenceforth He preached the new law and the new promise of the kingdom of heaven, worked miracles; having been crucified, He rose again the third day. (p. 248)

Tertullian continues with an anti-heretical remark: ‘This rule, as it will be proved, was taught by Christ, and raises amongst ourselves no other questions than those which heresies introduce, and which make men heretics’ (*Praescr.* 13). Several features of this passage are especially pertinent to the argument advanced here. Tertullian explicitly situates the *regula fidei* within anti-heretical discourse. Yet, the core content of the Rule is not primarily a reaction to external controversies; rather, it emerges from the church’s internal imperative to define and articulate its own faith (Bokedal 2013).

Moreover, Tertullian’s formulation of the *regula fidei* is replete with allusions to the Christian Scriptures, including the Old Testament, which Marcion had repudiated. Its phrasing affirms God as Creator: ‘There is one only God, and that He is none other than the Creator of the world’ – an unmistakable anti-Marcionite marker. It further situates the Son in direct relation to the Creator God and associates the Spirit of God with Christ’s incarnation. Taken together, these elements imbue Tertullian’s presentation with a distinctly anti-Marcionite character.

It is important to observe the close interrelation among the three articles of faith in Tertullian’s presentation:

[*The Son*] was seen ‘in diverse manners’ by the patriarchs, heard at all times in the prophets, at last brought down by the Spirit and Power of the Father into the Virgin Mary. (p. 250)

Finally, another notable anti-Marcionite – or more specifically, anti-docetic – emphasis is Tertullian’s insistence on the incarnation, affirming that the Son ‘was made flesh’ in the ‘Virgin Mary[’s...] womb’.

More broadly, and of particular relevance to the present argument concerning the inherent structure of the *regula fidei*, several additional features of the second- and third-century Rule of Faith may be noted. Foremost among these is its function as a response to the fundamental question of what constitutes Christian faith, addressing issues central to the content and identity of the Christian tradition. In this respect, the Rule

of Faith has been characterised as the 'sum content of apostolic teaching' (Young 2004, p. 102).

The Rule may also be understood as a normative interpretative tool that promotes the textual and theological unity of the Old and New Testament Scriptures. This becomes particularly evident in the accounts of the church's Rule of Faith by Irenaeus, Clement (ca. 150–215 or 221 CE) and Tertullian (Bokedal 2013). Their understanding of the close relationship between Scripture and the Rule of Faith can further be interpreted as expressions of an emergent biblical theology within the early and subsequent church (Bokedal 2023a, pp. 283–314).

Interestingly, two key editorial features of Christian Scripture appear to be closely connected to this notion of *regula fidei*. Firstly, the bipartite arrangement of the Old and New Testaments – absent from Marcion's teaching – underscores the Christian Scriptures' particular emphasis on the prophetic fulfilment of the Jewish Scriptures within the New Testament. Secondly, the triadic system of *nomina sacra*, or 'sacred names', which are distinctly emphasised in the Greek biblical manuscripts. This includes the Greek words for 'God' (θεός, *theos*), 'Jesus' (Ἰησοῦς, *Iēsous*) and 'Spirit' (πνεῦμα, *pneuma*), written in their contracted *nomina sacra* forms, with an overbar, as $\overline{\theta\epsilon}$ (God), $\overline{\iota\chi}$ (Jesus), and $\overline{\pi\nu\alpha}$ (Spirit).

These emphasised textual-interpretative features – the important Old Testament-New Testament linkage and division, along with the Triune *nomina sacra* demarcations – are closely linked to the early church's Rule of Faith and form part of a text-intrinsic Rule of Faith pattern of biblical reading (Bokedal 2023a, pp. 283–314). The crucial point here is the enduring significance of emphasising the ancient *regula fidei*. Broadly speaking, the Rule of Faith could refer to baptismal confession, apostolic teaching patterns and Scripture and its interpretation (Bokedal 2013). As for the latter, the *regula fidei* functioned as the early church's primary means of articulating its emerging biblical theology. As a vital interpretative framework, it was used:

[T]o read the Scriptures as a bipartite canon, consisting of a closely interrelated Old and New Testament portion, where individual scriptural parts were read in light of the whole, and vice versa, with a strong emphasis on the prophecy-fulfilment dynamic; to read Scripture with particular attention to its Christological and Triune message – highlighted by means of *nomina sacra* demarcations (especially the five sacred words: God, Lord, Jesus, Christ, and Spirit); and to summarise the faith in God the Father, his Son Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit by outlining the key revelatory events, and foundational Christian theology. (see, for example, Irenaeus, *Haer.* I, 10.1; Bokedal 2023b, p. 352)

Again, it is evident that both the creedal Rule of Faith and the hermeneutical Rule of Faith pattern, closely aligned with the bipartite structure of the Christian Scriptures, served a distinctly anti-Marcionite function. This recognition, in turn, carries pedagogical implications that may be fruitfully applied in contemporary biblical studies and theological instruction.

■ The relationship between theology and the Old and New Testaments in Christian discourse

In a recent chapter, Elisabeth Klein (2024) provides a compelling account of the antithetical role that Marcion came to occupy within early Christianity. She writes:

I would like to suggest that one reason why Marcion was rejected at once by so many across the Christian world is because it was, even at that time, essential for a Christian to profess faith in the God who is creator of heaven and earth – and indeed, this is precisely the article of faith which Marcion most wished to deny. (p. 168)

Once again, our discussion highlights the emphasis placed on the first article of faith – precisely the point contested by Marcion’s teaching – and its close relationship to the Jewish Scriptures (the Old Testament), which Marcion excluded from his canon. Klein (2024) underscores the textual and theological significance of the church’s response by drawing attention to the opening article of the creedal formulation, commonly referred to as ‘the faith’ or ‘the Rule of Faith’, and does so in forceful language:

Identifying the Christian God as the creator is part of the doctrinal fabric from which Christianity is woven, and this belief requires Christians to maintain the Hebrew Scriptures in their own canon; that God is creator would become both the opening line of the creed and the opening line of the Bible. (p. 168)

Marcion’s separation of his Scriptures from established theology – and of the law (Old Testament) from the gospel (New Testament) – bears structural resemblance, as argued in this chapter, to the division of key sub-disciplines within contemporary academic theology, where dialogue between fields is often minimal. This chapter contends that such sub-disciplinary isolation may prove detrimental to the theological enterprise in ways analogous to Marcion’s divisive strategy in the second-century church, which disrupted the integration of basic theology teaching with its foundational texts.

In contemporary academic theology, the sub-disciplines of Old Testament studies, New Testament studies and systematic theology are frequently treated as distinct and largely isolated from one another. The New Testament is often regarded as irrelevant to Old Testament studies,

while many biblical scholars maintain that systematic theology should remain separate from biblical studies. On the rare occasions when theology is permitted to inform biblical studies, it is commonly dismissed as a methodological distortion of the latter. According to this perspective, William Wrede, more than a century ago, voiced a well-known critique of New Testament theology within the framework of his historical-critical project. He argued that the discipline's task was to 'lay out the history of early Christian religion and theology', rather than to engage directly with the religious and ethical content of the New Testament texts (Wrede 1975, p. 84). From this 'purely historical' perspective – marked by a refusal to engage in dialogue with dogmatics – systematic-theological and several canonical biblical-theological elements were to be excluded from the curriculum of biblical studies. Within such a framework, the academic study of the 'New Testament' was not to be confined to, nor necessarily centred upon, the 27 writings of the New Testament canon. Thus, as Wrede sought to separate, as consistently as possible, biblical studies from dogmatic theology, he was of the view that 'the name New Testament theology is wrong in both its terms' (Wrede 1975, p. 116; cf. Bokedal et al. 2023, p. 11). In Wrede's view, both 'New Testament' and 'theology' are theological and canonical, and thus dogmatic terms, which he regarded as lying outside the proper historical domain of New Testament studies. In contrast to Wrede's strictly historical-critical stance and to Marcion's docetic Christological separation of biblical exegesis from established Christian theology, the present chapter argues for a renewed and constructive dialogue between biblical studies and theology.

■ Conclusion

As its primary response to the crisis triggered by Marcion's rejection of the Creator God, his docetic Christology, and his sharp separation of law (Old Testament) from the gospel (New Testament), the early church promoted a theological and hermeneutical tool known as the Rule of Faith (*regula fidei*). The church also pointed to the Old and New Testament Scriptures – interpreted in close alignment with this rule – as the foundation of the Christian faith. This chapter advances the argument that the crisis confronted by the early church, and its subsequent response, was not only of considerable historical importance but also of enduring relevance. Such a claim resonates with Augustine's perspective, as well as with that of the wider church, which regarded the creed as a lasting and authoritative distillation of the Rule of Faith. This chapter highlights three key dimensions of the church's early *credo* and Rule of Faith, and its enduring significance: Firstly, the importance of also linking – rather than just separating – Scripture or biblical studies and theology; secondly, the need to emphasise the inherent structure of the church's Rule of Faith,

particularly its Triune-Trinitarian and Christological creedal structure; and thirdly, the significance of recognising the close relationship, historically or otherwise, between the Old and New Testament corpora within Christian discourse. In addition, this chapter underscores the absence of these three emphases – once deployed against Marcion’s second-century teaching – in certain strands of contemporary theological discourse, particularly within biblical studies and in the dialogue (or lack thereof) between biblical studies and systematic theology. By highlighting Marcion’s second-century removal of the first article of faith and his separation of the Old Testament from the New Testament as an instance of the disintegration of Scripture and theology, and by considering the church’s response, this chapter aims to contribute to a more robust interdisciplinary dialogue among theological sub-disciplines, particularly between Old and New Testament studies, and between biblical studies and theology.

Teaching the New Testament as an anti-imperial text in the time of the empire⁷⁷

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■ Abstract

This chapter examines the rationale and compilation of a first-year biblical studies module that intentionally considers how the collection of texts now known as ‘the Bible’ emerged within the historical crucible of the Ancient Near Eastern and Roman Empires. Particular emphasis is placed on the Roman imperial context and its relationship to the New Testament. However, the emphasis is not primarily on the concepts of the Bible, empire or their interrelationship as topics in themselves, but rather on the pedagogical

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choices made, the reasoning behind them and their educational value.⁷⁸ Through the framework of Legitimation Code Theory (LCT), the module's orientation is explored by means of conceptual tools that clarify the teaching content, the student body and the contours of the social practice it engenders. Though crises resist hierarchical ranking, life in the Empire may be understood as among the most pervasive and consuming experiences of antiquity. Interpreting biblical texts in relation to empire not only discloses fresh perspectives but also enables a distinctive hermeneutical and pedagogical approach. At the same time, an empire-focused approach must carefully navigate both the deep-seated (confessional) convictions of students – particularly in an introductory module for those starting their studies – and the established conventions of the discipline, including textbooks.⁷⁹ This presentation offers a critical reflection on an alternative, empire-focused approach to the teaching of biblical studies, one that resonates with learning *in* and *through* times of crisis, including life in a time of Empire, and that calls for a resolute pedagogy.

■ Introduction

Living in the time of the Empire is one thing; teaching about it is another. The convergence of these realities renders the pedagogical task of addressing an ancient empire in neo-imperial or colonial times both unsettling and profoundly daunting. This chapter is situated within the Faculty of Theology at Stellenbosch University (SU) and reflects on the teaching of the introductory Bible module offered to first-year students. Given both the content and institutional context, such modules often follow a predictable pattern, typically shaped by prescribed materials. As evidenced by a range of standard textbooks, biblical introductions tend to approach the material by following the canonical order of the texts (e.g. Johnson 1986), adopting a particular methodological framework (e.g. Barr 1995), tracing a thematic thread through Scripture (e.g. Carr & Conway 2010) or insisting on a historical–culturally grounded approach (e.g. Burge, Cohick & Green 2020; Wright & Bird 2019). Many of these textbooks also include a theological segment (e.g. Achtemeier, Green & Thompson 2001; Powell 2009).⁸⁰ While it is tempting to think that they are the main reason for perpetuating conventional and often restrictive approaches to

78. Empire is capitalised when referring to a specific empire, such as the Roman Empire, but not when it is used generally or as concept.

79. By confessional is meant students' deeply held faith convictions and even their denominational persuasions in as far they may differ.

80. This list could be extended further to include classics such as Brown (1984, 2010) and Martin and Toney (2018), where introductory literary and historical aspects have been integrated with theological concerns in such a way that it is always possible to indicate which aspect takes priority.

biblical studies, textbooks more probably reflect the discipline's established operational and deeply ingrained assumptions.

Textbooks (here, in English) reveal significant structural problems rooted in assumptions commonly held within the field of biblical studies in English-speaking countries. These include patriarchy, whiteness, capitalism, imperialism and a perception of religion that lacks material substance (Friesen 2022, p. 25) – issues that often surface elsewhere in the theology curriculum.⁸¹ Concerns about how gender and sexuality are incorporated; how race, ethnicity and minoritised criticism resonate; how class and economic concerns are addressed; and how politics are recognised in curricula are not only important in themselves but also relate to the dematerialisation or spiritualisation of religion. A way to address such concerns is by using *empire* as a focal point or interpretive lens (see below for further descriptions). This chapter outlines the rationale behind the choices made for a first-year biblical studies module and textbook that focus on empire – specifically, the New Testament and the Roman Empire.⁸² Engaging with Legitimation Code Theory (LCT), the module is examined using conceptual tools that help make sense of the teaching content, the students in the programme and the nature of the resulting social practice. The chapter offers a critical reflection on an alternative (empire-focused) approach to teaching biblical studies – one that resonates with learning in times of crisis, including life under contemporary forms of empire, and one that calls for a resolute and contextually grounded pedagogy.

■ Legitimation code theory and empire

The late 20th-century recognition of the scholarship of teaching and learning has also spurred critical reflection within biblical studies on how the Bible is taught (e.g. McWhirter & Raquel 2022; Roncace & Gray 2005), particularly within liberal arts curricula (Roncace & Gray 2007). Increasingly, attention been given to issues such as students' sensibilities, aspirations and expectations; the inclusion of marginalised groups – such as black women – in education (Edwards & Davidson 2018); engagement with hegemonic epistemologies in education (Paraskeva 2011); and strategies

81. The human nature of science means that it is conditional on societal power dynamics, which practically means that the often treasured values of rationality and objectivity may find embodiment 'in a white, heterosexual, cis-gendered male' (Hlatshwayo et al. 2022b, p. 4).

82. A choice of textbook was made where empires are not simply brushed aside or held as, at best, conducive to the spread of 'Christianity' and, at worst, non-compliant to the wishes of 'the early church' (cf. Friesen 2022, pp. 22–25). Carr and Conway (2010) deliberately chose empire(s) as the central focus, along with a sociohistorical context and hermeneutical framework for their textbook or introduction to the New Testament. Other scholars have highlighted the value of integrating archaeology into introductory New Testament modules (e.g. Moreland 2003).

for addressing epistemic injustice (e.g. Fricker 2007; Kidd, Medina & Pohlhaus 2017). Rapidly changing educational contexts worldwide make it all the more important to explore conceptual tools that support thoughtful reflection on what we teach, who we teach and how this social practice is enacted.⁸³

Scholars engaged in the decolonisation of the curriculum often adopt a realist or critical realist approach, grounded in the view that ‘knowledge is not simply socially constructed. Knowledge is a social attempt to describe a real mechanism operating in the world’ (Hlatshwayo et al. 2022b, p. 3). Recognising the significance of knowledge – particularly in a contemporary world shaped by ‘knowledge economies’ – these scholars critique the failure to interrogate and unpack the nature of knowledge beyond superficial distinctions from news or entertainment. Such oversimplification is often found in what Hlatshwayo and colleagues refer to as ‘methodological essentialism’ (Popper 2013, p. 29).⁸⁴ Karl Maton (2014), who developed LCT in the 1990s – a framework that warrants more detailed discussion than is possible here⁸⁵ – argues that LCT holds significant potential for engaging critically with the nature of knowledge.⁸⁶ Legitimation Code Theory provides a valuable counterpoint to a central epistemological dilemma: The recognition that knowledge is socially constructed does not imply the absence of real phenomena. When the notion of social construction is transferred from knowledge to reality itself, a confusion between epistemology and ontology arises – something what Maton refers to as the *epistemic fallacy*.⁸⁷ Legitimation Code Theory also addresses what he terms ‘knowledge-blindness’: The paradox within academia – particularly in

83. Much has been written in recent years about the challenges of living in a ‘VUCA’ world – a term that stands for Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, and Ambiguity (cf. Potgieter [2022], who, however, focused more on the online context).

84. ‘Instead of aiming at finding out what a thing really is, and at defining its true nature, methodological nominalism aims at describing how a thing behaves in various circumstances, and especially, whether there are any regularities in its behaviour’ (Popper 2013, p. 30).

85. This is perhaps unsurprising, given that Maton (2014, p. 45) himself refers to his 350-page volume as ‘a partial snapshot of a framework and a body of research that are in motion’. He situates LCT in the broader meta-theoretical constellation of three kinds of ‘theories’: Social ontologies, explanatory frameworks, and substantive (research) studies. He concludes that ‘LCT can be described as an explanatory framework for enactment in and (re-)shaping by substantive research studies’ (Maton 2014, p. 40).

86. The approach has had a significant impact on education and has since expanded into a range of diverse fields, including law, museums, media, theatre, the armed forces, and dance (see also the dedicated LCT website: <https://legitimationcodetheory.com/theory/introducinglct/>).

87. Maton (2014, p. 27) refers to the epistemological dilemma in terms of ‘a false dichotomy between positivist absolutism and constructivist relativism. That is, they posit a choice between understanding knowledge either as decontextualized, value-free, detached and certain or as socially constructed within cultural and historical conditions in ways that reflect vested social interests. Of these options, they then choose the latter, and thereby dissolve knowledge’.

educational contexts – where the importance of knowledge is assumed, yet rarely critically examined or explicitly accounted for in terms of its nature, structure, or significance (Maton 2014, 2016, pp. 19–46). ‘Indeed, by reducing knowledge to knowing *and nothing but*, or to power *and nothing but*, the subjectivist doxa limits our understanding of knowing and power, for the crucial role played in these issues by “relations within” knowledge is ignored’ (Maton 2014, p. 29, emphasis in original).

Legitimation Code Theory is focused on problem-solving and is not intended as ‘a specific substantive account of knowledge or education’, nor as ‘an epistemology or ontology’.⁸⁸ It involves creative exploration and interpretation that is closely connected to the unique characteristics of the subject matter being studied. Legitimation Code Theory seeks to bridge the discursive gap ‘between theory and data that is traversed through “external languages of description” for translating between them’ (Maton 2014, pp. 40–42). It is characterised by several key dimensions and offers a multidimensional conceptual toolkit, identifying five legitimation codes or dimensions: Autonomy, Density, Specialisation, Semantics and Temporality.⁸⁹ Moreover, LCT emphasises the analysis of knowledge as a cumulative process, advocating for inquiry that moves beyond surface features to examine the deeper structures and practices that shape them. Legitimation Code Theory is, and will remain, an evolving work-in-progress.⁹⁰

Since LCT is grounded in social realism, it affirms that our understanding of the world is not entirely of our own making; there are real consequences to our actions (Maton 2014, p. 33). Knowledge is neither flawless nor purely self-generated. Rather, it is shaped by external conditions, built upon prior knowledge and appropriated and assessed by individuals situated within a specific social environment. In the South African context, LCT has been described as a ‘sociological framework motivated by social justice and knowledge-building issues’ (Winberg, McKenna & Wilmot 2021, pp. 1–15; cf. Hlatshwayo et al. 2022a). In short, LCT serves as a tool for exposing the underlying practices of knowledge, while pushing beyond a purely subjectivist view of knowing to make space for the substance and

88. ‘This is not to suggest it is without epistemological or ontological assumptions and implications... However, it is not a meta-theory of why such characteristics are ontologically necessary. In short, LCT is realist rather than a realism’ (Maton 2014, p. 40).

89. Three have been developed in particular: *Specialisation*, with the axes of epistemic and social relations; *semantics*, with density and gravity axes; and *autonomy*, with positional and relational axes.

90. When applying theoretical concepts to new problems, these problems can challenge the theory itself, leading to new questions and requiring the theory to be revised or expanded (Maton 2014, p. 48).

significance of knowledge itself.⁹¹ In this context, LCT functions not primarily as a critique of conventional hermeneutics, but as a critical theory that facilitates connections between empire studies and biblical interpretation. The challenge concerning the Roman Empire–New Testament nexus lies both in the under-acknowledgement of the Empire and its imperial influence on biblical literature,⁹² and in the difficulty of identifying appropriate and effective approaches for this purpose – and also in the relationship between the two. This complex interplay raises several pressing questions: Do traditional approaches, often characterised by their insistence on direct literary evidence, play a major role in obscuring the empire problem, the fact that the New Testament came into being in the shadow of the Empire? As the imperial ‘elephant in the room’ comes to be acknowledged – albeit sometimes reluctantly – within biblical studies, a pressing question emerges: Do the discipline’s standard methodological instruments continue to suffice? As certain scholars concede – albeit reluctantly – the challenges they encounter may indeed stem from the proverbial ‘elephant in the room’ or from particular parts of it. Can elephant-sensitive approaches simply be avoided? Will serious historical-critical scholarship be as effective for recognising and theorising the Empire as it has been for postcolonial studies? If the master’s tools will not bring the house down, which tools are needed then? And, in a related way, are all the alternatives equally useful, just as effective and comparably focused? (cf. Punt 2015, pp. 199–203).

■ Why empire? Rationale and purpose

Without attempting to rank crises, life under the Roman Empire was arguably among the most pervasive and all-consuming experiences endured by people in the New Testament period. Consequently, employing empire as a heuristic lens not only illuminates the biblical texts but also enables alternative hermeneutical and pedagogical approaches. Moreover, the concept of empire functions heuristically to address the three dimensions of knowledge blindness or myopia commonly identified in educational research. Firstly, many theoretical positions emphasise the importance of knowledge, but lack analytical tools to demonstrate how it

91. ‘LCT is far more than a sociology of knowledge or education – it is a sociology of possibility’ (Maton 2014, p. 22). Although there are many different sociological perspectives on education, most of them agree that knowledge is subjective and shaped by social factors. These approaches focus on understanding how people acquire and interpret knowledge within social contexts: ‘[T]hey offer sociologies of knowing’ (Maton 2014, p. 26).

92. ‘[J]ust as Jews are frequently dismissed as atypical by scholars of Roman history, so Rome still remains invisible or occluded in a surprising proportion of studies on Jewish materials written under Roman rule and/or by Roman citizens’ (Reed & Dohrmann 2013, p. 4).

is important. Secondly, subjectivist doxa too often dominate the few analytical tools that do exist, focusing on knowing rather than knowledge, for example, on Bloom's taxonomy. Thirdly, analytical accounts of knowledge tend to become restrictive and deal only with segmental typologies and taxonomies of limited explanatory power. In contrast, conceptualising the organising principles of knowledge requires attention in order to investigate their properties and powers (Maton 2014, p. 30).

While various interpretations of empire exist, conceptualising it as a structural, differentiated, influential and negotiated concept is particularly useful – and here the focus is on the Roman Empire.⁹³ Firstly, Empire was a structural and material reality, constituted by and operating through a fundamental binary: A dominant centre and subordinated margins – at a political, economic or cultural level.⁹⁴ However, this phenomenon is neither temporally nor spatially uniform; Empire is differentiated in both its constitution and its deployment, regardless of many enduring similarities.⁹⁵ Secondly, the Empire's reach and power influence and impact all aspects of life, both for the powerful and the subalterns, in direct and indirect, overt and subtle ways. The unrelenting material presence and ideological influence, traversing other dimensions of first-century life across a geographically spread range of communities, encompasses two further claims about empire. Thirdly, Empire was primarily a *conceptual entity* to which its material form(s) attest – even admitting mutuality between structure and idea does not reverse the conceptual *primacy*!⁹⁶

93. In 2005, the Accra Confession described empire as 'the convergence of economic, political, cultural, geographic, and military imperial interests, systems, and networks for the purpose of amassing political power and economic wealth. Empire typically forces and facilitates the flow of wealth and power from vulnerable persons, communities, and countries to the more powerful. The Bible is full of stories of empire rising, over-extending, and falling. Empire today crosses all boundaries, strips and reconstructs identities, subverts culture, subordinates nation states, and marginalizes or co-opts religious communities' (Pillay 2018).

94. From this key binary or 'binomial' (Segovia), other binaries follow: Civilised or uncivilised; advanced or primitive; cultured or barbarian; progressive or backward; developed or undeveloped or underdeveloped. In the discussion of Rome and its role and impact on the communities of the early followers of Jesus, Rome as a city constituted such a metropolitan or imperial centre; and areas such as the western and, in particular, eastern parts of the ancient world, including subcontinents such as Asia, were peripheral areas (Friesen 2001, p. 17).

95. Every empire is imperial in its own distinctive way since '[t]here are empires such as the Ottoman, based on a common religious faith, and there are religiously tolerant, pagan, and even largely secular empires, such as Rome became in its grandest centuries. There are short-lived empires, based, like that of Alexander the Great, upon raw military power. And there are empires that thrive for centuries, usually because, like Rome and Carthage, they achieve commercial prosperity that can enlist the allegiance of far-flung economic elites, or because they establish a professional civil service, an imperial governing class' (Walker 2002, p. 40).

96. Studies of the modern phenomenon of 'empire' also regard it as a construct, a *concept*, and not a nation, and thus without boundaries. With appropriate caution, the recent studies by literary scholar Michael Hardt and political theorist Antonio Negri (e.g. Hardt & Negri 2000, 2004) on empire provide valuable theoretical resources for theorising (about) ancient empires.

Finally, contrary to restrictive, essentialist understandings of empire, it can be theorised as dynamic and primarily a process, both in its conceptualisation and its constant fabrication: A negotiated concept. Positions towards Empire were dynamic, not naïve and static positions ‘for’ or ‘against’, as people’s responses to and interactions with Empire were infinitely more complex and hybrid than merely those of singular support or opposition (cf. Punt 2012a, pp. 1–11).⁹⁷

■ Tracing legitimating codes

The late 20th century ‘linguistic turn’ in New Testament studies marked the beginning of a new consciousness about hermeneutics and even epistemology in New Testament studies, along with the potential for a new epistemology and practice in the guild. Traditional beliefs in historical objectivity and the ability to describe the past as it actually happened were increasingly replaced with the acknowledgement that the past does not exist outside its literary presentation.⁹⁸ Literary texts came to be seen as part of a larger ‘inseparable, relational web of residues and artifacts that hang together in ways that are not always easily comprehensible’ (Lopez 2011, p. 80). The ensuing ‘cultural turn’ (even) in biblical studies ushered in the employment of various post-structural methods that demonstrate how language shaped the sociocultural setting of the early Christian world.⁹⁹ This had implications for scholarly exploration beyond the universalisms of the Enlightenment and 19th and 20th-century liberalism. Human beings increasingly came to be viewed ‘as historical creatures located within the complex matrices of particular cultures and social worlds’, requiring attention for the ‘located, particular, pluralistic, and thoroughly historical nature of human existence, experience, and knowledge’ (Davaney 2001, p. 5). In due course, the interconnectedness of texts and contexts embedded in various power constellations also gave rise to claims about a ‘political

97. Modern empire theory offers valuable categories for theorising the Roman Empire of the first century; however, a fuller discussion lies beyond the scope of this chapter. It is sufficient to note the significance of themes such as borderlessness, psychological impact, and imperial claims to world peace (Hardt & Negri 2000, p. xv). At the heart of imperial peace lies violence, sustained by the military alongside a range of structures, systems, and manifestations of violence (cf. Punt 2012b). The authority of Roman emperors and elites depended on their *perceived ability* to inflict violence (Mattern 1999).

98. With the acknowledgement that the past exists only in its literary representation came the realisation that such representations are always imbued with ideologies.

99. The origins and early development of cultural studies are often contested, though they are generally associated with efforts from as early as the 1950s to engage seriously with popular or mass culture (Easthope 1991, p. 176), even if these early movements are subject to varying interpretations and assessments (Vanhoozer, Anderson & Sleasman 2007, p. 248). In biblical studies, the use of analytical methods like cultural anthropology soon became widely adopted.

turn' (Stanley 2011, p. 111) in New Testament studies¹⁰⁰, prompting much debate on how to approach this turn (e.g. Barclay 2011; Kim 2008).

Legitimation Code Theory principles or codes uncover the 'guidelines' that influence various aspects of society. These guidelines are often implicit, giving an advantage to those who were brought up with knowledge of these 'legitimation codes'. Legitimation Code Theory's capacity to render these codes transparent enables tacit parameters to be taught, learned, or modified, thereby promoting fairness for all learners in line with widely accepted educational practices. Arguments that New Testament documents reflect engagement with Roman imperialism in conscious but indirect ways are often met with insistence on evidence amounting to the demonstration of similarity, the establishment of correlation, or even proof of causation. Such insistence on direct and provable reactions or responses to the Roman Empire in material or ideological format is hardly consistent with other comparative ventures, given how arguments, for example, for Paul's engagement with philosophical notions, overt or otherwise, are often explained with reference to the appropriateness of the sociohistorical contexts.¹⁰¹

A common understanding of Roman identity – and ways in which imperial power was sustained and expressed – was embedded in overarching public structures such as urbanism, religious ritual, and political activity, all undergirded by the emperor's authority, amidst considerable variety and pliability, as demanded by different local contexts. As Deissmann (1995, p. 341) observed long ago, at least some familiarity with imperial institutions and customs among first-century people needs to be acknowledged. What did it mean and entail that Paul and the Roman Empire shared the same rhetorical and material world? Public spaces were at once the medium to express Roman-ness while providing the opportunity for localised experiences. In cities, various mechanisms such as sculptures, temples, inscriptions, patronage and the imperial cult permeated the environment

100. Common to these 'turn'-approaches is the growing reluctance to see texts as adequate resources for the reconstruction of the voices of ancient people, that sees the emphasis shifting towards delineating and theorising 'the discursive strategies in "texts" themselves' (Harrill 2011, p. 310).

101. See, for example, Engberg-Pedersen (2000), Malherbe (1987) and others who argue for interpreting the Pauline letters in light of contemporary philosophical discourse. By contrast, the relative hesitation to approach the interface between the Pauline letters and the Roman Empire in a similar manner likely stems from a combination of factors, including the ongoing lack of scholarly consensus regarding the legitimacy and/or feasibility of such an approach (cf. Marchal 2011, pp. 147–150), as well as the challenge of substantiating imperial engagement due to limited comparative and material evidence. Although earlier contributions can be identified (cf. Deissmann 1995), sustained scholarly discourse on empire within biblical studies has gained momentum only in recent decades and continues to face hesitation – and at times, outright resistance – in certain academic circles (e.g. Bryan 2005).

and reinforced the authority of the emperor¹⁰² (Revell 2009; cf. Zanker 1990). The expectation of specific, direct counterclaims by Paul is therefore unrealistic, given the vast spectrum of imperialist endeavours, and inappropriate in light of the overwhelming context suffused with imperial pomp and power, which would have rendered a sweeping counter-culture almost unthinkable (cf. Punt 2015).

■ Accounting for codes and choices

At the same time, an empire-focused approach must negotiate the deep-seated confessional convictions of students, especially in an introductory module for those commencing their studies. There is an awareness that the standards of the dominant group in society are cast and assimilated into the universal – in short, normalised – shaping identity, role and alignments of power. Not only does active resistance count as resistance; any refusal to accept the normalised pattern aligned with the dominant powers constitutes resistance, as does the refusal of acquiescence.¹⁰³ Breaking with the traditional interpretative model built on the notion of a subject acting on unrestrained and rational reflection, human subjectivity is increasingly understood as the result of forces and effects that lie outside the control and even awareness of individuals. Human subjects are not ‘free-floating minds’ since minds belong to embodied human beings and, as such, are always implicated in historically situated networks (Perkins 2009, p. 12). Foucault’s notion of discourse¹⁰⁴ and Bourdieu’s concept of *habitus*¹⁰⁵ provide credible frameworks for understanding how social groups undertake reasonable actions without necessarily deliberating or consulting

102. Of course, mere presence does not constitute influence: ‘The forum was filled with imperial iconography, but does that mean that people were constantly incorporating them into their sense of identity, or did they eventually become another feature of the urban landscape that went almost unnoticed on a daily basis?’ (Graham 2009, p. 4).

103. ‘The very conception of a different future destabilizes the present and the status quo and thus provides a powerful ideological and political message. It proclaims that another world is possible, that changes can occur’ (Perkins 2009, p. 175).

104. A discourse constitutes a system of statements, social practices, and institutions through which the world is structured and subjectivity is made possible. It is inextricably connected to power and knowledge, with those in positions of power maintaining control over knowledge production. ‘There is now power that is exercised without a series of aims and objectives. But this does not mean that it results from the choice or decision of an individual subject’ (Foucault 1980, p. 95; cf. Perkins 2009, p. 12).

105. *Habitus* is a range of embodied, socialised frameworks that provide agents with a rationale for social practices and a sense of the social structure, leading to sensible behaviour in a given context (Bourdieu 1990, pp. 52–55; cf. Perkins 2009, p. 12). ‘The habitus is a spontaneity without consciousness or will’, or with emphasis on the sense in it all. ‘It is because agents never know completely what they are doing that what they do has more sense than they know’ (Bourdieu 1990, pp. 56, 69). Bourdieu distinguishes between agents and subjects, with the latter referring to those who supposedly know what they are doing (Bourdieu 1990, pp. 52, 75; cf. Perkins 2009, p. 12).

about them. Such notions are helpful in plotting and understanding the Empire-New Testament connection.¹⁰⁶

The enduring presence of framing is, however, largely subtle and concealed, and it has the potential to undermine well-intentioned efforts to educate on matters of power in society. The power of mapping and framing (Burrus 2007) or classification (Bowker & Starr 1999) remains a lingering concern, often resulting in normalising patterns that categorise people and groups according to established categories.¹⁰⁷ Bowker and Star (1999) investigated different classification systems to explore the role of categories and standards in shaping the modern world. The processes by which classification orders human interaction mostly occur unnoticed, albeit in different ways; however, people can change this invisibility when necessary. Classification systems are not neutral, and their moral agenda is rooted in how each standard and category privilege certain points of view while silencing others. These systems also produce advantage or suffering. Classification systems determine how people think about and assess objects, others, and themselves, as well as how they make moral and political choices; these are embedded in coloniality and its legacies.

Scholarly approaches and methods generally both reflect and contribute to broader social imaginaries. Methods function as scholarly homes – familiar spaces that shape and are shaped by academic identity. Methodology, as a heuristic device, creates and defines the conceptual and intellectual spaces within which scholars operate, often playing a key role in shaping their professional self-understanding. As has been noted, ‘Method, as home, as *habitus*, can be a comfortable and comforting mediating space between social relations and individual behaviors’; in the case of biblical scholars, ‘between professional hermeneutical and interpretative practices situated within the social relations and hierarchies of professional disciplinary orientations’ (Penner & Lopez 2011, p. 152).

Home or *habitus* implies that scholars, as social agents, develop strategies attuned to the demands of their social worlds. Thus, while method may serve as a kind of home, it also defines and renders that home intelligible to its inhabitants. In this sense, method maps – or even constructs – the route toward home (or back home), offering scholars intellectual familiarity and a space in which they can, proverbially, put up their feet. The method’s role, therefore, extends beyond

106. Earlier work by sociologists also emphasises how people are socialised or ‘programmed’ from birth to adopt their society’s values, convictions, and norms, resulting in each person contributing unquestioningly to the functioning of the system (cf. Berger 1967, pp. 3–52).

107. Who can ever forget the banality and brutality of apartheid classification? (Bowker & Starr 1999, pp. 195–225). ‘The advantaged are those whose place in a set of classification systems is a powerful one and for whom powerful sets of classifications of knowledge appear natural’ (Bowker & Starr 1999, p. 225).

its heuristic function; it also serves as a mediating space between scholarly work and academic structures, and between individual agency and social relations. Just as ‘the map is not the territory’ (J.Z. Smith), method is not merely procedure; at the very least, it is not reducible to a set of techniques to be followed. Method is not merely the roadmap of the academic journey; it also scripts the landscape, bringing the territory into being, while simultaneously fencing it off, delimiting and restricting it. Theory and imagination are thus intertwined, though in complex and intriguing ways. Hermeneutics, likewise, are more than erudite taxonomies. They involve us and impact us – not only as scholars but also as individuals shaped by, and shaping, our scholarship. Hermeneutics affect us on both personal and structural levels, with implications that extend into the academic and broader communities in which we live and work (cf. Punt 2022a).¹⁰⁸

■ Contemporary imperial codes

What becomes clear in the age of necropolitics – understood in its dual sense as the sovereign power to ‘dictate who may live and who must die’, as ‘the generalized instrumentalization of human existence’ and the ‘material destruction of bodies and populations’ (Mbembe 2003, pp. 11, 14) – is that rethinking empire presents urgent challenges and concerns.¹⁰⁹ This is especially true in a time when not only life but also death risks losing its meaning. As Lushetich (2018, p. 1) observes, ‘In a society preoccupied with accelerated accumulation and rampageous consumption, death has no value as it can be neither accumulated nor consumed’. As new forms of cosmopolitan neo-humanism emerge – shaped by postcolonial and race studies, gender analysis and environmental thought – the so-called posthuman condition presents the challenge of fostering new forms of social bonding and community building, while simultaneously pursuing sustainability and empowerment. As Braidotti (2013, p. 189) argues, ‘Far from being a flight from the real, posthuman thought inscribes the contemporary subject in the conditions of its own historicity’. Contemporary manifestations of neo-imperialism and neo-colonialism demand transnational analytical frameworks that foreground issues of colonialism, political economy and racial formation. Such frameworks are especially vital as we seek to move beyond both ‘the fractious and emotive tone’

108. Such shifts are understandable, given the changing pendulum of interpretation that includes and accounts for readers’ positions, roles, and participation in the interpretative process. This is best, if not exclusively, signalled by autobiographical hermeneutics (e.g. Kitzberger 2002; Staley 1995).

109. Liberation remains a key concept (see his early and important work in West 1991), but in a postcolonial, and at times very neo-colonial, world that is not yet decolonial, the content or shape – though not the intensity – has changed. This context also extends beyond political power, or economic wherewithal. For a study on some of these tensions in the Philippine religious education context, see Baring (2021).

that often characterises decolonisation debates and the tendency of these debates to ‘collapse ontological and epistemological considerations’ (Hlatshwayo et al. 2022b, p. 1). Additionally, the heteronormative regulatory practices embedded in modern state formations call for critical scrutiny. Such examination becomes possible through reconceptualising modernity and engaging gender theory to explore the spiritual dimensions of experience and the meaning of sacred subjectivity (Alexander 2005; cf. Punt 2022b).

■ Conclusion

How can academics decolonise theological and biblical studies curricula in contemporary South Africa during times of crisis? Beyond adopting a critical stance towards Western or colonising traditions and their lingering effects, a decolonising approach seeks to constructively retrieve African heritage, particularly its epistemic traditions and history, by historicising and centring the African perspective while investigating its relationship to decolonial knowledge traditions (Hlatshwayo et al. 2022b, p. 2). How can such dimensions be applied to a subject dealing with texts and traditions spanning over two millennia, without simply resorting to a study of their reception? Legitimation Code Theory provides us as teachers with greater explanatory power regarding our disciplines, enabling us to generate practical impacts, create a meta-language for understanding research and build cumulative knowledge. Legitimation Code Theory-generated findings serve as a call to action, promoting interaction and communication so that, through discourse and collaboration, we can transcend the boundaries of individual knowledge and arrive at a more comprehensive understanding (Maton 2014, p. 45). A particularly useful way to express this in the classroom is to explicitly focus on the power differentials present in the text at sociocultural and political levels, which, in the context of teaching the New Testament, can be encapsulated in one word: *Empire*.

Decolonising the study of ancient Israel: An autoethnography of rewriting a Hebrew Bible curriculum

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■ Abstract

One of the challenges in teaching courses on the history of ancient Israel is that the subject carries real-world consequences beyond both the academy and the church. This stems from the fact that the historiography of Israel or Palestine has consistently functioned as a political act. From the outset, biblical and epigraphic sources construct narratives of ancient Israel that assert claims to the land and establish connections to its people. This historiographical project persists unabated whenever the history of Israel is retold. Early Christians asserted that they were the true heirs of Israel, a claim echoed by certain rabbis. Israel, or at least Jerusalem

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and its past, was subsequently appropriated within Muslim historiography. The crusades, together with successive empires from the medieval period into modernity, likewise participated in this ongoing contest to claim ownership of Israel's past. As recent events demonstrate, the contest over rightful possession of the land and its history remains highly relevant today. This paper presents an autoethnographic account of my efforts to examine how courses on Israel's history both participate in such claims and how I have sought to introduce critical interrogation of them into my teaching. In doing so, the chapter frames Israel's past as an archive requiring sustained critique.

■ Introduction

What happens when the subject of your courses is perennially used as a tool for oppression? Although the political control of Israel or Palestine is a notoriously complex and multifaceted subject, the use of the past plays an exaggerated role in claims for legitimate ownership of the Holy Land (Havrelock 2020, pp. 17–18). Throughout history, diverse groups claiming to be Israel or its rightful heirs have asserted that the history of the Holy Land demonstrates their entitlement to rule and inhabit the territory. These groups include various ancient Jewish communities, Hellenistic kingdoms, the Roman Empire, Muslim invaders, Christian crusaders and a succession of others, with the struggle to claim Israel's past extending into the assertions of current governments (Sand 2012, pp. 67–176). The fact that the ancient past is continually made relevant through its use in contemporary political discourse naturally demands some input from those who claim expertise on the subject of the history of this hotly contested region.

While historians of Israel/Palestine should not have the final say on this matter, they certainly have a valuable perspective to offer, both to their students and to the public at large. However, an examination of my own syllabi and teaching history as a historian of ancient Judaism reveals that, until a few years ago, I did nothing to address this phenomenon. Not only did I refrain from taking a stance on the validity of historical claims regarding the identity of ancient Israel or possession of the land, but I also neglected the crucial task of interrogating the archive of Israel's past. Instead, in my courses I treated both literary and material sources for the region's history and peoples as self-evident and, in some sense, objective. As a result, my teaching began by training students to critique and interpret the ostensibly neutral sources they encountered. Yet, as is widely acknowledged, what counts as evidence is far from objective (Stefaniew 2020, pp. 281–283). Even before interpreting sources or writing history, the designation of

something as a 'source' or 'evidence' is the first battleground in historiography (Harris 1996, p. 7). The designation shapes which texts and materials are considered significant for study, determines the level of funding allocated to such research, and ultimately influences whether that material is memorialised. This constitutes a serious problem, one that I have sought to address in my own work.

This chapter takes the form of an autoethnography, documenting the ongoing development of my teaching on ancient Israel across several courses. The chapter begins by considering the appropriateness of the autoethnographic genre for tracing personal growth and challenging established archives of knowledge. It then reflects on my earlier approach to the study of ancient Israel and the difficulties I encountered. The discussion proceeds by introducing critical archival studies as a possible framework for addressing these challenges. The chapter concludes with selected examples of how I have integrated postcolonial and feminist critical archival pedagogies into my teaching practice.

■ Autoethnography and pedagogical growth

Autoethnography is a qualitative research method that uses personal experiences to observe and critique cultural phenomena (Koopman, Waitling & LaDonna 2020, p. 2). It allows the researcher to draw on their own biography for better understanding and clarification of broader social issues. This approach starts with first-hand experience and uses that knowledge to generate generalised conclusions, often employing abstract theories and models. As a result, autoethnography has become increasingly popular in the social and human sciences since the late 1970s, despite receiving its current name only in the early 2000s (Wall 2006, p. 158).

When engaging in autoethnography, the researcher may perform a wide variety of activities, including examining physical archives such as diaries, photographs, artwork, notes and other documents. However, autoethnography can also rely heavily on a mental archive, drawing on the memories and emotions the researcher associates with a particular experience or event. Reflecting on the archive in all its forms is a critical part of the process. The researcher must determine, through discussion and introspection, what is significant for the findings and why (Moustakas 1990, p. 43). Most importantly, themes or topics emerge that can be connected and communicated as a coherent story, whether in the form of an academic paper, literary narrative, poem or photo essay (Ellis & Bochner 2000, p. 734). From a broad perspective,

the process generally unfolds in three stages: (1) researching the archive; (2) curating the archive; and (3) synthesising the findings into a coherent narrative. Although these steps are not linear (Ellis 2004, p. 119), they offer a framework for approaching autoethnography and contributing to knowledge about a given phenomenon. Nonetheless, the process remains open-ended.

It is precisely this open-endedness that many critics highlight when characterising autoethnography as an unscientific genre. In particular, within the German-speaking academic community, the way autoethnography transgresses the established boundaries between *Wissenschaft*, hermeneutics and artistic production is considered problematic for its acceptance as a legitimate method of knowledge production (Ploder & Stadlbauer 2016, p. 753). Such critiques highlight the dual roles of the researcher as both subject and object of research, the dual functions of autoethnography as both a product of investigation and part of the investigative process, the acknowledgement of the emotional and the physical as sites of authentic knowledge, and autoethnography's tendency to move beyond the description and reconstruction of phenomena into advocacy for change. These aspects of autoethnography challenge the ways in which modernity constructs authentic knowledge production (Ploder & Stadlbauer 2016).

The criticisms of autoethnography are strong and highlight real-world consequences for using it as a method of inquiry, particularly within an academic system that only recognise one specific type of knowledge or a singular process of knowledge production (Geimer 2015, p. 17). Nevertheless, these criticisms are not inherently detrimental to the legitimacy of autoethnography as a method. By transgressing epistemological boundaries, it challenges the modernist myth of an objective point of view (Bilimoria 1995, p. 440) and rejects scientific storytelling that separates data from interpretation (Latour 1993, pp. 11-12).

Moreover, it expands the canon of both knowledge and knowledge production by taking seriously the emotional and physical experiences of the researcher, along with their cognitive insights. Through the deconstruction of the knowledge archive, autoethnography creates space for the researcher to advocate for new directions in their field (Dutta 2018, p. 94). This is a product of the reflexivity that autoethnography demands, requiring from scholars to reflect on their own experiences in the production and dissemination of knowledge and to communicate these experiences clearly in relation to the broader world of science (Humphreys 2005, pp. 841-842). Thus, autoethnography serves as an effective genre for cultivating one's role as both teacher and scholar, while contributing to the advancement of a field rather than leaving it constrained by outdated practices.

When we turn to pedagogical practice, autoethnography presents itself as a method for reflecting on one's past experiences and using those reflections to identify a path toward future success (Austin & Hickey 2007, pp. 364–365).

■ Early experiences and problems

As many might recognise from their own courses on early Judaism and ancient Israel, the stories we tell about Israel's past are primarily based on two categories of sources. The first of these is material remains from the southern Levant and surrounding regions. The second is literary texts primarily written from the perspective of those claiming to be Israel or its rightful heirs (Grabbe 2007, p. 6). Although selected texts from external perspectives are occasionally considered, they are typically engaged only as sources that reinforce Israel's narratives or as comparanda for the genres and motifs evident within Israel's own texts. It is rarely the case that these texts from other cultural contexts are used to counter the narratives found in Israel's own writings (Carroll 1998, p. 53).

This approach to material and literary sources has led me to narrate a predominantly one-sided history of the people of Israel and their possession of the land. In order to critically reflect on this tendency, I deliberately employ first-person statements, borrowing from therapeutic discourse as a mode of self-examination. Although I have guided students in critically assessing material and textual sources for their value in reconstructing historical events, I have paid little attention to the processes through which particular sites, objects and writings came to be privileged as evidence in the first place. More specifically, I overlooked how such selection practices inevitably contribute to the unintentional reinforcement of certain national myths, while marginalising many others. This tendency has manifested in multiple ways across my courses; here, I offer only a representative selection of examples.

Material sources provide some of the most striking examples. Because they are objects with which one can directly interact, and, in the best cases, even physically connect to a place, they are often treated as though they are almost naturally occurring phenomena (Abu El Haj 2001, pp. 3–4). They seem permanent and inevitable. As I will elaborate in this chapter, this is not the case. However, I have tended to present these material finds as direct physical testimonies to past peoples and events. In this regard, one example will suffice.

I incorporate the study of Masada into several of my courses, including an in-country study tour to Israel and Palestine. Located on a rocky outcrop in the Judean desert, Masada was possibly both a Hasmonean and Herodian

palace stronghold during the first centuries Before Common Era (BCE) and Common Era (CE) (Magness 2019, p. 60). However, it is most widely known through Josephus' account of Jewish rebels who encamped there to escape the Roman army in 66–70 CE (Schwartz, Zerubavel & Barnett 1986, p. 148). According to Josephus, the story illustrates the bravery of the Jewish people of his time, highlighting their refusal to surrender to the Roman army or allow themselves to be captured or defiled.

I have tended to teach the site in close connection with this account, focusing on the Roman siege works, the western walls where the Roman breach appears to have occurred, and the ostraca that supposedly attest to the story's veracity (Netzer 2004, p. 229). While this approach is admittedly selective, it remains within the bounds of the available evidence and contributes meaningfully to students' understanding of the site and its significance. The problem, however, is that my treatment of the site and its events provides minimal contextual framing for why they warrant our attention. My teaching on Masada has failed to address important questions about why this particular site and event have become part of the historical canon. By neglecting these questions, my curriculum inadvertently becomes part of an ethnocentric myth-making project surrounding the site – one that begins with Josephus and continues into the present-day (Silberman 2013, p. 12). This ethnocentric mythology includes the site's role in Israel's military rituals. Further details on this use will be provided below, as I reflect on my ongoing efforts to address these oversights. Textual sources can be just as insidious as material sources in historiography. As written documents, they are human artefacts that require interpretation for proper understanding (Wilson 2012, pp. 346–347). While this provides a better starting point than material sources, the scarcity of preserved textual sources from antiquity means that written works about any given person or event are often treated as far more reliable than they truly are (Kofoed 2005, pp. 25–26). This tendency disrupts what should otherwise be normal historical practice: The criticism and comparison of various accounts to develop a richer picture of past events and their significance (Finkelstein & Silberman 2001, pp. 21–24).

One example drawn from my courses is the study of 1 and 2 Maccabees. These texts primarily recount the story of how the Hasmonean family took responsibility for leading a group of Jews against their oppressors from the Seleucid Empire (Goldstein 1976, p. 3). The sources, in varying ways, portray the Hasmoneans as divinely aided representatives of the 'real' Israel, while depicting their Jewish opponents as inauthentic outcasts from this 'real' Israel (Borchardt 2014, pp. 174–181). My coverage of the figures and events in these texts has acknowledged certain complexities, yet it has not situated them within the broader context of extremist ethnocentrism. My teaching has also not addressed how the mythology that these texts

both inherit and contribute to is incorporated into a Zionist national discourse of muscular Judaism (Don-Yehiya 1995, pp. 303–304). As I will demonstrate, this significant oversight renders my teaching complicit in perpetuating a particular vision of both Judaism and the Holy Land – a vision that has functioned, and continues to function, as a tool of oppression against non-Jewish residents of Israel and Palestine. This outcome is unintended, yet it appears difficult to avoid given the nature of the extant sources on ancient Israel.

■ A solution in post-colonial or feminist critical archival studies

Critical archival studies emerge here as a pivotal framework for advancing the analysis. It is a multidisciplinary field that encompasses diverse approaches aimed at examining and elucidating injustices within contemporary archival practices. Furthermore, it proposes specific achievable goals for how archival practices should change and establishes the norms for conducting such a critique (Caswell, Punzalan & Sangwand 2017, pp. 1–2). In doing so, this set of approaches draws upon the perspectives and practices established in post-colonial, feminist and critical race research, which recognise and account for knowledge as a form of power (Mbembe 2019b, pp. 69–74). Once this is accepted, the archive – the collective body of what is considered a source of knowledge – becomes a generative and often invisible source of power (Jimerson 2006, pp. 21–24). Furthermore, as the archive generates power, it enables actors to wield that power for both oppression and liberation (Carter 2006, pp. 222–227). The goal of research employing a critical archival approach is to use the power of the archive in a liberative way (Punzalan & Caswell 2016, pp. 3–13). For this reason, its task is to identify where the archive is used as a tool of oppression and to suggest ways in which this oppression might be transformed into liberation by wresting control of the archive from a particular actor or group. The goal is to ‘blow open’ the archive as it was previously received, reassembling it so that its contents no longer solely or primarily support the history of the oppressor (Mbembe 2019a, pp. 160–161).

■ Implementing archival critique into teaching on the Hebrew Bible

Armed with the tools provided by a critical archival approach, I started making adjustments to my course on the study of ancient Israel. While I am by no means finished with this – and likely never will be – these changes have incorporated criticism of historians’ focus on selected themes and

topics as a central aspect of the curriculum. To illustrate this point, I return to the topics previously identified as problematic.

Earlier, I noted that my teaching on Masada, both as a site and an event, focused on it as a setting for an episode reported by Josephus. I suggested that this coverage was fairly standard compared to an average curriculum on Jewish history. It furnished students with the contextual background required to grasp the site's significance for Josephus. However, by not examining the ongoing interest in this archaeological site and episode, it unintentionally contributed to a nationalist myth linking the Holy Land to the state of Israel.

To address this problem, I will begin with an overview of the modern identification and history of the site. Although Masada was first identified (by Westerners) with Josephus' Masada in the mid-1800s, it was never fully excavated until after the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 (Ben-Yehuda 1995, pp. 50–52). Following its identification, the focus of most European and American archaeologists centered on the Roman siege works surrounding the mountain, with comparatively little attention given to the Jewish structures on Masada's plateau (Richardson 1962, pp. 142–155). It was only with the establishment of British Mandate Palestine and the marked growth of Jewish settlement in the region that Masada began to draw the attention of Jewish scholars and laypeople alike (Paine 1994, p. 372). The mountain quickly transformed from a site where Israeli youth movements camped and climbed to experience the desert into a place of such national significance that it became the basis for one of the State of Israel's national slogans (Ben-Yehuda 2007, pp. 272–273).

Zionist author Yitzhak Lamdan's epic poem *Masada* uses the site as an allegory for a Jewish homeland and concludes with the line: 'Masada shall not fall again' (Rajak 2016, p. 222). With this development, Masada was reconstructed from an intriguing, if little-known, episode in history into both a symbol of Jewish efforts to possess the land and a rallying call for Israelis to defend the site and the land with their lives (Chapman 2007, pp. 85–86). Thus, when Masada was systematically excavated two decades after the establishment of the State of Israel, it is unsurprising that its national significance shaped the project. The chief excavator was Yigael Yadin, Israel's most famous archaeologist, who also happened to be Chief of Staff for the Israel Defence Forces and later became Deputy Prime Minister (Silberman 1993, p. 351).

Also notable, and relevant to our project of situating Masada within the archive, is its role as the site where the Israeli Armoured Corps were sworn in following basic training, concluding their ceremony with the slogan, 'Masada shall not fall again' (Ben-Yehuda 1995, pp. 147–159).

Worth mentioning too is that Masada, as Israel's second most popular archaeological site and a United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage site, welcomes numerous tourists each year under the shadow of an enormous Israeli flag and under the auspices of the Israel Nature and Parks Authority (Van Henten 2017, pp. 1334-1337). In all these ways, and many others, interest in Masada has become both a symbol of the lengths to which Jews have gone to possess the land and an endorsement of the State of Israel's project to do the same.

By pointing out to students how and why Masada became part of the historical archive, they become aware of our complicity in the narrative as both historians and visitors to the site. This awareness better empowers them to take an informed stance on the state of Israel and its national myth, rather than being unconsciously enlisted in it. The next step is to articulate an alternative account that may serve as a counter-narrative of the land, one that builds directly upon the critique advanced in the preceding section.

Previously, I noted that my teaching on 1 and 2 Maccabees was adequate in addressing these sources and the events they recount. However, I also acknowledged its insufficiency, particularly with respect to the model of Judaism articulated in these texts. I have been principally concerned about how Zionist movements have employed this model of Judaism since the late 1800s. By addressing the figures, stories and events in the books of the Maccabees without considering their subsequent reception, I inadvertently present these narratives as elements of a Jewish past to be accepted as historical fact. Such an approach risks compelling readers to regard this model of Judaism as historically grounded and justified.

Once this later use is acknowledged, students are better empowered to form their own perspectives on the questions of identity that arise from these sources. In my teaching, I now also incorporate their role in the development and promulgation of the *Muskeljudentum* identity. This terminology and identity have their roots in the Zionism of the late 1800s and early 1900s (Reizbaum 2003, pp. 133-134). Coined by Max Nordau, the term refers to a new Jewish identity that aims to counter the domesticated Jewish intellectual, who had come to be seen as the norm in Jewish diaspora communities (Schaps 2017, pp. 326-327). At its core, this shift represented an important change, encouraging Jews to fight against the pervasive antisemitism of their time (Schaps 2017, p. 330). However, the muscular model of the new Jewish man also became linked to the belief that Jews needed to return to the Holy Land to realise their true identities (Kasten 2012, p. 276).

As the idea of muscular Judaism gained popularity, a range of institutions arose to advance its promotion. Among these were the Zionist youth movement Maccabee HaTzair, the Maccabee World Union, and countless sports clubs incorporating the name 'Maccabee' into their titles (Malamud 2017, p. 23). All of these groups shared the goal of training young Jews to realise their potential as muscular Jews and using that newfound strength to reclaim the land in British Mandate Palestine for themselves. These 'Maccabees' were among the most active European Jews in both settling the Holy Land and confronting local Arab populations who contested their right to settle (Conforti 2012, pp. 158-160). The choice of the Maccabees as the name and symbol for such a community is based not only on their apparent military strength in historical texts but also on their willingness to fight and die for possession of the Holy Land (Berger 2007, p. 17). This is evident not only in these Zionist movements but also in the arts and in the celebration of Israeli Independence Day. However, Jewish interest in the Maccabees is a direct result of the Zionist adoption of the family as paradigms. Other than the celebration of Hanukkah, the Hasmoneans had been largely ignored for more than a 1,000 years. Thus, their incorporation into the historical narrative is closely tied to Zionism. Re-examining this history provides students with the necessary context to sustain a critical distance both from the claims advanced by the sources and from our own deployment of those sources.

■ Conclusion

In the foregoing autoethnography, I shared my experiences in teaching the history of ancient Israel across several courses. I observed that, while I was satisfied with the coverage of the historical content in these courses through my selection of topics and sources, I was unintentionally supporting an Israeli national myth employed by Zionist actors. Acknowledging my dissatisfaction with this outcome, I reflected on how adopting a historical approach critical of the archive enabled a more nuanced engagement with the subject matter in my courses. By narrating how particular episodes and sources entered the archive of history, I enabled students both to grasp the ancient events and their sources and to critically assess their selection by myself and other historians of ancient Israel. Rather than presenting a narrative of ancient Israel that is ahistorical, this approach cultivates in students the skills of careful historical inquiry, while also enabling them to account for the contemporary implications of the histories they construct.

A hopeful witness in changing times

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■ Abstract

The field of theological education is neither neutral nor static; it is continually constituted by the historical, cultural and social contexts in which research is undertaken and the communities it seeks to serve. Doing theology is no longer conceived primarily as the pursuit of a singular truth or the definitive interpretation of a text – whether biblical, personal, congregational or sociopolitical. Rather, it is an invitation to participate with others in traversing multiple worlds, each each offering unique interpretive possibilities.

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We believe the first and most unequivocal affirmation is that theological teaching and education can play a vital role in fostering hope and healing across diverse contexts. This hope and healing are embodied through pastoral care for individuals, a prophetic stance against injustice and a practical commitment to engaging with the realities of the world.

■ Introduction

As this volume comes to an end, we carry forward both the sobriety of critical awareness and the hope of transformative possibility. The field of theological education, as reflected in the diverse contributions of this book, is neither neutral nor static; it is deeply shaped by the contexts in which the research was undertaken and the communities it seeks to serve. 'The influence of the theologian's cultural context on his or her theological formulation can no longer be ignored' (De Vries 2016, p. 1). Meylahn (2017) elaborates on what he terms the theologian's multi-world context by describing it as:

[...] environments characterized by multiple, overlapping worlds shaped by different worldviews (logoi), which are influenced by diverse cultural, social, political, racial, religious, and economic factors. These contexts are dynamic, with individuals frequently transitioning between different worlds throughout their daily lives, such as work, family, social media, and religious settings. In such environments, each world presents its own ontological inventory and dominant narratives and understanding these is essential for doing theology [...] theologians must develop sensitivity to these varied worlds, recognizing the plurality and shifting nature of individuals' lived experiences and interpretative frameworks. (pp. 1-2)

Beyers (2021, p. 1), in his reflection on the role of religion and spirituality within society, observes that religion may assume multiple functions in discourses on social development and transformation. It can serve as a champion, raising awareness and actively participating in the struggle against social injustices while working to restore justice. At the same time, religion can also contribute to the creation and perpetuation of structures and conditions that facilitate injustice.

Theological education, therefore, assumes diverse forms shaped by the particular contexts in which it is situated. Formal theological education is situated within the accredited domain of higher education (HE) and is delivered through academic programmes and degrees. As Headley (2018) affirms:

Through theological training, there is an opportunity to prepare workers who will seek the welfare of the city by connecting with those who continue to be excluded from the economic and political decision-making tables. (p. 1)

Informal theological training, by contrast, occurs within local communities where access to HE may be challenging or even contested.

In essence, this volume set out to examine the diverse and evolving landscape of theological training, seeking to sustain relevance in the midst of a crisis characterised by limited theological training (Mugambi 2013, pp. 121-123). The essays in this collection address pressing issues such as pandemics, decolonisation, the impact of digital transformation and the urgent need for pedagogical renewal. Each chapter invited readers to grapple with the complexities and possibilities inherent in teaching theology during periods that are simultaneously tumultuous and generative.

Doing theology is no longer conceived primarily as the pursuit of a singular truth or the definitive interpretation of a text – whether biblical, personal, congregational or sociopolitical. Rather, it is an invitation to participate with others in traversing multiple worlds, each each offering unique interpretive possibilities. Together, we seek not definitive or ‘true’ interpretations, but *preferred* interpretations – ones that allow preferred worlds to emerge and take shape (Meylahn 2017, p. 2). One limitation of this volume is the absence of a sustained theorisation of churches as agents of transformative theological learning and teaching. Instead, the academy, whether university or seminary, is assumed to be the primary pedagogical space in which theological learners are formed for ministerial service. These academic spaces are often prioritised as the ‘natural’ sites of training; however, future studies should attend more closely to the lived ecclesial and community contexts of students and scholars working in local settings beyond the academy, particularly among the marginalised (Maluleke 1997, p. 23). Pobee (2021) explicitly critiques the ‘academic captivity’ of ministerial formation, cautioning against the academy’s assumption of a monopoly on theological training while neglecting the formative role of churches in shaping ministerial identity and praxis. Future South-West collaborations may provide an avenue for extending this critique and addressing the crisis more fully.

The title of this volume alludes to four interrelated dimensions: Person, place, process and practices. Each of these functions both as a lens through which theological education may be viewed and as a focal point for transformation. Throughout these chapters, we encounter students and educators navigating the delicate interplay between fragility and resilience. The disciplines of theology and teaching are reimaged here through lenses grounded in specific contexts and responsive to the needs of particular communities. The learning processes described are characterised by their inherent incompleteness – and, at times, their messiness – reflecting the dynamic interplay between innovative pedagogical methods and established theological frameworks. In this instance,

[R]eimaged epistemologies and pedagogies are needed to unlock potential and invigorate the spirituality of practitioners in ways that will equip them to revitalise communities of faith, while energising and mobilising the marginalised in all contexts. (Headley 2018, p. 3)

The practices of theological education explored in this volume range from collaborative teaching across international borders to communal singing, from expressions of lament and suffering to moments of collective joy. This affirms that theological education is not merely a theoretical endeavour but is deeply embodied in the lived experiences of those who engage it in their full humanity. The volume itself emerged during a period of overlapping crises, including ecological challenges, public health concerns, epistemic ruptures, ecclesiastical fragmentation and technological upheavals.

Over time, it has become increasingly evident that the term 'crisis' should not be understood solely in catastrophic terms. Etymologically, it also connotes decision-making and discernment. The central question, therefore, is not whether theology can be effectively taught in times of crisis, but how teaching unfolds within such contexts. The contributors have responded not only to critiques of prevailing paradigms but have also advanced imaginative and innovative proposals. As Meylahn (2017, p. 9) states, 'Doing [t]heology is being a theologian, a way of reading the worlds and texts within contexts, without proposing an alternative worldview but proposing Christ-alone'. In this spirit, the collection advances models and practices that embody hope and articulate pedagogies grounded in lived experience.

Several recurring themes traverse the volume, each examined from a fresh and distinctive perspective. Foremost among these is a strong emphasis on the need for theology to be contextualised – deeply rooted in the lived realities of individuals and attuned to the dynamics of cultural responsiveness and various forms of power. Another prominent theme concerns the formation of relationships, emphasising that theological education is inherently interpersonal, requiring ethical and mutual engagement. Additionally, there is a call for the integration of the spiritual with the academic, suggesting that cognition and understanding should be combined with lived experience. Finally, the authors remind us that transformation is not merely a technical goal, but a deeply theological undertaking. It involves the holistic formation of individuals into more fully integrated persons, shaped and guided by the message of the gospel. As Headley (2018, p. 7) and Naidoo (2021, pp. 69–70) argue, transformative learning develops in community when participants integrate theory and practice in response to lived, communal realities. This book constitutes one such multi-contextual academic community, in which theological pedagogies from the West were discussed, reflected upon and integrated with those of communities in the South, and vice versa. The mutual exchange of knowledge and experience has substantially enriched the overall contribution of this volume.

■ Conclusion: On being a hopeful witness

The concluding question is: What do we take forward on this reflective journey? We believe the first and most unequivocal affirmation is that theological teaching and education can play a vital role in fostering hope and healing across diverse contexts. This hope and healing are embodied through pastoral care for individuals, a prophetic stance against injustice, and a practical commitment to engaging the realities of the world. As noted earlier, our hope is that ministerial training which prioritises indigenous knowledge and the lived experiences of communities will constitute the next step in future collaborations of this kind. Hutcherson (2016, p. 36) refers to such practitioners as reflective scholars – active theologians who integrate their research with insights from other relevant disciplines, thereby supporting the formation of engaged ministers, youth workers and Christian leaders. Reflecting on hope as an active outcome of Christian education, Klangwisan and McConnell (2016) observe that:

A theological approach that invites teachers to explore a pedagogy and theology of hope is an exciting space to realise a new social imaginary, such as critically and culturally responsive Christian schooling that successfully prepares the next generation for a changing world. A philosophy grounded in a Christian theology of hope has the potential to energize Christian teachers with renewed agency and purpose in the classroom and school community [...] Christian teachers impact communities through their faith when they celebrate diversity and educate inclusively from the place of an authentic, dynamic and hopeful orientation towards society and the world [...] A theology of hope, inspired by resurrection, motivates teachers to value curiosity, creativity and critical problem[-]solving in their students. (pp. 19–21)

We are inspired by the courage demonstrated by the authors in this volume, not only in their exploration of theological teaching but also in their willingness to critically interrogate established methodologies and to reimagine the field in radical ways. We remain hopeful that theological education continues to hold enduring relevance amid the crises confronting the world and its diverse communities.

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This edited volume is a courageous and timely contribution by thoughtful and critically engaged scholars to the future of theological education in an age marked by multiple and overlapping crises. Arising out of the student-led protests in South Africa during 2015–2016, the book captures the struggles of that period and shares a fresh vision for the present.

The book wrestles honestly with ecological devastation, the ongoing entanglements of colonialism, the rapid rise and ambivalence of Artificial Intelligence, and the urgent call for emancipatory, contextual and intercultural pedagogies. With clarity and conviction, the contributors argue that theological formation must be interdisciplinary, intentional, socially engaged and polyvocal. Theological education is that which deals with the Absolute, and as such, it must draw from multiple knowledges, voices and practices to do its work holistically.

The candour and hope that permeate these pages testify to the courage of both the editors and authors. They invite readers into a pedagogical vision that is at once critical and constructive and rooted in the specificity of the African context, while also speaking transnationally to the wider church and academy.

Dr Aizaiah Yong, Executive Director, Colledgeville Institute of Ecumenical and Cultural Research, Saint John's Abbey and University, Colledgeville, Minnesota, USA

This edited volume presents an interdisciplinary and intercontextual scholarly work arising from a four-year collaborative project between theologians at Stellenbosch University, South Africa, and NLA University College in Bergen, Norway, with contributors from Rwanda, Kenya and the United Kingdom, articulating a vision of theology as a contextual, communal and holistic educational journey that integrates spiritual and academic formation to foster transformative, gospel-shaped personhood.

The scholars explore the contextualisation of theology through communal and facilitative pedagogies, emphasising relational formation, ethical discernment and the integration of spiritual and academic dimensions. Transformation is presented as a holistic journey towards gospel-shaped personhood. This scholarly work is intended for those engaged in theology and theological education.

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