

Relational Spiritual Formation

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Summary

On the basis of 15 years of research on the relationship between spiritual and personal, the empirical research of the authors supports a relational model of formation and the personal development that balances spiritual dwelling with seeking or questing.

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE AND RESEARCH ON SPIRITUAL FORMATION IN A SEMINARY CONTEXT

The traditional approach to theological education and ministry training has been designed to transmit considerable knowledge and skill, but has not necessarily prepared students to have mature capacities to cope with the complex adaptive challenges of their future ministry settings. In a society that has become increasingly data-driven, the perceived inability “to measure to three decimal places how much personal mastery contributes to productivity and the bottom line”² has further reduced the value and attention placed on formation of the self. For nearly 15 years, Bethel Seminary, an Evangelical, Protestant seminary originally rooted in the Swedish Pietistic and Baptist tradition—but now serving a student body comprised of students from 60 different denominations—has been seeking to address this gap with an integrative, reflective practice approach to spiritual formation.

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SPIRITUAL FORMATION AND REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

Working from the assumption that self-development is a spiritual process, the Center for Spiritual and Personal Formation at Bethel Seminary has developed both curricular and para-curricular strategies designed to help students who are preparing for leadership vocations in ministry and therapy become more self-aware and to utilize their insight on behalf of effective practice. Simultaneously, members of the Center have conducted empirical and integrative research in an effort to understand the impact and to enhance the efficacy of spiritual formation programming. This dialectic between formation education and research has been an intentional effort to model reflective practice in action. In this context, reflective practice is defined as “a learning process examining current or past practices, behaviors, or thoughts in order to make conscious choices about future action.”³ We have identified several key theoretical constructs which related to aspects of self-development and spiritual growth necessary for reflective practice.

Double-loop Learning

We have discovered that developing reflective practitioners requires double-loop learning. By double-loop learning, we mean learning that results in a change in values as well as in strategies and assumptions.⁴ In contrast, single-loop learning may impact strategies or assumptions but leave values unchanged. Skilled double-looped learning is a difficult and anxiety producing endeavor. It is psychologically unsettling to ask human beings to question the foundation of their sense of competence and self-confidence related to effective practice. Three criteria for double-loop learning include: a) openness to examining personal responsibility; b) willingness to play with ideas that seem wrong; and c) the capacity to deal with the bewilderment and frustration often inherent in learning.⁵ This involves a transformational, or crucible-like, approach to education and training in which anxiety and ambiguity will increase during a liminal middle phase of the process. The importance and quality of relationships or relational containers of this crucible process is a theme we will highlight below.

Differentiation of Self

One process that supports the development of these attributes is the family systems concept of differentiation of self (DoS). According to Michael Kerr and Murray Bowen, DoS is a process that increases one's capacity to define and express one's own thoughts regardless of social pressure, to decrease

emotional reactivity, and to respond intentionally and non-reactively.⁶ When there is growth in the DoS, an individual is more likely to experience the psychological unsettledness and anxiety that emerges because of greater self-awareness gained through reflection with less reactivity and more receptivity. The process of growth for individuals will also be affected by the systemic context of theological education, and training can itself be more or less differentiated. Below, we describe empirical research in our context validating the positive relationship between DoS and spiritual development.

Integrating Growth in Self-Awareness and Ministerial Tasks

Helping individuals reflect on their skilled incompetence, lack of awareness of that incompetence, and its counterproductive consequences is critical to the process of reflective practice. Only when individuals become aware of how they behave and how their behavior sabotages effective practice will they have the insight required to overcome their skilled unawareness and make intentional changes in behavior based on new assumptions and values. As Argyris states, "The challenge [then] is to integrate personal growth and the task world, so that the values associated with growth can significantly influence the design and management of our workaday world."⁷ These differentiated, reflective capacities are particularly crucial for spiritual leaders since: a) the work "tasks" are often relatively ambiguous while also existentially and emotionally loaded; and, b) there is a great risk of spiritual leaders being initially idealized and later punished for areas of perceived incompetence. In our evangelical context, many students come from "low church" traditions where ministry leaders can often have considerable autonomy with limited denominational oversight. This may actually heighten the importance of self-awareness and conscious reflection on one's areas of insecurity, ways of coping with incompetence, and shadow sides. At the same time, students from these traditions may be unfamiliar with examples of ministry leaders who modeled an openness to this type of self-awareness and reflection.

Ministry skills such as exegeting a biblical text, preparing a sermon, or crafting a theological statement are viewed by some as technical applications of (relatively) objective knowledge using various grammatical, historical, and literary tools. In contrast, our understanding of formation for reflective practice is rooted in the awareness that we cannot escape the human, personal—hence interpretive—dimensions of knowledge and skills. Psychological and contextual factors influence our theological formulations. Within the Christian tradition it is consistent with the theological centrality

of the incarnation that God entered human form and experience. Formation training must consciously attend to the personal and subjective as valuable for the effective and responsible use of ministry skills.

Although valuing subjectivity is part of the Pietistic heritage of Bethel Seminary, some evangelicals in our context worry that acknowledging subjectivity will compromise Christian truth and biblical authority. We have found it helpful to suggest that self-awareness and contextual understanding are actually capacities essential to sound biblical hermeneutics—since we are all at risk of projecting our personalities and unconscious dynamics onto the biblical text—thereby distorting the sacred meaning. Self-awareness can help us differentiate our perspective from that of the biblical author.

Orders of Consciousness

The capacity for reflecting on the practice that is required to move out of skilled unawareness is also conceptually linked to the evolution of orders of consciousness, a meta-theory of the organizing principles we bring to our thoughts, feelings, and relationships. Robert Kegan's theory examines the "unselfconscious development of successively more complex principles for organizing experience"⁸ that potentially results in increasingly higher and more complex orders of consciousness. What is called for is a new capacity of mind. A way of knowing becomes more complex when the mind is able to *look at* what before it could only *look through*. What best facilitates this pathway to increasing mental complexity is *optimal conflict*, or:

[T]he persistent experience of some frustration, dilemma, life puzzle, quandary, or personal problem that is perfectly designed to cause us to feel the limits of our current ways of knowing in some sphere of our living that we care about with sufficient support so that we are neither overwhelmed by the conflict nor able to escape or diffuse it.⁹

Underlying assumptions perpetuate these conflicts. It is the recognition, exploration, and utilization of these previously unchallenged and deeply rooted personal beliefs that ultimately facilitate the transformation of mind that precipitates sustainable change.¹⁰ When students say that they have lost their faith in seminary, what they are talking about is the frequent "clash" experienced by students between personal values, in the form of espoused moral points of view, and external expectations—this provides us with an example of *optimal conflict*. Failure to resolve the tension between various hidden and revealed parts of self, or of self-experience, in opposition to a preferred self-presentation may contribute to frustration and stagnation of spiritual formation.¹¹

In response to information overload—compounded by the hectic pace that is a common experience in today’s world—individuals often rely on cognitive scripts, a specialized framework used to impose structure on information, to make difficult decisions. Not only do individuals rely on these scripts to problem-solve important moral and ethical decisions, but to provide relief for themselves and to diminish their internal moral wrangling. These shortcuts to decision-making may actually discourage conscious reflection. In contrast, mindful or differentiated learning requires that one implicitly or explicitly “view the situation from several perspectives, see information presented in the situation as novel, attend to the context in which we are perceiving the information, and eventually, create new reflective categories through which this information may be understood.”¹² Mindfulness, or differentiated consciousness, is the first step towards gaining awareness. To learn new skills and to gain knowledge, one needs to be conscious of what one does and does not know and to appreciate the potential benefits of diverse perspectives. This requires tolerating dissonance, awareness of conflicting commitments, and unresolved questions which pull for further exploration. We will return to these important connections between differentiation, questioning, and valuing diversity below.

EMPIRICAL AND INTEGRATIVE RESEARCH ON SPIRITUAL FORMATION

Theological seminaries, as systems, have a vested interest in assuming that the seminary experience fosters the spiritual formation of students. There have been studies in theological seminaries on the vocational development or personality traits of students, but we could not locate any programmatic research on spiritual formation of seminary students. In the absence of empirical data, it seems leaders within a system are forced to rely upon anecdotal impressions of students’ experiences, which might readily be filtered through a biased perceptual set. Seminaries often use very general surveys or ratings of student satisfaction in various areas, including spiritual formation, to support their programs. While this is a positive step forward, general surveys often lack any theoretical grounding or the use of previously validated research measures—so these types of consumer satisfaction surveys do not contribute much substantively to the process of reflective learning and practice.

In 2001 then Bethel Seminary Provost, Leland Eliason, commissioned a longitudinal mixed methods study of spiritual formation among Bethel Seminary students as a way of holding ourselves accountable for under-

standing the diverse landscape and multi-faceted impact of the seminary experience on students. I (Steve) became Principal Investigator of the quantitative studies and Carla M. Dahl became Principal Investigator of the qualitative studies. The primary goal was to use the data and the overall research program as a reflective and dialogical process to understand and enhance spiritual formation at Bethel Seminary.¹³

Since its inception, this ongoing program of research has been more generative than was initially envisioned. Our research was initially supported by a grant from the Lilly Endowment, Inc., and we gained subsequent funding from the John Templeton Foundation and the Fetzer Institute.¹⁴ Before describing some of our theoretical models and specific research findings, we will summarize key contours of our *Integrative Communitarian Model* of spiritual formation research that emerged in relation to our reflective learning process. By “communitarian,” we mean that our research and reflection engaged multiple dimensions of our own Bethel community, as well as wider professional and lay communities; and this process became integrative across various disciplines—particularly theological, social science, and spiritual formation matrices.

- First, students became involved in helping conduct and analyze our empirical research through paid and volunteer positions. Over time, students from other units of Bethel University have done thesis research using data from our projects. Their perspectives as students have aided in the ecological validity of our studies.
- Second, we have engaged in an ongoing process of “in-house” dialogue about research findings and future research questions with groups of faculty, staff, students, and alumni of the seminary. This has facilitated both: a) interdisciplinary and integrative theoretical model building; and b) systemic applications of research findings to curricular and programmatic changes aimed at fostering spiritual formation among students. We also engaged in a process of articulating our desired spiritual formation learning outcomes for students, informed by the research, which came to include growth in: a) secure attachment with God and the sacred; b) humility; c) emotional intelligence; d) differentiation of self; e) diversity competence; and f) generativity.
- Third, we have been able to present research findings at academic conferences and in community settings, which has helped us bring our reflective process on spiritual formation into dialogue with both wider bodies of literature on spirituality and grassroots concerns of ministry leaders and laypersons.
- Fourth, to date, we have published 15 articles reporting empirical findings from our spiritual formation studies along with several theoretical articles in peer-reviewed journals, and the review processes have been extremely valu-

able sources of critical reflection for our own context. These articles and two books which have emerged from the research have also become classroom resources for reflective and integrative learning with students.¹⁵ Students have co-authored many of the conference presentations and articles and this has added to the actual generativity of this research program. These articles and books are referenced in the endnotes.

- Fifth, staff members in student life and admissions have dialogued with us about our findings of spiritual formation factors that predict graduation, in order to enhance our efforts at effective recruitment and retention. This has helped us wrestle with considerations about which applicants might have an optimal fit with our approach to education and training and, also, which students might need extra formation support to succeed.

We do not intend to convey an idealistic depiction of our research process. Faculty, staff, and students who enjoy interdisciplinary conversations and who hold epistemological positions that are open to an integration of theology and social science have tended to be more appreciative of this approach than those within our Evangelical context who are wary of social science and prefer an exclusive focus on Biblical understandings of spiritual formation. To some, the use of empirical research and contemporary social science concepts seems too secular to be applied to Christian spirituality, and the term “formation” is even uncomfortable for some who prefer the more traditional language of “discipleship” or “sanctification.” And we concur with the many systems theorists who have observed that the degree of healthy collaboration and differentiation within the relationships among faculty, staff, and administrators will have a significant impact on the quality of reflective practice and integration which is modeled for students and trainees. With the growth of integrative and interdisciplinary approaches to spiritual formation, there is a growing need for leaders who: a) value, and are proficient with, integration; and—even more importantly—b) are skilled at bringing faculty, staff, and ministry supervisors of differing expertise into fruitful dialogue for the benefit of student trainees.

A RELATIONAL MODEL OF SPIRITUAL FORMATION

Our reflective process of research and the systemic observations above have led us to developing an integrative, relational model of spiritual formation. Our framework is grounded in understanding *relationality* as a key dimension of personhood in the image of God. Christian spirituality emphasizes the process of maturing in differentiated capacities to love both God and neighbor. Similarly, our research has explored the connections between

styles of relating to God and ways of relating to others. The Christian story also offers hope for change and transformation so we have studied reports of spiritual transformation among our students. Our model is described in detail elsewhere, so for brevity here we will highlight three key points.¹⁶

- First, we define spirituality broadly as “ways of relating to God and the sacred,”¹⁷ which can include a myriad of relational styles including trust, hostility, avoidance, surrender, gratitude, compulsive petitioning, and many others. This relational definition opens conceptual space for a *wide variety of measures of spirituality*, including forms which range from the pathological to salutary. For example, we have used measures of spiritual grandiosity and spiritual instability, which are based on traits of narcissistic and borderline personality disorders, respectively.¹⁸
- Second, we have also found it useful to *differentiate spiritual well-being and spiritual maturity* in both our use of measures and our theoretical models of spiritual formation. Growth toward spiritual maturity often involves a stressful, crucible-like process—with periodic reductions in spiritual well-being as deconstructive processes—leading to a systemic reorganization toward more complex ways of relating with the sacred. In fact, in our longitudinal research there is a consistent U-shaped pattern with a dip in many well-being measures during the middle of seminary before finishing higher.
- Third, *our relational orientation includes an appreciation for dialectics in human development*. While some faith communities emphasize either the stability of dwelling within spiritual commitments or the open process of spiritual seeking and questing, we have come to see spiritual dwelling and seeking, or commitment and questing, as an ongoing dialectical process within spiritual formation. In fact, our longitudinal findings with Bethel seminary students show general linear trends toward *both* increased internalization of faith commitment and increased spiritual questing during seminary.¹⁹ This provides empirical support for the notion that growth in spiritual formation may pull for a dynamic integration of internalized commitments with an open and reflective complexity that comes from critically engaging deep existential questions.

THREE KEY SPIRITUAL FORMATION FACTORS

Space does not allow us to discuss the full range of spiritual formation factors we have investigated in our research, but we will highlight three key spiritual formation factors which involve reflective capacities: Differentiation of Self; Quest; and Intercultural Competence.

Differentiation of Self

Differentiation of self (DoS) involves the developmental capacity to balance: a) cognitive and emotional functioning (i.e., intra-personal differentiation);

and b) autonomy and connection in relationships (i.e., interpersonal differentiation).²⁰ Those who are high in DoS are self-aware and generally effective in regulating their emotions while reflecting on experience. Interpersonally, they are adept at managing necessary independence and solitude, while being able to connect with others in close relationships and community contexts. Those who are low in DoS tend to frequently become emotionally reactive and rely on emotional cutoff or fusion to manage interpersonal stress. Friedman has described the necessity for DoS among religious leaders navigating the challenges and expectations within religious systems, which could otherwise lead to over-functioning and eventually burnout.²¹

In our studies at Bethel Seminary, DoS has been positively associated with a wide range of spiritual formation factors, including spiritual well-being, interpersonal forgivingness, hope, gratitude, meditative prayer, intercultural competence, and social justice commitment.²² In several studies, DoS has mediated the association between two of these other spiritual formation factors—meaning it has statistically accounted for the connection between the variables. For example, DoS mediated the positive relationship between interpersonal forgivingness and emotional well-being.²³ DoS also accounted for the negative relationship between interpersonal forgivingness and spiritual instability—showing that spiritual instability involves an emotionally turbulent style of relating with God and the sacred which tends to be characterized by low DoS and high interpersonal hostility. In a study of students who were struggling with psychological distress, DoS mediated the negative relationship between spiritual well-being and negative emotion.²⁴ DoS involves strong capacities for regulating anxiety, and other difficult emotions, rather than relying on defense mechanisms like denial, projection, or repression. In our research, those who score high in DoS also tend to engage regularly in meditative forms of prayer, while petitionary or “help-seeking” prayer is uncorrelated with DoS. It seems evident that DoS can represent a relational stance toward self and the Divine which facilitates the emotional and relational health intrinsic to virtues such as forgiveness, hope, and gratitude.

These findings suggest DoS could be a valuable area for spiritual formation focus in ministry training contexts. Based on community presentations of our work, we have also found most pastors, parish nurses, and laypersons respond positively to differentiation-based understandings of spiritual formation even though some of the social science language may be new. Those who are uncomfortable with the concept of DoS are sometimes helped through more inductive engagement by considering some ac-

tual ministry case studies where the relevance of DoS can be explored in the context of real ministry challenges and dilemmas.

Quest

Quest is a construct that has been investigated in the psychology of religion since Daniel Batson's seminal research in the 1980s. Those high in quest tend to engage in the process of existential questioning and reflection, to be open to changing religious beliefs in the future, and to value doubt as part of growth. As mentioned above, students in our longitudinal research show increased questing during their time in seminary, and quest scores are positively associated with seminary graduation seven years later.²⁵ Those who can tolerate ambiguity—and even value the liminal process of critical reflection—are probably a better fit for theological education than those who are uncomfortable with questing and have a strong need for closure. Questing is positively correlated with symptoms of anxiety and stress for some students, however, among students who report a recent spiritual transformation, moderate levels of quest are associated with the highest levels of spiritual maturity and generativity.²⁶ This provides some empirical support for our relational model of formation and the developmental process of balancing spiritual dwelling and seeking.

Most who work with graduate students, or in other training contexts, would probably endorse the value of probing deep questions as part of growth and learning. Yet it is our observation that educators and supervisors can hold vastly different stances on the process of questing, ranging from those strongly valuing an ongoing, open-ended process of discovery to those assuming that questions will efficiently be answered in building a systematic framework of knowledge. Students also differ in this regard and, in our context, we have found students in both our therapy and Christian philosophy programs tend to score higher in questing than our Master of Divinity students. These individual differences in questing invite reflection on potential challenges of “goodness of fit” between a given student and a given educator or supervisor and the relational stress that may emerge if the orientations toward questing are extremely divergent. The linear trend toward increased questing in our longitudinal research also suggests it may behoove educators and supervisors to consider where students are in their training process and adapt the “questing index” accordingly. We have also learned that students and trainees are often able to tolerate considerable ambiguity and questing when they are also offered authentic relational attach-

ments with staff, faculty, and supervisors. When questing exceeds attachment security, the benefits tend to be reduced.

It is also worth noting that questing and DoS are distinct constructs. Some who score high in questing may also be high in emotional reactivity. This could be due to the person being in an early period of individuation from her family of origin or other leadership figures in her life, which is generating a strong motivation to question and disagree with anyone in authority—or, the person might have experienced a trauma which is lacing certain existential questions with tremendous anxiety or anger. Until the trauma is addressed therapeutically, the person might quest in highly reactive ways that do not result in transformation. But it is fair to assume that mature levels of DoS result from at least a moderate level of questing, which eventually leads to a reflective internalization of values and spiritual commitments.

Intercultural Competence

Intercultural competence involves the self-reflexive capacity to relate sensitively and effectively across cultural differences. While some in conservative religious communities might consider intercultural competence quite distinct from spiritual formation, our research has found the opposite. Among Bethel Seminary students, intercultural competence is positively associated with spiritual well-being, gratitude, meditative prayer, and quest.²⁷ Intercultural competence is also negatively associated with two indices of spiritual pathology—spiritual grandiosity and spiritual instability. As mentioned above, DoS mediates many of these relationships, probably due to the fact that those high in DoS can tolerate the anxiety of differences, while also having a well-nuanced perceptual set related to interpersonal differences. Intercultural competence is not only a vital capacity for contemporary reflective leaders in ministry or the helping professions, but this set of findings suggests intercultural competence is consistent with growth in differentiation-based spiritual formation. The intercultural-competent practice of frame-shifting, or reflecting on the perspective of someone who is culturally different from oneself, is not only conducive to effective ministry in our increasingly diverse world, but it also is associated with healthy Christian formation. As mentioned above, DoS and quest are distinct constructs but both correlate positively with intercultural competence.

Intercultural minimization is probably the most common orientation toward cultural diversity in educational, training, and ministry contexts in the United States and involves focusing exclusively on similarities across

cultural groups. At times, this can be effective in building some initial unity and fostering a concern for equal rights across groups, but it is limited in obscuring the richness of valuable and valid differences which impact intercultural interactions. In other words, saying “we are all really the same” does not foster reflective practice nor differentiated understanding with regard to meaningful cultural differences and, also, masks issues of social privilege. Theological principles or perspectives can be employed to support intercultural minimization, and this typically involves under-valuing contextualization in theology, missions, and ministry. Some in our evangelical context see intercultural minimization as important for avoiding moral and theological relativism, yet our empirical studies do not show a positive association between minimization and any of the spiritual formation factors which are positively correlated with intercultural competence (i.e., spiritual well-being, gratitude, meditative prayer, quest, and DoS). In a study of intercultural competence and moral development among undergraduates, Endicott and colleagues actually found intercultural minimization was not even associated with mid-level conventional morality, whereas the higher levels of intercultural competence measured by the *Intercultural Development Inventory* (IDI) were positively associated with moral development.²⁸ Ministry leaders can hold certain theological or moral principles, but without flexible capacities to reflectively engage the perspective of others and contextualize ministry strategies there will be barriers to spiritual and moral formation.

CONCLUSION

Amidst the many contemporary challenges for theological education and ministry training, we have found it helpful to seek to articulate and investigate a differentiation- and reflective practice-based relational model of spiritual formation. We have described some of our theoretical, empirical, and practical discoveries, but we also recognize that all of what we have described would need to unfold differently in other religious and cultural contexts. We hope for emerging opportunities to participate in reflective dialogue and research across contexts where differences in formation models and strategies are valued and utilized.

NOTES

1. Steven J. Sandage has been named Albert and Jessie Danielsen Professor of Psychology and Theology at Boston University and the Danielsen Institute.

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13. We selected a battery of previously-validated measures of spirituality, virtue, goal orientations, relational development, mental health, prayer, and intercultural development based on our theoretical interests and our desired spiritual formation outcomes for students. The quantitative research has utilized a cohort sequential longitudinal design, which has allowed us to conduct cross-sectional analyses of a cohort or group of participants in a certain year, while also conducting longitudinal analyses of changes in repeat participants over time. For the past twelve years, we have annually invited students to voluntary participation in the study offering a bookstore gift card incentive. The battery of measures has involved a mix of repeated measures for our longitudinal analyses and the use of new measures based upon our reflective process of investigation and theory generation. To date, 2,391 student participants have completed measures generating well over half a million quantitative data points on spiritual formation at Bethel Seminary. Carla Dahl has also conducted a series of qualitative studies using interviews and focus groups in order to deepen our understanding of the spiritual journeys of students, as well as those of spouses: see Carla M. Dahl, Mary L. Jensen, and Jane L. McCampbell, "A Butterfly Effect: The Impact of Marriage and Family Therapy Training on Students' Spouses," *Journal of Psychology & Theology* 38, no. 1 (2010): 3–14.
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THEME

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Supervision and formation of individuals and groups in these times must navigate complex, multi-variant identities. In one sense, cultural competence is an impossible ideal. Cross-cultural experiences are more than binary relationships in which people of different cultures, religions, gender identities, sexualities, social classes or races come into alliance. Because every human encounter is a cross-cultural one, we need to embody and train emerging religious leaders in humility, flexibility, curiosity, respect and empathy to meet the challenges of our increasingly globalized communities. What are the expanding forms of cultural complexity in power, privilege, particularity, humility, shame, fear, and regret (to name just a few) that affect care, supervision, and the formation of future religious leaders? How do these forms challenge collaboration, which is further enhanced and complicated by a growing awareness of, and respect for, all forms of diversity?

The deadline for submission is December 31, 2013 for an article to be published in Volume 34. It is beneficial, however, to indicate your intention to write to the Editor (handerson@plts.edu) sometime prior to the deadline. Ordinarily, articles are 5,000 words in length with endnotes (Chicago-style citations) and submitted electronically.