

Theological Vocation and the Academy

Marc Cortez
Associate Professor of Theology
Wheaton College

I often wonder if I should add another job title to my business cards: Crusher of Other People's Dreams. A budding scholar walks into my office. She has fallen in love with the idea of teaching theology and the vision of training Christian leaders so they are better equipped to serve the Church. She just wants some advice on how to go about doing that, how to pursue a theological vocation in the academy. Although I usually try to lead with something warm and encouraging, I eventually have to drop the hammer: The job is harder than you think, the economic realities are worse than you think, and many spend years on the chase without ever catching the unicorn.

These are generally not fun conversations.

I say more than that, of course. I happen to think that I have one of the greatest jobs in the world, and I will support anyone who is truly convinced that the unicorn is worth chasing. Before they start, though, I want to make sure they know that the unicorn is a sneaky beast. If you are not careful, it will tear you in half with its pearly white horn.

To explain what I mean, I want to focus on two issues. First, the economic challenges facing anyone just starting to pursue a theological vocation in the academy. Second, some of the realities with which those of us already in place must deal. I will conclude with just a few thoughts on some things we might need to consider moving forward, though I recognize that there are no easy solutions.

Careful, the Unicorn Has a Horn

I probably do not need to spend much time convincing anyone here that the job market is rather challenging. We really cannot talk about the theological vocation as it relates to the academy without being clear on the current state of the theological job market in higher education. With that target in mind, I want us to focus on some statistics from the Association for Theological Schools (ATS). Although ATS does not cover all of our institutions, mine included, it is sufficiently broad to provide a representative indication of the state of the theological job market as a whole.

In 2008, ATS schools employed a total of 3,671 faculty. That number has declined in each subsequent year, reaching a total of 3,538 in 2013 (a 3.6 percent decline overall). By itself, that number may not seem terribly troubling. Nonetheless, a longer timeline demonstrates that this is not a fluke. In the five years from 1999–2003, total ATS faculty grew by 11 percent. This was followed, though, by five years of stagnation in which total faculty grew by less than 1%. The decline in recent years, then, is part of a larger transition from a period of faculty growth to one of overall retraction. Additionally, the 3.8 percent decline in faculty over the last five years mirrors the 4 percent decline in total full-time equivalent (FTE) over that same period. Given that few predict a turnaround in overall FTE at theological schools in the near future, it seems reasonable to conclude that reductions in total faculty numbers will continue for the foreseeable future.

Although these numbers should trouble anyone interested in academic theology, the situation is even more difficult for those just starting out. In 2008 ATS schools hired 420 new faculty. By 2010 that number had declined to 226 new hires, a startling 46 percent drop. Although those numbers have improved steadily since then, ATS schools still hired only 297 new faculty in 2013, an overall reduction of 29 percent from five years ago. Because these new faculty numbers include anyone transferring from a non-ATS school to an ATS school, the actual number of new PhDs hired by ATS schools in 2013 will be somewhat less. If you compare the less than 300 new faculty hires to the nearly 4,000 students currently enrolled in PhD programs at ATS schools, the competitive realities for PhD students become clear. Interestingly, despite the increasingly difficulty job market, enrollment in PhD/ThD programs has remained stable (3,963 in 2009 and 3,935 in 2013 for just a .7 percent decrease), and acceptance rates actually increased slightly (from 50.9 percent in 2012 to 51.6 percent in 2013).

This not only means that enrollment in doctoral programs has not changed to reflect the realities of the job market, but that ATS schools continue to produce hundreds of more PhD graduates every year than the number of new PhDs those

same schools are hiring. Many of those PhD graduates will, of course, seek employment in non-ATS schools, but they will also compete for those same jobs with students from non-ATS doctoral programs (esp. those in the UK) and those PhD graduates who are already on the market.

Thus, the job market reality for new PhDs is bleak. Of course, many of these students face these realities with substantial educational debt. Although PhD students at ATS schools do not accumulate as much debt as one might expect, the average educational debt for graduating PhD students still ranges from \$15,000 (average for all PhD students) to \$30,000 (borrowers only). Thus, these students are taking quite a financial risk: accruing debt to pursue jobs in an increasingly challenging market. The unicorn has not disappeared, but it is more elusive than it used to be.

An additional part of the economics of the theological vocation comes into play when we include the reality of the adjunct life. Although I was not able to locate statistics from ATS on the use of adjunct faculty, the trends in US higher education as a whole are quite clear. In 1969, 78 percent of professors held tenure-track positions. By 2009, that number had dropped to 33.5 percent.¹ At private four-year schools, over half were part-time, nontenure (53 percent). I do not think we would find that these numbers reflect ATS schools as a whole, but they do suggest an industry-wide trend toward more “flexible” faculty.

Thus, even though full-time positions have grown scarce, plenty of part-time, nontenured teaching opportunities await the new PhD. Students often use these positions as a way of staying near the unicorn, running alongside for a while, hoping to jump on its back when it is not looking. My concern, though, is that too many are being trampled in the process.

An adjunct instructor is often paid somewhere between \$3,000 and \$3,500 for a three-credit course. That will vary from school to school, but I would be surprised if there were many institutions that went far beyond that. Many institutions will limit the number of hours you teach so that you remain nominally part-time. Depending on location, the adjunct might be able to cobble together close to a full-time load by teaching at various institutions. For that effort and creativity, she will receive \$25,000–28,000 per year. This will probably be enough to keep her above the nominal poverty threshold in the United States, but not by much. Of course, she will probably not receive any benefits. Furthermore, let us keep in mind that teaching a three-credit class is about more than the specific hours that you spend in the classroom. There is also the course prep, grading, random conversations, and other things that take more than a little time. When all is said and done, then, it is not unusual for an adjunct to make less than \$15 per hour for their work. Thus, as one commentator pointed out, the reality is that

for many, being a professor in America can no longer be considered a middle class job, which involves a significant shift in how we understand the vocation:

A professor belongs to the professional class, a professor earns a salary and owns a home, probably with a leafy yard, and has good health insurance and a retirement account. In the American imagination, a *professor* is perhaps disheveled, but as a product of brainy eccentricity, not of penury. In the American university, this is not the case.²

On top of that, because the adjunct operates outside the established framework of the university, she will typically not experience the same kind of support as regular faculty. That could be as little as a lack of office space in which to meet with students, but it runs deeper. I have a friend who adjuncts at a secular institution on the west coast. Their policy is that if a regular faculty person has a section of their class canceled, they will automatically pull a class from an adjunct to keep the regular faculty person's load full. As a former dean, I understand the economic realities of that policy. Why put out extra money for an adjunct for a class that you have already paid a regular faculty person to teach? The reality for my friend, though, is that she routinely spends the summer preparing to teach a course only to have it pulled the week before the semester starts, which is usually too late to find other teaching opportunities.

The lack of support extends to emotional and relational support as well. We all know how difficult teaching can be, especially in those early years. Most of us would not have made it if it were not for some more senior faculty who helped us navigate the waters of constructing syllabi, writing exams, handling difficult students, balancing the academic life with other responsibilities, and understanding institutional policies, among a myriad of other things. Although adjuncts are not usually left completely on their own for these things, it is common for them to experience far less relational support from within the institution.

One final reality: Although the adjuncts that I have known have been incredibly self-sacrificial, going above and beyond expectations despite limited financial benefit, the reality is that adjuncts simply do not have the time that they would like to devote themselves to their classes. They are either teaching in too many places, or they are spending most of their time earning some real money so they can take care of themselves and their families. Regardless of what impact this might have on the classroom, many adjuncts find the situation inherently unsatisfying and frustrating. After all, these are people who feel a call to the classroom and want to fully invest in their theological vocation.

Despite the significant challenges that adjuncts face, it is difficult to see the trend toward using more adjuncts changing any time soon. With schools experi-

encing declining enrollments and pressure to avoid raising tuition, it makes sense to shift resources from expensive full-time faculty to relatively less-expensive adjunct faculty. The growth of distance education programs also makes it easier for institutions to support programs with part-time and adjunct resources.

Riding the Unicorn Is Not Easy Either

To this point, we have focused entirely on those who are just starting on their career in theological education. We all know that those already in full-time positions face challenging realities as well. First, as I already mentioned, theological schools around the country face declining enrollments, and I am sure we all know people who have had their positions terminated as a result of the corresponding budget cuts. Although positions in higher education are probably still more stable than many, shaky economic realities have many wondering if they will still have jobs in years to come.

Those who have retained their jobs increasingly find that the nature of the vocation has changed around them. As institutions seek to be more flexible and reach more students, faculty face increased expectations to accommodate in ways they may not have originally anticipated. Teaching at multiple locations, on the weekends or evenings, and creating and managing online learning courses are becoming normal aspects of the academic life, often leaving faculty wondering if this is really what they signed up for.

If declining enrollment and changing job expectations were the only challenges, though, we would be facing something relatively manageable. At least the fundamental nature of our industry would remain the same. The challenge, however, goes further, with many raising questions that go to the heart of the academic theological vocation itself. This is happening at both the graduate and undergraduate levels.

At the graduate level, we have those who think graduate theological education has run its course, the seminary system is dead or dying, and it is time to try something radically new.³ Thus, Frederick Schmidt asks,

So, should we throw the system out, disband our seminaries, and launch even more deeply into the brave new world of clergy preparation? Should we throw the task back on the churches, requiring each one to grow its own clergy? Or should we rely on regional choices and an array of on-line approaches? All of those options are currently in play.⁴

At the same time, an increasing number of voices are raising questions about the value of the liberal arts and the humanities. American pragmatism combined

with an unsteady economy means that students are increasingly attracted to undergraduate majors with obvious pathways to employment, ignoring the statistical realities that students from liberal arts colleges and humanities programs actually fare quite well on the job market. As a result, recent years have seen a steady decline in humanities enrollments and a reduction in the number of dedicated liberal arts colleges. According to an article from *Inside Higher Ed*,

Today, only one-third of all bachelor's degrees awarded annually in the United States are in the liberal arts, and less than one-third of these are in humanities. The most common major by far, according to the American Council of Learned Societies, is business, with 20 percent of all undergraduate degrees ... awarded in this field.⁵

The article goes on to state that “in these harsh economic times, many students feel that liberal arts education is a luxury they can't afford.”⁶

Even those who have caught the unicorn find themselves in a precarious position, one steadily undermined by declining enrollments, changing job expectations, and questions about the very legitimacy of their vocation,

Moving Forward

I am not going to say much in the way of making specific proposals because I am hoping that much of that will come out of the discussion to follow. However, I cannot end without making at least a few observations about what we might need to consider as we move forward in light of these challenging circumstances.

First, given the realities of the job market, we need to make some changes to how we approach doctoral-level training so our graduates are better equipped for what lies ahead. Specifically, we need to see fewer, smaller, and better-funded doctoral programs. I am aware of one program right now that is reducing the number of students it admits every year by two thirds so it can consolidate resources and ensure that every student is fully funded. If more schools moved in that direction, we would minimize the financial risk to students by reducing both the costs of our programs and the competitiveness of the job market.

I realize this would also mean that fewer students would have access to our doctoral programs, minimizing the reach and impact of that kind of advanced theological training. This would in turn mean that the evangelical community as a whole would have a reduced number of PhDs working for the well-being of the church, potentially exacerbating the already challenging problems of biblical and theological illiteracy in the church and the decline of the pastor theologian as a

model for pastoral ministry. It seems likely, though, that there are other ways of addressing these problems that would allow us to reduce overall enrollment in our highest academic programs without adversely affecting the evangelical church.

I also wonder if doctoral programs need to make changes based on the reality that many of its graduates will end up working in less traditional situations, often involving bi-vocational teaching, teaching overseas, or utilizing their theological skills in the church or the marketplace. Given that few doctoral programs have the internal resources to address this growing reality, it would seem wise for such programs to begin developing intentional partnerships with ministries that can help prepare their students for what lies ahead.

In addition to making some necessary changes to our doctoral programs, we also need to change how we utilize adjunct professors. Because it seems unlikely that the shift toward adjuncts will change any time soon, we need to make sure that we are doing everything possible to support, train, and develop adjunct professors, viewing them as integral to the mission of our institutions and co-partners in the theological vocation. Although I do not know how realistic this is, we need to work toward increased pay for adjuncts so they are encouraged and enabled to develop in their vocation and support their classes effectively.

Finally, we need to cast a clearer vision for the value of academic theological training. At the undergraduate level, we need to cast a renewed vision for the humanities and the liberal arts. (Yes, I know I am at Wheaton.) In his article, Gregory Thornbury appeals to the model of Jonathan Edwards as a creative response to these difficult educational circumstances. Edwards was famous for taking bright young leaders into his home and mentoring them in theology and pastoral life. Thornbury argues that this could be a helpful model for a kind of seminary training that is more sustainable in the modern world. He also notes that there is one very good reason this worked so effectively for Edwards: “These young theologues were not starting from ground zero when they arrived at Edwards’ doorstep, however. They had already received outstanding undergraduate preparation at Yale which gave them a classical education in the liberal arts and theology.”⁷⁷ In other words, Edwards was able to mentor them effectively because he was helping them use theological skills they had already received, mentoring them in how to apply that theological knowledge in a ministerial context. There is much to be said for a model like this, but it has the obvious consequence that it will only work if we have vibrant liberal arts colleges. I am not sure that evangelicalism as a whole thinks that its well-being is in any meaningful way connected to the well-being of its liberal arts colleges. If that is true, then we have some work to do in casting that vision.

A similar challenge exists for graduate theological education. Here I want to raise some questions about the increasing number of voices calling for us to return ministry training to the church, including Thornbury's model, which would at least build church-based training on the foundation of a liberal arts education. I wonder if we have adequately reflected on all of the challenges that would face such an endeavor. In my former years as a dean, I spent considerable time talking with local pastors about these kinds of projects. I was struck by how many of them openly admitted that they do not think they have the time or the requisite skills to be solely or even primarily responsible for training the next generation of pastors. They are happy to be involved in the process, and I think ministry-training models of the future need to involve more robust partnerships between local churches and seminaries, but very few have any interest in taking on that responsibility entirely. Indeed, I wonder how many of the people calling for us to "throw the task back to the churches" have even asked many pastors what they think about that proposal. One of my fears here is that in the face of a proliferation of church-based training programs, more schools will close their doors. By the time we come to realize the difficulties of training effectively in exclusively church-based contexts, those academic resources will no longer be available to us. If we remain convinced that the academic context has something of unique value to contribute to the overall health and well-being of the church, now is the time to articulate that as clearly as possible.

Notes

1. Adrianna Kezar and Daniel Maxey, "The Changing Academic Workforce," *Trusteeship* 21, no. 3 (May/June 2013), <http://agb.org/trusteeship/2013/5/changing-academic-workforce>.
2. Rachel Riederer, "The Teaching Class," *Guernica*, June 16, 2014, <https://www.guernicamag.com/features/the-teaching-class/>.
3. Tom Ehrlich, "The Rise and Fall of the American Seminary (Commentary)," *The Washington Post*, October 7, 2014, http://www.washingtonpost.com/national/religion/the-rise-and-fall-of-the-american-seminary-commentary/2014/10/07/9c43911c-4e39-11e4-877c-335b53ffe736_story.html.
4. Frederick Schmidt, "Is It Time to Write the Eulogy? The Future of Seminary Education," *Patheos*, March 21, 2011, <http://www.patheos.com/Resources/Additional-Resources/Is-It-Time-to-Write-the-Eulogy-Frederick-Schmidt-03-21-2011>.

5. Mary Crane, "Stop Defending the Liberal Arts," *Inside Higher Ed*, January 17, 2011, https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2011/01/17/mary_crane_on_a_different_way_to_help_the_liberal_arts.
6. Crane, "Stop Defending the Liberal Arts."
7. Gregory Alan Thornbury, "The Future of Theological Education," *Journal of Markets & Morality* 18, no. 2 (Fall 2015): 404.