

# Reviews



**THE END OF THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION**, by Ted A. Smith,  
Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2023. 239 pages. \$19.99.

“They never taught me that in seminary!” How many times have you heard a Christian public leader say those words in recent years? The world has changed so dramatically over the past few decades that leaders who went to seminary hoping to be trained as ministry professionals often feel overwhelmed and under-equipped to lead congregations through this moment of rapid, discontinuous change. Many Christian public leaders are dropping out. Equally alarming, very few people are signing up to fill the traditional roles of pastor or Christian public leader of an institutional organization.

Ted Smith helps us to understand the shifts that are happening around us and, more specifically, how those shifts are impacting theological education and the institutions that pursue and uphold it. The title of the book teases the question: is theological education coming to an end—an abysmal demise—or is this moment affording us an opportunity to reflect on the chief end, or *telos*, of theological education? Smith’s answer is: Yes.

Smith makes his argument in four movements. First, he tells the story of Lyman Beecher at the turn of the nineteenth century to offer a case study of how leadership can adapt to cultural shifts in the social imaginary of a nation. This opening movement of the book is worth the read in itself. It offers insightful historical context as it names the societal pressures that the church faced in the opening decades of the nineteenth century. The social imaginary of the United States shifted from what Smith calls the “Colonial Standing Order” to the new world dominated by the voluntary association. Smith finds analogies here for the shifts we are currently experiencing.

Borrowing language from Charles Taylor, the second movement of the book covers three chapters in which Smith analyzes the shift from the

“Age of Association” to the “Age of Authenticity.” He notes the impact it has on the social imaginary of the church and institutions of theological education in the early twenty-first century. In this section he identifies the consolidation of theological education into a professional degree that services voluntary associations. Then he names the power of individualization, as opposed to individualism, that is fracturing the voluntary association and placing the impetus of personal identity on the will and merit of the individual self, whether the individual wants it or not. Finally, he names how the twin engines of identity and expression are unraveling denominations, congregations, the profession, and theological education itself.

The third movement is a brief interlude in which Smith explores the meaning of the word “end.” Making use of motifs from Jeremiah, he argues that the prophet was not proclaiming the end of the world. Rather, he was announcing, and reminding the people, of the purpose of the covenant that is written on their hearts. Smith claims this as the hope of and the chief telos—purpose—for theological education: to know God.

Finally, Smith’s shift toward purpose and hope in the previous section leads him to the fourth movement of the book in chapters four and five. Here he names the negative aspects of the Age of Association that we must renounce. Leaders who have been trained in modern professionalism must not try to manage their way out of this problem and back to the old status quo. Instead, they must renounce the professional model and find a new vision for leadership. In chapter five he names the positive aspects of the Age of Authenticity that offer affordances to explore fresh opportunities to carry out the Gospel of Jesus and reclaim the true end of theological education. God is doing, and has always been doing, something in the world as new ministries continually form in unexpected places, outside of judicatories and credentialing systems. Smith encourages his readers to imagine a world in which institutions of theological education do not see themselves as gate-keepers and credentialing agencies, instead challenging them to be places that recognize the leaders that God raises up to further equip them and deepen their knowing and being known by God.

This book is an important contribution to the body of literature designed to help today’s Christian Public Leaders—both in the local context and in the institutions of higher education—to both understand and to navigate the changing spiritual landscape. I offer one positive evaluation and one room-for-growth observation. First, one of the strengths of this book is Smith’s intentional awareness of his own place of privilege in

the story of theological education. He names the reality that Protestant theological education, particularly in the United States during the Age of Association has serviced white, male privilege, reflecting the ethos of professionalism across a spectrum of disciplines. The story of the end of theological education in the age of association and the affordances that the age of authenticity gives it is not a universal one. Many Christian traditions, particularly those of people marginalized by white, male supremacy, have resisted the professionalization of the clergy and the credentials of the academy all along. People who are currently in a context like this might read this book and think, "They are finally catching on. It's about time." Regardless, it is important for all leaders to be able to articulate the societal forces that are driving our decision making in our local contexts.

Second, the one critique of this book is that it does not answer the question, "Yes, but how?" It is one thing to diagnose the situation. It is another thing to prescribe practical suggestions for how the institutions of theological higher education can effectively renounce the demons from the past and experiment with the affordances that the Age of Authenticity offers. Hopefully, volume two, "What Now?" is in the works.

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