The Impossibility of Being "All things to All People":
The realities of trying to be a scholar, educator and activist

As an academic who is undergoing the Ph.D writing process, my supervisor and I have spent quite a bit of time together, and mostly it consists of me trying to drain as much knowledge and information out of him as possible. On one particular day when I was asking him about job searches and what kind of institutions I should look to for employment, he imparted to me a nugget of wisdom that I had never thought about before and was asked to talk about today as a response to Dr Soskice’s lecture.

My supervisor said to me: “Jayme, there are three types of theologians. You need to decide: are you an educator, a scholar or an activist? Where you’ll be happy teaching or working depends on your answer.” I suspect this divide is not relative to only the theology field, but my supervisor presented me with an interesting question: Am I a theological educator, a scholar, or an activist?

Upon reflection, I began to think about the apostle Paul’s words in I Corinthians 9:22 where he states that he became “all things to all people” in order to win some to the gospel, and how impossible that has always seemed to me. I also became convinced that no other profession in the world carries with it the expectation that one be everything to everyone, as does being a theologian or clergy. Think about it – we are expected to have something to say about every aspect of human experience, or be able to argue what this passage means or what the desert mothers and fathers said about that, is it morally better to buy fairtrade or locally-sourced, and to be able to translate for family members the news given to them by doctors or police in times of crisis. I trained as a minister before I went the route of academia and when people found out what I did – the number of times I got asked random questions – like I should know the answer to everything – were innumerable.

We’re asked to respond to the economy, human-trafficking, sexual abuse, the environment, war, peace, as well as that great expanse we call the interior life. So, there is nothing – and I mean, nothing! – that our profession as theologians or
clergy is not expected to have something to say about or find meaning in. Historians and sociologists have it to some degree, but their realm doesn’t include more existential questions most of the time. Philosophers have some of the same pressure, but they are not usually expected to be practical and figure out the nuts and bolts of their theories – how exactly are you going to mobilize people to put their faith into action? Theologians and clergy are often expected to be able to do both. That’s a lot of pressure, y’all!

And yet, I’ve met some people who are loving and caring pastoral caregivers but are crap preachers and oral communicators. I’ve met some extremely talented lecturers who can parse St John the Divine, Aquinas, Levinas and Kung in four different languages to their hearts’ content and write pages and pages on a never-before explored topic -- but asking them to use the vocabulary of the everyday person to explain it and make it relevant is like asking them to pilot a mission to Mars. And I’ve met teachers and pastors who have forgone what would-have-been brilliant careers in publishing and scholarship because the idea of sitting behind a desk all day and not walking the halls with their students or congregants or bearing witness in demonstration against injustice would be soul-destroying.

So, it’s worth saying that “being all things to all people” sets a pretty high standard that most people are unable to reach. As the old maxim goes – one may be able to be a jack of all trades, but usually when you are, you are master of none. Very rarely are there such people who are successfully all three – a scholar, educator and activist – despite obituaries that describe them as such (and one could speculate that maybe the stress of trying to be all three is what killed them!).

So what’s a young (or even old) theologian to do? How can we fulfill our love for theology without destroying our souls and feeling guilty for trying to be something we’re not?

Well, first, we need to be honest and own up to the fact that specialization is a good thing and no one can really be “all things to all people” where theology is concerned. If you’re a bible person, be a bible person and don’t feel the pressure to be able to recite verbatim Immanuel Kant’s treatises on deontological ethics or moral absolutism as well, unless it’s useful to your work. If you’re a Schliermacher specialist, be a Schliermacher specialist and don’t feel the pressure to be able to parse the hiphil imperfect or infinitive construct of a Hebrew verb. And if you’re a feminist, liberationist, or contextual theologian working on the grassroots level, don’t feel the need to immerse yourself in Aquinas unless you just want to – because
chances are that the little old granny or working dad or 16 year old you’re talking to isn’t going to be asking you questions about Aquinas. There’s nothing wrong with branching out and expanding your knowledge – it’s useful and in this line of work, we know that everything is connected – but you can’t know and be everything and it’s high-time we start allowing for this to be the case. Don’t hear me wrongly here – don’t be ignorant. Keep learning. But set aside the need or pressure to know everything about everything. You’ll drive yourself crazy. You’re not Google.

Second, I think it would be helpful if we look at what each of these are. What does it actually mean – practically speaking - to be a scholar, an educator or an activist, particularly in the context of theology.

A scholar is (to quote someone else) “a knowledge expert who toils in archives, laboratories, or other isolated spaces…engag[ing] in an exhaustive exercise of knowledge-gathering by digging deeply into a nuance of a specific subject, to the point where he or she may be one of the handful of experts on it.”¹ Scholars enjoy research for research’s sake. They live for writing, publishing, giving lectures on their knowledge and may or may not wear elbow pads on their tweed blazers. (just kidding!) In all seriousness, scholars live for knowledge, and whether society is able to integrate and follow along with that knowledge or not is, for the most part, irrelevant. A theological scholar exegeses, parses, finds pleasure in difficult texts and ideas, and lives for the debate found within the original sources and years of tradition since. I have theological scholar friends who are able to explain Ricouer, converse methodologies, and debate the finer details of the influence of the Protestant Reformation on the Industrial Revolution in the blink of an eye and with great relish.

An educator is a teacher, one who educates. An educator is someone who seeks to nurture, challenge, and uncover knowledge within those she or he teaches. An educator will enjoy new ideas, re-forming ideas and challenging the norm but looks ultimately to how it can be absorbed by and transform her or his students. Knowledge for knowledge’s sake is a luxury one partakes in every now and again, but is not the norm. Ultimate satisfaction for the educator is found, at the end of the day, in seeing students learning. A theological educator looks to see theological, moral and spiritual development in his or her students, finds pleasure in their

questions and ‘ah ha’ moments, and the relationships built as a result of the educational process. I have theological educator friends who teach RE in high schools, who teach religion and theology in universities, and who are teaching pastors in their local churches. Note the emphasis is upon teaching.

An activist is someone who (and I quote) “has the ability to take risks of the kind that would make colleagues, students and family members question one’s sanity...[and] involves reaching out to relate one’s work as an academic...to the real world, to the lives of ordinary human beings.”² In practical terms, an activist is primarily interested in scholarship that has the capacity to change policies, society or individuals in a particular form or fashion. A theological activist is someone who seeks out action and change in relation to a particular issue – usually a moral one – and spends time developing mobilizing campaigns, teaching to inform, build capacity and recruit new activists, and using energy to build influential networks that can bring about the change desired. I have theological activist friends who work in the political sphere, who mobilize churches to respond to the needs of ethnic minorities, and who write articles and teach on issues related to torture, sexual abuse, and peacemaking.

So, do you see the differences here?

Third, we need to understand how these work together. If one could be so bold, one might be able to see these three as the holy Academic Trinity. Trinitarian arguments aside, all three of these are necessary. All three are needed in order for healthy academia to take place. Education and activism without scholarship can get stagnant and uninspiring with the absence of new ideas and pushing intellectual boundaries. Scholarship and activism without education is unable to make any sort of sustainable change. Scholarship and education without activism has little practical value outside of the expansion of one’s own mind, or to echo James – scholarship and education without activism is dead.

But you may be sitting there saying to yourself, “I care about all three of those! What if I’m all three?” It is possible that you are – and a well-rounded academic should be, I think, to some extent - but I would argue that in most cases, one of the three will take still take precedence. As for me, I am an educator primarily. I have spent years doing all three and I know that being an educator

gives me the most energy, utilizes my skills, and makes me feel the most fulfilled. My educator self will always be involved in activism; but in the end I educate in order to bring about sustainable change – and so primarily, it’s about education for me. That’s me. It may be very different for you, because if you’re a scholar, I need you to keep writing those books and presenting me with new ideas and if you’re an activist, I need you to corral my students into causes that make their education relevant to them. We are all different parts of the same academic body and need each other!

Look around – this weekend we are going to hear papers from a diverse collection of individuals representing numerous approaches, disciplines and concerns, from social justice theology, inter-religious dialogue, moral theology, ecclesiology and a host of other good stuff. Some who present are scholars as I’ve just described here. But some are activists and some are educators and it’s visible in their abstracts. For that I am so glad. I can’t wait to hear what’s presented tomorrow!

On the whole, in this profession, scholarship is awarded over education or activism. The “publish or perish” system of tenure within many universities perpetuates this cycle. But not all schools have this system, and there are more ways and means to utilize your theological genius than just by lecturing and publishing ad infinitum. Despite secularization, people are still looking for meaning and we are being trained to provide that service. As part of the greater body of theologians, our community can be all things to all people – but that’s up to the entire body to be, not you.

As we’d say in the American South, “Be who you be” and, I’d add, do what you love. Find your niche and be proud. Fly you scholar flag, your activist flag or your educator flag. The world needs you and the theological community needs you too.

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