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**Inside the Mirror:
Five Domains of Theopoetic Critique on Theological Education**

Beginning with an overview of the emerging literature on theopoetics, this paper considers the implications of a theopoetic critique across five domains of theological education: reading, writing, research methods, pedagogy, and publication. It argues that the theopoetic impulse to value embodiment and aesthetics asks more of current religious education practices than they currently provide. Suggestions are made for areas of growth that support a theological imaginary that is more fully incarnational and prophetic.

A mirror with an inside is a liar. The mirror must be absent from itself...
Instead of the I, the impersonal “one.” One sees, one observes, one
concludes. Who?

Nobody.

Everybody...

It happened, however, that my mirror got tired of
this boring function of always repeating what is outside, and started having
its own ideas. Instead of faithful reflections it began showing images for
which there was no corresponding reality outside...

And

as I did it, another of my credentials as a respectable teacher was lost. I was
no longer a mirror which could be trusted...¹

– Rubem Alves

While its academic origins begin in the late 1960s with work at the intersection of theology, literary criticism, and Heideggerian hermeneutics, conversation around “theopoetics” has recently seen a significant growth in attention. With a notable presence in an increasing number of articles and books (eg Catherine Keller’s *Cloud of the Impossible*, Paul Scott Wilson’s *Preaching as Poetry*, John Caputo’s *The Insistence of God*, Gabriel Vahanian’s *Theopoetics of the Word*, etc.) theopoetics continues to rise in citation and use by both theologians and continental philosophers of religion. Given this increasing attention, the inspiring question of this paper pertains to the ways in which this emerging topic is related to embodied practices, particularly those which comprise the activities of formal theological education.

Here we briefly take up the question of what theopoetics is before moving into the claim that there are five domains of theopoetic critique that can be made at the levels of reading, writing, researching, teaching, and publication. The challenge in each of these domains is detailed and the paper closes with a reflection on the potential of the theopoetic perspective for Theological Education, including some suggestions for integration moving forward.

Though there have now been thousands of pages devoted to reflection on theopoetics and how it challenges attempts at “pure” rationalism and propositional methods, this paper is the first to claim that there is a fairly consistent – and broad – critique that theopoetic methods suggest across multiple domains within theological education. Inspired by the work of Rubem Alves, we wonder here with him if the time has come for the mirrors of theological education to “start having their own ideas.”

1 Alves, *The Poet, The Warrior, The Prophet*, 5.

So, What is Theopoetics, Exactly?

Literature on theopoetics takes seriously the claim that containers change content, and looks not only to the *substance* of theological arguments, but the genre, style, context, and aesthetics from which they emerge and in which they are embedded. J. Denny Weaver offers a succinct description.²

A non-poet's definition of theopoetics might be that it is a hybrid of poetry and theology... But to call it that misses the mark. It is an entire way of thinking. From the side of poetry, it shows that ideas are more than abstractions. They have form – verbal, visual, sensual – and are thus experienced as least as much as they are thought . . . What one learns from the theology side [is that] theology is more than an abstraction. It is a way of thinking, visualizing, and sensing images of God.³

As a term, theopoetics originates in the religious and theological scholarship of Stanley Hopper and his work around hermeneutics, religion, and literature in the 1960s. Indeed, Hopper was the co-founder of the first graduate program in Theology and Literature in the United States.⁴ His focus was highly philosophical and academic in tone, with his own description of theopoetics containing the following:

If I am going to talk about God, I must recognize this mythopoetic, metaphorical nature of the language I use. What... *theopoiesis* does is to effect disclosure [of Being] through the crucial nexus of event, thereby making the crux of knowing, both morally and aesthetically, radically decisive in time.⁵

Since the 1960s though, writing about theopoetics has continued to grow.⁶ Theopoetics often focuses on the intersection of theology with one or more of the following, often with several lenses being in place at once: aesthetics, literary criticism, embodiment, philosophies of the imagination, process-relational thought, hermeneutics, and post- and de-colonizing pedagogy.

What theopoetics brings to the conversation is not all that novel compared to critical theory in the wake of Derrida and some of the insights around colonized and patriarchal

2 For additional definitions see <http://theopoetics.net/what-is-theopoetics/definitions>

3 J. Denny Weaver

4 David Miller, "Stanley Hopper and Mythopoetics."

5 Hopper, 3.

6 See Google N-Gram in attachments.

language from liberation theologies, feminism, and womanism. That is, many now acknowledge that *how* we say things influences the content of *what* we say; what theopoetics uniquely does is bring the aesthetic dimension of these insights to the forefront,⁷ pressing on theorists and practitioners alike to consider and adjust given that ideas “have form – verbal, visual, sensual – and are thus experienced as least as much as they are thought.”

Five Critiques

While theopoetics work often challenges the status quo in theological and religious education we note that sometimes it unintentionally re-inscribes and reinforces dominating language.⁸ In this piece we want to gesture to where we feel the theopoetics conversation must be headed: to a means-and-ends consistency that takes seriously the challenges that earlier theopoetics work has issued to the domains of reading and writing and bring that critique through into research, pedagogy, and publication as well.

Resisting domination, patriarchy, oppressing others.
Playing into the spirit of the word to address the community
Sometimes accepting the prescribed bibliography,
But – embodying those who were not present.
Or – at times, or should we say “in places,” theopoetics is the powers that be,
Expressed with new fervor, moving through new bodies.
Theopoetics in this generation, humbly resists;
Considering which tropes to continue, disrupt, and deconstruct.
Always challenged by language, choosing new sources –
“evolución, enriquecimiento de palabras nuevas por invención o adopción,”
translating to “*un lenguaje que corresponde a un modo de vivir.*”⁹

Theopoetics gestures beyond content. It is process: engendering a new language for expressing and relating the divine encounter. A language that turns back on itself, projects creatively ahead, or, and most important for religious educators, accepts those sources of inspiration, knowledge(s) of authority, practices of value, and bodies previously rendered invisible.

Reading

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- 7 We are grateful to Katheryn Common for this insight.
 - 8 For example, a 2015 writing conference focusing on theopoetics, the importance of allowing “non-standard” discourse to have authority, and the centrality of the body to thinking and faith has no people of color among its seven presenters and workshop facilitators.
 - 9 Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands: the new mestiza / la Frontera*. 3rd. edition. (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 2007), 77.

Theopoetics invites us to consider that text is more than just a container for data. It can be said that theology is the content of theological texts. Theopoetics says, “Yes, and... the texts themselves *are theology*.” What M. Craig Barnes says of pastors and scripture we say also of theology.

[Pastors] train their souls for their high calling by constantly moving beyond the rationalistic means of handling Scripture and congregations. They don’t ignore these necessary exegetical and analytical tools, which provide a critical introduction to the text of the Bible and the organization that they serve, but as poets they know that when all that work is done, they still have miles to go before they sleep.¹⁰

Theopoetics encourages people to give up thinking that “understanding” Scripture or theology is something that can be done and completed as a finished act. We resist seeing Augustine’s “faith seeking understanding” as a model where people of faith are on some safari hunt for meaning with Reason as their gun, encouraging instead a broader, immersive and self-transformative experience. We watch out not just for the elusive “prey” of understanding, but also for the other wildlife present: awe, frustration, joy, and the feeling in the body as we enter the text. We read not to master the material but so that it “can really be made to speak to us,”¹¹ cascading over and breaking through our certainties.

Writing

Theopoetics suggests that writing itself is a form of theology enacted. How a thing is said is part of the theological project just as much as the thing itself. Maybe *more* since we don’t have direct access to the thing in itself except through language. Whether I use citations or not; whether my voice is formal, technical, or colloquial; my use of pronouns; the presence of typographical errors; half-hearted attempts at textual humor; full-hearted attempts to describe real contexts and real hearts... these are all part of what theology is. Texts are not just the vehicle of theology. They *are* theology. Or, at least, that’s what theopoetics suggests. If we take this suggestion seriously it means that we must not only read with greater attention to context, but also *write* with an awareness of genre and bodies and breath.

The flattening effect of disembodied, I-less, academic language regularly comes under interrogation by theopoetics thinkers. Discussing his time of U.S. doctoral work in theology while simultaneously in exile from Brazil, Rubem Alves writes as follows.

10 Barnes, *The Pastor as Minor Poet*, 109.

11 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 358.

The doctorate required that each one of us mastered the field of our chosen segment of learning: “to dominate the field” was “scholarship.” I was dreaming, however, of a world that I had lost. And I was amazed with the questions students had chosen, to which they would be dedicating four or five years of their lives. They were fantastic abstractions to me, which I was unable to connect with anything. I remember the famous colloquia with the doctoral students in ethics. The most painful questions, of life and death, were transformed into trapezes where intellectual virtuositities were performed. What was at stake was neither life nor politics, but analytical exercises in which an intellectual skill was exhibited.

Theopoetics suggests that the insistence of a certain type of semantic patterning and style to demonstrate legitimacy is hardly coincidental: the mandated trapeze-ing of much theological scholarship has significant repercussions. Many of these are powerfully articulated in Willie Jennings’s *The Christian Imagination*.

Christian theology is trapped in the revised universalism that feigns the legitimization processes of ancient orthodoxy while being deeply committed to the literary supremacy and ‘universal human genius’ of the languages of the central literary powers—French, English, Italian, German (and sometimes Spanish).

Those theologians who think from within the revised universalism of the world literary powers are concerned with questions of orthodoxy... this is an important, well-intentioned concern. But it is a concern buried inside the hierarchy of languages in world literary space....[a] style generated inside the historic advent of whiteness and the racialized world it has produced.¹²

The contours of our language shape the ideas that the language carries forth. And the ideas that language suppresses.

Research

As a (re)emerging field of discourse, theopoetics invites practitioners to imagine new ways in which to do and report research. While the early practitioners of the 1960s and 70s were almost exclusively focused on writing, contemporary work has pressed out of that boundary. Theopoetic researchers are not only paying attention to the “how” of writing, but also to “who” is writing, to “where” one writes, and in “what body,” – both fleshly and communally – one writes. This is not a novel concept in research, as religious educators have long pointed out the insights provided

12 Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 232-233.

through participant observation and critical theory informed sociological, ethnographic, and indigenous research methods.

Looking at writers such as Melanie Duguid-May in *A Body Knows*, or Rubem Alves in *Tomorrow's Child* and *The Poet, the Warrior, the Prophet*, they are naming the flesh and the theological insights inscribed in its contours: "In my language, 'saber' – to know, and 'sabor' – taste. Eating and knowing have the same origin. To know something is to feel its taste, what it does to my body."¹³

Building on this embodied writing, there are those who are researching and sharing research in a theopoetic mode. They are representative of the new locations from which theopoetics is emerging, such as Shelly Rambo (trauma studies and theology), Ashley Theuring (sites of public tragedy),¹⁴ Callid Keefe-Perry (inclusive invitation to new writers of authority),¹⁵ Patrick Reyes (decolonizing those dominating practices of theopoetics),¹⁶ Matt Guynn (the public square),¹⁷ James Hill Jr. and Jon Gill (hip-hop),¹⁸ and Mayra Rivera (poetics of the flesh).¹⁹ Through theopoetics, scholars and practitioners are starting to reimagine the "power" of the theopoetic researcher. Researchers in theopoetics are working to investigate, name, and look for those codes, themes, utterances, and insights that have been subjugated and ancillary to the language of academic research. Theopoetic research methods are seeing, hearing, and actively participating in the call for healing and restoration, for hope and beauty, and allowing for the expression of those themes to emerge outside of traditional registers of academic discourse.

Pedagogy

Like reading, writing, and research methods, theopoetics also challenges religious educators to begin to imagine new possibilities for our academic and congregational pedagogy. This imagination is embodied, performative, populist, engaged with the tradition but wary of traditionalism, interreligious, inclusive, and constantly invitational to a dialogue between learning and unlearning. Theopoetics engenders experiments with new ways of being in the academy together and performing our research findings.

13 Alves, *The Poet*, 122.

14 Theuring, "Holding Hope and Doubt: An Interreligious Theopoetic Response to Public Tragedies," *CrossCurrents*, Dec 2014, Vol. 64, 4 (549-565).

15 Callid Keefe-Perry, "Flesh to Mind: Whetstone to Thought," *CrossCurrents*, Dec 2014, Vol. 64, 4 (489-495).

16 Patrick B. Reyes, "Alisal: Theopoetics and Emancipatory Politics," *Theopoetics* 2, 2.

17 Matt Guynn, "Theopoetics and social change," *CrossCurrents*. 60.1 (2010): 105-114.

18 Gill's (as Gilead7) process philosophy hip hop record, "Advent: A Modern Bible" and Hill's forthcoming "The Tunes Written in Our Flesh: Theopoetics from an Ontologically Hip-Hop Perspective"

19 Mayra Rivera, *Poetics of the Flesh*.

Pedagogy, as the bell hooks names it, is the art of education. While theopoetics lends itself to the activity of critical pedagogies – the local, contextual, liberating educational movements by way of pedagogues such as Paulo Freire, Augusto Boal, Henry Giroux, bell hooks, Joe Kinchloe, etc. – it challenges religious educators to see beyond the limitation of the classroom experience. Returning to Alves in *Tomorrow's Child: Imagination, Creativity, and the Rebirth of Culture* (1972), he addresses religious education in particular. He names explicitly that “the community of faith ... gains flesh and bones. In this community the future takes on space in the time still present: it is the ‘objectification of the Spirit,’ *the place where the creative insight and the creative intention become creative power.*”²⁰ Theopoetics informs pedagogy in that its principal posturing is towards *poïesis*, to create. How can we make our classrooms and communities of faith places where multiple ways of knowing (and showing that you know) can take place?

If we accept the creative theopoetic critique, gatherings of scholars and practitioners will look towards the margins, making room at the table not just for marginalized perspectives and ideas but also for marginalized bodies and methods. It will take seriously the emerging research that

the lecture is not generic or neutral, but a specific cultural form that favors some people while discriminating against others, including women, minorities and low-income and first-generation college students. This is not a matter of instructor bias; it is the lecture format itself... that offers unfair advantages to an already privileged population.”²¹

How a thing is communicated – its aesthetics – can alter the thing itself. Neutrality in communication is unattainable.

This is resonant with Courtney Goto’s notion of play and imagination: “some body stories are difficult to express in words, especially for bodies that have been wounded, silenced, or excluded, but giving space for these stories to be revealed can be transformative for both persons and communities.”²² A theopoetic pedagogy is one that makes space for variety in expression of knowledge and in the bibliography: in the authority of texts – both written in word and in the body.

“We are palimpsests, writing on writing, forgotten, erased, but indelibly engraved in the tissue, ready to arise again, if the correct spell is pronounced. Within each body lives a

20 Alves, *Tomorrow's Child*, 198.

21 Paul, Are College Lectures Unfair?, *The New York Times*, 9/12/2015.

22 Goto, “Pretending to be Japanese,” 454.

writing. Story. Or rather: writings, stories... in dreams they appear, small fragments of torn paper.”²³

Publication

We are thinking here of “publication” both in the sense of the systems and pipelines by which theology and education are made accessible via journals and books, but also the ways in which ideas are made available through other means: publication as “making public.” With its attention to media, a theopoetic critique asks if the means by which we are sharing our ideas is effective. Are journals, books, and academic conferences working as such? What does “working” mean in this context? How is the form and aesthetic of the various media we use to communicate shaping what gets to be said and who gets to say it? Might we be better served – or perhaps, serve better – by using YouTube and podcasting instead of a journal? What are we after?

For example, when the planning committee for the first theopoetics conference²⁴ was working on design concept for the event we struggled. We considered bringing in “big names” to give lectures that might make the event more appealing to those who might travel. However, *this is exactly the opposite of how our thinking should proceed given our commitments!* Ultimately we felt like having an event committed to exploring theopoetics meant that the event itself had to be reflective of that commitment: instead of keynote speakers and experts on display we have organized it around circles of dialogue, including the opportunity for interaction and content that is not just linguistic or formally academic. We also have asked that all participants provide us with a brief statement of interest and a picture: when you click on “Who’s Coming?” on the conference website you don’t just see two or three “big names” that will hopefully entice you to come. You see everyone who is coming and can read about each of their passions and commitments.

Paying attention to style and form yields perspectives that can be missed if content is the only thing considered: from words on the page to who gets time on a stage.

Beyond Reflection

Religious education invests in imagination, because to live into the divine mystery is not only the work of the Spirit, but also the community of believers. We read Daniel Schipani:

The challenge to be met is how to develop awareness of the free movement of the creative and liberating divine will, in tune with the eschatological view of the gospel of

23 Rubem Alves, as cited in Jacobsen, Enieda (Ed.) *Public Theology in Brazil: Social and Cultural Challenges*, 140.

24 March 18-19, 2016 at Boston University. See <http://TheopoeticsConference.org/>

the reign of God. The educational program and process must thus affirm hope and expectance in the face of mystery.²⁵

Religious education cultivates a sense of the divine in others, empowering those to feel and bear witness to the divine encounter, and to live into the divine entanglement that is God's creation. Put another way, "religious education activity is a deliberate attending to the transcendent dimension of life by which a conscious relationship to an ultimate ground of being is promoted and enable to come to expression."²⁶ Taking on the theopoetic charge, religious education can examine the divine Word in a new hue and think about impact of the canvas and frame.

We feel like extending an invitation to other religious educators. If your work writes on the "boundary line" of theology and poetics, if your bibliography explores beauty, if your research leans over into the void of research and is resurrecting bodies as opposed to reporting the dead, if your pedagogy is embodied in the flesh, or if you are interested in community publication as opposed to self-aggrandizement in publishing, we encourage you consider theopoetics.

Lose some of your "credentials as a respectable teacher," and become a mirror that reflects, yes... and also shows images for which there is not yet any corresponding reality. Or one that dances itself off the wall. Or sings the love songs your mother sang to you. We would love for you to get to know those who are already dancing in among theopoetics' definitions and we would invite you to come play with us in that space.

25 Schipani, *Religious Education Encounters Liberation Theology*, 193.

26 Groome, *Christian Religious Education*, 22.

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