

# David Kelsey

## On the Defining Goal of Theological Education in the Midst of Change

Interviewer: Tracy Schier



David Kelsey is Luther Weigel Professor of Theology at Yale Divinity School and is well known as one who studiously monitors the pulse of theological education in North America. Indeed, two of his books deal with theological education as a focus of study in and of itself: ***To Understand God Truly: What's Theological About Theological Education?*** (Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992) and ***Between Athens and Berlin: The Theological Education Debate*** (Eerdmans, 1993). His articles appear in such journals as the *Journal of Religion*, *Theological Education*, *Theology Today* and *Modern Theology*. An article that raises questions about the wisdom of theological education via distance learning, entitled

“Personal Bodies and Spiritual Machines,” is in the fall, 2001 issue of the journal *Teaching Theology and Religion*. He also has contributed chapters to a number of books and is currently writing a book on theological anthropology titled *Eccentric Existence*. Over the years Kelsey has worked closely with others concerned with the goals and state of theological education including Barbara Wheeler, Joseph Hough, Edward Farley, among many others. Kelsey received his A.B. degree from Haverford College, and holds B.D., M.A. and Ph.D. degrees from Yale where he has served on the faculty since 1965.

This conversation is edited.

**Q. Certainly theological education has changed during the past several decades. Can you talk about the biggest issues that existed in the 1960s, '70s and '80s and how they relate or don't relate to the big issues today?**

**A.** At the risk of romanticizing the past, I'd say the most articulate interest of students in the 1960s was for social change – churches as “change agents” was the catch phrase of the era. At Yale, and at other institutions with which I was familiar, that interest in social change seemed to go along with a growing disinterest in the traditional academic pursuits. Then in the 1970s there was a big shift among students to a preoccupation with spirituality and religious interiority. I would say that the students at this time were academically industrious but that what was offered in the classroom didn't seem to be hooked to their spirituality interest. These students weren't rebellious like the students of the '60s, and spirituality was where their energy was.

That interest in spirituality has abided, but in late years it has become complicated by widespread pluralism. We were now seeing students interested in women's spirituality and men's spirituality. And then, on top of that, the students were paying attention to tradition in the broadest sense and seeking their roots. So then we had interest in Hispanic women's spirituality and middle class men's spirituality and Black and middle European spiritualities, and so on.

**Q. How have the theological schools responded to all of this?**

**A.** I would have to say that by and large the seminaries tagged along. We need to understand that most seminaries do not have sufficient resources to constantly add faculty when new interests arise. So they cobble together new courses. But overall, I think that the schools have been mostly reactive in these areas

**Q. What new challenges are on the scene for theological education?**

**A.** One recent challenge is the growing realization among mainline Protestant seminaries that they no longer dominate the American scene. These institutions – and these mainline denominations – are asking questions about how they can survive and about the quality of leadership that is needed in order to survive. Seminaries also have to be concerned with a variety of kinds of leadership – after all, leadership for change can be quite different from leadership for spirituality. Students and members of denominations are well aware of this. Around the country we see niche congregations arising – by this I mean that one parish will have a pastor who is good at community organizing while another congregation will have a pastor who is into spirituality. And the people are looking around and selecting a church more on how they feel and where their interests lie than because of any sense of denominational loyalty.

**Q. What do you believe should be the defining goal of theological education today?**

**A.** What I believe is something that I learned from Ed Farley. And that is that theological education ought to be aimed at developing people with a range of special capacities for theological wisdom. He calls it “theologia” – we should be educating people who have a take on the world that is shaped by an understanding of God. Theological schools should not just be training quasi-professionals that we call clergy. The schools need to focus on helping students to focus on developing a personal core of abilities that enables them to size up the world as they come to know God more truly. Of course, seminaries have always existed in large part to educate clergy just as law schools exist to educate attorneys. The question is how best to accomplish that. Maybe an analogy can help explain what I mean. Think of the way classical philosophy teaches us that happiness is not something you can pursue directly – that it is a by-product of the life that is led pursuing other goals. In the same way, clerical skills should also be a by-product of theological education instead of its focal, overarching academic goal.

**Q. Can you talk about what the presence of greater numbers of women and minorities have contributed to the theological education enterprise?**

**A.** I believe that the presence of women and minorities has brought about high consciousness about the importance of understanding that where a

person comes from makes a difference in how they think about things. Our old assumptions about the “right” way in which to learn the subject matters of theological education don’t hold. Women and minorities in large numbers in the student bodies have required that both faculty and fellow students pay attention to the way that ideas are presented and dealt with. It is impossible any more for a seminary experience to be just a head trip. Background and personal experience move the way classes are conducted and pedagogy has changed a lot because of this. Both the questions that are addressed and the methods by which they are addressed have changed. A ready example is the move to interactive teaching methods from the strict lecture format that was standard for such a long time. Even with all the change, however, I find that women students continue to feel that the ethos of seminary experience is male dominated – women still speak up about this in papers and in class.

**Q. What do you see as the role of technology in theological education?**

**A.** I need to divide that question into two parts. First, I see that there are a lot of classroom enhancement tools that are valuable and I see no controversy in that. For example, technology has become important in biblical studies and history classes. There is an immense wealth of images and historical resources available that can be projected in class and researched in the library. Some of these new technologies that assist us in the classroom are breathtaking when we think of the old, cumbersome ways that we had to present materials.

The second part of my answer to your question has to do with distance learning. I find this to be far more problematic. Of course the obvious advantage is that technology allows us to offer satellite courses and thus involve more people in far-away places. But this ignores the tough questions about the nature of learning and teaching in theological education. My line of thought is this: if the central goal of theological education is to help people acquire a range of capacities to know God truly and to know what it is to be human, is not bodily presence, in addition to the use of intelligence, necessary for this to happen? I am of a mind that face-to-face interaction in the classroom may be essential to the relevant learning experiences. On this issue we need to talk more about the assumptions of human nature – if we abstract actual physical bodily experience and replicate it electronically, do we have a fully human experience? I am not sure that we do, and I don’t think these questions have yet been well examined.

**Q. In a way this is a related question: how has the move to accommodate working students and adults affected the traditional residential aspect of seminary education?**

**A.** The extent of the impact varies with the denominational heritage of the seminary. Overall, I think that this accommodation has been happening for enough decades that it has been an evolutionary and not an abrupt change. The impact has been most pronounced, I believe, in those seminaries in the Episcopal and Catholic traditions, and to a certain extent the Lutheran tradition. These theological schools historically thought of themselves as worshipping communities as well as academic communities and there was a worship structure that gave a shape to daily life. It was often quasi-monastic. Thus, the accommodation of students who come part-time or who are not resident students has had a big influence on the structure of common life so important to those traditions.

On the other hand, if you look at the Methodists you will see that they always had a high percentage of students who were already out in parishes, serving in small towns or rural areas, and who would commute to seminary Tuesday through Thursday. So in this tradition the sense of common life was not as strong. When you look at Presbyterian, Congregational, and Dutch Reformed schools you will see that they fall somewhere in between. In many cases the students' worship experience was in the church where they worked on weekends, and the academic experience was at the seminary.

At Yale we have been serving commuting students since the 1960s. We find that sub-communities providing face-to-face interaction on academic and personal issues develop over time. For the commuters, lunchtime provides the greatest opportunity for interaction and focus on a common life. But it is true that some things get lost for these students--endless late night discussions for example.

**Q. A lot of ink has been spilled in recent years about the need for high quality students in the seminaries and about the lack of interest in church vocations. What do you see being done to help that?**

**A.** This is a perpetual challenge for all seminaries. I can talk about what we are doing at Yale which will seem conventional to many, but it is new to us.

Our admissions office is actively traveling the country and recruiting. Years ago we were lucky enough that fine applications literally came over the transom to make strong entering classes. Such is no longer the case but we see that this effort of our admissions people is making a difference in both the size of the pool of applicants and in their quality.

Interestingly, the average age of students, while still hovering around 30, has been dropping for the last three years. Without any scientific study of why this is happening I believe that the recruiters are spending time on campuses and engaging young people. If I can speak globally for a minute, I would say that a case has to be made that there is need for a national program, not connected to any one denomination, that actively engages undergraduates in conversations about vocations in the church and provides them with ways to learn and ask questions about this possibility. I know about the Lilly Endowment-funded programs on campuses and think that this is an excellent example of how undergraduate students can be reached and encouraged.

**Q. Looking at theological education across the country, what do you see as the greatest strengths and weaknesses?**

**A.** Certainly the fact that so many seminaries are well established and that they hang on and survive in the face of adversity with incredible tenacity is a strength. There is a reservoir of personal commitment and persistence and loyalty to these institutions that is striking. I find that people involved in theological education are faithful to the enterprise under the most amazing circumstances. The graduate schools continue to attract people with extraordinary talent in the face of very little cultural reinforcement to enter ministry or go into theology; so the up and coming faculty appears to be strong.

The downside of such tenacity might be characterized as institutional stubbornness and rigidity. A downside of having such talented people in the graduate schools is that fewer and fewer of them are graduates of undergraduate theological schools. While they have great personal commitment to the church they often don't have a clear sense of what the undergraduate theological school experience is all about. When they join the faculty of these institutions it takes a while for their socialization into that particular world. That goes along with the need for these younger people to begin to think of teaching as vocation. Typical of most graduate students,

their loyalty is to their field or their guild and they know all the rules about how to gain tenure. But in the theology schools is it important that faculty have a loyalty to their institution and think of teaching as more than just a career.

**Q. Are you optimistic about the future of theological education?**

**A.** Yes, I am as optimistic as one can be when there are a lot of clouds, such as enormous financial threats, overhead. But I think the tenacity I talked about earlier will help. One thing that I do worry about is what will happen among the mainline Protestant seminaries if the denominations splinter. This can have a ripple splintering effect on the schools' potential student bodies and the financial resources. Overall, however, I think that the role of churches and religious organizations and religiously based organizations is so important to our culture that the prospects for the continued existence of the seminaries – the places where the leadership of these churches and organizations is formed – are excellent. They will always need a lot of support, however – support for the institutions themselves, support for those who teach and do research and study in these schools, and support for those who analyze the impact of these institutions on the American scene.