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Spirituality and Public Character: A Qualitative Cross-Sectional Study of Master of Divinity Students in Toronto

Jeffrey P. Greenman and Yau Man Siew

Introduction

Spiritual formation, along with theological learning and professional competence, are three widely accepted goals of theological education. Knowledge in both biblical and theological disciplines have clear and established criteria within the theological curriculum. Most seminary programs include a field education component as well as practical ministry courses to help develop skills necessary for pastoral leadership. However, despite some foundational courses in spirituality and the existence of chapel services, seminary administrators and faculty members sometimes seem uncertain about how to foster the spiritual growth of their students or how to relate spirituality to the “academic” offerings. Indeed, relatively little is known about the nature of spirituality among seminarians, and how spiritual formation is affected through theological education.

The Public Character of Theological Education project examined the ways in which seminaries prepare men and women for leadership in public life, and explored the seminary’s public presence and public voice in their respective communities. In light of renewed attention being given to spiritual formation in most theological schools, as well as the North American trend toward embracing a bewildering variety of “spiritualities,” a central question emerging in the project is how seminarians related spirituality to public life or social issues. To help answer this question, some corollary questions need to be answered. In the first place, how is spirituality conceived among seminarians? What beliefs and values do they hold about spirituality, and what are some of the major influences shaping these beliefs prior to their seminary experience? What impact does the seminary experience have on these beliefs and values? How, if any, have their views on spirituality changed through their seminary experience, and why? Answers to these questions not only will provide a clearer understanding of how current seminarians view spirituality, but also will help educators to identify fundamental presuppositions that shape their students’ perspectives on the relationship between Christian faith to public life.

Our aim in this study is to understand spirituality from the perspective of the seminarians. It is an attempt to “put our ears to the ground,” so to speak, and to describe phenomenon from an insider’s perceptions, rather than imposing outside definitions. This is in line with “grounded theory” in ethnography, where the theory of a culture is grounded in the empirical data of cultural description.¹ Clifford Geertz speaks of the “thick description” that forms the basis for skillful anthropological inquiry.² To this end, we sought to listen carefully to what seminarians said during in-depth interviews and to collect verbatim quotations. Sound qualitative research involves a careful selection of quotations that are typical or characteristic of the phenomenon described.³

Problem statement and research method

The purpose of this study was to identify the beliefs and attitudes of Master of Divinity students in Toronto concerning their understanding of spirituality and its relationship to public life and social issues. Our research began by sending a letter of intent to the Principals or Academic Deans of five theological seminaries in the Toronto area. One of the researchers followed up with a personal meeting with each Principal/Dean to explain the details of the study and to answer any questions related to the study. During this visit, we requested a room for the interviews to be conducted in private, as well as for a copy of the list of students enrolled in the Master of Divinity program.

Only two seminaries allowed us access to student lists, and only on site. From the lists, subjects were randomly selected from each of the three years of the program. The Principals and/or Academic Deans in the other three seminaries simply assigned students for the study as required by our methodology, according to the gender balance and stages of completion in the program.⁴

After the school obtained the consent of the subjects to participate in the study, we made appointments to interview the subjects. The semi-structured interviews were carried out in the rooms provided for the interviews at the participating seminaries. During the interview we reviewed the purpose of the study and thanked the subjects for their participation. The subjects were requested to report information about their demographic and religious background by completing a data sheet. The subjects were informed that their responses would be coded and treated with the strictest confidentiality to protect their privacy. The interviews were taped and personally transcribed for analysis by the interviewer. The qualitative responses were analyzed for common factors and patterns.⁵

The population for this study is all the theological students who are enrolled in the Master of Divinity programs in graduate theological schools in Toronto. A sample of thirty subjects was drawn for the study, with one male and one female student each, at the beginning, middle and end of their theological programs, drawn from five theological institutions. The result is a cross-sectional sample of students from five theological schools selected for the study representing a range of denominational traditions: evangelical Anglican, transdenominational evangelical, United Church of Canada, Presbyterian, and Jesuit.

Operational questions

The following operational questions were used during the interviews: (1) A recognized goal of theological education world-wide is in three major areas: knowledge—particularly biblical and theological knowledge; professional competence—“tools” for ministry; and this whole area referred to spirituality/spiritual formation. Tell me what you understand by spirituality/spiritual formation. (2) Let’s bring spirituality down to a more personal level. Suppose you see someone and you say, “That is a spiritual woman,” or “That is a spiritual man.” What criteria do you use to say that? (3) What were some major influences to these perceptions of spirituality, prior to coming to seminary? (4) How, if any, has your seminary experience impacted your spirituality? (5) Some people conceive

of spirituality in terms of an axis. The vertical line represents one's relationship with God. The horizontal line represents one's relationship with people. What is your response to this axis model of spirituality? (6) As we end our conversation together, is there anything about spirituality or spiritual formations that you want to emphasize?

What values and beliefs do seminarians hold about spirituality and spiritual formation?

In the mainline Protestant (United Church and Presbyterian) students, some subjects pointed out that spirituality today is “trendy” and a “buzz word” sometimes being abused in everyday usage, without a clear meaning or reference to Christ, God or Christian formation. Most subjects, however, see spirituality as the development or strengthening of one's “connection” with God through Christ. Spiritual formation is seen as the process of feeding that connection with God.

Subjects from the United Church tradition cited prayer, reading Scripture and the work of the Holy Spirit as important disciplines in the nurture of spirituality. In contrast, subjects from the Presbyterian tradition demonstrated a greater diversity of approaches. In addition to Scripture reading, prayer and worship, subjects also noted the importance of paying attention to dreams, keeping “soul friends,” and journaling.

When we probed their expression of spirituality, many subjects pointed to the evidence of “Christ-like” character in a spiritual person, such as humility, service, loving concern for others. Several subjects identified “peace” or “tranquillity” as a defining mark of a spiritual person.

Sometimes you meet someone and there is a certain calm, there is a certain presence about that person...a peaceful presence, a kind of sturdiness, almost as though they are rooted somehow. Rooted and peaceful—it is just the feeling I get from the person. (A32)

Almost all subjects, in both United Church and Presbyterian traditions, said that spirituality is expressed in some kind of visible, caring or compassion action. In many cases, the students used the category of “service” and spoke of caring action lived out in the wider community or “outside the church”, going beyond the fellowship of congregational life, in order to “encompass the whole of life.”

... [E]xpressed as action, daily reflection and integration, action—things an individual does that makes them feel they are living out their faith, service projects, spending time with important people in their lives. People who are spiritual often give off this vibe of good community...They carry their faith with them in personal reflection, lived-out action and community, beyond the church. (A12)

To become...as a way of connecting yourself to God...I guess in some ways God's work, we are asked to participate in reaching out to community--whether it is just the local community or the international community. (B12)

...justice--it could be on a big scale or on a small scale. Some people are called to justice work nationally or internationally. For me, I am called to justice on a micro-scale--of working with the youth and teaching them about justice, and smiling to people on the street, being kind to the cashier during Christmas time who is flooded with a line-up. And being friendly with the people that I work with in my daughter's nursery school. (A22)

One subject, from the Presbyterian tradition, best encapsulated this typical line of thought when he said that spirituality is “the incarnation of God’s love in humanity.” (B11)

Turning next to the evangelical students, their definitions of spirituality and understanding of how it is nurtured were consistent. Almost all subjects in the evangelical tradition, both Anglican and transdenominational, define spirituality as the development of one’s personal relationship with God, founded upon Christ. Spiritual formation is the process of growth in one’s spirituality over time. Spirituality is nurtured through the disciplines of prayer, Bible reading and fellowship within the Christian community. The clear goal is Christ-like character. In contrast to the transdenominational evangelical tradition, all subjects in the Anglican tradition cited the benefits of a spiritual mentor and the importance of community.

In terms of the expression of spirituality, almost all the subjects, in both the Anglican and transdenominational evangelical contexts, mentioned that spirituality is expressed by a demonstration of Christian character (holiness, humility, obedience to God’s will, deep prayer lives, discernment) most notably, the “fruit of the Spirit.” Several subjects mentioned the qualities of “peace” and “inner joy” as particularly important.

Someone who values other people, someone who respects other people. I guess certain qualities you pick up in what Paul writes, patience, kindness, self-control. (C31)

There are a couple of women in my church that are spiritual--I call them that because they have incredible prayer lives. God speaks through them...they have incredible discernment. The fruits of the Spirit are very evident in their lives... (D32)

There are two things I look for. One would be evidence of the fruits of the Spirit. ...Along with that would be a mark of obedience, of self-surrender, and a longing to do God's will. (D11)

In sharp contrast to subjects from the mainline Protestant tradition, caring and compassionate engagement in the wider community is entirely missing from the

definitions of spirituality among subjects in the evangelical tradition. One subject mentioned that the goal of spiritual formation is “to represent Jesus in this world.”

At the most basic level subjects from the Jesuit tradition see spirituality as the cultivation of one’s relationship with God. However, the emphasis is on developing this relationship in community with others, and upon an ongoing process of “discernment.” Here, the person enters into dialogue with self, in relationship with others and God. Many students referred to spirituality as nurtured through a three-fold dynamic of study, engagement with the community and personal prayer.

Spirituality can be nurtured by learning—an academic approach. It is also nurtured in practice—I am going out there and living out my spirituality. And I think, importantly it is nurtured through dialogue with God, through prayer. These things do not exist in isolation. At one time or another in a person’s life, one area may be more dominant. (E11)

While spirituality is seen as the cultivation of one’s relationship with God, subjects consistently said that spirituality infuses all aspects of life. There is no fragmentation between Christian faith, daily work, church ministry, personal prayer and community involvement.

...[Someone who] is involved in relationship with the community, who has not fragmented herself into different parts—this is my work over here, this is my home over here, this is my church over here. It is a moment by moment living of her life, in which she reflects the gospel values. Where her prayer life is incorporated with how she lives her life. (E32)

One subject sums up spirituality as “the spiritual aspect of being human.” (E31B)

How do current seminarians define spirituality? Seminarians in all theological traditions commonly understand spirituality as the development of one’s “relationship” or “connection” with God founded upon Christ, through the practice of certain disciplines. However, there is significant difference in how spirituality should be expressed. Seminarians in the mainline Protestant traditions feel strongly that spirituality involves some kind of caring and compassionate social action in the wider community. Seminarians in the evangelical traditions largely view spirituality as personal piety and cultivation of the fruit of the Spirit. Seminarians in the Jesuit tradition view spirituality more holistically, noting an inseparable connection between faith, work, study and community involvement.

What are some major sources of influence to these perceptions?

Responses from subjects representing all the theological traditions were analyzed together. We were struck that a majority of the subjects noted that their family was a primary source of spiritual influence before coming to seminary. Sometimes it is the direct guidance of parents, other times it is the quiet witness of one of their relatives, or

the values these relatives hold about the importance of faith or church. Parents, and in some cases grandparents, established important spiritual foundations through modelling faith and exemplifying religious convictions.

My grandmother ... is a determined, passionate Christian—just her lived example. She had great trouble expressing her faith in words, but she lived a holy life. There was an implicit connection between her obvious love for people and her faith in God. (C31)

Family of origin is also important in giving me a sense of spirituality... Though their doctrine might be different, their sense of belief and commitment and personal, deep commitment to a spiritual reality and to God is something I was given by them. (E22)

Many subjects also said the church was important. The influence of the church ranged from the pastor's sermon or counsel, to Bible stories in Sunday school and being in fellowship groups within the church community. In particular, we noticed that many subjects emphasized the role of a key individual in the church—such as a pastor, retreat speaker, or youth group leader—whose personal support or intervention in their lives made a significant difference.

After family and church, there were a number of factors that exerted somewhat less influence. A significant number of subjects recalled how a “personal crisis” prompted them toward a journey of faith. Others cited the importance of reading certain works of Christian literature as the beginning of a spiritual pilgrimage. A small number of subjects, all from the Jesuit tradition, said that mentors were important in sharing faith stories in the context of spiritual friendships. Others, within the evangelical tradition, pointed to friends who encouraged them to grow in their faith.

How, if at all, has their seminary experience affected these perceptions?

Almost all the subjects from the mainline Protestant schools said the seminary experience laid strong theological foundations. Their perceptions ranged from developing important framework for life and ministry, to helping them read the Bible afresh, to gaining perspectives from different theological traditions.

Subjects within the United Church tradition noted that while their encounter with broader theological viewpoints was at times disturbing, most appreciated the opportunity it offered to articulate their faith more thoughtfully. In contrast, many subjects within the Presbyterian tradition said that the critical approach to biblical studies undermined faith. Indeed, some contemporaries had even given up their faith.

... At times I would be frustrated. You would think that in a seminary you would be nurtured in your spiritual growth. Yet, in some many ways, it was torn out from us. ... Yes, and I had classmates who lost their faith—some left ministry, and some couldn't stand against the teaching that we received and so they bought

into it, and I would say have less faith when they graduated than when they first started. (B32)

... There are times in some of the studies, where you will be reading some of the interpreters and you say, "What is happening here, is there a God?" You are forced to the other end in terms of questioning your faith, in terms of questioning your beliefs. You listen to the philosophers, "Is there really a God? Is all this a lot of hogwash?" You get this theory, and that theory, and this theory, and all the arguments, and you go back and look at the "garbage" in the OT, and you say, "How could God let that happen?" Almost to the point that on the one hand you are growing in your spirituality and on the other hand, they try to rip it out of you. (B31)

A significant number of subjects, from United Church and Presbyterian traditions, said that academic study, while valuable, also discouraged spirituality. They suggested that their concerns arose in several instances from the pressures of academic study, made worse by a lack of integration in the classroom and a jam-packed curriculum in a very tight schedule.

I find it really hard ... especially when I am at school because I find that I just have so much work to do that it is really hard for me to practice my spirituality. Actually it makes me feel quite guilty a lot of the time, because I spend so much time learning about my faith, about God and what God calls me to do and then have to go home and do assignments about them instead of spending time integrating it. (A12)

Also, I am forced to...the academic pressures dampen the spiritual being in me because you are so busy working on the academics, you are not focusing on developing spirituality. (B11)

...most of the students here are commuter students, they are older and married with families, and they don't live in Toronto, they commute. They are only on campus for the three days that classes are offered. All of us, for three days of the week are jam-packed from 9:30AM to 8:30PM, fitting in everything to accommodate the commuter students who then go home. People like me, who are single and without family commitments, are then left here—the community leaves every week. This is also a real spiritual struggle. (A12)

Some subjects, from both mainline traditions, believe that the schools do not emphasise spirituality because they view themselves more as academic institutions than as formation centres.

I don't know that the College actually does anything towards spirituality. I can appreciate that because it is an academic institution, and that's what it is about—the transmission of knowledge here and making sure the students have X amount

of knowledge to be able to understand at a certain level. I personally find the College is draining of spirituality. (B31)

It's not something that is talked about--I don't think there is a great deal of attention paid to spiritual formation. I think part of it is the structure of the school--it is a two-day a week, commuter school.... Part of it is the discussion of whether we are a seminary or an education centre...theological education is probably the main area, but spiritual formation is not a focus of the College, it is not talked about. (A32)

During such times, some subjects from the Presbyterian tradition, found support within student community groups which developed spontaneously.

I found among my fellow peers that we could find some relief in spirituality. We would pray for each other, and I could see concerns for one another. ... we did these on our own. We happened to meet in the student lounge and so we talked about issues. We shared the spiritual enlightenment that we might have got in a certain class. I feel that some of the prayers at the start and end of the class are "rehearsed," it did not feel genuine. (B11)

Turning now to the evangelical students, from both transdenominational and Anglican traditions, said the seminary positively impacted their spirituality. Subjects from the transdenominational evangelical tradition appreciated the school's multi-denominational diversity, which often prompted a deeper understanding of one's own faith tradition. Subjects from the Anglican tradition particularly appreciated the models of ministry, either from professors in class or supervisors at fieldwork.

There was one lecture in one of my courses, it was done by different lecturers every week. One of them certainly had an axe to grind. It was very much political in orientation, and I disagreed with most of what he said. And...but one of the high points of the lecture was the response given by ... the principal. He gave a lovely response—he said just about everything I was thinking. He has actually been a very great help. He is very accessible and he is a very good man, and he is incredibly sharp. I have listened to him speak on several occasions now and I have got a great deal of respect for him and I am learning a lot from him. (C11)

While all subjects in both evangelical traditions acknowledged the positive impact of academic study, all subjects, in the Anglican tradition, said rigorous academic study also hampered faith. Most subjects felt rigorous study took time away from being in God's presence, challenged foundational beliefs, made faith dry and strained family life.

On the other hand, seminary is so much like 'boot camp' and it is so demanding that it is very difficult to maintain the amount of time that I spent with God before

on a daily basis. It's been a real struggle to maintain that. And I succeeded for the most part, except for the last 3 weeks where it has fallen apart (sigh). (C12)

I think I have a sense of how fragile our spiritual lives can be. I should speak directly to the point ... we study Scripture, we read theology, we struggle with various disciplines. So spirituality becomes homework in a sense. So at the end of the day, I don't read from my Bible you know. I am more inclined to go for a walk, call up a friend to go to the pub. The odd thing happens—your spiritual life becomes objectified—it becomes your job, your task, your homework. ... Obviously your spirituality becomes compromised, unless you counter that complacency with a really disciplined prayer life. In this sense, our spiritual life is fragile. (C31)

... [T]he family and Christian life is very much valued in the classroom and by professors. This is very much talked about, and everyone puts a high value on that. But, on the other hand, it seems like for 3 years, you really have to neglect a big part of your life to be able to manage the workload of seminary. So, although most of us can find some kind of balance, it is a real struggle. It is very difficult on the families, very difficult. (C12)

Students at this Anglican College consistently highlighted the value of community and the school's attempt to provide some structure for it to happen. However, one subject noted that community mostly happens serendipitously, not as something that can be planned.

Oh, we are constantly being lectured about community ... [A] critique of individualism, a critique of the idea that we can know God all by ourselves. We tend to live in a highly individualistic society and I think the church is trying to counter that a little. We are being lectured about community here—sometimes I think it is a little overdone. (C31)

I applaud the school for providing some of the structure for that to happen. We have a retreat at the beginning of the year, and I think that is great. That helps to see where people are at spiritually. I think it is good to create that stage, but I don't think we can impose what shall happen. (C31B)

Many subjects, in the Anglican tradition, expressed the value of spiritual direction in their seminary experience. The Anglican seminary provides a spiritual director for any student who desires one. Spiritual direction is helpful for accountability, providing a friend along the journey of faith.

Well, I have had a spiritual mentor for a year and a half now, and I find it extremely helpful. This is something that my seminary also provides. And the advantage of having a spiritual mentor is that it helps to... keep you accountable, but it also helps to have an opportunity to articulate your journey with someone

who is very grounded in Christ, who can help you see what you cannot see for yourself. (C12)

The Jesuit students clearly affirm that study is closely related to life in Ignatian spirituality. Study, for them, is not just the acquisition of knowledge, but is the process of reflecting upon truths and personally engaging the content of their studies, for the development of one's life and ministry. One subject shared how this approach to studies contrasted with the approach of professors in other schools within the Toronto School of Theology consortium.

... [The college] is a Jesuit school and so the whole idea about reflection-action, reflection-action-reflection and contemplation in between... I do notice the difference between how the professors are engaging me here. Not that one system is better than another—I want to make that qualification. The professors here encourage... I think we speak the same language—at least myself and the professors here, in that they are encouraging me to be reflective, not just pouring in the information. They are doing that, but at the same time, they are also engaging me in a dialogue at a more personal, affective level. Which then forces me to engage in a dialogue with myself and be reflective on it. Whereas my professors from the other schools—there is not much of a dialogue going on, it is more you are here to learn and you learn this. ... I mean studies now, at this stage of my formation, is not about myself anymore. The focus has changed—I am not here to get the highest grade I can, I am here to learn, as much as I can. I don't mean this as any kind of cliché, or me being humble. I really do see it as an opportunity to learn, to make me a better pastor, to make me a better companion of Jesus. (E11)

Other subjects observed that the school highlights the importance of spirituality, either through the provision of spiritual direction or the modeling of professors who integrate spirituality in their classes.

Certainly through spiritual direction. I have been really grateful for that. I think I did not have any idea when I started the M.Div program, that it would be required. They are really conscientious about making sure that you grow spiritually. If you are stuck, they ask you why. They are still in the process of further developing the program. During the interviews, they will ask how it is going spiritually, how your academics relate to your own spiritual development. They will get information from your history—I think it is really important to do that. The other thing is reflection. It is done in a way that is not intimidating and in a very supportive way. I felt very endorsed by that. (E22)

I just sat in the corner just with the tears flowing—I wasn't crying but I could not stop the tears. The Dean was in the other corner and he saw what was happening. When the class ended, everybody started talking. He got up to leave and I got up and just made a beeline for the washroom thinking, I don't think I

could hold myself any longer. I am finished, I am leaving and I am not coming back. I can't even complete this term. He was waiting around the corner and he came, and figuratively, just picked me off the floor and dusted me off. He said, "You are going to be OK with this. Cry, you are grieving. It is OK for you to be doing this. I want to see you in my office." I just look him in the eye and said, "I can't do this. I can't be in this class anymore. I can't hear anymore of this. I am too raw." He literally took the time—and he was so busy—with the ATS study, all the classes he was doing, all the students he mentors. He took the time to be with me, to sit with me, to talk with me, to help me through, to mentor me, to say, "You can finish this." He helped me develop a plan for January to cut back on my studies, to finish my spiritual direction course I started in the fall, to take just one course. If it had not been for that experience of him, who is such a deeply spiritual man, who just cares so much, who was so inclusive, so hospitable, and who constantly goes outside of himself but welcomes what is given back to him. He is my mentor, my model. That experience just changed my situation completely—it changed me even more. I realize this is what spirituality in ministry is all about—what he was able to do with and for me. (E32)

Three subjects were deeply impressed by the spirit of hospitality and inclusion, as part of the culture of the school. This is expressed in a variety of ways—from being open to the contributions of laypersons in class, to a gracious respect for different approaches to the spiritual life.

There is a great respect for variety of spiritualities. In the past I have often felt like my way of making sense of God in the world. Spirituality that is unorthodox but in keeping with the Christian tradition. Here, I found really authentic feedback on my own beliefs, without criticism. They were just very respectful. That this college can hold the diversity of communities is very impressive. (E22)

How does seminary education affect the spirituality of students? All seminarians, irrespective of theological traditions, shared an appreciation both for the efforts being made by their institutions to provide resources or opportunities to strengthen their spiritual lives, as well as for the valuable contribution of the seminary programs in laying strong biblical and theological foundations. However, seminarians from the mainline Protestant traditions, especially the Presbyterians, found that a critical approach to biblical studies undermined and even eroded faith. Almost all subjects, both mainline and evangelical, commented that the personal demands of rigorous academic study dampened or threatened their spiritual lives. However, seminarians in the Jesuit tradition have a more integrated view of faith and learning, with professors modeling integration of study, prayer, ministry, and the provision of spiritual direction.

How do seminarians perceive the relationship between spirituality and public life?

Almost all the subjects, in both the United Church and Presbyterian traditions, believed that spirituality is linked to public life and social issues. Often these subjects critiqued the vertical-horizontal line axis metaphor as being “too linear” and provided other

metaphors such as a “circle,” “straight line,” “ascending spiral,” or “double-helix.” Other subjects critiqued the axis metaphor as an “inadequate” model as social engagement was the “natural outgrowth” of faith.

As a basic model it is fine. You deal here on a level with other human beings, and you look heaven-ward and there is God. ... Over the course of my time here, I hold less to a history with a teleological end. Now, I see God in evolution—we are part of the creation, and we work with God. Now, I see God more ahead, not up there in ethereal mansion. All humanity and I will end up with God. In a sense, it brings down, so there is no axis—there is a straight line, God and humanity. We are on a journey to perfection. When I look ahead of me, I see God ahead. God wants to be here with everybody and God is all around. (B31)

I think it is probably too strictly defined. I wouldn't think of it like that. I would think of it as something more integrated. Instead of two axes, I would...the metaphor I heard recently is the double helix from biology, where things are intertwined so completely that they are distinct, but yet they are definitely the same. For me, that represents spirituality much better than two axes, which we can then separate. Because I don't think that without a connection to God we have a connection to other people. Without a connection to other people I don't think we have a connection to God. So, for me, if I had to represent it, it has to be much more integrated than the two axes. (A11)

One subject sums up their perspectives well when she said that failure to go out to the community is “failing God” and “not being Christlike.” (B11)

In contrast to subjects from the mainline Protestant traditions, not one subject from the evangelical tradition critiqued the axis metaphor of spirituality. Indeed, almost all subjects expressed that the model represented spirituality well in that God and people were involved. In virtually every case, their discussion of the model emphasized the vertical axis, or interpreted the horizontal axis as subordinate to the vertical. In addition, subjects often provided a biblical basis for their responses.

I think it is accurate. You see both axes at work in Christ's life. I mean he does this all the time—he goes away and prays by himself on the mountain, and then he comes back and talks to his disciples. In the Gospel of John, he continually talks about his relationship to the Father, and yet, he speaks of that to his disciples and to other people. And of course, if we take the incarnation seriously—the incarnation is the point where the two axes meet. God who is ultimately vertical, enters our horizontal world—I think that is good theology. (C31)

While subjects speak of engagement with other people, the emphasis very clearly was upon Christian fellowship rather than non-Christian neighbours, and particularly upon being accountable for each other's spiritual lives within the Christian community.

Yeah, I think that is a reasonable model because spirituality has other people involved. First of all there is the Lord of course, but without the community aspect, we don't share in that together. When the Bible speaks of 'you,' it is the 'you' plural—so it is both the individual and the community aspects. ... we share our struggles and successes. In our spiritual lives we encourage each other to maintain a close relationship with God. In a large community setting, it would be public worship—be it in music or prayer or the whole worship experience. (D21)

In all the responses and examples given about how to represent spirituality, there was a notable absence of engagement with the larger social community. Only one among the 12 subjects was critical of too much of a “church slant” in the evangelical seminary tradition.

If I can be a little critical. I think the one thing that was a little lacking was...OK, evidently this has something to do with my slant—it has to do with the whole idea of social justice, of putting your faith into the world. I come back to experience. In the seminary we have to do our placements in the church, especially for me as I am in the pastoral program. There is not a lot of emphasis of putting your faith into the world. That is my criticism of the church in the world—we do not emphasize the fact that it is good to help out at a shelter, that it is good to do food banks and things like that. ...It should certainly be taught, but I am not sure how practical it is to encourage this in the seminary. You go to a seminary to be a pastor. I think we need to take away the church slant and give it a world slant. (D32)

Among the Jesuit students, all subjects pointed to a close and vital link between spirituality and public life. One subject said separation would lead to a false sense of piety. Another subject highlighted caring for the earth as a genuine mark of spirituality.

I think because they are so interwoven. If we try to fragment one without the other—into just relationship with God—it leads to a false sense of piety, separation, marginalization. If it is just with the community, we lose a sense of the spiritual—of this relationship, of this free-flowing modeling within the Godhead, which is this grace that flows and is constant. It is just like the Spirit dances constantly. I don't know that She dances constantly if we separate the two. The two are interwoven and it is a beautiful tapestry of life, filled with color and passion and action. If these two are separated there is no action, there is no justice. If there is no justice, then the Kingdom will not be fulfilled as God intended. (E32).

I think we are missing a third intersecting axis, which is some kind of relationship with the earth. A lot of my ethics work in business came out of the experience of the environmental crisis that we face. I was in Nicaragua earlier this year, doing some kind of research on the forgiveness of third world debt. Ecological crisis is as oppressive and difficult for Nicaragua to manage as the economic crisis. ...People are dying and we are finding that there are industrial and agriculture

chemicals involved. There is foot and mouth, there is mad cow disease, the genetically modified food issue—there are just so many aspects to this. In part, we've lost the sacred relation to life and to the earth and we are dealing in a very idolatrous way with human intellect. We assume we can make these manipulations and that we can control them and we can endlessly pursue some kind of benefits. (E31)

What is noteworthy is that these subjects not only talked about this link, a majority of them are involved in community projects. One subject is the director of an organization that helps businesses think through ethical issues. Another subject is deeply involved with the Catholic Family Services, helping parishes develop their social and pastoral ministries. A third subject is a geneticist who assists the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, helping to draft documents to governments on issues of science and faith. A fourth subject is a consultant on diversity and education and has been involved with the Asian-Canadian AIDS service.

Perhaps this integrated perspective of spirituality and public life is best summarized by the response of one subject to the axis metaphor of spirituality.

I would disagree with it, completely. Because all of our lives and God's life is one event, meaning they are more held together and always touching, always connecting. So, instead of two lines, it is one thick line, going in the same direction. I don't think we can compartmentalize in a way I think the cross does. ... My understanding of God is a God who is faithful to us, who is always with us. It makes more sense to me that God is with us every single step of the way. Meaning, at every single moment of my life, I can't divorce my spiritual life from God. At every single moment of the way—whether I am in consolation or desolation. God in consolation or God in desolation is my perception of the situation. At times it is easy to say that as it is only one point where we intersect with God. But realistically, it is every single step of the way. (E11)

How is spirituality related to public life in the understanding of seminarians? Seminarians in the mainline Protestant tradition consistently said that spirituality is significantly related to social issues. Indeed, they often critiqued the axis metaphor of spirituality as an inadequate representation in this regard. In contrast, seminarians from the evangelical tradition consistently affirmed the important of the two elements, quoting biblical support. There was a telling absence of critique of the axis model. Seminarians in the Jesuit tradition see an intimate link between spirituality and social issues. Indeed, from their perspective, separation would lead to a false sense of piety.

It is also clear that there is a good measure of triangulation in the responses of the subjects across the theological traditions. There is often close correlation between how subjects define spirituality, how they believe spirituality is expressed and their responses to the axis metaphor.

Theological reflections and educational implications

This study seeks to provide a clearer understanding of how current seminarians view spirituality. It is valuable to observe what was present or absent in our conversations with students, as we “put our ears to the ground.” First, there are strong threads of shared language and themes used by students from across the various theological traditions. A great many subjects spoke of spirituality as “relationship with Christ” or “being connected with God.” There was much talk of “journeying” as a metaphor for the Christian life. There was also widespread agreement about how spiritual lives are positively nurtured, as many students spoke of prayer, Bible reading, fellowship with other Christians, and being sensitive to (or discerning) God’s presence or the Holy Spirit’s workings. Virtually every subject strongly associated spirituality with personal qualities of character, or the fruit of the Spirit, with a powerful emphasis upon “peace” and “calmness” under duress. We were struck by how consistently, and clearly, the subjects identified their families of origin as the primary formative influence upon their spiritual lives, and how frequently they specified the church’s influence upon their spiritual growth in terms of the significant influence of a key relationship, rather than the impact of preaching or formalized church programs.

Second, there is a surprisingly consistent absence of certain language or concepts used by the students to describe spirituality. These absences emerge distinctly when we consider current student perceptions against the backdrop of the broader range of approaches and vocabularies used to articulate Christian spirituality throughout the centuries. Notably, there is a complete absence of any reference to sin, across the spectrum of theologies. Current seminarians simply do not associate spiritual growth with a commitment to combating sin. The related categories of confession, forgiveness and reconciliation also were not found. Apart from a few passing mentions, the sacraments are not associated clearly or powerfully with spiritual formation, even in the Jesuit tradition. In fact, corporate worship is only rarely mentioned, and it is never associated with issues of social justice, despite recent attempts by liturgical theologians to make this connection. Despite the frequent mentions of the formative significance of prayer, specific content to those prayers is rarely offered, and it is striking that only one subject out of thirty made explicit mention of the Lord’s Prayer. Nor do we find any meaningful engagement with the category of the Kingdom of God, one which has clear social implications. There is remarkably little awareness of issues of violence or poverty as related to Christian spirituality at all. Likewise, students displayed virtually no awareness of a connection between spirituality and evangelism, even among evangelicals, for whom evangelism would supposedly be a very high priority. Nor is there any mention of public proclamation of the Gospel, and articulation of its social, political or economic implications—there appears to be a loss of confidence in the church’s moral voice in its preaching. It is notable that only among the Jesuit students was there a clear awareness that the Christian faith calls us to engage in social reform, aimed at systemic structures or public policy decisions. Rather, students consistently focused upon more immediate spheres of involvement, such as helping at a soup kitchen or homeless shelter.

There was no great surprise in the patterns we discovered in the mainline, evangelical and Jesuit traditions. This study confirms some common generalizations. The mainline Protestant students highlight the connectedness of personal piety and social involvement, with a special concern for social justice issues (however, usually localized at the micro-level). Arguably, those in this tradition should be concerned to maintain a vital connection to Christ so that their social concerns do not become disconnected from the Gospel. The evangelical students emphasize personal piety, expressed as inner qualities and nurtured through fellowship within the church. This typically evangelical piety, however, was linked with neither evangelism nor social concern. We would suggest that those in this tradition should be concerned to avoid a drift toward a form of self-preoccupation that entails public irrelevance. Jesuit students articulate the inseparable connection of prayer and action, the spirituality of study and reflection, and the Christian faith's concern for social transformation, not merely for relief efforts to provide short-term aid to those in need. For those in this tradition, arguably there should be a sharpened focus upon students being equipped to maintain their spiritual vitality apart from the nurturing environment of their college.

This study may serve as a resource for theological educators as they identify fundamental presuppositions that shape their students' perspectives on the relationship between Christian spirituality and public life. We believe that current seminary students reveal themselves as being predominantly oriented by an "affective-relational" understanding of spirituality.⁶ Students consistently emphasize relational categories, inner qualities, the fruit of the Spirit, and inter-personal conduct as the locus of spirituality, and they understand this to be supported and nurtured through close personal relationships with peers, mentors or faculty members. This depiction would seem to reflect a tendency toward the individualization, privatization and subjectivization of Christian faith. Given an "affective-relational" understanding, many students do not naturally associate "spirituality" with public life or social issues. This is not to say that they are entirely indifferent to the wider community, nor that they see that community as wholly unrelated to Christian concern. Rather, our subjects' predominant approach suggests why so many students have difficulty seeing their own spiritual lives as expressed in public realms, and why they struggle to articulate a significant role for the church in the wider community.

In closing, we believe our research should prompt renewed discussion among seminary administrators, faculty members and students, as well as their supporting constituencies, concerning the place of spiritual formation in theological education. In those seminaries where considerable numbers of students are experiencing spiritual struggles or an erosion of confidence in Christian beliefs precisely on account of the content and context of their seminary studies, there is a need for renewed attention to the formative nature of theological reflection and the school's role in spiritual nurture. This study also suggests a need for ongoing consideration (and in some cases, re-evaluation) of the nature of theological learning, especially the crucial relationship between critical methodologies or theoretical knowledge about God and the cultivation of practical Christian wisdom expressed in knowing, loving and serving God.⁷

The study which inaugurated The Public Character of Theological Education project was entitled, *Missing Connections*.⁸ Our findings in this study correlate with the Lynn-Wheeler study. We conclude that many current seminarians are, to a considerable degree, missing connections between Christian spirituality and public life. In addition, we believe that seminary education can and should play a vital part in transforming the attitudes and values of students toward social concerns, both through curricular and co-curricular measures which reinforce the active expression of Christian faith as a necessarily public life of discipleship.⁹ If seminaries wish to form men and women for public leadership, expressed either through ordained ministry or as Christians across the professions and throughout society, then they must give careful attention to grounding their students in the best ways in which their respective traditions understand and exemplify the integration of personal spirituality with public responsibility.¹⁰

Jeffrey P. Greenman, Ph.D., is Vice President and Academic Dean of Tyndale Seminary, Toronto. He was a member of the Evangelical Protestant Study Group in The Public Character of Theological Education project, and a principal author of the "The Public Character of Theological Education: An Evangelical Perspective". Yau Man Siew, Ph.D., is Professor of Christian Education at Tyndale Seminary. Together they undertook this research project with the support of a grant from the ATS funded by the Lilly Endowment.

¹ Barney Glasser and Anselm Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research* (Chicago: Aldine, 1967). James P. Spradley, *The Ethnographic Interview* (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc.: 1979), pp. 3-16.

² Clifford Geertz, "Thick description: Toward an interpretive theory of culture." In *The Interpretation of Cultures*, Clifford Geertz, pp. 3-32 (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

³ David M. Fetterman, *Ethnography Step by Step*, Applied Social Research Methods Series 17 (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1989), p. 11-23.

⁴ Subjects were selected using the following method: (1) Two schools provided the researcher with a list of students enrolled in each of the three stages of their Master of Divinity programs (beginning, middle, end). Using a Table of Random Numbers, two students in each stage of the Master of Divinity program were randomly selected (6 in each seminary). In four other schools, students were assigned to the researcher by the Registrar (in consultation with the Academic Deans/Principals). (2) The students selected had to fulfill the following criteria: have been in Canada for at least 5 years prior to commencement at the seminary; one to be a male student; one to be a female student.

⁵ Before the actual interviews, a pilot study was carried out involving two seminary students from one of the five institutions. This pilot study provided useful insights to sharpen the operational questions, and also enhanced the research design of the study.

⁶ See Urban T. Holmes, *A History of Christian Spirituality: An Analytical Introduction* (New York: Seabury Press, 1981), esp. 1-13.

⁷ An excellent resource in this regard is Ellen T. Charry, *By the Renewing of Your Minds: The Pastoral Function of Christian Doctrine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

⁸ Elizabeth Lynn and Barbara G. Wheeler, *Missing Connections: Public Perceptions of Theological Education and Religious Leadership* (Auburn Theological Seminary, Auburn Studies, no. 6, 1999).

⁹ For some suggestions about possible approaches that seminarians can take to these issues, see David Jones, Jeffrey Greenman and Christine Pohl, "The Public Character of Theological Education: An Evangelical Perspective," *Theological Education* 37/1 (Autumn 2000), 1-15.

¹⁰ We are grateful to our colleagues Timothy Larsen and Robert Derrenbacker for their comments on a previous draft of this essay.