Measuring the Spiritual, Character, and Moral Formation of Seminarians: In Search of a Meta-Theory of Spiritual Change

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Abstract
Theological schools are well situated to create intentional cultures for the purpose of spiritual formation. Indeed, most schools of theology have this goal as an essential part of their mission as well as a requirement for continued accreditation. And yet, the measurement of spiritual formation over time is fraught with challenges. This article seeks to address some of these challenges by means of developing a meta-theory of positive change/growth which would eventually serve as a theoretical basis for the development of a generalizable and reliable measurement tool.

Keywords
spiritual formation, spiritual assessment, spirituality, psychology of religion

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Introduction

With varying degrees of intentionality, theological schools are increasingly seeking to positively contribute to the spiritual, character, and moral formation of their students.[1] The accreditation standards of the Association of Theological Schools (ATS) define a theological school as "a community of faith and learning that cultivates habits of theological reflection, nurtures wise and skilled ministerial practice, and contributes to the formation of spiritual awareness and moral sensitivity."[2] Such an understanding of theological education presents unique challenges from an accreditation perspective, as institutions are tasked with the challenge of assessing whether they are actually achieving their stated mission and purpose. Indeed, the *ATS Handbook of Accreditation* identifies assessment as, "the most frequent area of needed growth (and concern) surfaced by accreditation committees and by the ATS Board of Commissioners."[3] Many scholars in theological education, alongside ATS, have also called for greater attention to the formal methods of assessment of seminarian spiritual and personal formation. However, research in this area remains limited.[4]

Speaking from their Catholic context, Karen Dwyer and Edward Hogan articulate the practical importance and challenge of this problem:

> We contend that we also cannot recommend a candidate for ministry who does not have sufficient spiritual maturity to promote the encounter between God and humanity. And we cannot "not assess that" on the grounds that we do not quite know how to do so. We need to start figuring out how to do so. People in the pews will assess it and will vote with their hearts and their feet. We need to go there first—or, at least, to start taking some baby steps toward it.[5]

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1. See, e.g. Charles R. Foster, Lisa E. Dahill, Lawrence A. Goleman, and Barbara Wang Tolentino, *Educating Clergy: Teaching Practices and Pastoral Imagination* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2006).
2. The Association of Theological Schools, *Commission on Accrediting: Standards of Accreditation* (2010), 5. Retrieved from http://www.ats.edu/uploads/accrediting/documents/standards-of-accreditation.pdf.
3. The Association of Theological Schools, *Board of Commissioners: Self-Study Handbook Chapter Seven* (2015), 2. Retrieved from http://www.ats.edu/uploads/accrediting/documents/self-study-handbook-chapter-7.pdf.
4. For instance, see Karen Kangas Dwyer and Edward M. Hogan, "Assessing a Program of Spiritual Formation Using Pre and Post Self-report Measures," *Theological Education* 48:1 (2013): 25–34; Mary Kay Oosdyke, "Vocation in a New Key: Spiritual Formation and the Assessment of Learning," *Theological Education* 41:2 (2006): 1–10; H. Frederick Reisz, "Assessing Spiritual Formation in Christian Seminary Communities," *Theological Education* 39:2 (2003): 29–40; The Association of Theological Schools, *Standards of Accreditation*, 1.2.2 and ES.6.
5. Dwyer and Hogan, "Assessing a Program of Spiritual Formation," 30.

This systemic observation—that the informal assessments of the spiritual, character, and moral formation of religious leaders by lay persons will impact the sustainability of congregations and denominations—is surely relevant to all Christian traditions. Religious leaders occupy complex vocational roles and will be unlikely to be effective in ministry without adequate spiritual, characterological, and moral maturity. Theological schools and seminaries have a unique opportunity to facilitate the formation of their students over multiple years, in addition to serving a preventative role in the early detection of students who may need more significant interventions to circumvent potential future problems in ministry roles. This high-impact, real-world problem necessitates further interdisciplinary research on the development of reliable measures to assess spiritual, character, and moral formation. Given the religious contexts in which such assessment takes place, the development of these measures will need to draw from both theology and the social sciences. Theological work will be needed in order develop assessments that are sensitive to the kinds of spiritual, character, and moral change anticipated within the religious context. And social science work is needed in order to develop assessments that are psychometrically sound.

Notably, one of the many challenges hindering such interdisciplinary efforts concerns the limitations inherent in the scholarship available on the assessment of seminarian formation. Two particular limitations are that, first, the scholarship tends to be predominantly theoretical with little empirical grounding. For example, from a biblical-theological perspective, it is quite easy to commend the two greatest commandments—love of God and neighbor—as essential outcomes for seminarians. But these outcomes are extremely difficult to measure from an empirical-social science point of view. A second limitation is that scholarship on assessing spiritual formation tends to be written from the perspective of a single theological institution or tradition within Christian spirituality (e.g., Evangelical, Lutheran, Roman Catholic), thus limiting the generalizability of measurement tools and results across distinct institutions and Christian traditions.

This article seeks to address these two limitations by developing what we are calling meta-theory of change to serve as the theoretical grounding for the development of a tool to measure the effectiveness of formational efforts across a variety of seminary contexts. In an attempt to have this meta-theory of change grounded in an ecumenically Christian framework, we first develop six core theological concepts of Christian formation that support and motivate an underlying theory of spiritual change. These six core theological concepts position Christian formation as involving a developmental process of relatedness to God within community that gradually brings about characterological and moral change. In light of this view of spiritual change, we turn to an overview of an existing, empirically studied model of formation—namely, the Relational Spirituality (RS) model first developed by F. Leron

Shults and Steven J. Sandage.[6] The RS model has been empirically tested in over twenty-one published studies of seminarians to date.[7] In light of the six core theological principles of Christian formation, the RS model helps us arrive at a more detailed and empirically tested meta-theory of spiritual change which can be used to help develop a generalizable measurement tool. The conclusion of the article offers several recommendations for the development of such a tool. We begin with a clarification of some of the terminology used and then turn to three preliminary principles that guide our development of a meta-theory of spiritual change.

Terminology and preliminaries

First, the locution "meta-theory of spiritual change" is meant to signal that this is an attempt to offer a fairly abstract, higher-level conceptualization of spiritual, characterological, and moral change that could be fleshed out with specific details and emphases according to the particularities of various Christian traditions and denominations. This meta-theory is not so much a particular theology of positive change as it is an attempt to provide an integrative, higher-order framework under which various tradition-specific theologies would fall. We are attempting to operate at the level of genus of which there would be a wide variety of species.

Second, we begin with a conceptual distinction between spiritual, characterological, and moral formation. For our purposes, "spiritual" formation has to do with features of an individual or group's relatedness with God and/or what is held as sacred (e.g., God-image, the presence of God, love of God, word of God, filling of the Spirit, Scripture, etc.). "Characterological" formation refers to the development of habituated, virtuous dispositions (e.g., kindness, generosity, compassion, love, etc.). And "moral" formation is meant to emphasize the outward behavioral manifestations of virtue in a person or group's life (e.g., forgiveness, service, enemy love,

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6. See, F. L. Shults and S. J. Sandage, *Transforming Spirituality: Integrating Theology and Psychology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006); S. J. Sandage, M. Jensen, and D. Jass, "Relational Spirituality and Transformation: Risking Intimacy and Alterity," *Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care* 1:1 (2008): 182–206; E. L. Worthington, Jr. and S. J. Sandage, *Forgiveness and Spirituality: A Relational Approach* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2016).

7. See D. R. Paine and S. J. Sandage, "Religious Involvement and Depression: The Mediating Effect of Relational Spirituality," *Journal of Religion and Health* 56 (2017): 269–283; S. J. Sandage, P. J. Jankowski, S. Crabtree, and M. Schweer, "Attachment, Spirituality Pathology, and God Images: Mediator and Moderator Effects," *Mental Health, Religion, and Culture* 18 (2015): 795–808; S. J. Sandage and M. L. Jensen, "Relational Spiritual Formation: Reflective Practice and Research on Spiritual Formation in a Seminary Context," *Reflective Practice: Formation and Supervision in Ministry* 33 (2013): 95–109; E. S. Tung, E. G. Ruffing, D. R. Paine, P. J. Jankowski, and S. J. Sandage, "Attachment to God as a Mediator of the Relationship between God Representations and Mental Health," *Journal of Spirituality and Mental Health* (2017): 95–113.

etc.). Each of these three interrelated terms qualifies "formation," which is meant to pick up on the notion of positive change/growth.[8]

In developing this meta-theory of change, there are three preliminary principles that operate as guiding assumptions. First, this theory seeks to be ecumenical in nature in the hope that it will find some resonance within a variety of seminary contexts, including Catholic, Orthodox, Mainline Protestant, Evangelical, Pentecostal as well as other Christian groups. By ecumenical, we are not attempting a "view from nowhere" but rather the sort of ecumenical theology helpfully characterized by George Hunsinger: "Ecumenical theology, though properly grounded in a single tradition, looks for what is best in traditions not its own. It seeks not to defeat them but to respect and learn from them."[9] As the authors of this meta-theory, we attempt to be aware of the influences of our own respective theological traditions and respectfully look for help from traditions outside our own. This ecumenical aim is challenging given the wide breadth of spiritualities that can be found within Christianity but the aim is aided by the higher-order, less tradition-specific nature of the endeavor. We recognize that even in our attempt to be ecumenical and to articulate general themes of spirituality, representatives of some traditions might resonate with our approach or some elements of it more so than others. This eventually becomes an empirical question of testing our model in various contexts rather than assuming generalizability.

A second preliminary principle is that we are investigating both indications that formation has occurred (i.e., change itself) as well as indications that formation is in progress (i.e., processes of change). In other words, evidence of formation will be of two types: realized change (e.g., increased humility, increased intimacy with God) and observable processes that indicate change is occurring (e.g., increased self-awareness, increased God-awareness). From a broadly Christian perspective, formation includes anticipated end-results (e.g., holiness, Christlikeness, being filled with the Spirit) as well as anticipated pathways towards those end-results (e.g., the way of holiness, imitation of Christ, walking in the Spirit). Using biblical language, we can refer to the anticipated end-results as the "fruit of the Spirit" or "bearing fruit" and the anticipated processes as "walking in the Spirit" or "abiding in the vine." Not only are both aspects of change (outcomes and processes) part of the Christian picture of formation, but assessing both aspects of change is a preferred approach given that seminarians might show measurable signs of being in the midst of change even if realized change has not yet occurred. Accordingly, we will be

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8. For a helpful discussion of Christian character formation that includes an appreciation of relational, characterological, and behavioral elements, see Joanna Collicutt, *The Psychology of Christian Character Formation* (London: SCM Press, 2014), 3–42.
9. George Hunsinger, *The Eucharist and Ecumenism: Let Us Keep the Feast* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 2.

building on some prior evidence of longitudinal changes in relational spirituality among seminarians.[10]

A third preliminary principle is that this meta-theory of spiritual change is developed with epistemological openness to both theological and psychological methodologies. This openness to theology and psychology as equally legitimate sources of knowledge is a methodology in itself that some have referred to as the theoretical, conceptual, or interdisciplinary integration of psychology and theology.[11] Hence, we have not bracketed our psychological understanding(s) in developing our theological conceptualization; nor have we bracketed our theological conceptualization in developing our psychological understanding(s).

Six theological basics of Christian formation

With these preliminary points in place, we now propose six core theological concepts of Christian formation. These basics of Christian formation are offered in the sort of ecumenical spirit described above, and yet they are so fundamental that we expect they will resonate—albeit in an extremely generalized way—with a wide variety of Christian traditions. Again, these theological basics of Christian formation are meant to motivate and support the underlying shape or structure of a meta-theory of spiritual change. While there is great diversity amongst Christian views of spiritual formation, these core principles suggest that there are also some commonalities. The six principles are:

> Theological Basic #1: Positive spiritual, characterological, and moral change is valued and expected
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> Theological Basic #2: Positive spiritual change is interconnected with positive characterological and moral change
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> Theological Basic #3: Positive spiritual, characterological, and moral change takes place within community
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> Theological Basic #4: There exist various obstacles to positive spiritual, characterological, and moral change

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10. I. Williamson and S. J. Sandage, "Longitudinal Analyses of Religious and Spiritual Development among Seminary Students," *Mental Health, Religion, and Culture* 12 (2009): 787–801.

11. See, for example, the relevant articles in Daryl H. Stevenson, Brian E. Eck, and Peter C. Hill, eds., *Psychology & Christianity Integration: Seminal Works that Shaped the Movement* (Batavia, IL: Christian Association for Psychological Studies, 2007). See also, Deborah van Deusen Hunsinger, *Theology and Pastoral Counseling: A New Interdisciplinary Approach* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995) and Steven L. Porter, "Wesleyan Theological Methodology as a Theory of Integration," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 32:3 (2004): 190–199.

Theological Basic #5: A variety of practices are enjoined to facilitate positive change

Theological Basic #6: Acquired virtue is included in positive change

In what follows, we briefly examine each of these core, theological basics.

Theological Basic #1: Positive change is valued and expected

The first theological basic of Christian change is that positive spiritual, character-ological, and moral development in persons is valued and expected. While particular traditions will value growth more or less highly compared to other goals of Christian living and will expect growth of different degrees and kinds, a fundamental Christian claim is that progress in one's relatedness to God, one's character, and one's moral life is an important and expected dimension of Christian living.

The valuing and anticipation of such change can be captured in Jesus' naming of the two greatest commandments: to love God with one's whole being and to love one's neighbor as one's self (Matt 22:37–40; Mark 12:29–31). These commands set the highest of ideals towards which imitation of God and Chris is assumed.[12] More-over, it is fairly clear in Jesus' teaching that the love of God and others is meant to proceed from an inner life of peace and joy, increasingly freed from fear and anxiety (see, e.g. Matt 6:1–34; 7:15–23). As well, many have noted that the two great love commands are importantly related to Jesus' "new commandment" to his followers to "love one another as I have loved you" (Jn 15:12; cf. Jn 13:34).

In the Pauline writings, we find an equally strong emphasis on being *conformed* to the image or likeness of Christ (Rom 8:29) and Paul is in labor pains "until Christ be *formed* in you" (Gal 4:19, emphasis ours).[13] While many Pauline scholars rightly indicate a future, eschatological dimension to these formation passages, it is clear that the transformation of those in Christ begins to some degree in the present age: "Do not be conformed . . . but be *transformed* by the renewing of your mind" (Rom 12:2, emphasis ours). Or, again, "And we all . . . are being *transformed* into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit" (2 Cor 3:18, emphasis ours). James W. Thompson notes,

> If the transformation of believers is the ultimate goal of Paul's work, it is also the focal point of his theology, as his letters indicate. He frequently employs the language of formation to describe the moral progress of the converts . . . Thus Paul provides the

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12. Gerbern S. Oegema contends that the "love commands" are enjoined as commands whereby believers imitate both God and Jesus. See Oegema, "Jesus' Use and Interpretation of Scripture: What Was 'Scripture' to Jesus and How Did Such Texts Influence Him?" in James H. Charlesworth, Brian Rhea, and Petre Pokorny, eds., *Jesus Research: New Methodologies and Perceptions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), 818–822.

13. All Scripture quotations are from NASB unless otherwise noted.

vocabulary for what would later be called spiritual formation. He envisions moral transformation—a metamorphosis—in the present as a prelude to the ultimate transformation at the end. Thus he writes his letters to ensure that his goal is fulfilled.[14]

In delineating this first theological basic, it is important to highlight that positive change is seen as important along three dimensions: (1) growth in relatedness to God, (2) growth in character, and (3) growth in an outwardly moral life. What it means to be in relationship to God will be characterized in divergent ways (e.g., intimacy, obedience, surrender, dependence, openness, empowerment, etc.) and how that relationship is mediated to persons will also be understood in a variety of ways (e.g., direct experience, sacramental grace, cognitive comprehension, etc.). Greater homogeneity amongst Christian traditions will likely be found amongst the characterizations of praiseworthy character traits (e.g., love, joy, peace, kindness, compassion, self-control, humility) and moral actions (e.g., forgiveness, service, truth-telling, justice-work, enemy love). But, even here, some traditions will tend to prize certain virtues and moral expressions more highly than others. Nonetheless, underlying these divergent views will be a valuing and expectation of spiritual, characterological, and moral change.

It is also important to highlight that what is valued and expected is the positive nature of growth. While there has been much debate in church history on the timing and extent of progress within earthly life, there is nonetheless widespread consensus that positive progress of some sort is available and that making progress is an important dimension of Christian living.[15] St. Augustine represents the broad stream of church history in writing,

> This renewal does not take place in the single moment of conversion itself . . . But as it is one thing to be free from fever, and another to grow strong again from the infirmity which the fever produced, and one thing again to pluck out of the body a weapon thrust into it, and another to heal the wound thereby made by a prosperous cure; so the first cure is to remove the cause of infirmity, and this is wrought by the forgiving of all sins; but the second cure is to heal the infirmity itself, and this takes place gradually by making progress in the renewal of that image.[16]

This first theological basic leads us to insist on a meta-theory of change that looks for positive change along the three dimensions of relatedness to God, character

14. James W. Thompson, *Moral Formation according to St. Paul: The Context and Coherence of Pauline Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 2.
15. For a helpful discussion emphasizing the progressive nature of spiritual life, see John Webster, "Communion with Christ: Mortification and Vivification," in Kent Eilers and Kyle C. Strobel, eds., *Sanctified by Grace: A Theology of the Christian Life* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 121–138. See also, Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 4, pt. 2: *The Doctrine of Reconciliation*, trans. G. W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1958).
16. Augustine, *On the Trinity* XIV.17.

formation, and moral formation. This theological basic does not insist that change along these three dimensions will be best conceptualized as linear or straightforward, nor does it insist that positive change will always outwardly manifest as positive. In fact, the RS model that will be developed below posits that spiritual transformation and growth often emerge through crucibles of suffering that follow nonlinear patterns of change and there is some empirical evidence to support this idea.[17] We also need to remain realistic that the context of seminary education can prove stressful at many levels, and increased stress and suffering do not automatically generate formation. However, we propose that the widespread Christian understanding is that positive spiritual, characterological, and moral change is available.

Theological Basic #2: Positive relational change is interconnected with positive characterological and moral change

A second core theological concept is that positive growth in one's relatedness to God (however this might be conceived) is in some manner interconnected with positive growth in one's character and moral life. We might think here of the teaching in John 15 regarding the connection between "abiding in the vine" and "bearing fruit" or the Pauline notion of "walking in the Spirit" leading to "not gratifying the desires of the flesh" and the resultant "fruit of the Spirit" (Gal 5:16–25). Of course, differences will emerge regarding what it is about relatedness to God that aids in character and moral formation.

In a helpful discussion of this point, William Alston proposes three models of the role of the divine in change: (1) on the fiat model, God supernaturally decrees formation to occur; (2) on the interpersonal model, God's relational presence influences formation; and (3) on the life-sharing model, participation in the divine nature brings about formation.[18] Within those broad categories, one might locate more specific notions such as infused virtue, deification, sacramental participation, mystical experience, charismatic models, liturgical formation, and so on. Grant Macaskill writes, "accounts of Christian ethics or moral theology that do not present participation [with God] in terms of dynamic *koinonia* with God will always struggle

17. S. J. Sandage and S. Moe, "Spiritual Experience: Conversion and Transformation," in K. I. Pargament, J. J. Exline, and J. W. Jones, eds., *APA Handbook of Psychology, Religion, and Spirituality (Vol 1): Context, Theory, and Research* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2013), 407–422; S. J. Sandage and D. C. Link, and P. J. Jankowski, "Quest and Spiritual Development Moderated by Spiritual Transformation," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 38 (2010): 15–31; S. J. Sandage, P. C. Hill, and D. C. Vaubel, "Generativity, Relational Spirituality, Gratitude, and Mental Health: Relationships and Pathways," *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 21 (2011): 1–16.
18. William Alston, "The Indwelling of the Holy Spirit," in Thomas V. Morris, ed., *Philosophy and the Christian Faith* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 121–150. See also, Steven L. Porter and Brandon Rickabaugh, "The Sanctifying Work of the Holy Spirit: Revisiting Alston's Interpersonal Model," *Journal of Analytic Theology* 6 (May 2018): 112–130.

to accommodate the New Testament teaching . . . Similarly, imitation of Christ is an inadequate account of Christian ethics unless it is embedded within this broader participatory and transformative account."[19] The point highlighted here is not whether Macaskill correctly describes relatedness to God as "dynamic *koinonia*," but rather his underlying assumption that there is some sort of connection between divine relatedness and character/moral formation.

This underlying assumption unearths a unique mechanism of change on the Christian view that is germane to measuring spiritual growth. For, on the Christian view, not only is growth in relatedness to God part of the positive change valued within the Christian tradition, but relatedness with God is itself in some manner transformational. This is important for the purposes of measuring formation in that if it is possible to measure growth in one's relationship with God and/or measure participation in practices that are thought to bring about growth in one's relationship with God, then that would provide some basis to predict characterological and moral formation. Moreover, if there are certain character traits, such as humility and trust, that connect one to the divine, measuring those traits would lead us to predict further change mediated by relatedness to the divine.

Theological Basic #3: Positive change takes place within community

A third widely shared concept of spiritual change is that Christian formation takes place within community with others, particularly "those of the household of faith," as the Apostle Paul puts it in Galatians 6:10. A clear theme in the Christian Scriptures is the essential role of Christian community—the body of Christ or family of God—in spiritual development (e.g., Eph 4:15–16; 1 Cor 14:26; Heb 19:24–25).[20]

On this point it is difficult not to think of the classic discussion of Aelred of Rievaulx's on spiritual friendship or Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Life Together*.[21] Bonhoeffer poignantly states, "One who wants fellowship without solitude plunges into the void of words and feelings, and the one who seeks solitude without fellowship perishes in the abyss of vanity, self-infatuation and despair."[22]

Again, this shared theological understanding of the role of Christian community provides an important clue to measuring formation. If maintaining close

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19.   Grant Macaskill, *Union with Christ in the New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 307–308.

20.   For more on a Pauline understanding of the role of community in formation, see James George Samra, *Being Conformed to Christ in Community: A Study of Maturity, Maturation and the Local Church in the Undisputed Pauline Letters*, Library of New Testament Studies 320 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2006) and James W. Thompson, *The Church according to Paul: Rediscovering the Community Conformed to Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2014).

21.   Aelred of Rievaulx, *Spiritual Friendship*, Lawrence C. Braceland, trans., and Marsha L. Dutton, ed. (Trappist, KY: Cistercian Publications, 2010). Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, John W. Doberstein, trans. (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1954).

22.   Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 78.

interpersonal connections is in some manner essential for spiritual maturation, the degree to which these sorts of relationships are active in a seminarian's life is one indication of whether that seminarian is in a conducive environment for spiritual change.

Theological Basic #4: There exist various obstacles to positive change

A fourth core theological concept for spiritual change is that the positive growth that is valued within the Christian tradition does not typically come about with ease. Due to the ongoing systemic effects of human fallenness, human persons and the environment in which they live are not as they should be. While conversion and regeneration bring about an initial renewal or "new birth," there remain barriers to the relational, characterological, and moral formation that is expected within the Christian tradition. Picking up on the three classic enemies of the soul, St. John of the Cross warns that

> All the harm the soul receives is born of its enemies ... the world, the devil, and the flesh. The world is the enemy least difficult to conquer; the devil is the hardest to understand; but the flesh is the most tenacious, and its attacks continue as long as the old self lasts. To gain complete mastery over any of these three enemies, one must vanquish all three of them; and in the weakening of one, the other two are weakened also. When all three are overpowered, no further war remains for the soul.[23]

Again, distinct Christian traditions will emphasize and delineate these three dimensions of sin in different ways, but the core theological concept remains that spiritual progress is hampered by such barriers. Given these barriers, our model of change might be expected to include such themes as: struggle, disorientation, purgation, despair, self-deception, healing, deliverance, and the like.

St. John of the Cross particularly notes the tenacious nature of the "flesh," the "sin that so easily entangles" (Heb 12:1). The flesh, understood in an extremely general way as an inner propensity to find life outside of God (i.e., idolatry), complicates the measurement of formation. This is because the Christian tradition has always been sensitive to a lack of congruence between outward appearance/behavior and inward reality. From Jesus' diagnosis of the wolf in sheep's clothing (Matt 7) and his critique of Pharisaism as a mere cleansing of the "outside of the cup" (Matt 23) to 1 John's teaching on those who deceive themselves about their lack of sin (1 Jn 1:8), there is a clear testimony that what people might perceive about themselves at one level of awareness is not always true of themselves at deeper levels of human personality. This, of course, complicates the empirical study of formation in that there can be a tendency to initially self-report a high level of change before then

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23. St. John of the Cross, "The Precautions," in Susan Muto, *Words of Wisdom for Our World: The Precautions and Counsels of St. John of the Cross* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1996), 11.

arriving at a more accurate appraisal of one's actual condition. The problem here is that this will show up on most longitudinal measures as a decrease in formation when in actual fact the more accurate self-awareness is movement towards growth. Our meta-theory of change takes into account this difficult feature of measuring Christian growth.

It is also important to note that barriers to formation include systemic dynamics of oppression. Various kinds of prejudice, injustice, and discrimination shape environmental and social conditions that can work against the formation of healthy spirituality. For example, dynamics of evil such as racism and economic greed violate Christian shalom and contribute to traumatic social conditions and experiences for non-dominant groups, which in turn can make it difficult to grow in Christian wholeness and holiness. In other words, the complications to spiritual growth within diverse seminarian populations must include sensitivity to the social-economic, ethnic, racial, gender as well as other complex factors that impact formation.

Theological Basic #5: A variety of practices are enjoined to facilitate positive change

A fifth theological basic is that the Christian tradition is not merely a belief system, but calls for a way of life that is supported by practices, rituals, and experiences meant to facilitate change. For instance, Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount assumes various practices: "*when* you give to the poor . . . *when* you pray . . . *whenever* you fast . . . " (Matt 6:1–16, emphasis ours). Matthew's account also presents an appropriate motivation for doing these practices: "do not be like the hypocrites" (Matt 6:2; cf. 6:5, 16) who seek to be noticed for their righteousness, but rather, give to the needy, pray, and fast in "secret" which can only be noticed by God (Matt 6:4, 6, 18). The Pauline Epistles continue this emphasis on practices, for example, "The things you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, *practice* these things, and the God of peace will be with you" (Phil 4:9, emphasis ours).

Some of the earliest Christian literature contains detailed instructions on Christian *praxis*. For example, the *Didache*, St. Clement's *Paedagogos*, and, perhaps most influential, St. Benedict's *Rule*. Sarah Coakley writes,

> The practices of Benedict's Rule, ranging from psalm-singing to harvesting to welcoming strangers . . . are no longer so much ways of keeping the world at bay; but nor are they activities that will immediately (let alone invariably) produce an elevation on a scale of virtue. Rather they are to be followed in order that, over a lifetime, there may be a habituating of love, an imitation in a more extrinsic way of the life of Christ . . . they will cause us to find Christ . . . .[24]

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24. Sarah Coakley, "Deepening Practices: Perspectives from Ascetical and Mystical Theology," in Miroslav Volf and Dorothy Bass, eds., *Practical Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 86.

While Coakley may be right that these practices in and of themselves will not "produce an elevation on a scale of virtue," a meta-theory of spiritual change that is in keeping with the Christian tradition will maintain that such practices are conducive to, perhaps "over a lifetime," the love of God, and thereby, the formation of character. Therefore, Christian practices that are rightly motivated are understood to be predictors of change. Jennifer Herdt writes, "Christian convictions about how to live in relation to finite reality grasped as God's creation, and a divine reality revealed in Jesus Christ, have consistently been expressed in practices for the formation of character. Christianity is a living tradition of ethical formation."[25] Herdt goes on to identify four significant features of Christian practice. Christian practices are made up of (1) a variety of meditative practices; (2) that are supported by a community of others; (3) which include "practices of coping with frailty"; and (4) that are "inseparably joined with practices of outreach and ministry in the 'world'."[26]

It is important to recognize that some Christian formational practices are focused on relatedness to God both as a formational end in itself and also as an independent means to the characterological and moral formation of the person. For instance, certain forms of prayer can be understood as fostering greater trust in God's provision, which thereby brings about a peaceful contentment that lays the emotional groundwork for the exercise of generous giving. Indeed, studies have empirically linked meditative prayer with the virtues of gratitude, forgiveness, and hope among seminarians.[27]

But there are also formational practices that are not explicitly directed at relatedness to God but nonetheless seek to bring about character and moral change. For instance, while fasting from food can be engaged in as a means of developing dependence on God, it can also be engaged as a means of developing one's self-control independent of any explicit engagement with God. This sort of "natural formation" and the resultant "acquired virtue" is yet another important aspect of the formation of seminarians. Accordingly, it is to this final theological basic that we now turn.

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25.   Jennifer Herdt, "Frailty, Fragmentation, and Social Dependency in the Cultivation of Christian Virtue," in Nancy E. Snow, ed., *Cultivating Virtue: Perspectives from Philosophy, Theology, and Psychology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 227.

26.   Herdt, "Frailty, Fragmentation, and Social Dependency," 242.

27.   P. J. Jankowski and S. J. Sandage, "Meditative Prayer, Hope, Adult Attachment, and Forgiveness: A Proposed Model," *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 3 (2011): 115–131 and "Meditative Prayer, Gratitude, and Intercultural Competence: Empirical Test of a Differentiation-based Model," *Mindfulness* 5 (2014): 360–372.

Theological Basic #6: Acquired virtue is included in positive change

The sixth and final theological basic that will be proffered can be clarified by the Thomistic distinction alluded to above between "infused" and "acquired" virtue.[28] On this distinction Romanus Cessario writes,

> The Christian tradition judges that a complete account of the development of virtue in the life of the believer requires examination of at least two efficient causes: on the one hand, human activity in itself and, on the other hand, a special divine action, which, since it involves the graced development of a *habitus*, theologians call "infusion."[29]

Infused virtues are those character traits that are brought about by the supernatural power, grace, and/or presence of God (what we have referred to here as relatedness to God). This sort of character and moral formation was discussed above under theological basic #2. What was not discussed there are changes to one's character and moral behavior that arise due to natural formation. Naturally acquired virtues are those character traits that are formed by practice and habituation independent of supernatural action of God, grace, or other supernaturally given resources. These acquired virtues are found through common grace and wisdom that can be learned via observation and reflection on patterns of human living. While acquired virtue has a checkered past in church history (e.g., Augustine referred to these pagan virtues as "glittering vices"), the existence of acquired virtue within human development needs to be acknowledged as an important type of positive change.

Altogether, these six theological basics motivate and support a meta-theory of spiritual change that will emphasize positive growth/change in relatedness to God (Theological Basic #1); that will be connected to positive characterological and moral change (Theological Basic #2); within meaningful, Christian community (Theological Basic #3); which will involve opposition and struggle (Theological Basic #4); that can be responded to through a suite of prescribed practices (Theological Basic #5); that is augmented by naturally occurring, acquired virtue (Theological Basic #6). It is our hope that these core concepts are recognizable across a broad swath of Christianity and provide an underlying theoretical meta-model of spiritual change.

Integrating the Relational Spirituality (RS) model

While these six core concepts provide the underlying, ecumenical shape of a meta-theory of spiritual, character, and moral change, more detail is required to build a model of change which can help facilitate the development of an assessment tool.

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28. See Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I–II, Q. 62–65. For a helpful discussion of acquired and infused virtues, see Romanus Cessario, *The Moral Virtues and Theological Ethics*, second edition (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009), 99–113.
29. Cessario, *The Moral Virtues*, 96.

One existing model that fits well with these theological basics as well as other more substantive theological constructs (e.g., the image of God, the Trinity) is the RS (Relational Spirituality) model cited above and initially developed and validated at Bethel Seminary.[30] A clear advantage of integrating RS is the empirical work that already exists that utilizes this model. In order to see the relevance of RS to the six theological basics, a brief overview of the model is in order.

Harnessing conceptual resources from the turn to relationality in both recent theology and social science, RS defines spirituality broadly as "ways of relating with the sacred."[31] This definition opens conceptual space for a variety of ways of relating with the sacred (Theology Basic #1) and is meant to apply to the sacred as understood in the Christian tradition, as well as the sacred as understood in other religions. Within the Christian tradition, relatedness to the sacred "ultimately refers to God as Trinity, but the term 'sacred' can also be inclusive of the Bible, sacraments, church community, covenantal relationships, and other sacralized spiritual practices and holy spaces."[32] Obviously, Christian traditions differ in the spiritual objects that are emphasized, which could include saints, martyrs, angels, the Virgin Mary, Scripture, and other relational figures. Spiritual warfare is another important RS dynamic in some traditions, while de-emphasized in others. "Relational spirituality" is a term that has been increasingly used in social science literature with some important points of conceptual similarity and difference emerging.[33]

It is important to emphasize that the notion of relatedness to the sacred can also refer to multiple ways in which people might be engaging their spiritual life and growth. From a Christian point of view this model of RS can include features such as Bible knowledge, practice of particular disciplines, participation in the Eucharist, service, worship, participation in community, exhibiting certain moral behaviors, and so on. All of these features of one's spiritual life are understood relationally in terms of relational dynamics between oneself and God and/or the sacred, and these relational dynamics can take a variety of forms—for example trust, avoidance, hostility, submission, intimacy, fear, and others. In other words, an individual's RS is not always salutary and may even be at times pathological. Studies of seminarians based on this model have identified themes such as spiritual grandiosity, spiritual instability or insecurity, and excessive need for idealization as some of the forms of RS that can be problematic for spiritual formation.[34]

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30. Sandage and Jensen, "Relational Spiritual Formation," 95–109.
31. Worthington and Sandage, *Forgiveness and Spirituality*, 38.
32. Sandage, Jensen, and Jass, "Relational Spirituality and Transformation," 186–187.
33. For review, see J. Tomlinson, E. S. Glenn, D. R. Paine, and S. J. Sandage, "What is the 'Relational' in Relational Spirituality? A Review of Definitions and Research Directions," *Journal of Spirituality and Mental Health* 18 (2016): 55–75.
34. Jankowski and Sandage, "Meditative Prayer," 360–372 and S. J. Sandage, D. R. Paine, and P. C. Hill, "Spiritual Barriers to Humility: A Multidimensional Study," *Mental Health, Religion, and Culture* 18 (2015): 207–217.

The RS model suggests further that spiritual formation involves an ongoing process of systemic balancing of what is termed *spiritual dwelling* (i.e., relating to the sacred in familiar and stabilizing ways) and *spiritual seeking* (i.e., relating to the sacred in new and more complex ways). Spiritual dwelling includes a sense of comfort and safety in, for example, one's relationship with God, spiritual practices, understanding of the Bible, ways of participating in Christian community, and familiarity with certain theological traditions or frameworks. For some, spiritual dwelling is a healthy orientation that includes a sense of intimacy with God, intrinsic spiritual motivations, supportive community, internalized values, and practices that provide spiritual and emotional regulation. Psychologically, spiritual dwelling corresponds to the safe haven function of the attachment system as understood in attachment theory.[35] For others, their approach to spiritual dwelling may be (or become) less helpful and formative and may represent a rigid or habituated approach to RS that lacks vibrancy and authenticity, a kind of clinging to "old wineskins" (Mk 2:22). Over time, a lack of spiritual change may eventually lead to an experience of boredom or disappointment, or a person's form of RS may simply not meet the demands of situations they are facing. This may intensify the need for spiritual seeking or exploring new ways of understanding God and the sacred, and an awakening can initially heighten anxiety over ambiguity and change. Spiritual detachment or complacency can result as spiritual dwellers defend against the discomfort of boredom or disappointment. This feature of the model corresponds to Theological Basic #4 (opposition and struggle in growth).

The RS model utilizes the classic threefold way of purgation, illumination, and union to describe the dynamic intensification that occurs as dwellers move into the cycle of spiritual seeking. When one has the internal resources to contain the anxiety of moving from dwelling to seeking, one enters a purgative process in which former notions of one's self, God, one's church community, spiritual practices, rituals, and so on are questioned and confronted. Purgation, of course, tends to be uncomfortable, increases anxiety, and can cause further tension but often increases a focus on key spiritual and existential dilemmas. The seeking cycle can therefore be disrupted by a return to the comfort of prior forms of spiritual dwelling. Or, alternatively, an intensification of the seeking process might continue to occur.

Spiritual seeking or questing, on the other hand, can be highly anxiety-provoking or distressing for some and may be prompted for seminarians as they gain exposure to a variety of novel theological views or gain critical academic skills that introduce ambiguity or doubt into their personal theologies. Many seminarians report struggles maintaining their prior spiritual practices after starting the academic study of theology, and we interpret this as a shift in their RS that might potentiate formative

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35. For more on attachment theory, see *Handbook of Attachment: Theory, Research, and Clinical Applications*, third edition, Jude Cassidy and Phillip R. Shaver, eds. (New York: The Guilford Press, 2016).

growth or decline. Encounters with diversity or alterity (experiences of otherness) can also prompt deconstruction of prior understandings and intensified seeking, which is crucial for growth in intercultural competence. According to the model, a continued quest might potentially spawn a period of wandering (which is a form of escape from relating to the sacred and a reduction of both spiritual dwelling and seeking) or a gradual move towards illumination understood as a fresh spiritual insight or experience of self and other in relation to the sacred. With this illumination can come renewed and intensified commitment and progress into the unitive way, which can be understood as an increased level of trust and intimacy with God, Christian community, spiritual practices, and so on. Depending on various factors, the person might return for a period to spiritual dwelling but with a fresh and more mature understanding, appreciation, and experience of the sacred, or carry on with a deeper intensification of the process of purgation, illumination, and union. In all, this model assumes that spiritual maturity involves an integration of spiritual dwelling and seeking over time. Longitudinal research with seminarians has shown increases in measures of both spiritual dwelling and seeking over the course of seminary, although students also show differing trajectories, patterns, and outcomes.[36]

Stemming from the biblical notions of *shalom* (understood as spiritual well-being) and *teleios* (understood as spiritual maturity), the model of RS provides space for an interplay of spiritual well-being and maturity in the process of spiritual change. For instance, purgation may disrupt a sense of spiritual well-being even though it is a movement towards spiritual maturity. Alternatively, someone in the dwelling cycle might report high levels of spiritual well-being that may in fact defensively mask his or her spiritual immaturity. Nonetheless, the model is committed to the idea that "spiritual maturity includes a capacity to recover a sense of spiritual well-being following periods of stress and suffering," which involves a central construct of the model—namely, the differentiation of self.[37]

The differentiation of self (hereafter, DoS) is a developmental maturity concept initially drawn from family systems theory and the field of intercultural relations and then integrated with both Christian theology and empirical studies on Christian spirituality.[38] DoS involves a suite of personal and relational capacities that includes abilities to: (a) regulate anxiety and other emotions, (b) balance connection and autonomy (or community and solitude), (c) relate effectively across differences, and (d) tolerate suffering that is necessary for growth. DoS partly relates to Theological Basic #3, which stresses the importance of human relational connection.

Of note, empirical studies with seminarians have found positive associations between DoS and a wide variety of formation factors, including humility, spiritual

36. Williamson and Sandage, "Longitudinal Analyses," 787–801.
37. Sandage, Jensen, and Jass, "Relational Spirituality and Transformation," 191.
38. B. Majerus and S. J. Sandage, "Differentiation of Self and Christian Spiritual Maturity: Social Science and Theological Integration," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 38 (2010): 41–51 and Sandage and Jensen, "Relational Spiritual Formation," 95–109.

well-being, psychological well-being, spiritual maturity, meditative prayer, forgiveness, hope, gratitude, social justice commitment, and intercultural competence.[39] Intercultural competence is positively correlated with spiritual seeking and considered a key marker of spiritual maturity in the RS model and involves well-developed capacities to manage the anxiety of difference, humbly take the perspective of others, and relate effectively across these differences. An assumption of the RS model is that differentiated and interculturally competent relational capacities are crucial for ministry effectiveness in the contemporary world. The association of these formational factors with the RS model connects the model to Theological Basic #2 (relatedness to God will be connected with positive characterological and moral change).

Thus far, the RS model has been used in cross-sectional studies to predict individual differences in various virtuous dispositions, such as humility,[40] forgiveness,[41] hope,[42] gratitude,[43] and justice.[44] However, this research could also be extended to longitudinally investigate growth in other virtues and behaviors.

The RS model also includes an appreciation of the role of human relationships in containing the process of growth in relatedness to God (Theological Basic #3). Sandage and Shults use the metaphor of a crucible to emphasize that "the resiliency and non-reactivity of the container is essential to the transformative process. Crucibles or containers with melting points lower than the chemical reaction inside will crack under pressure and "spill out" the potential transformative process, which is why the differentiation or anxiety tolerance of a leader, therapist, spiritual director, or spiritual community is so central to their capacity to contain and steward the process of transformation."[45] This model assumes that spiritual formation is influenced by the levels of differentiation of self in the surrounding relational and communal dynamics and the degree to which crucible processes are either supported or discouraged.

Given the six theological basics discussed above, the RS model offers a helpful framework for conceptualizing the process of growth in relationship with God as well as additional sacred elements that might be valued in Christian spiritual traditions. In particular, the RS model helpfully conceptualizes how relatedness to God is both progressive in nature as well as a process that elicits anxiety and resistance

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39. Sandage and Jensen, "Relational Spiritual Formation," 95–109.
40. Sandage, Paine, and Hill, "Spiritual Barriers to Humility," 207–217.
41. See Worthington and Sandage, *Forgiveness and Spirituality*.
42. S. J. Sandage and J. Morgan, "Hope and Positive Religious Coping as Predictors of Social Justice Commitment," *Mental Health, Religion, and Culture* 17 (2014): 557–567.
43. Jankowski and Sandage, "Meditative Prayer," 115–131
44. S. J. Sandage, P. J. Jankowski, S. A. Crabtree, and M. L. Schweer-Collins, "Calvinism, Arminianism, Gender Views, and Relationality: An Empirical Investigation of Worldview Differences," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 45 (2017): 17–32.
45. Shults and Sandage, *Transforming Spirituality*, 194. See also David Schnarch, *Constructing the Sexual Crucible: An Integration of Sexual and Marital Therapy* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1991).

which might in turn lead to either wandering or a premature return to spiritual dwelling. Furthermore, the model highlights the intensification that often occurs in formation in which one's previous mode of spirituality breaks down and requires a renewed process of spiritual seeking. Another benefit is that the model is highly ecumenical in that it can include various values of spiritual growth (e.g., prayer, engagement with Scripture, community, sacraments, etc.) all centered around relatedness to God and the sacred.

Recommendations for measuring the formation of seminarians

Based on the presence of the six core theological principles of spiritual change in the RS model and the results of previous research using the RS model, several recommendations arise from this meta-theory of spiritual change for the development of a generalizable measurement tool for assessing Christian formation.

First, based on this meta-theory of spiritual change, measurement of the formation process should consider such constructs as God-attachment, religious defensiveness, differentiation of self, established safe relationships, virtues, alterity, intercultural competence, spiritual pathologies, spiritual struggle, faith maturity, and authentic engagement with spiritual practices. Furthermore, based on this model, we would predict that constructs such as secure God-attachment, low religious defensiveness, high differentiation of self, presence of safe relationships, and authentic engagement of spiritual practices would be positively correlated with indicators of spiritual maturity and, eventually, authentic characterological and moral change.

Second, since spiritual maturation involves various obstacles, including self-deception as well as increasing self-awareness, and since the process of spiritual seeking can bring about anxiety, self-report measures of spiritual growth and well-being over time should be sensitive to the idea that increases in spiritual maturity are often accompanied by increases in spiritual disorientation. For one, spiritual growth over time can bring about a more honest and accurate assessment of one's virtues and vices that may show up as a decrease in spiritual maturity on a self-report measure when it is actually representative of an increase in spiritual maturity in that the person is less defended and more able to integrate the truth of him- or herself. In addition, since maturation often involves periods of spiritual seeking, which often involve stress and anxiety, increasing maturity through spiritual seeking will potentially appear on a self-report measure as a decrease in well-being.

A third recommendation is to recognize in the measure that the presence of virtue and moral behavior may, despite Theological Basic #2, have little to do with relatedness to God as understood on a relational model of spirituality. In other words, there are naturalistic ways to form acquired virtue that run independently of growth in one's relationship with God. This is especially the case in Christian contexts in which morality is highly valued and yet naturalistic processes of change (e.g., Aristotelian virtue formation) are often easier and more familiar than the relational

intimacy required for supernatural processes of change. This is not to say that there is anything inferior or theologically problematic about naturalistic processes of change. It is just that on a relational model of spirituality one would like to see a high, positive correlation between a maturing relationship with God and a maturing moral life and yet because a maturing moral life is possible apart from relationship with God, those two factors can come apart.

One potential solution to this last problem, and a final recommendation, is to locate and measure the formation of virtue that may be unique to the Christian sanctification process. One candidate is joy and peace in the midst of suffering, which may be somewhat unique to a Christian understanding of maturing relationship with God. And yet, post-traumatic growth of this sort can be found amongst religious and nonreligious persons. A second, and perhaps more promising, candidate is the Christian practice of enemy love. Love for one's enemies (those to whom we feel opposition and a lack of positive affect) is counter-intuitive and yet is an attribute of God towards which Christians are meant to be conformed. Since the desire and willingness to sacrifice one's own good for the good of one's enemies is not an expected result of naturalistic processes of change, to find evidence of the disposition to love one's enemies amongst maturing Christians could be a more reliable sign that an explicitly Christian maturation is taking place. Moreover, the measurement of enemy love need not involve actual behavioral manifestations of it, but could involve measuring a person's attitudes to those who are perceived as a threat to one's well-being (e.g., refugees, the homeless, criminals, those who oppose one's political views, and terrorists).

Conclusion

Ministerial training within seminaries and schools of theology is a unique opportunity to focus on the spiritual, character, and moral formation of future pastors, priests, and other Christian leaders in hopes of benefiting those leaders themselves as well as those they eventually serve. And yet we will not know if theological schools are being effective in that endeavor without a reliable and generalizable measurement tool. This article has sought to develop a meta-theory of spiritual change that would be theologically acceptable across a broad range of Christian traditions and relevant to the empirical study of spiritual change. We concluded with several recommendations for the actual development of a measurement tool.[46]