

‘A GODMOTHER OF THE TRUE BELIEVERS’

Teaching Spirituality in a Non-Denominational Seminary

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REFLECTION ON TEACHING Christian spirituality is necessarily influenced by one’s understanding of Christian spirituality as an academic discipline, and the context and goals inherent in the situation in which one teaches it. For the last five years, I have been teaching Christian spirituality at Yale Divinity School (YDS), a seminary that serves 42 denominations and shares some faculty with the religious studies department at Yale University. Students in any given class in spirituality usually espouse eight to ten different denominational identifications, with many students claiming at least one ‘former’ denomination. This information at the beginning of a term guides me as to how many versions of Christian faith and practice I need to take into account during that term. I think about this in terms of how many ‘languages’ I need to speak in this particular class.

I am the first professor hired explicitly to teach Christian spirituality at the divinity school. Prof. Henri Nouwen and Prof. Louis Dupré preceded me at Yale. Nouwen had been hired in pastoral care as a psychologist but was also, of course, deeply interested in spirituality and taught it. Louis Dupré, a philosopher of religion whose primary appointment was in the religious studies department, had a deep interest in mysticism and phenomenology of religion as well as in Marxism and other areas of scholarship. Both had received their academic training in Europe, and had left the faculty by 1998.

A number of factors led to the Yale Divinity School faculty’s designating a position in ‘Spirituality and Ministerial Leadership’ during the 2008–2009 academic year. This faculty, especially the leaders in ministerial studies, recognised:

Christian Spirituality [is] an academic discipline that involves the interdisciplinary study of Christian religious experience as it has been practiced through the ages. This discipline incorporates critical reflection upon the classic documents of Christian belief, upon the

theologies that undergird and inform faith practices, and upon the individual and communal practices that sustain, nurture and deepen the life of faith. Such study is an essential part of preparing persons for ministerial leadership in a world of many religions.¹

Not only did the faculty recognise Christian spirituality as an academic discipline in its own right, but—deeply influenced both by Bernard McGinn and Sandra Schneiders²—they were attuned to the need ‘for congregational preachers, pastoral care givers and educators who can engage and nurture the spiritual life of those whom they serve’ and to ‘the persistence of concerns from students about the spiritual dimension of their education’. They were convinced that courses in spirituality ‘could help them integrate academic theology, ministerial praxis, and the lived experience of faith as it is manifest in individuals and communities’.³

In addition, they were deeply aware of various spirituality movements in relation to health care, social justice and the environment, and of increasing interest in spiritual practices such as prayer and meditation, and of the demand that the Churches should address these. Finally, they recognised the need for persons of faith and their pastors to ‘find a way to relate spiritually across the chasms of inter-religious misunderstanding and alienation’. The faculty believed this could be achieved if graduates left ‘equipped to address the issue of spirituality through a sound theological, historical and practical knowledge of the spiritual riches of their own traditions’.⁴

Sandra Schneiders has often delineated three areas or arenas in higher education where academic institutions currently offer courses in Christian spirituality, each with distinct purposes. She put it this way in a 2010 essay:

The study of spirituality has at least three possible goals which may be overlapping: academic research in the field, deeper understanding of the nature and process of spiritual growth and participation in that process, practical professional preparation for assisting the spiritual growth of others.⁵

¹ Area IV [Ministerial Studies] Faculty, ‘Draft Rationale for a Position in Spirituality and Ministerial Leadership’, 2008, 1.

² See Bernard McGinn, ‘The Letter and Spirit: Spirituality as an Academic Discipline’ and Sandra M. Schneiders, ‘The Study of Christian Spirituality: Contours and Dynamics of a Discipline’, in *Minding the Spirit: The Study of Christian Spirituality*, edited by Elizabeth A. Dreyer and Mark S. Burrows (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins UP, 2005). The ministerial studies faculty also discussed these issues in conversation with Prof. McGinn and held a teleconference with Prof. Schneiders.

³ ‘Draft Rationale’, 1.

⁴ ‘Draft Rationale’, 1, 2.

⁵ Sandra M. Schneiders, ‘Spirituality and the God Question’, *Spiritus*, 10/2 (2010), 245.



Yale Divinity School

Usually, she describes doctoral programmes as primarily involved with academic research, contributing to the development of the field itself. Schneiders assigns the second goal to programmes of pastoral renewal for people in ministry; these would mainly be sabbatical programmes, either within academic institutions or offered in other settings. The third goal she identifies with MA and MDiv. courses in spirituality for formation directors, pastors/ministers in training and religious educators. The YDS faculty focused most intensely on this third purpose for obvious reasons.

From my personal experience of thirty years teaching spirituality courses at the MA and MDiv. graduate level, the majority of students have been deeply interested in their own spiritual growth. I have only encountered an occasional student at Yale who enrolls in a spirituality course in order to fulfil a distribution requirement in ministerial studies who is not also very interested in ‘deeper understanding of the nature and process of spiritual growth and participation in that process’.⁶

My academic position in spirituality at Yale is situated in the practical theology department, which also includes preaching, pastoral theology and care, religious education, choir, leadership in school ministry, chaplaincy, parish leadership and administration, and other applied disciplines. A requirement of all ministerial studies courses is that they incorporate a significant practice component. This introduced a new rubric into how I adapted some previous courses and created new ones for this context.⁷

⁶ Schneiders, ‘Spirituality and the God Question’, 245.

⁷ See Elizabeth Liebert, ‘Practice’, in *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Spirituality*, edited by Arthur Holder (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 496, for an excellent description of the role of practice in teaching and researching spirituality, drawing on insights from practical theology and educational theory.

At Fordham University, where I led a programme in spiritual direction, the supervised *practicum* was the integrating course that brought theory and practice of this ministry together.⁸ Survey courses in the 'History of Christian Spirituality', however, were taught through historical method and required research papers, and students were also encouraged to refer to pastoral situations or to their personal experience where appropriate through integrating questions (which invite students to make a historical text applicable to their current life or context), in mid-term or final exams. The theology department at Fordham also had a PhD programme in historical theology, chaired at the time by Prof. Ewert Cousins, so I frequently had some doctoral or pre-doctoral students in these classes.

The course on 'Contemporary Christian Spirituality' served as an introduction to the study of the field, as well as covering topics of current interest within it or in a specific area, such as spirituality and ecology, spirituality and postmodernism, or spirituality and a particular culture. Students could either develop a foundation in the technical literature or engage with topics of particular interest to them through reflective essays on assigned readings or on the topic more generally. They also presented areas of interest, as individuals or as groups, that were not covered in the course itself. This course had to be significantly adapted for Yale.

'Meditation: East and West' always included a practice component of four prayer periods a week, using whatever form of Christian prayer or approach from Eastern religious traditions had been explained and practised together in class. This course was designed to cover key competences needed by spiritual directors: knowledge of the Christian contemplative tradition, helpful bodily practices that aid meditation, and a capacity to lead guided prayer sessions with a directee or in another pastoral context. The prayer form of the week was practised and reflected upon together, so that students could glimpse a variety of responses to the same approach, preventing them from seeing their own experience as normative for everyone.

Students also formed small groups in which they rotated the role of guiding the group's meditation, following the pattern demonstrated in class. Two more individual sessions were also required, along with a journal

⁸ The supervised *practicum*, as I developed it, covered the practical aspects of the spiritual direction process. In it, students saw two to three directees from campus or from their own parishes, wrote process notes (general descriptions of the whole session) for every session for their supervisor, and presented shorter written verbatims (word-for-word transcripts) twice in small supervision groups, and several other verbatims in individual supervision.

entry for each of the four weekly practices, submitted after every four classes. Students could not pass the course without the journal submission accounting for this practice component. I responded as a spiritual director to their accounts: journals are never graded, but they are required to pass the course; other written work and class participation are then the primary basis for the grade. This course did not need to be significantly revised other than expanding the content to include Protestant spiritual figures.

To my surprise, I discovered at Yale that a significant number of students had been so challenged by the historical critical approaches in their scripture courses that they had become unable to practise scriptural devotion as divinity students. Helping students return to various ways of praying with scripture with their critical and historical consciousness functioning as a benefit instead of a deterrent is now built into this class, as well as the 'Contemporary Christian Spirituality' class. There we discuss sapiential reading of scripture as an ancient Christian practice that is simply different from, rather than antithetical to, scripture studies. It is also important to note that some of our scripture faculty, as well as those in other specialties, are deeply concerned about the spiritual development of their students. But that is not necessarily the focus of large lecture classes in scripture.

The 'Contemporary Christian Spirituality' course now emphasizes ascetic practices more than Christian spirituality as an academic discipline. Because of the breadth of the course and the relatively small number of class sessions, I decided to eliminate the student topical presentations. Instead, we explore together a variety of critical ways of understanding what spiritual practices are and the rationale for choosing them in terms of the positive goal of each practice, or what might be the negative goal (avoiding a behaviour or situation perceived to be detrimental physically, emotionally or spiritually).

Students choose five practices from a very wide list of possibilities at the beginning of the semester after these classes on practices and in conversation with me. At the end of the semester, they write a reflection based on what happened with their chosen practices. How did the practices work, what did they find they needed to change along the way and what did they learn about themselves in the process? These reflections are shared, seminar-style, so a significant subgroup of the class learns from one another. Shifting to the emphasis on practice rather than on an understanding of the field places this class more firmly under the rubric of preparing students for ministry or assisting their spiritual growth rather than preparing them for doctoral studies in spirituality.

This particular class helps support the students' understanding of vocation across the many dimensions of their lives. The composition of the class changes every time it is taught, but half the students in the school are in their twenties, a small group are second-career students in their thirties, then another larger group are clearly in the second half of their lives, forties to sixties, with deep life experience. This mix of students is very helpful: it is good for all those preparing for ministry to learn from one another across generational lines.

Another surprise in my first year at Yale was the hunger of these students to study mystical texts as performative or formative texts, illuminating experiences readers may have had already or desire to have, rather than as historical artefacts. As I looked at 35 students in front of me in 'Discernment of Spirits through Selected Mystics' on the first day of class, many in their twenties, I wondered aloud if they had the interior experiences that might help them approach and understand these mystical texts. They stunned me by asking, right then and there, if one or another experience they had had might count.

***Welcoming
this rush of
Spirit into the
classroom***

This overflow into the room of their unprocessed experiences of God and deep hunger to learn how to interpret and be guided by them was amazing, I think, to all of us. And almost no one dropped out of the class. I had unknowingly broken the first rule of the academy by welcoming this rush of Spirit into the classroom, receiving it, respecting it, being affected by it, and leaving the decision to stay in the class or not up to them. Students often comment on the way they feel free to bring up aspects of their spiritual lives or experience in all of my classes if it is relevant to the topic we are discussing. This openness within the classroom helps them integrate academic knowledge across theological disciplines into their lives. Most, however, do this integrative work, which may involve considerable self-disclosure, in their written assignments. I will sometimes comment on some of their questions and reflections when they touch on an important concept or understanding that might benefit the whole class.

This course on 'Discernment of Spirits' I also had to adapt from Fordham. I had originally created it as an alternative to the second half of the survey course in 'History of Christian Spirituality' that typically started with the thirteenth century. So I taught it as history, but also focused on the practice of discernment and the many meanings and subject matters that require discernment. This was primarily intended to support the spiritual direction part of that programme, which had the largest enrolment in the interdisciplinary spirituality programme.

Adapting this course led me to think more deeply about what issue was being discerned in each text (often multiple issues) and what practice was inherent in the text itself. For instance, *The Cloud of Unknowing* revolves around the call to a contemplative life, explicitly the gift of contemplation, so a logical practice was an experiment with centring prayer, based on this classic text and student reflection on their experience of this practice of prayer as well as discernment about it. Catherine of Siena's *Dialogue* and letters focus primarily on one's character and virtues. So students were asked to reflect on this teaching in their own lives, discerning their strongest and their weakest virtues. For Ignatius' 'Rules of Discernment of Spirits', they discerned a choice facing them at that moment. And Teresa of Ávila's *Interior Castle* gave them the opportunity to consider which rooms in the castle were most familiar to them in their own experience. Finally, Jonathan Edwards's *Treatise on Religious Affections* focused them on interior affections and discernment of them, as well as their experience with a variety of charismatic movements.

All of these texts are also 'classics'. So we discuss what a spiritual classic is and ways that one might read them.⁹ When I teach courses on mystics and their teaching, I draw on the best historical scholarship I can. My students come to a US Ivy League university, having already been fully inducted into a variety of modes of critical consciousness where there is apparently not much room for the mystical on its own terms. The Protestant Churches have not done a very good job of passing on their own mystical traditions to their congregants. Anything that preceded the Reformation does not count for some. I learnt to emphasize that the common tradition in Christian texts does not end with the patristic era. I was stunned when one Anglican exchange student did not seem to recognise *The Cloud of Unknowing* as part of the English mystical tradition!

I began by mentioning a number of factors that contributed to the Divinity School's decision to create a faculty position in Christian spirituality and ministerial leadership. An additional institutional factor may have played a role. The Divinity School, while part of a major university, is technically a professional school. Its accrediting body is the Association of Theological Schools (ATS), the primary accrediting body for seminaries in the USA, especially those that are not under a specific

⁹ See Lawrence Cunningham, 'On Reading Spiritual Texts', *Theology Today*, 56 (April 1999), 98–104; Arthur Holder, 'The Problem with "Spiritual Classics"', *Spiritus*, 10/1 (2010), 22–55.

ecclesiastical jurisdiction. The ATS specifies formation requirements for seminaries, assuring graduates are adequately prepared for their ministerial lives. This includes classes in preaching or homiletics, liturgical training, clinical pastoral education or some form of internship or supervised ministry, the fulfilment of polity norms for each of the denominations served, and norms for spiritual formation. Along with these very specific requirements, the school has to develop some way of assessing its adequacy in achieving these goals. The faculty was working on the spiritual formation goals and their assessment at the same time as the search committee was seeking candidates for the spirituality position.

The school has long been host to the Annand Program for Spiritual Formation, endowed by an Episcopalian bishop through Berkeley Theology School, which graciously serves the entire student population. This includes small mentored groups in the first year of studies, spiritual direction for second-year students and beyond (and for some first-year students on request), and a series of six to eight sessions of mentored topical groups in the second semester. There are now two ongoing groups for second-career students. The programme director is responsive to initiatives from Annand mentors, students and the Spiritual Formation

Committee; a large number of students participate.

Students are also encouraged, but not subsidised, to make use of opportunities that are off campus. The Yale Campus Ministry and various denominational chaplaincies near the university also offer many opportunities both for worship and for spiritual formation. The faculty require students to participate in some kind of corporate worship on and off campus. The Marquand Chapel programme is robust and a model of intentionally ecumenical worship, with brilliant musical support from the Institute of Sacred Music. Preaching courses have always been required for the MDiv. degree. Students were left free to choose spiritual formation opportunities



Marquand Chapel, Yale Divinity School

offered by the school or not, but with the provision that some kind of mentoring by an experienced person was involved, which might include classes taught in spirituality as well as some in other areas such as liturgy, and so on.

Early on, I was asking what the formative difference was between the Annand Program's topically organized groups and the classes I was teaching. I found that the former tended to be less academic and more like faith-sharing groups, and I discovered very quickly that divinity school students could not integrate their spirituality and their critical consciousness if spirituality classes were not taught on the same academic level as everything else. Spirituality classes have to deal with critical theory of various kinds, cultural movements and the arts, as well as offer enough technical disciplinary material in the field of spirituality that students can be fully present in the spirituality classroom—head, heart, body and spirit together. If the conversation and critical frames of reference encompass their wholeness, they can become whole. They need to understand theological and philosophical aspects of spirituality as well as the emotional, relational, mystical and ascetical. God meets people in their wholeness and in their brokenness, in both their strengths and their weaknesses.

Today many people are aware that human persons have various different forms of intelligence, but the academy seems to recognise only some of them. The academy privileges thinking over feeling, logic over intuition, reason over bodily knowing, words over art forms, argument over appreciative awareness, science over the humanities. But I do not think this is the way we learn spirituality or mysticism.

The response to 'Discernment of Spirits through Selected Mystics' was so strong that I have developed three other courses based on the mystics. I first created 'John of the Cross: A Guide for Difficult Times', exclusively focused on John in dialogue with contemporary interpreters such as Constance Fitzgerald in her work on impasse and apophaticism. 'Women Mystics' came next, looking at Gertrude the Great, Hadewijch, Teresa of Ávila and Dorothee Soelle. And the latest is 'St Ignatius of Loyola and his Spiritual Exercises', using Michael Hansen's *First Exercises* as the practice component and Roger Haight's *A Spirituality for Seekers*, which ably addresses most of the students' theological questions. The central texts are all Ignatian primary sources: the *Autobiography* and the *Spiritual Exercises*. The effect on the students was even greater than I could have imagined—both in their grasp of the meaning and purpose of the Exercises and in the depth of their spiritual experience in the practices.

Shortly after I began my work at Yale Divinity School, Tilden Edwards sent me a small monograph he had written: *The Promise of a Contemplatively Oriented Seminary: Valuing and Nurturing a Mind-in-Heart Way*. In it he makes the argument that ‘contemplative awareness is intrinsically ambiguous to the thinking mind, because it touches reality in a different way than the mind can directly grasp’.¹⁰ This is another way of knowing, a different epistemology:

It can bring to rational teaching a dimension of living in the larger Presence, a way that draws teacher and student closer to the open door of Spirit-presence together. It takes our thinking out of ‘quarantine’ from the spiritual heart and allows it to grow from that more integral place of subtle knowing and desiring in us that befits the mystery of the religious/spiritual subject at hand.¹¹

Even more radically, he argues that the entire seminary, not just classes that purport to teach spirituality or spiritual practices, ought to function in this ‘Mind-in-Heart way’. At the time, this seemed like an unreachable goal at YDS. But there are moments when I see glimmers through my students of the ways in which individual faculty members function from this deeper consciousness. But this is not yet a widely shared aspiration or commitment for the faculty as a body.

A Carnegie Foundation volume, *Educating Clergy: Teaching Practices and Pastoral Imagination*, explores in some depth how seminary faculties explicitly think about and engage in intentional pedagogies of formation, using interviews with faculty members and classroom observation. The authors name two approaches that relate rather explicitly to spiritual formation and are not necessarily restricted to the spirituality classroom: practising the presence of God and practising holiness.¹² Both are somehow embodied in a professor’s teaching style. All of the faculty members interviewed considered their teaching to have a sacramental quality to it, whether or not they prayed with their students in class and

¹⁰ Tilden Edwards, *The Promise of a Contemplatively Oriented Seminary: Valuing and Nurturing a Mind-in-Heart Way* (Washington, DC: Shalem Institute for Spiritual Formation, 2010), 14. See also Andrew D. Mayes, *Spirituality in Ministerial Formation: The Dynamic of Prayer in Learning* (Cardiff: U. of Wales P, 2009). Mayes focuses primarily on ways of integrating prayer in ministerial formation. He, too, points to another way of knowing that results from this immersion in prayer as it affects learning and personal development.

¹¹ Edwards, *Promise of a Contemplatively-Oriented Seminary*, 14–15.

¹² Charles R. Foster and others, *Educating Clergy: Teaching Practices and Pastoral Imagination* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006), 105–116.

however explicitly they referred to the presence of God. Yet students most remembered:

... catching a glimpse, through their professor's teaching, not only of 'exciting subject matter, but of living Torah, living Truth'; 'not only knowledge about God but knowledge and love of God'; not only an encounter with the professor's 'wisdom of the tradition ... [but through the professor] also the realness of the Divine'.¹³

In my own teaching, each course has its own subject matter which guides me in how I go about designing it and how I integrate prayer, the presence of God, personal witness (spoken and unspoken) and the students' expression of their experience and questions about all of the above. I also remain very careful in maintaining the need for each course, and requiring an account of the cognitive content appropriate for it. This includes such things as critical theories about asceticism and spiritual practices, and the actual teaching of particular mystics and their historical context.

Within a given class, I typically use multiple ways of knowing when teaching a text. This might mean beginning with a prayer composed by the mystic we are studying, or a poem that points to a theological theme within the spiritual text or the theme of the day, or a visual art form, or music inspired by the figure. The class moves in an interactive way, from discourses that are not technically theological but evocative on multiple levels to the presentation and lecture that capture the historical context and the core cognitive teaching of the text, as well as responses to student observations and questions.

Exams tend to be the primary exercise that requires consolidating firm cognitive understandings from the course. Practices accounted for in written form nurture individualised experimentation and learning about spiritual reality and graced openness to God beyond the texts, and God often bestows God's presence in and among all of these activities and modes, in and outside the classroom itself. This particular pedagogy may fulfil the desire for spiritual renewal and growth, but is most clearly focused on the formation of MDiv. and MAR students themselves and on how to meet the spiritual needs of their congregations or of other groups they will serve. I have many students who pursue PhDs in a theological discipline. I believe such teaching and writing is a vocation

¹³ Foster and others, *Educating Clergy*, 110.

and a spiritual path in its own right, but one that is often unacknowledged within the academy. As the only professor explicitly identified with the field of Christian spirituality in the entire university, I am not directing major research projects in this field except for an occasional STM thesis, and this has necessarily shaped my approach to teaching spirituality in pastoral schools in higher education.

In many theological schools or departments of theology only one permanent faculty position seems to be dedicated to spirituality. On the one hand, this inhibits the development of the interdisciplinary field of Christian spirituality at the doctoral level. On the other hand, I find it deeply fulfilling to create programmes that either mentor students in a particular spirituality ministry, such as spiritual direction, or participate in the formation of lay and ordained ministerial students, as well as of those who will enter public service or teach at either the secondary or university levels of education. The addition of the cycle of courses I teach, which are both academic and practical, symbolically validates the deep longing for God that students come to seminary to explore and develop.

The title of this essay comes from an epithet given to me by one of my students. He said to me after class one night, 'The way I explain you to my church people,¹⁴ ordination board, etc., is that you are the Godmother of the True Believers'. I often wonder what my Protestant students project on to me as a Roman Catholic Sister teaching spirituality. My student's description pleased me very much. I think he meant by 'true believers' those who have a deep life with God—those to whom God/Jesus is not only important but a real presence. For him this is a way of saying something about claiming belief—faith—as something experienced. A godmother, of whatever age, is one who nurtures that relationship and fosters its deepening and growth. And I do this precisely as a teacher and mentor as well as through my own witness to the life of the Spirit over a lifetime of religious commitment.

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¹⁴ Evangelical Lutheran.