

Book Review

Beyond Profession: The Next Future of Theological Education. Daniel O. Aleshire. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2021.

Ka Hon Tony Wong

Summary

Beyond Profession is a reflection regarding the future of theological education in North America by Daniel O. Aleshire, former executive director of the Association of Theological Schools.

Aleshire begins with his journey in theological education as a student, faculty member, and ATS's executive director. With post-baccalaureate education as his primary concern, Aleshire pinpoints ongoing changes in theological education. These changes include: kinds of learning required at the graduate level, practices, settings, and standards.

Later, Aleshire traces the history of North American theological education in mainline Protestant, Catholic, Evangelical, and historically Black schools. He argues that "the past does not determine the future, but its layers of influence never go away" (30). This historical survey demonstrates that all North American theological education institutions experience "the powerful influence of culture, higher education, and religion on the institutional forms and educational practices of theological schools" (71).

Thanks to this history, Aleshire believes that theological schools need to decide whether they "can reinvent their work to fit the current religious, cultural, and educational realities" (74). Aleshire emphasizes the importance of formation for religious leaders in the coming era as a response to a "declining positive view of the ethics of clergy. . . and declining confidence in organized religion" (77). Thus, the future theological schools should move from a purely professional model that focuses on skills and specialized knowledge to a formational model:

The goal of theological education should be the development of a wisdom of God and the ways of God, fashioned from intellectual, affective, and behavioral understanding and evidenced by spiritual and moral maturity,

relational integrity, knowledge of the Scripture and tradition, and the capacity to exercise religious leadership. (82)

Educational practices need to align to this holistic formational goal. To help institutions achieve this goal, Aleshire proposes the cultivation of “a renewed sense of the vocation of the theological school and faithfulness of faculty for that vocation” (112); a commitment to formational theological education “and [development of] the assessment strategies the goal requires” (118); enhancement of opportunities for fostering spiritual maturity, moral maturity, and relational integrity; and changes “involving the evaluation of students, the organization of student learning, and the partners that theological schools engage” (131).

Aleshire concludes that theological education is moving (and should move) toward holistic formation of religious leaders who have “a deep identity as Christian human beings” (140).

Assessment

Three major arguments deserve further consideration: 1) theological education needs to respond to the context in which it is situated, 2) holistic formation is key, and 3) faculty and institutional leaders are central to fostering formation.

Respond to context.

Aleshire stresses that educators need to recognize that theological education is contextually bounded – influenced by culture, trends within higher education, and local churches and denominations. This fact described by Aleshire is also true of institutions globally. For example, governments can exercise authority over accreditation in very different ways, so school leaders need to pay attention to how government requirements (or other accreditation requirements) impact their priorities. Theological educators outside the West can use Aleshire’s analysis to spark their own reflections on how their context shapes their school.

Furthermore, theological educators should be mindful of the cultural assumptions that theological education from other parts of the world may insert into their own contexts. During COVID-19, theological schools often use online education platforms, but on these platforms, they may find themselves relying heavily on Western-derived resources. Majority World educators need to be aware of and navigate carefully the differences between their own and Western perspectives. Although Aleshire’s argument comes from his experience in the West, it can encourage Majority World leaders to reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of Western-based resources. Indeed, theological education should not be one-directional, from West to Majority World. Rather, the Majority World should cultivate genuine collaboration and wisdom to share with the West.

Recognize the centrality of holistic formation.

Next, Aleshire stresses holistic formation in theological education. He comments that, in North America, “protestant theological education attends to some of these qualifications exceptionally well while it does not attend to others. And while Roman Catholic theological education attends to all of them more fully, it is still learning how to do this well” (97). He sees formation as a major gap in Western theological education.

As global theological schools often pattern their goals and practices on those of the “minority world,” they may experience weaknesses in formation that parallel the problems faced by their North American counterparts. Aleshire’s goal is for formation to serve as a checklist for Majority World theological educators: he encourages them to review their own development and thereby strengthen theological education by paying attention to areas that need to be improved. Particularly, spiritual maturity, moral maturity, and relational integrity are crucial for faculty and administrators. Schools’ practices need to align to these goals to help future religious leaders grow to serve in Christ’s name.

Uphold faculty and other institutional leaders in student formation.

Aleshire emphasizes the vital role of faculty and leaders of theological schools in fostering formation in their context. If holistic formational theological education is a virtuous endeavor for schools, leaders need to commit to changing the educational practices in their schools. Certainly, each school needs to define how it understands holistic formation – as aligned with its particular faith tradition, its institutional history, and its broader cultural/social context. As schools affirm their vocation of forming religious leaders holistically, they need to “steward their theological and religious identity carefully, cultivate institutional practices and disciplines that sustain their identity, and reflect that identity in their educational practices” (114).

One change to foster formational theological education can occur in schools’ curricula. Here, faculty become vital members as they implement a formational learning experience, as they teach and live alongside students. One difficulty for implementing a curriculum that integrates holistic formation is faculty members’ own struggles with this concept. One school attempted to implement an integrative curriculum. One of their leaders found that some of the faculty members lacked the appropriate skills to teach integratively and remained disconnected from the integrative approach (Cahalan and Graham 2017, 100). If this problem happens, how can school leaders motivate and support faculty to learn how to form students holistically? Both leaders and faculty need to commit to this process so that formation can be implemented – another point for reflection from this book for leaders in theological education.

Beyond Profession is written from a North American perspective. However, its main arguments can generate thoughtful discussion about formational theological education globally.

Reference

Cahalan, Kathleen A., Edward Foley, and Gordon S. Mikoski, ed. *Integrating Work in Theological Education*. Wipf and Stock, 2017.



Ka Hon Tony Wong

Ka Hon Tony Wong is a PhD student in Educational Studies at Trinity International University (Illinois, USA). He is currently the Associate Pastor of Chinese Ministries of Calgary Chinese Baptist Church. He has also served on the board of the Canadian Chinese School of Theology Calgary. He may be reached at ztwong1@tiu.edu.