

Reconfiguring Religious Education: Liberating Interdependence in a Post-Institutional Age

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Abstract

[Objective] This article interprets the current disruption in theological education as a moment of reconfiguration rather than decline, examining how widespread disaffiliation and the rise of fluid spiritual ecologies are reshaping religious formation.

[Contents] Drawing on a case study of the Iliff School of Theology, it analyzes how dialogical pedagogy, public theology initiatives, and justice-centered curricular practices model new forms of theological learning suited for plural and post-institutional contexts. Engaging Musa Dube's postcolonial feminist theology and Thich Nhat Hanh's concept of interbeing, the article proposes liberating interdependence as a constructive framework for guiding formation that is relational, accountable, and publicly engaged.

[Conclusions] It concludes that theological education can thrive in this era by cultivating communities of mutual transformation capable of addressing the moral and spiritual challenges of a reconfigured world.

[Keywords] Theological education, Disaffiliation, Spiritual ecologies, Public theology, Liberating interdependence, Justice, Interreligious formation

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탈제도화 시대에서의 종교교육 재구성: 해방을 향한 상호의존

이보영

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요 약

[연구 목적] 본 논문은 신학 교육의 현재 위기를 쇠퇴가 아니라 재구성의 시기로 해석하며, 광범위한 탈종교화와 새로운 영적 생태계의 부상 속에서 종교적 형성이 어떻게 변화하고 있는지를 분석한다.

[연구 내용] 아일리프 신학대학원의 사례를 통해 대화적 교육법, 공공신학적 참여, 정의 중심의 교육과정이 다종교적이고 탈제도화된 시대에 적합한 새로운 신학적 학습 모델을 어떻게 제시하는지 살펴본다. 특히 무사 두베의 탈식민주의 여성신학과 틱낫한의 상호존재(interbeing) 사유를 바탕으로, 해방적 상호의존성을 관계성과 책임성, 공적 참여를 중심에 둔 형성의 신학적 틀로 제안한다.

[결론] 본 논문은 신학 교육이 이러한 재구성의 시대에, 도덕적·영적 도전에 응답하는 상호 변혁적 공동체를 형성함으로써 새롭게 자리매김할 수 있다고 결론짓는다.

[주제어] 신학 교육, 탈종교화, 영적 생태계, 공공신학, 해방적 상호의존성, 정의, 다종교적 형성

I . Introduction: From Decline to Reconfiguration

For more than a century, Protestant seminaries in North America functioned as the intellectual and spiritual engines of denominational life. They cultivated clergy who embodied the academic rigor, ethical integrity, and pastoral imagination necessary to lead faith communities in relatively stable ecclesial ecosystems (Aleshire, 2021). Yet the infrastructure that sustained these institutions - denominational funding, congregational pipelines, and broad public trust in organized religion - has eroded.

As Daniel Aleshire (2021: 3), who served as the Executive Director of the Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada for 27 years, observes, theological education now stands *between the times*, a liminal space in which inherited forms no longer align with the emerging contours of religious life. This “in-between” moment is not simply a crisis of enrollment or economics; it signals a deeper cultural reconfiguration of how people seek meaning, belonging, and transcendence.

Empirical data underscore this transformation. Confidence in organized religion among Americans has fallen from 68 percent in 1975 to just 38 percent in 2023 (Saad, 2023). Trust in clergy’s ethical standards has declined from 56 percent in 2006 to 36 percent in 2025 (Saad, 2025). The Pew Research Center (2024) reports that nearly one-third of U.S. adults now identify as religiously unaffiliated, and among those under 40, “None” constitutes the single largest category. Similar patterns appear in Canada and Western Europe, where institutional participation continues to drop even as interest in spirituality, meditation, and social ethics grows. These data reveal not the disappearance of religion but its migration beyond the institutional boundaries that once defined it.

I write from within this shifting landscape as a Protestant Christian theologian who has spent my academic and ministerial life within the traditions of mainline Protestantism. The disaffiliation and reconfiguration described above are not abstract trends but realities I have witnessed in classrooms, congregations, and communities across North America. They have reshaped what it means to teach, to lead, and to form people for spiritual and moral life.

At the same time, my conversation partners, and, indeed, my audience for this reflection, represent a wide range of religious and philosophical commitments. Theological education today unfolds in an interreligious and pluralist context in which Buddhist meditation, secular ethics, and Indigenous cosmologies may sit alongside Christian scripture and theology in the same learning space. This article, therefore, does not presume a confessional stance shared by all, but

rather approaches theology as a public practice of meaning-making, one that engages multiple wisdom traditions in dialogue for the sake of the common good.

In this sense, my reflections arise from both a confessional and a dialogical posture: rooted in the Protestant tradition yet open to interspiritual conversation. I seek to interpret what the present transformation of religion means for all of us, Christians, Buddhists, secular humanists, and others, who care about the future of moral and spiritual formation in a fragmented and interconnected world.

In what follows, I first outline the broader cultural and spiritual shifts that signal not the disappearance of religion but its migration into new and fluid spiritual ecologies. I then present the Iliff School of Theology as a case study that illustrates how theological education is being reconfigured in response to these changes. Building on insights from this institutional example, I introduce *liberating interdependence* as a theological and pedagogical framework suited to post-institutional contexts. I conclude by situating these developments within global patterns of disaffiliation and emerging spiritual practices to consider the vocation of theological education in this reconfigured era.

1. Religion's Migration and the Rise of Spiritual Ecologies

While some describe the present moment as an “irreligious era,” such a characterization overlooks the ways spiritual life is being reconfigured rather than erased. The ongoing transformation represents not the death of religion but its migration into new and fluid spiritual ecologies. Scholars of lived religion have observed that meaning-making, moral discernment, and ritual practice now unfold across diverse contexts—retreat centers, yoga studios, digital communities, and activist networks (Fuller, 2001; Mercadante, 2014). Individuals once formed primarily by denominational catechesis now draw on multiple wisdom traditions, constructing eclectic and self-curated forms of spirituality. Linda Mercadante (2014) describes this phenomenon as a turn toward individualized, experience-driven faith, while Melissa Wilcox (2020) characterizes it as a form of spiritual *bricolage*, assembling diverse religious and cultural elements to craft meaning and belonging in a plural world. These shifting forms of spirituality invite theological educators to attend more deeply to how humans seek transcendence, community, and justice beyond the institutional walls of organized religion.

This spiritual migration also carries an ethical dimension. The “spiritual-but-not-religious” turn often expresses disappointment with institutional hypocrisy, particularly the gap between faith

communities' proclamations of justice and their complicity in racial, gendered, and economic inequities. Disillusionment with organized religion does not extinguish the moral imagination; it redirects it toward practices of justice, ecological care, and mindfulness that embody what Campbell-Reed (2021) calls *pastoral imagination*, an integrative and relational capacity for ministry that extends beyond the walls of the church.

2. Theological Education's Mismatch

The reconfiguration of religion has exposed a widening gap between theological education's inherited models and the lived spiritual realities of contemporary societies. Theological schools were designed for a world in which denominational identity was stable, ministry was primarily congregational, and clergy served as authoritative interpreters of faith. That world no longer exists. Enrollment in Master of Divinity (M.Div.) programs has fallen by more than 40 percent since 2006, dropping from nearly 50,000 students to fewer than 28,000 in 2022 (ATS, 2023). Many schools depend heavily on tuition and endowment income even as their sponsoring denominations reduce subsidies (Millard, 2024; Minnesota Conference UMC, 2024). Yet the deeper problem is not financial but epistemological: the conceptual frameworks shaping theological curricula often presume a Christendom social order that no longer corresponds to lived experience.

In this environment, theological education risks becoming anachronistic if it continues to prioritize clerical credentialing over moral and spiritual formation for plural publics. Campbell-Reed (2018) documents how younger generations, particularly women and people of color, are dissuaded from ministry due to institutional inequities and the precarious economics of congregational life. As a result, seminaries face not only declining enrollments but a legitimacy crisis: they prepare students for roles that may no longer exist in their traditional form.

3. From Decline Narratives to Reconfiguration Frameworks

Recognizing this disjunction requires reframing the conversation. Decline narratives, whether framed in terms of "dechurching," "secularization," or "loss of faith," conceal the generative processes of transformation underway. Theological education today stands within a profound season of reconfiguration. The decline of traditional institutions does not mark an ending but signals the emergence of new spiritual ecologies and moral imaginations. The task before us is

not to restore the past but to accompany this transformation with integrity, humility, and imagination.

The metaphor of *migration* captures this transition more accurately than that of *decline*. Religious energy has not vanished; it has relocated. The growth of interspiritual communities, ecological activism, and justice-oriented networks reveals that many people still seek transcendence, ethical coherence, and communal belonging, only outside institutional frameworks. This migration challenges theological educators to discern how formation might occur across boundaries of faith, tradition, and worldview.

4. Formation for a Reconfigured Era

To serve this transformed landscape, theological education must move beyond disciplinary silos and professional credentialing to recover formation as its central task. Formation here does not mean indoctrination into fixed dogmas but the cultivation of the kind of embodied discernment that Dykstra (1997) envisions, a wisdom formed through practice that integrates intellect, vocation, and community. In this sense, theological learning becomes a communal discipline of faithful and ethical reflection.

This article argues that the crisis of theological education should not be read as institutional collapse but as a moment of reconfiguration that invites new pedagogical, relational, and public paradigms. I approach this argument as a Protestant Christian theologian working within a multireligious academic environment, where students represent diverse faiths and social commitments. The Iliff School of Theology in Denver, Colorado, where I serve as a faculty member and previously as academic dean, provides a concrete context for examining this reorientation in theological education. As a historically Methodist seminary that now serves a justice-oriented and interreligious student body, of whom roughly one-third identify as Christian, Iliff offers insight into how Protestant-rooted institutions can reimagine formation within a plural spiritual landscape.

II. Reconfiguring Theological Formation: The Case of Iliff School of Theology

As a Protestant Christian theologian teaching in a multireligious environment, I have

witnessed firsthand how theological education must evolve to meet an age of moral disillusionment and spiritual searching. My institutional context, Iliff, offers a case study of this reorientation through its emphasis on liberating interdependence, a concept adapted from Musa Dube's (2000) postcolonial feminist theology and resonant with Thich Nhat Hanh's (1998; 2021) Buddhist notion of *interbeing*. By centering relationality, justice, and plural spiritual formation, Iliff models how seminaries can align educational practice with the emerging spiritual topography of the twenty-first century.

In an era marked by moral disillusionment, spiritual searching, and institutional fragility, Iliff's recent trajectory offers insight into how theological education might adapt to the realities of disaffiliation and reconfiguration. As a senior faculty member and former academic dean (through 2022), I witnessed and helped shape Iliff's redefinition of its mission around what many now call a public theology of justice, an integrative approach that weaves together spiritual formation, intellectual rigor, and social responsibility. This reorientation finds theological resonance with the vision of *liberating interdependence* articulated by postcolonial and interreligious thinkers such as Musa Dube (2000) and Thich Nhat Hanh (1998; 2021). Iliff's curricular and community practices resonate with this ethos, emphasizing relational learning, participatory pedagogy, and public engagement as integral dimensions of formation in a reconfigured age.

1. Diagnosing the Disconnection: Why People Leave the Church

Any discussion of theological reconfiguration must begin with why so many, especially younger adults, are walking away from organized religion. Surveys from the Pew Research Center (2023; 2024) and the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI, 2016; 2023) reveal a deep erosion of confidence in institutional religion and clergy ethics. According to PRRI (2016), nearly one-third of Americans who left their childhood faith cite scandals involving religious leaders as a contributing factor, while almost half of former evangelicals name negative teachings about LGBTQ people as decisive. More recent findings (PRRI, 2023) confirm that ethical disillusionment, especially regarding issues of inclusion and justice, continues to drive disaffiliation. Concurrently, Pew (2023; 2024) reports that although religious affiliation declines, the number of people who describe themselves as "spiritual but not religious" continues to rise, reflecting a desire for authenticity, community, and ethical coherence rather than institutional loyalty. Many young people perceive churches as talking about compassion and justice without

embodying them, and thus failing to support racial equity, environmental responsibility, or scientific integrity (Saad, 2025).

Qualitative research on millennials and Gen Z corroborates these findings: respondents describe religion as hypocritical, irrelevant, or complicit in injustice (Pew Research Center, 2023). They express frustration that religious institutions, particularly churches, often resist social movements such as Black Lives Matter and climate action, reinforcing the sense that religious institutions are morally out of step with their professed values. Saad (2023, 2025) of Gallup likewise reports that public trust in organized religion has fallen to historic lows, declining to 36 percent in 2023 and remaining near that level in 2025. This decline in credibility, more than disbelief in God, drives disaffiliation.

For theological schools, this shift poses an existential question: if institutional religion has lost moral authority, what kind of formation can restore integrity? How might seminaries help future leaders live the congruence between theology and ethics that many young people find missing in the church?

2. Iliff's Reconfiguration: Formation for a Plural and Public Era

Iliff has grappled with these questions for more than a decade. Founded in 1892 as a Methodist seminary serving the western frontier, the school has continually adapted to cultural and ecclesial change. As a senior faculty member and former academic dean, I witnessed and helped shape Iliff's redefinition of its mission around what many these days call a public theology of justice. This integrative approach weaves together spiritual formation, intellectual rigor, and social responsibility.

Iliff's reconfiguration to be relevant for the time did not arise from strategic marketing but from sustained discernment about vocation in a rapidly shifting religious landscape. As traditional pipelines for ministry eroded and denominational subsidies shrank (Meinzer & Gin, 2025; Millard, 2024), Iliff re-imagined theological education as preparation for public leadership. Students are formed not only for parish ministry but for work in non-profits, chaplaincy, advocacy networks, and emerging spiritual communities, as well as various social and political organizations. This curricular reorientation acknowledges that theological wisdom must serve plural publics, not merely denominational institutions.

3. Curriculum: From Individual Calling to Collective Vocation

At the heart of Iliff's curricular renewal is the sequence Identity, Power, and Vocation in Community (IPVC), later renamed Identity, Power, and Difference in Community (IPDC). As the first required course for all entering students, this sequence introduces Iliff's educational ethos and provides a common framework for theological reflection and communal formation. It invites students to discern how their social locations - race, gender, sexuality, class, nationality, and religion - shape their theological imagination and public engagement. The course does not separate academic study from spiritual practice; instead, it integrates them through dialogue, ritual, and critical reflection on lived experience.

Students read theological texts in conversation with feminist, womanist, queer, and postcolonial frameworks, interrogating how theology can both oppress and liberate while cultivating awareness of how their own worldviews and vocational identities have been shaped within these intersecting systems. Faculty serve not as authorities dispensing knowledge but as co-learners and facilitators of discernment, modeling dialogical pedagogy and critical self-reflection. Through peer and affinity groups, spaces for LGBTQ+ students, students of color, and others navigating systemic inequities, students learn to practice theological discernment in community.

This pedagogical approach transforms the classroom into a site of mutual vulnerability and relational accountability, where learning becomes a process of shared becoming rather than the acquisition of religious knowledge. Formation in this context moves beyond the paradigm of individual calling toward collective vocation, the shared work of reimagining what justice, compassion, and leadership mean in plural, fractured worlds. Students often extend these insights beyond the classroom into community projects, field education placements, and public rituals that integrate intellectual rigor with spiritual depth. The IPDC sequence thus becomes both gateway and anchor of Iliff's curriculum: a lived expression of its mission to form leaders who embody the courage to question inherited narratives, the humility to learn across difference, and the imagination to build communities of liberating interdependence.

4. Public Theology in Practice: Engaging Technology, Politics, and the Common Good

Iliff's reconfiguration extends beyond the classroom into the public sphere through its centers and institutes that model public theological education. As a Protestant theologian and former

dean at Iliff, I have witnessed how these initiatives translate theological vision into civic and technological engagement. Together, they illustrate how theological education can serve as both critique and catalyst, challenging reductionist views of the human person while contributing to the moral and ethical formation of society.

1) The AI Institute and Ethical Innovation

The AI Institute, the first of its kind in a theological school in the world, exemplifies how seminaries can engage emerging technologies as moral frontiers. Partnering with technology start-ups, civic organizations, and legal experts, the Institute discovered that most AI-ethics frameworks treat moral questions in purely technical or legal terms, omitting any recognition of the spiritual dimension of human existence. Theological anthropology - what it means to be human in relation to God, others, and creation - was largely absent.

In response, Iliff developed the AI TRUST Framework, a multi-stage review process assessing AI systems according to five interrelated principles: Transparency, Responsibility, Understanding, Sustainability, and Truth (Iliff School of Theology, 2024; Business Wire, 2024). Each principle draws upon theological anthropology to affirm that ethical technology must safeguard relational dignity, ecological sustainability, and social equity. The framework equips public and corporate partners with tools to evaluate not only what technology does but who it helps humans become. In this sense, AI TRUST bridges theology and innovation, embedding moral discernment within the very architecture of digital systems.

Through this work, Iliff positions theological education as a civic partner in shaping technological futures. Students collaborate with engineers, ethicists, and policymakers to explore how faith traditions can inform humane innovation. The seminary thus becomes a laboratory for moral imagination, extending theological discourse into boardrooms and data labs where decisions about human life are increasingly made.

2) The Institute for Religion, Politics & Culture

Another pillar of Iliff's public theology is the Institute for Religion, Politics & Culture (IRPC), which extends theological discourse beyond the classroom into civic, artistic, and political life. Founded in 2022, the IRPC emerged from Iliff's commitment to engage religion as a constructive force in public life. It serves as a research and engagement hub exploring how religion shapes, and is shaped by, public values, political movements, and social change (Iliff School of Theology, n.d.). Its work engages the full spectrum of belief, from Evangelicals

and Buddhists to atheists and the religiously unaffiliated, positioning theology as a living conversation within a pluralist democracy.

The Institute fosters dialogue among scholars, activists, policy makers, and faith communities to explore religion's role in sustaining the moral and imaginative foundations of democratic life. Rather than treating religion as a source of division or private belief, the IRPC approaches it as a public resource for ethical discernment and civic repair. Its programs encourage communities to ask not only *what* they believe but *how* those beliefs shape their participation in a shared public world. Through public lectures, workshops, and community partnerships, it creates spaces where theological reflection meets the practice of justice, equity, and belonging.

Together, the IRPC and the AI Institute demonstrate how seminaries can engage pressing social questions while cultivating moral imagination for the wider world. By linking theological reflection with civic participation, these initiatives embody Iliff's vision of a public theology of justice, one that translates faith commitments into collaborative work for equity, compassion, and the common good.

Taken together, Iliff's curricular, pedagogical, and public-facing innovations illustrate how a historically Protestant seminary can reorient its mission within a rapidly shifting spiritual landscape. This case demonstrates that institutional fragility can become a site of creative reconfiguration, where formation is reimagined for plural and justice-oriented publics. These insights open onto the broader theological question that guides the next section: how might such institutional experiments be interpreted through a framework of *liberating interdependence* that speaks to global patterns of religious change?

5. An Evolving, Imperfect Model

Iliff's journey remains unfinished. Like many seminaries, it continues to face financial constraints and enrollment pressures (Gin, 2020, 2022; Meinzer, & Gin, 2025). Yet its adaptive ethos suggests that institutional fragility can become a site of theological imagination rather than despair. The school's recent experiments in pedagogy and public engagement seek to embody relationality, justice, and accountability as integral to formation. Its work does not perfect these ideals but gestures toward new possibilities for theological education in an age marked by disaffiliation and moral disillusionment.

This approach reframes the current moment not as the death of theological education but as its reconfiguration—a transition from institution-centered religion to relational, justice-oriented

spiritual formation. Iliff's work in public theology, technological ethics, and pluralistic pedagogy illustrates how seminaries can evolve into civic learning communities that form ethical leaders for a post-institutional world. In this sense, theological education becomes a practice of rebuilding trust: between belief and behavior, between sacred traditions and public life, between the local and the global.

Iliff's case, therefore, shows that theological education can respond to disaffiliation not by lamenting decline but by cultivating integrity between conviction and practice. The seminary becomes a community where justice is pedagogy, dialogue is formation, and public engagement is spirituality. What emerges is not a perfect model but a faithful experiment, a living answer to the question that defines our era: *How shall we teach theology when religion itself is being remade?*

III. Reconfiguration as Global Transformation: Toward Liberating Interdependence

The reconfiguration of theological education must be understood within a broader global transformation in how human beings imagine their interdependence with one another, the earth, and the sacred. Across continents, postcolonial, feminist, ecological, and interreligious thinkers have articulated visions of liberation that move beyond individualism and institutional dominance toward mutuality, care, and relational justice. This global shift challenges Western paradigms of theological education that have long privileged autonomy and mastery over community and reciprocity.

Within this landscape, *liberating interdependence* offers a generative theological lens. As articulated by Musa Dube (2000), liberation is not an individual achievement, but a communal process grounded in justice, reciprocity, and healing. This vision resonates with Thich Nhat Hanh's (1998; 2021) teaching that "to be is to inter-be," emphasizing that spiritual and social transformation are inseparable. Together, these frameworks call for a pedagogy that forms persons not as isolated professionals but as participants in the web of life, accountable to the flourishing of all creation.

Although Iliff has not formally adopted this framework, aspects of its work, public-theology initiatives, participatory pedagogies, and interreligious formation, reflect its spirit. In this sense, Iliff offers a glimpse of how theological education might respond to the disaffiliation and

disillusionment of our time: by cultivating relational, justice-centered communities that embody the mutual transformation of self and world.

1. Transnational Reconfigurations of Faith

The reconfiguration of theological education is not confined to North America. Across Asia and the Pacific, similar shifts are reshaping the moral and religious landscape. In Korea, Japan, and the Philippines, younger generations are increasingly distancing themselves from institutional religion, often citing hypocrisy, gendered hierarchies, and political entanglements—as seen in qualitative fieldwork on Korean young adults (Song, 2019), the sharp post-scandal collapse in trust in religious organizations in Japan, especially among the young (Nippon.com, 2023), and Filipino youth’s widening value gap with church teaching on issues such as divorce and LGBTQ+ rights (SWS, 2024). As in the United States, many do not reject faith itself; rather, they reject *forms of religion* that fail to embody compassion, justice, or transparency. This global pattern signals not secularization but a search for credible, ethical spirituality.

This global disaffiliation underscores that the questions facing theological education are not merely institutional but civilizational. The task before us, then, is to discern how theology itself must be reconstructed to speak meaningfully within these emerging spiritual ecologies.

2. From Reconfiguration to Reconstruction

The current turbulence in theological education does not signal its demise but its reconfiguration. Across continents, faith communities are undergoing a spiritual realignment that redefines what it means to believe, to belong, and to act justly in the world. The disintegration of traditional denominational structures, once the backbone of Protestant seminaries, reveals not an absence of faith but the exhaustion of inherited forms. As the Pew Research Center (2024) and PRRI (2024) show, religious affiliation is giving way to fluid spiritual identities shaped by moral passion, ecological consciousness, and social activism. People are not abandoning the sacred; they are seeking it in new places—at climate marches, art collectives, online meditation circles, and community movements for justice. For theological schools, this shift demands more than adaptive strategy; it requires theological reconstruction. A model of education built for clerical reproduction cannot address a generation searching for authenticity, solidarity, and spiritual depth beyond institutional boundaries. The task before us is not to resuscitate

Christendom but to cultivate new forms of theological formation capable of inhabiting this reconfigured spiritual landscape. Formation must now prepare leaders who can translate faith into public responsibility, hold lament and hope together, and discern the movement of the Spirit in the moral complexities of a plural world.

3. Liberating Interdependence: A Framework for Theological Formation

To imagine such a model, the framework of liberating interdependence provides both theological grounding and pedagogical direction. First articulated by Musa Dube (2000) in her postcolonial feminist reading of the Syrophoenician woman (Matthew 15:21-28), the concept arose from the African post-independence context, where the celebration of political freedom revealed its limits. Dube observes that independence, while essential, often replicated hierarchies of domination and exclusion. Genuine liberation, she argues, requires interdependence that is itself liberating, a transformation of relationships distorted by colonialism, patriarchy, and empire.

Dube writes that “liberation becomes possible only through interdependence that seeks the well-being of all, human and nonhuman alike,” challenging Western and postcolonial notions of freedom as autonomy or control (158-160). For her, “no one is saved until all are saved,” a vision that locates salvation in the healing of communal and ecological relationships, including those between former colonizers and colonized, but in ways that dismantle domination rather than perpetuate it.

Building on Dube’s insight, I have developed liberating interdependence as a theological and pedagogical paradigm for intercultural and communal formation (Lee, 2013). In my usage, liberating interdependence names both a goal and a method: it envisions human flourishing as inherently relational and calls for educational practices that nurture this relationality through justice, dialogue, and mutual accountability. To educate theologically, then, is to ask whether our teaching and ministry contribute to the liberation of those most marginalized among and beyond our communities.

This relational imagination resonates with Thich Nhat Hanh’s (1998; 2021) Buddhist teaching that “to be is to inter-be,” affirming that spiritual and social transformation are inseparable. When read together, these frameworks invite theological education to reimagine formation as the cultivation of awareness of interconnection and the disciplined practice of resisting systems that fragment human and ecological communities.

At Iliff, this framework finds expression in collaborative learning, dialogical pedagogy, and public engagement. Students and faculty discern across lines of race, gender, religion, and vocation, embodying what Dube calls “reading for relationship.” Such formation is not the delivery of content but the nurturing of communal transformation. It equips students to inhabit the liminal space between faith and doubt, church and society, belief and action, precisely the terrain of a reconfigured religious world.

4. Public Theology as Accompaniment

Reconfiguration also demands a reimagining of theology’s public role. Theological education can no longer presume cultural privilege or institutional authority; instead, it must learn to *accompany* communities in their struggles for justice, belonging, and meaning. Public theology, in this sense, is not proclamation from the pulpit but *participatory discernment*, the practice of listening and acting with others to seek the common good. It emerges wherever faith and ethics meet the public sphere: in city councils, social movements, classrooms, and data labs.

At Iliff, public theology takes institutional form through initiatives such as the AI Institute for Social and Theological Ethics and the Institute for Religion, Politics & Culture (IRPC). The AI Institute’s TRUST Framework integrates theological anthropology into the ethics of artificial intelligence, reminding the technology sector that truly ethical design must safeguard human dignity and ecological sustainability (Iliff School of Theology, 2024; Business Wire, 2024). Likewise, the IRPC convenes interfaith and civic dialogues on democracy, ecological responsibility, and racial equity (Iliff School of Theology, n.d.). Together, these initiatives demonstrate how seminaries can serve as moral laboratories, spaces where theological reflection contributes to public discernment and collective well-being rather than institutional preservation.

This understanding of public theology echoes Dykstra’s (1997) notion of practical wisdom as the telos of theological education. For Dykstra, Christian practice is not mere technique but participation in God’s ongoing creation of justice and compassion. Teaching theology, then, is a communal apprenticeship in discernment—the cultivation of wisdom to act justly and love mercifully amid the world’s complexity. Public theology extends this apprenticeship beyond ecclesial boundaries, preparing leaders to bridge religious, political, and technological divides with humility and hope.

IV. Conclusion

Across the globe, patterns of disaffiliation and spiritual renewal reveal not the end of religion but the birth of a new religious imagination—one that is relational rather than institutional, justice-oriented rather than dogmatic, contemplative yet engaged. This emerging imagination calls for theological education that mirrors the interconnectedness of creation itself: learning as relationship, leadership as solidarity, formation as collective discernment.

As a Protestant Christian theologian in a multireligious context, I have come to see that the future of theological education depends on our capacity to learn *with* one another rather than *about* one another. Liberating interdependence provides a theological grammar for this vocation. It understands education as sacred relationship, an act of mutual transformation that bridges spiritual traditions, cultures, and generations. Seminaries that embody this ethos will not thrive because they preserve the past but because they witness to the future: a future where wisdom, justice, and spirituality inter-are.

To teach theology in this time, then, is to practice interbeing. It is to live and learn as if our liberation were bound together. When theological education becomes a community of liberating interdependence, it joins the Spirit's work of renewal, turning institutional decline into creativity and global reconfiguration into grace.

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