



THINKING
THEOLOGICALLY
Eric D. Barreto, editor

FOUNDATIONS FOR LEARNING

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Eric D. Barreto

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Introduction

Eric D. Barreto

My five-year-old daughter helped me think about thinking recently.

I was editing the essays found in this book when she insisted on collaborating on a new book together. How could I say no? So we gathered all the necessary supplies and got to work. She set about designing a cover. She needed a little bit of help writing out the book's title: *Thinking Book*. When the time came to illustrate the cover, she was a bit stumped. I encouraged her to draw a picture of someone thinking. Still flummoxed, she eventually concluded, "We're thinking about thinking. That's hard." She was right. This is hard work.

After all, the odd thing about thinking is that we barely have to think about thinking in order to think.

Let me explain.

Your brain is constantly at work. Whether you are asleep or awake, aware or zoning out, exercising or resting, your brain is a buzz

of activity. It is guiding your movements, synthesizing new information, recalling old data.

Think about it this way. You are breathing at this very moment, aren't you? If you start thinking intentionally about your breathing, you will find yourself thinking about breathing as you compel your lungs to expand. You may even notice the complex physiological exertions breathing requires. But remember: even as you are reminding your body to breathe at this very moment, in a short while, you will forget to remember to breathe. And yet you will continue to inhale and exhale because your brain will pick up the slack. Imagine the intellectual burden we would carry if we had to *think* about breathing and digestion, healing and sleeping. Our brains are marvelous creations, never stopping their meticulous work until the day we draw our last breath.

And yet that's not exactly the kind of *thinking* we want to talk about in this book. The thinking that regulates breathing and practices habits and leans on instinct doesn't actually require much thought or intentionality on our part. That kind of thinking is usually not a powerful source of transformative theological and personal reflection and change. It won't necessarily shape and reshape the work of ministry to which you have been called. It probably won't be tested and honed as you work through seminary.

The kind of thinking we do discuss in the book is intentional and potentially transformative. It is much more than my brain's sometimes feeble, sometimes inspiring machinations. The thinking we discuss in the chapters that follow is thinking about the God of the universe, the world God has created, and God's many children who populate it. Thinking theologically is hard work, for it seeks to discern the very source and sustenance of life: the God in whose "mind" we were first an inkling, the God who "thought" us into existence, the God whose "thinking" sustains us at every turn. Our

thinking poignantly reflects God's own image. And so our thinking can help us participate in God's reign.

At the same time, we know that our thinking can be flawed, errant, unduly biased, prejudiced, sinful. Thinking theologically requires training and education certainly. But most of all, we lean on the Spirit when we think theologically. This is the Spirit God has promised will accompany us whenever we call on God. Paul writes in Romans 8:26: "Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words." As Amy Marga explores in her essay "Thinking Systematically," thinking theologically is a prayer, a yearning for the Spirit to help us, as much as it is an act of the intellect.

Like *Reading Theologically*, this volume draws together the reflections of nine writers. They all share a common vocation: teaching people like you to think and grow and be in a rapidly changing world for the sake of the good news of Jesus Christ. Moreover, they are all excellent scholars who are seeking to hone our knowledge and understanding of a God whose grace and magnitude we cannot exhaust. In their diverse approaches, however, they share some important ideas, ideas we hope will dwell in your hearts as you study, and as you struggle and rejoice in your learning.

1. *Thinking theologically is as embodied as it is cerebral.* Thinking is not the exclusive domain of the brain. Certainly, the neurological work of learning and contemplation happens between our ears. But our brains are not severable from our bodies. Our brains are very much a part of our bodies. And so thinking is not just a cerebral act but also an embodied interaction with the world. Thinking theologically does not just deal with abstract thoughts and theoretical notions. Thinking theologically also requires us to see and touch and taste the world

that God has created. In short, we think not only with our brains but also with feet that guide us to strange places, hands that serve our neighbors, ears that listen to songs of joy and regret alike.

2. *Thinking theologically is as emotional as it is intellectual.* When we think theologically, we exercise the whole breadth of human experiences. Thinking theologically is not just a matter of learning facts, reading arguments, or writing informative essays. Thinking theologically also involves our spirits and our hearts. Thinking theologically calls us to love what we learn and grieve that sometimes our answers are wholly insufficient to the task of ministry. Sometimes all our thoughts will culminate in a faith that asks for God's help. Thinking theologically means that we see failure as a painful but indispensable part of following a path of faith, that we can measure ourselves not just by the grades we receive but also by the relationships we can foster with the help of a God that draws us together.
3. *Thinking theologically is as relational as it is individualistic.* To put it bluntly, you can't think theologically by yourself. We don't measure our theological acumen by participating in some sacred version of *Jeopardy*. Instead, thinking theologically drives us to our intellect in order to draw us to our neighbors. Thinking theologically does not require us to retreat into our studies and dwell in our minds; instead, it compels us with an insatiable curiosity to know and love one another—even and particularly those who differ from us.

In short, thinking doesn't just happen in that intricate collection of nerves and nodes in your skull. Thinking is not just a matter of dwelling alone with lofty thoughts. Thinking is not just a matter of accumulating bits of trivia or even collecting a wealth of theories. Thinking theologically also draws us to others, for how else will we

know the world and know God? Thinking theologically draws us to our deepest fears and hopes, to the depths of despair and the heights of joy, to failure and risk. Thinking theologically, that is, thinking about God, is as human as anything else we do. And for this reason God draws near to us when we think in this way, for God's Spirit dwells whenever and wherever we gather together in faith and seek the face of God. Thinking theologically is about discerning a God who loves, cherishes, and exults in all our particularity; who shares our deepest griefs; who tastes our pain; who will not be limited by our imagination or hide from us.

Thinking can sometimes be akin to breathing. We are constantly engaged in processing data and sensory inputs all around us even when we are not conscious of the many neural pathways our minds are traveling. So, taking a step back to ponder the dimensions and practices of a particular way of thinking is a challenge. Even more important, however, is cultivating the habits of mind necessary in a life of ministry. Thinking theologically invokes an embodied set of practices and values that shape individuals and communities alike. Thinking theologically demands both intellect and emotion, logic and compassion, mind and body. In fact, this book will contend that these binaries are actually integrated wholes, not mutually exclusive options.

Thinking theologically is, I hope, something that will become as ingrained in you as breathing. Perhaps you will be so shaped by God's Spirit, so loved by God that your every thought will be infused with God's graciousness and justice, your every word marked with hope and expectation, your every deed surrounded by God's love. When we think theologically, we live theologically. When we think theologically, we exit the life of the mind and enter God's creation.

1

Thinking Mindfully

Jennifer M. Shepherd

In January 2011, mall surveillance cameras captured video of Cathy Cruz Marrero falling into the mall's main water fountain as she was walking and texting. It was a funny video, people laughed, and it brought to our attention the dangers of walking and texting. Ms. Marrero's accident could have happened to anyone, and even though her embarrassment led her to contemplate a lawsuit against the person responsible for posting the video online, she admitted she had learned a lesson when interviewed by NBC's George Stephanopoulos on *Good Morning America*.¹

Stephanopoulos: And, Cathy, I know that you—as embarrassed as you are from all this, you did learn a big lesson, huh?

Marrero: Absolutely. Absolutely, George. Do not text and walk, especially to the younger generation. The fountain could have been

1. "Fountain Lady Fights Back," *Good Morning America*, <http://lybio.net/cathy-cruz-marrero-good-morning-america-fountain-lady-fights-back-lawsuit/people/.html>.

empty. I could have been in the hospital. I could have walked into a bus. You know, gotten hit by a car. It can happen anywhere. Anywhere.

And it is happening. Statistics show that walking and texting accidents are rising quickly in the United States. In fact, some towns like Fort Lee, New Jersey, are passing legislation that imposes fines of eighty-five dollars for residents caught walking and texting. There are numerous words to describe people as they walk and text: distracted, unaware, engrossed, oblivious. And if you are distracted, unaware, engrossed, or oblivious in an unfamiliar place and you are looking down, your next experience may be looking up from your phone in the middle of a mall water fountain.

But in Ms. Marrero's case, this was not just a matter of being unfamiliar with the landscape. She works in that mall. She was not in a new place. She was very familiar with her surroundings. She had navigated that same mall corridor for years. But this time, while walking and texting, she encountered the unexpected.

Stephanopoulos: Cathy, let me say, right at the start, I get it. When I saw this video, I said this could be me, but can you just take us back to that moment? What happened? What were you thinking? And what made you realize that you had a terrible fall?

Marrero: I realized I was falling when I was in the water already. Unfortunately, I didn't have anything to grab on to and hold my balance.

Stephanopoulos: From looking at the video, you look pretty composed for someone who just fell in a fountain in the middle of a mall. You got out, picked yourself up. What happened next?

Marrero: I was probably more dumbfounded. I was like, well, I'm hoping nobody saw me. So, let me just walk away. A kind lady of a store there, manager at the mall, was kind enough. I walked up to her. And all I kept saying was, "I fell. I fell. I fell in the fountain. I fell in the fountain. I fell in the fountain."

Marrero lost her situational awareness and fell in a place where she felt comfortable and confident. The jarring realization of what had happened—that she had fallen—was compounded by the truth of where it had happened, in a familiar setting. This is what left her shaken, disoriented, in disbelief, and, in her own words, dumbfounded.

Inherited Faith and the Moment You Look Up

At some point, every person will experience a moment when he will “look up” from his inherited faith tradition. It is unavoidable in this postmodern North American culture. It is disorienting in its unexpectedness. It is isolating in its uniqueness for each individual. You look up as if hearing something for the very first time: “What did you just say?? You look up with furrowed eyebrows in concern: “Do you really mean that?” You look up because you want to protest: “That doesn’t make any sense.”

Encountering the unexpected in a seminary classroom is an unavoidable hazard for students. It may not be as dramatic as falling into a fountain, but it will happen. It is unavoidable because in seminary, as in life and ministry, students become aware of their partial perspectives, are asked to reflect upon the influence of their religious traditions, and are challenged to consider the various interpretive options for belief that may and do exist. In these moments, the bodies of knowledge about God, which have been handed down to you, no longer seem secure. Something is always lost when you look up. Stability. Confidence. Naiveté. But much more is waiting to be gained when you can learn to think mindfully about your inherited faith traditions and the development of your personal beliefs.

When I refer to inherited faith traditions or bodies of knowledge about God, I am referring to the work of Ninian Smart and the six-part definition or scheme of study he established as the dimensions of religion: the experiential, the narrative, the ritual, the doctrinal, the ethical, and the institutional.² Knowing these six religious bodies of knowledge and what they establish as foundational for belief can be very insightful in the moments you look up; they can help you understand the range of theological beliefs you will encounter in seminary and active ministry. These categories can help because your religious community has appealed to one of the six bodies of knowledge, in varying degrees, and has influenced what you believe and the evidence you accept as reliable.³

2. Ninian Smart, *The Religious Experience of Mankind* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1969), 15–25. Ninian Smart, the world-renowned expert in the study of religion as a nonconfessional, methodologically agnostic discipline, what most universities offer as Religious Studies, proposed that whatever else religions may or may not be, whether theistic or nontheistic, they possess certain recognizable elements, which can and should be studied. The study takes its place in the secular academy, where it draws heavily on anthropology, sociology, archeology, psychology, and other disciplines.

3. *Experiential bodies of knowledge* emphasize making a personal connection with God and accept feelings, emotions, and personal experiences as foundational for theological belief. You may look up if someone explains that they believe something about God because they have felt it or experienced it. *Narrative bodies of knowledge* emphasize how profoundly true, understandable, relatable stories, regardless of whether they are provable through the scientific method or defy common sense or logic, are foundational because testimonies reveal and explain theological belief. You may look up if someone explains that they believe something about God because that's just what the Bible says. *Ritual bodies of knowledge* emphasize the successful expression of belief found in repetition, standardization, and performance as foundational for belief so that participants benefit. You may look up if someone explains that they believe something about God because that's what God requires. *Doctrinal bodies of knowledge* emphasize certainty found in intellectual reasoning, systematic thinking, and prepackaged truths as foundational for belief. You may look up if someone explains that they believe something about God because it's the truth. *Ethical bodies of knowledge* emphasize relational behavior found in obligations, responsibilities, rules, and punishments as foundational for belief. You are expected to act in certain ways toward others. You may look up if someone explains that they believe something about God or are doing something because God watches and will judge our actions as good or bad. *Institutional bodies of knowledge* emphasize the role the religious group play in and the influences they exert upon society as foundational for belief. People may identify as defenders or adherents of the faith (church), as volunteer or individual participators in faith (denomination), as reformers of faith (sect), or as inventors of faith (cult). You may look up if someone is defending Christianity against change or advocating that we investigate new ways

In seminary, most students are only just becoming aware of their inherited traditions when they encounter the unexpected in the form of a different body of knowledge. It need not be the end of faith if you question or reject the bodies of knowledge of your inherited faith, since one body of knowledge is not the whole of the Christian message. However, the experience of looking up from your inherited faith can be just as dramatic as Marrero's, not just because of *what* is happening but also because of *where* it is happening. Such an experience is disorienting in its unexpectedness. You think that you are in a familiar, safe place—a seminary—doing a familiar, safe thing—studying the Bible—and *bam!* You fall and you look up as if hearing something for the first time. *Did your professor just provide experiential knowledge for discussions on healing in the New Testament when you expected logical, doctrinal answers?* You fall and you look up with furrowed eyebrows. *Do you look around the room wondering how other students find ethical standards in Leviticus that they want to apply today when you just find a story from an ancient culture?* You fall and you look up because you want to protest. *That doesn't make sense to me! Why are you trying to fix what isn't broken?* You don't see anything coming. You don't realize that you are falling until you fall. When you finally do get up, you may appear composed, but your confidence has been severely shaken, leaving you disoriented, confused, and dumbfounded. Such an experience is isolating in its uniqueness for each individual because our beliefs about God are deeply held and very personal. When Marrero fell into the water fountain, she was disoriented, embarrassed, and defensive. In the same way, the range of initial emotions that will arise in a seminary classroom—shock, sheepishness, fear, aggravation, irritation,

to do church. You may look up if someone is asking questions and calling for reform within Christianity or claiming that an entirely new vision is now required.

astonishment, embarrassment, concern, confusion, delight, even humor—can highlight the realization that most of us aren't prepared to explain or defend our beliefs beyond how we *feel* about them.

Thinking mindfully about theology and faith allows you to embrace this moment of being shaken, disoriented, and in disbelief as real and important and potentially educational. When you can acknowledge your emotions and reactions and allow those reactions to highlight the truth that the story you tell about God has been influenced by certain evidence, you are prepared to begin to think critically about theology and faith. You can come to understand why someone else thinks differently, engage those other views in healthy dialogue, evaluate your faith traditions, and add your voice to the discussion. You do not need to stay in a shaken, disoriented, disbelieving, and dumbfounded state nor do your feelings, which are powerful and real, necessarily have to lead to the death of belief. Rather, thinking mindfully can begin a process that can and should enable a person to look up, back, and again at her inherited faith so that its strengths, weaknesses, influences, and tendencies might be acknowledged. Richard Kearney has suggested that this process be labeled “anatheism,” for the word denotes “repetition and return.”⁴ When you learn to look up, back, and again at your beliefs, you have a way to return to belief after the unavoidable, unexpected, and isolating experience of not knowing or, as I have explained it, falling.

4. See Richard Kearney, *Anatheism: Returning to God after God* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010). This process begins with what is secure (theism), passes through the loss of that security or a death-of-God moment (atheism) or the not-knowing moment (agnosticism), but does not have to lead to the death of belief. I appreciate Kearney's emphasis that people today need a way to return to belief in God after having a dreadful and disorienting moment of “not knowing.”

Learning to Think Mindfully When You Look Up

Whatever issue, topic, theory, or interpretation has caused you to look up, this is the starting point for mindful thinking. The experience of discomfort and strong emotions as you struggle to understand how someone else does not see things the same way you do will begin to highlight the influence of your inherited faith traditions and explain why you feel passionate about something that someone else considers to be a minor detail. The practice of being mindful is an important concept in most spiritual traditions, ranging from practices that meditatively empty the mind to practices that focus introspectively on the mind.⁵ Mindfulness is a third way of knowing (awareness) that complements rational and sensory knowledge with subjective experience.⁶

Let me share two quotes that can help you understand the mindfulness I am advocating. The first anonymous inspirational quote is this: “Don’t shush your inner voice. It’s who you really are.” When you are mindful, you are aware of feelings that are occurring in the moment, and you take them seriously for the information they provide without trying to alter or manipulate the experience. Pleasant reactions are enjoyable, making you feel agreeable. You will naturally desire to discuss issues that make you feel agreeable. Unpleasant reactions are displeasing and offensive, making you feel disagreeable. You will naturally desire to shut down discussions of issues that make you feel disagreeable. Neutral reactions are disinteresting and

5. The term *mindfulness* and many current mindfulness practices generally associate with the meditative traditions of Eastern religions. Thinking mindfully is not primarily concentration meditation (the practice of focusing, quieting, or emptying the mind of judgment), and it is not primarily introspection (the process of reflectively looking inward at one’s own thoughts and emotions). It is a combination of intentional focus and awareness of emotions.

6. Bob Stahl and Elisha Goldstein, *A Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction Workbook* (Oakland: New Harbinger, 2010). The two forms of meditation are insight and concentration. Mindfulness meditation is considered insight meditation.

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