



Meadville Lombard
Theological School

**Theology as a Way of Life:
Theological Reflections on the
Meadville Lombard Educational Model**

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Transitioning: Toward the new and the ancient

The Meadville Lombard Educational Model (MLEM) represents a new *and* old (as I will suggest further along) way of doing theological education. It arises out of some of the key principles that have emerged out of the faculty's curricular review meetings held over the past years. In what follows I will share some of my thoughts about the pedagogical and theological rationale of the model and why I believe it presents a creative new direction for Meadville Lombard to be heading in. I do not speak for the whole of the faculty, but I would like to articulate what I have been thinking and talking about in conversation with the colleagues with whom I have been working over the last few months.

The key principles that the new design carries forward from the faculty's longer term curriculum review include:

- 1) more deliberate integration of practice and theory through the whole of the curriculum;
- 2) blending of the residential and MRP programs;
- 3) institutionalized assessment;
- 4) the critical priority of other-regard in ministry; and most of all
- 5) the idea that since ministerial excellence takes many forms, and therefore has no final blueprint, the task of theological education is to craft a culture of diverse theological and ministerial possibilities.

While the new educational model carries these principles forward and remains especially committed to being academically rigorous, spiritually grounded, and unapologetically progressive, it departs in obvious ways from Meadville Lombard's historical pedagogical design. The most obvious of these changes include:

- 1) the compression of the degree program to three years;
- 2) the integration of praxis throughout the curriculum (in the form of "rotations" and "signature courses"); and
- 3) the relocation of the traditional third year congregational internship as an optional fourth-year Master of Arts in Ministerial Leadership.

As I interpret these things, some deeper theological commitments underlie these formal curricular changes. These commitments turn on different ways of understanding the *mode*, the *focus*, and the *context* of theology at the core of ministerial formation.

Modal Shift: Theology as a Way of Life

With respect to *the modal shift*, the MLEM reflects a recovery of theology *as a way of life* from the longstanding treatment of theology *as a science*. The history of the contraction of theology to a science, or to an episteme or discipline of knowledge is a long and convoluted one. But through western history, theology

eventually became understood as a discipline of thinking that was in many ways abstracted from the practices of religious life. During the period of the birth of the university in the western middle ages, theology was first configured as the queen of the sciences, the knowledge regime that comprehended and supported all other forms of inquiry. Later, as the model of the modern university emerged and the varieties of knowledge and their disciplines were being reclassified, theology came to be treated as one science among others. As a result of this, one of the most longstanding tasks of modern theology has been the apologetic one of justifying (and gradually losing) its place within the ordering of liberal education. Partly for this reason, a great deal of theological work over the past couple of centuries has been focused upon theoretic and methodological questions, and liberal theology in particular has for many years been nearly paralyzed by this.

The point of briefly mentioning these things is simply to historicize the modal theological shift underlying the Meadville Lombard Educational Model. The MLEM is rooted at least in part in a very old understanding of theology as the practice of wisdom in light of divine things. In various ways, the new model retrieves the practice of theology as a way of life and attempts to thread it through the formation experience. Put very simply, the idea is that a *theology is not something that one has, but something that one does*, across and through the curriculum as well as across and through religious life and ministry. This is emphasized in the new model, for example, in the embedding of theology through the three signature courses as well as in the explicitly theological traditional courses. The embedded and explicit placements of theology through the whole of the curriculum challenge the idea that theology is just one among the several disciplines. Instead, the new model provides occasion for student and faculty experimentation with theology as an integrative (not queen) praxis (in addition to being a discipline of knowing it is also treated as a discipline of practice).

Focal Shift: “A subversive turn toward mutuality and collaboration”

A second important theological shift within the MLEM concerns the *focus* of theological practice. In short, the focal shift is *from self to other* or *from identity to difference* and *from experience to context*. The transition to these emphases is critical to the pedagogical aims of Meadville Lombard as well as the transformational and justice-committed principles of progressive religion. The issue is not so much that the existing educational model at Meadville Lombard is necessarily on the wrong sides of these emphases, but that the MLEM promises to more deliberately integrate “other,” “difference,” and “context,” as theological foci. A little history helps to understand how and why the foci of self, identity, and experience came to be treated as theology’s primary sources of authority, as well as why liberal theology has for too long been much too “self-preoccupied.”

Liberal theology emerges in many ways in response to the question of authority: What authorizes or grounds, legitimates, or validates theology? In response to the abuse of authority by the Roman Catholic Church, the early Protestant reformers argued for the grounding of theology in scripture rather than in tradition, and, in so doing, brought individual Christian believers to the center of theological work in place of ecclesial hierarchy. Through a number of historical dynamics, modern theology gradually ceded the authority of scripture to the authority of the self as the focal source of theology. This shift was later radicalized by the modern European Enlightenment call for the emancipation of conscience and reason from what Immanuel Kant referred to as humanity’s self-imposed intellectual immaturity.

While the priorities of self and experience have yielded a number of crucial theological contributions, a deep paradox of purpose and logic is embedded within them. The purpose of the shift to the self was to liberate human thinking from its bondage to sectarian and ideological divisions. This purpose was tied to a logic that sought a form of universal reason that would serve to cut through the many religious and political conflicts raging at the time. Erupting from between this liberal (liberative) purpose and the logic of a (supposedly difference-neutralizing) universal discourse is the problem of exclusion.

A great deal more can be said about the intellectual roots of liberal theology and the social conditions of its emergence. What is most important in this short summary is the recognition that liberal theology is historically premised upon the prioritizing of partial perspectives. The standpoint of reason and experience which was taken to be universally normative was in fact socially, economically, racially, and sexually privileged. Acknowledging this does not mean that all liberal theologians have been bigoted. But it is to say that liberal theology is haunted by an internal contradiction. The wedding of the emancipation of reason and conscience to the universalization of partial perspectives constricts the community of theological inquiry, normalizes privilege, and thus ends up (even unintentionally) reinforcing (by naturalizing and masking) the logic and practice of exclusion.

Liberal theologians are deeply habituated to appeal to the experience of reason and conscience as the authoritative ground of theological reflection and practice. This is a native liberal tendency sourced in the shift away from the perceived distortions of tradition and errors of uncritical appeal to scriptures. “Experience” of course is an inescapable aspect of theological work; without it, theologians would literally have nothing with which to work. But it is always important to ask which and whose “experience” we are talking about, because “experience” is not a transparent category. Indeed, the idea of “experience” tied to the history just briefly described means that “experience,” rather than serving as an alternative solution to the problems of scripture and tradition, ends up being an alternative that may be at least as problematic.

Feminist theologian Mary McClintock Fulkerson expresses this issue well when she writes, “Experience is not the *origin* of theology in the sense of the evidence for our claims, but the reality that needs to be explained.”¹ As intuitive as this claim might seem, it presents a profound challenge to contemporary liberal theology and theological education. Fulkerson’s point, which has been made by numerous others as well, is that experience is no less opaque, no less complex, no less unproblematic, and no more transparent, no more undistorted, and no more self-legitimizing than any other potential origin or frame for theological work. All experiences are tradition-shaped (which is to say historically and contextually imprinted), and like all traditions, all experiences are partial. All experiences are also already textured and textualized (whether by scriptures or other classics). The suspicion and criticism that is often applied by liberals to the theological traditions and to various scriptures is too infrequently applied to the supposedly self-legitimizing experiences of the autonomous self.

So, while “experience” is certainly a *necessary* aspect of theological work, it is no more a *sufficient* ground for it than unquestioned dogma or uncritically accepted traditions or scriptures. The fictions of transparent experience and of the unitary and indivisible self upon which much of liberal theology has been based have been radically questioned for years—inside and outside of theology. Rather than serving as final authoritative arbiter of things theological, experience itself is in need of theological interpretation and response. The *focal* turn to difference and otherness from identity and self is about a turn toward accountability for the perspectives and experiences too often neglected within liberal theology—it is a turn toward humility from the pride of self-transparency and the narcissism of emotive authentication; it is a subversive turn toward mutuality and collaboration in a time and tradition that have tended to privilege the autonomies of conscience and reason and independence. By providing occasion to reroute liberal theology from its preoccupations with identity and self to a concern with difference and otherness, the *theological interpretation and response to experience and its problems is at the focal center of the proposed new educational model*.

¹ *Changing the Subject: Women’s Discourses and Feminist Theology*, viii, emphasis original.

Contextual Shift: A different starting point and framework

The *modal* and *focal* shifts described above cannot simply be thought or imagined into existence. To gain traction in the lives of students and to become part of the texture of progressive religious life, they need to become part of the warp and woof of the *contexts* of theological education.

As mentioned above, part of the problem with an exclusive focus upon self and experience as the self-legitimizing foundations of theological work is that we are not so much unities as multiplicities and we are more shaped than we realize by the prejudices of our positions and the partiality of our perspectives. Liberal religionists may be more self-focused and self-preoccupied than ever before (i.e. self-definitional anxieties, identity politics, methodological hang-ups), but we are not necessarily more self-aware or self-critical. In order for the modal and focal transformations of liberal theology and liberal religion most genuinely to take hold, theological work and theological education need to take shape in reflexive relation with difference, and especially the differences of marginalized and historically voiceless others. The new educational model prioritizes this *contextual* commitment and provides occasion *modally* to integrate it through the curriculum by treating it as a *focal* concern in the community studies, congregational studies, and ministerial leadership studies signature courses.

The contextual emphasis through each of the signature courses is an especially significant pedagogical and theological shift within the new educational model. It provides a very different starting point as well as framework for ministerial formation, transitioning from the cloistered seminary to the broader (but always locally specific) world as a rich setting for learning. It could possibly be put this way: the new educational model begins with a commitment to the contexts of *koinonia* (community) and *demos* (the people) in order to form ministers for whom the *ecclesia* is understood and practiced as a congregation of common hopes and aspirations rather than an aggregation of individuals who believe some things in common. This contextual shift may be the most important part of the new educational model, one that is shaped by and promises to give shape to a more liberal and liberating theological practice and a more fully liberalized and opened *ecclesia*.

A return to roots

The pedagogical and theological paradigm represented by these modal, focal, and contextual shifts is quite “radical” in the literal sense of being a “return to roots” or of being the “retrieval of an original.” It departs in some ways from what Meadville Lombard and other progressive seminaries have been doing in recent years. But this departure is also a return to something ancient. The return is to an integrated community model of religious formation that existed long before modern universities divided the disciplines of knowledge (which resulted in the reduction of theology to a specialized science) and long, long before denominational seminaries and theological schools were even imagined (which led to the extrication of theological learning and ministerial formation from the practices of religious life in community). The educational paradigm being retrieved is an ancient one in which theology is understood as the practice of wisdom and religious life is understood as communal praxis.

The many liberal and progressive theologians at work today, at Meadville Lombard and elsewhere, have been shaped by a tradition in contradiction with itself. The task of contemporary progressive theological educators is to decide what to do about this, not only because every generation of theologians has to negotiate the tradition they inherit, but more importantly because the liberal legacy is complicit in some of the very social, political, moral and religious distortions to which it originally aspired to present an alternative. This is a profoundly theological task, as it calls upon us to critically examine our most cherished categories, to question the deepest habits of our thinking, and to suspect our most native tendencies and motives of practice.

One of the imperatives of liberal religious theological education in our time—if liberal religious ministers and religious liberalism seek to move beyond sectarianism and to participate in the building up of what Jesus calls the Kingdom of God, womanists and mujeristas call the Kindom of God, Royce and King call beloved community, and what Dewey refers to as the Great Community—is the imperative to dilate the circle of theological reflection, spiritual formation, and ministerial practice.

This circle of reflection, formation, and practice needs to be expanded to include not only those who may be theologically *different* from us, but especially those whose experiences have been *excluded* and whose wisdom has been *marginalized* from liberal thinking about the openness and ongoingness of revelation. The imperative here is theological as well as ethical and political: it issues not only from a commitment to the inherent worth and dignity of all persons, and to the aspiration to beloved community, but also through fidelity to the radical openness and creativity of the holy and to the many names of divinity. Theologian Joerg Rieger puts this very well:

“In a context where social and ecclesial structures are deeply shaped by the powers of exclusion, some of the most interesting alternative modes of theological reflection have been developed by theologians who have been in touch with excluded people—or who have themselves been excluded. In these approaches we encounter a completely new set of voices. Turning to others, the theological horizon is broadened to include those who have so far been excluded from the theological enterprise, a move based not on a general concern for otherness and difference (as, for example, in postmodernist critiques of modernity) but on actual encounters with people at the margins. Theological guidelines are reshaped in this light. The search for that which has been repressed, a fresh theological move, leads to a constructive reinterpretation of the overall task of theological reflection.”²

What Rieger here says about the reinterpretive tasks of theological reflection in the face of difference, plurality, and exclusion, applies as well to the overall task of ministerial formation and of ministry, and Meadville Lombard’s proposed new educational model takes steps in these directions.

² Joerg Rieger, *God and the Excluded: Visions and Blindspots in Contemporary Theology*, 99.