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## ARTICLE

# Theological Education for Sense-sational Leadership: Cognitive Science, Christian Agility, and the Case for Sensory Theological Education

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## ABSTRACT

In a century of rapid technological change, escalating religious conflict, and seismic shifts in how people live and worship, those in Christian ministry require more than quick thinking skills. They must reason imaginatively, face change with flexibility, and reinvigorate tradition while simultaneously supporting transformation and growth. What kinds of pedagogies cultivate the creativity, vision, and flexibility such leaders require for ministry today? This paper brings together research from theological education and cognitive science to show how pedagogical practices that engage the senses can help Christian leaders develop “agility”: namely, an ability to think and act in ways that are both discerning and dynamic, flexible as well as faithful. I argue that theological pedagogies that prioritize the senses in the pursuit of knowing God, others, and the material world, when coupled with attunement to the Holy Spirit, can help Christian leaders exercise Spirit-led agility in their ministries today.

## KEYWORDS

cognitive science, embodied pedagogy, theological education, Christian ministry, creative religious education

Christian history is full of them: daring leaders and creative dreamers, people like Mother Jones, Martin Luther King, Jr., Ella Baker, and Cesar Chavez, as well the more ordinary yet hardly less innovative and inspired educators, ministers and activists who regularly seek to respond to changing socio-political and cultural contexts and issues, including the current world-wide “double pandemic” of COVID-19 and racism ([Countess and Minter 2020](#)). What do such leaders share in common? While diverse in cause and differing in contexts, such persons were and are vision-casters and action-takers, people who saw possibilities despite difficulties and believed God’s peaceable reign was not merely plausible in theory but pursuable in practice. And so they pursued that reign of peace and justice with faithfulness, creativity, and profound care.

Today's world continues to demand creative and transformative leadership. Peter Murphy, editor of *Imagination*, describes such creativity as an ability to ask “what-if?” and “if, then?": what if this reality, situation or practice could be otherwise, and if it can be, then what does it imply we do? (Murphy, Peters, and Marginson 2010, 3, 5).

While Murphy speaks of societal leaders in general, his comments prove relevant for the leaders of the peculiar “society” that is the Christian community. Indeed, the terrain of ministry is complex, and creative solutions to pressing problems are needed. Like their forebearers above, Christian leaders must ask “what if?”—what if God’s justice came in concrete ways for an oppressed community? What if a struggling congregation could thrive again?—as well as “if, then?”—“if justice is possible, then what does it mean for us now? If thriving is conceivable, then how might we move towards it?” This ability to ask “what if?” and “if, then?”—to refine theory and practice in light of God’s promised reign and current contexts—is best described as Christian *agility*.

That Christian leaders today require agility is not itself a novel claim. Indeed, few would disagree that ministry of various kinds requires immense flexibility and creativity as well theological competence. Changes in theological education over recent years reflect this awareness, with seminaries and theological schools shifting towards more holistic, integrative, and experience-based models of education.<sup>1</sup> That said, the prioritization of abstract language and discourse over and above aesthetic and creative pedagogies can inadvertently inhibit the kind of agile, creative thinking Christian leaders require.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, while the need for “agile” Christian leadership is readily apparent, few scholars have examined cognitive science research on creativity and agility or its implications for theological higher education. Such research is important, for it is agile thinking, coupled with attunement to the Holy Spirit, that can enable Christians to communicate the knowledge and love of God in creative, faithful, and transformative ways.

Cognitive scientist, Wilma Koutstaal, in her book *The Agile Mind*, defines agile thinking as “ways of representing and processing (using) information and knowledge that [are] flexibly, creatively, and adaptively attuned to changing circumstances and goals” (2014, 3). She argues that mentally agile people are able to draw upon and use the “full continuum of levels of specificity of representations—ranging from the highly abstract . . . to the exceedingly specific (e.g., item specific, concrete, episodic, subordinate), as well as any of the number ‘basic-level’ midpoints in between” (4). This paper focuses on one aspect of this continuum and its implications for cognitive agility: sensory and materially-grounded thinking. By sensory and materially-grounded, I mean thinking that draws upon the material reality that we perceive via our senses and engage through physical or imaginary interaction (see Koutstaal 2014, 389).<sup>3</sup> The sensory and material can include objects, visuals, the physical environment, people, specific memories or experiences, and activities. While a broad category, all of the above share the characteristic of materiality.<sup>4</sup>

I concentrate on sensory knowing from the perspective of cognitive science for two reasons. First, interaction with sensory and concrete inputs can provide noetic content for reflection and refine the abstract thought crucial for theological thinking and construction of grounded theories (Liebert 2005, 90-92).<sup>5</sup> Specifically, sensory thinking and interaction, by inviting learners to pay attention to specifics and utilize under-engaged senses, can sharpen learners’ observation skills

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- 1 Conversations about “transformative” models of theological education have abounded over the last two decades. The following are simply a selection; clearly scholarly work on the subject exceeds this list. Katie Cannon argues for an African American model of theological education that takes seriously power dynamics and oppression in the context of the classroom (2011, 17–24). See also Drescher (2009, 137–40); Davis and Wadell (2016, 90–105); K Johnson (2015); Keating (2010); [Shaw \(2016, 205–16\)](#); Smith and Smith (2011); Fleischer (2006, 147–62); Das (2000, 103–9); and Hess, Brosmer, and Moore (2015, 170–85).
  - 2 Luke Johnson (2015) gives an excellent overview of the overemphasis on verbal language to speak about and encounter God. Keith Johnson (2015) laments the segregation of practice from theological reflection and provide an overview of the movement from scholasticism to the re-structuring of the university such that theologians needed to make a case for their scientific merit. Courtney Goto’s article captures the emphasis on the verbal and abstract well (2016a, 80-82). Other resources on creative pedagogy include Hamman (2011), Elkind (1980, 282–93), Goto (2016b), Goldburg (2004, 175–84), Dyrness (2001), Illman and Smith (2016), Hart, Hopps, and Begbie (2012), Begbie (2000), Harris (1991), Graham, Walton, and Ward (2005), and Moore (2004).
  - 3 Though I will explain in more detail below, Koutstaal (2014) underscores that all thinking is sensory, and that semantic knowledge is linked to language, perception and action. This is because we draw on various sensory modalities to form memory.
  - 4 I use materiality even in reference to “imaginative interaction” because such interactions require attention to specific details. One might think, for example, of imaginative prayer. In praying imaginatively, we draw on ours or others’ experiences of material reality to construct a scene. The act necessarily demands grounded thinking, making our imagining an engagement with materials of human experience. See especially Koutstaal on “sensory-perceptual simulation” (2014, 141–44).
  - 5 This is the main claim of Goto’s (2016a) article. See also Harris (1991) and Saliers (1980, 265–78). Koutstaal’s main claim regarding the sensory and material is that our knowing is linked the physical world; when we pay closer attention to it, we gain new insights for thinking and problem solving (2014).

(Koutstaal 2014, 153), enable them to notice new details of context or content (140-43), and help them to develop a greater repertoire of leadership skills through engagement with diverse media. Second, many who advocate for sensory knowing and pedagogies in theological education turn to theological aesthetics, embodiment and ritual theory, or communication theory to support their arguments. Few incorporate cognitive science research on how sensory and concrete thinking can foster the cognitive skills Christian leaders require (Winnings 2011, 266-70; Flaman 2011, 252-56; Brown and Strawn 2012). My reason for drawing on Koutstaal's research in particular is both because of her comprehensive treatment of cognitive agility and the attention she gives to sensory and embodied knowing.<sup>6</sup>

The paper proceeds in three parts. Part I seeks to situate the argument within theological education's wider turn towards the sensory and aesthetic, with a focus on the limited interaction with cognitive science. Part II examines Koutstaal's research on the role of sensory thinking in fostering cognitive agility and draws preliminary connections to the act of theological reflection. Part III addresses practical implications for integrating sensory and materially-grounded thinking into theological education. By helping theological students utilize their senses and attend to materiality, educators can correct the overemphasis on abstract representations of knowledge and better foster the cognitive and spiritual agility required for ministry today.

## Coming to our Senses: Literary Review of the Sensory in Theological Education

I have argued above that theological educators must prepare Christian leaders who demonstrate agility, who can ask, "what if?" and "if, then?" and join God in bringing peace and justice into reality. I have also claimed that sensory and concrete thinking, essential for agility, remains underutilized in theological education. This is not, however, to dismiss scholars seeking to correct the overreliance on verbal and abstract representations in religious education and formation more generally (Goto 2016a, 80-81). Indeed, theologians have given increased attention to the sensory dimensions of knowing in the last half century, and the desire to recover the place of the aesthetic, sensory and embodied has spurred many to reimagine how engagement of the senses might enrich theological reflection and spiritual formation (Ballard and Couture 2001; Baab and Kelly 2011; Ryken 2005; Taylor 2011; Viladesau 2013). While theological educators anchor their arguments in various theological and non-theological fields, efforts to link sensory engagement and theological education are most common in two areas of research.

The first is that of theological aesthetics, which focuses on how the arts cultivate theological sensibilities.<sup>7</sup> Scholars in this domain explore how sensory experience, imagination, and art supply theology with vital information about the world, God, and self. Richard Viladesau articulates the resourcing role of the arts for theology well when he writes, "the aesthetic realm provides theology with 'data' concerning its three objects (God, religion, and theology itself), as well as with knowledge of the cultural matrix to which these are related in reflection" (2013, 11). This is because, as Viladesau puts it, "Art and symbolic behavior objectify aspects of consciousness that are nonverbal, but are not for that reason pre-rational or pre-spiritual" (16). In other words, sensory experience, imagination, and art are themselves forms of knowledge, as well as avenues for knowledge expression and creation.<sup>8</sup>

Theological aesthetics' growth as a field has had spillover effects in the area of Christian education and formation. Indeed, many monographs and scholarly articles in recent years have explored this relationship between aesthetic experience and educational ministry, whether in the academy or congregation. Courtney Goto's recent work on creativity and education identifies artistic creation as a central mode for constructing and reforming knowledge of God (2016b, 2010). Similarly, Maria Harris's *Teaching as Religious Imagination* (1991) shows how the senses and materiality foster knowledge creation.

6 This is not to say that scholarship linking cognitive science and religion is lacking. On the contrary, Justin Barrett (2011) and Harvey Whitehouse (2004) have articulated cognitive theories of religious thinking and transmission that identify religious traditions as shaped and constrained by the material world. That said, neither author connects his research to conversations about religious and theological education, which is why I have chosen to engage with the cognitive science research directly. See Koutstaal (2014), chapters 4 and 11, for her focus on sensory knowing.

7 Richard Viladesau provides an excellent summary of the history of "aesthetics" in general, as well as theological aesthetics in particular. He understands theological aesthetics as the consideration of "God, religion, and theology in relation to sensible knowledge (sensation, imagination, and feeling), the beautiful, and the arts" (Viladesau 2013, 11). Also, the following provide introductory resources for thinking about aesthetics theologically: McCullough (2015), Brown (1993), and Farley (2001), and Wolterstorff (1987).

8 Many draw on Balthasar's theological aesthetics to anchor their work, as well as research from the fields of communications and literary criticism. See for instance, Baab and Kelly (2011), Begbie (2007), Bakhtin, Holquist, and Emerson (2011), and Balthasar, Fessio, and Riches (2009).

As concerns spiritual formation, James McCullough's (2015) research on the arts and spirituality explores how the arts provide gateways for theological reflection on and spiritual connection to God. Jeremy Begbie's (2002) reflections on aesthetics and theology in the context of worship pinpoint liturgical practices as theological expressive and formative. While the above is hardly comprehensive, it suffices to show the increased attention to how aesthetics connect to Christian education and formation.

The other conversation concerning the senses and Christian education focuses on "practices." Specifically, the "practices" discussion in practical theology has sought to nullify the segregation between lived spiritual, liturgical, cultural, and moral practices, on the one hand, and theological reflection on the other.<sup>9</sup> Practical theologians engaged in research on practices argue that practices possess "normative and generative functions" and serve as central vehicles for developing "phronesis," or "practical wisdom" (Richter 2014, 206, 213). This focus on how practices inform and orient human knowing has inspired a number of publications in recent years.<sup>10</sup> The Lilly Endowment-funded *Practicing Our Faith* project explored how various faith practices inform and reflect individual and communities' theologies (Bass and Copeland 2010). Don Saliers' work on liturgy and worship as "transformative rituals" (2005a, 310) similarly gives attention to the embodied nature of knowing (2005a, 2005b, 1994, 1996). James K.A. Smith's analysis of cultural liturgies and worship (2013, 2009) and Craig Dykstra's research on faith practices also emphasize that practices, as embodied, sensory activities, carry "epistemic weight" (1997; 2008; [Wigger 2017](#); Dykstra 2002; Bass and Dykstra 2011; Dykstra 1987). That said, much of the research on practice focuses on how ministers or Christian leaders might think about practices in congregational or community contexts. Less research exists on how embodied practices function in theological education.<sup>11</sup>

On the one hand, it is clear from the above that research exploring how the sensory and concrete relate to theological reflection is increasing. On the other, few scholars have brought cognitive science insights on agile thinking, and particularly the sensory and materially-grounded thinking upon which it depends, into conversation with methods in higher theological education. In addition, many do not treat the senses as unequivocally essential for the knowledge creation and spiritual formation that occurs in theological classrooms; rather, the sensory and material are presented as useful, additional avenues for the formation of Christian leaders (McCullough 2015, 14–15).<sup>12</sup> My goal in drawing on cognitive science is to expand the conversation concerning the role of the sensory and material in theological higher education and thus sharpen educators' efforts to foster agile Christian leaders. This kind of interdisciplinary dialogue between cognitive science and Christian education is particularly fitting for a practical theological project that seeks to examine and transform Christian faith and practice in light of the "situated and embodied character of human life" (Cahalan and Mikoski 2014, 3). Specifically, I employ Don Browning's (2010) critical hermeneutics to bring the theological disciplines, natural sciences, and social sciences into a mutually enriching and critically engaging conversation, with the aim of promoting theologically faithful and critically reflective educational praxis (Cahalan and Mikoski 2014, 4; Osmer 2008, 4-42). I use Browning's method because it recognizes the hermeneutical nature of all interpretation without dismissing the potential for both scientific and theological research to provide insights into reality (Browning 2010, 24). In this case, bringing non-theological disciplines and research tools aimed at analyzing lived experience (Cahalan and Mikoski 2014, 3) into conversation with Christian Scripture and theology provides an avenue to practice "distanciation": namely, "a process of critically examining our own theoretical and historically shaped assumptions" through dialoging with alternative perspectives (Cooper 2011, 27). Though cognitive science possesses its own hermeneutical biases, engaging with such research can help Christian educators think more critically and holistically about how concrete and sensory engagement can help theological students better exercise the agile thinking that Christian leadership requires.

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9 The following provide helpful introductions and overviews of the "practices" conversation: Bass and Copeland (2010), Bass and Dykstra (2008), Volf and Bass (2002), Bass and Dykstra (2011), and McGuire (2005, 117-134).

10 James K. A. Smith (2009, 2013, 2016) is a good example of someone whose work depends on a theory of embodied knowing and the power of habit to shape our sensibilities, including thought and action. Many anchor or at least draw on Alasdair MacIntyre's (2007) work to justify the idea that Christian practices cultivate "virtue."

11 This is not to say that it doesn't exist; rather the orientation of the "practices" conversation tends towards congregations rather than theological higher education. Examples, however, of research on practices in the context of academic classrooms include: Bass and Copeland (2010); Miller-McLemore (2012); Dreyer and Burrows (2005); Goto (2016a); Graham, Walton, and Ward (2005); and Das (2000).

12 Courtney Goto is an exception, however. She identifies all people as artists, thereby making artistic creation a central avenue to theological reflection. That said, her explanation is somewhat limited and relies heavily on theology (2016a, 84–85).

## Please DO Touch: The Sensory Support for Agility

Cognitive scientist Wilma Koutstaal, in her book *The Agile Mind*, claims that agile thinking entails movement between different modes of thinking and different levels of specificity (2014, 4, 24-25). In terms of modes of thinking, agile thinkers must be able to exercise the high concentration or control characteristic of critical analysis (4, 25; also see chapter 7), as well as the automatic thinking that supplies intuitive insights.<sup>13</sup> Agility also requires movement between levels of specificity, where specificity refers to the content or “what” of thought (4, 11, 25). This content ranges from abstract ideas to very specific objects, memories or materially grounded concepts (14-16). A person’s ability to utilize the full range of the continuum is what constitutes agility (7, 25-26). Over-reliance on one mode of thinking or level of representation, on the other hand, restricts flexible action and creative thinking.<sup>14</sup>

Attention to sensory and material inputs belongs to what Koutstaal calls “specific representation” (2014, 14). While such engagement can occur from either an automatic or controlled state and constitutes only one aspect of agility,<sup>15</sup> I focus on it both because of its underuse in theological education, as well as the perceived separation between the sensory and material and reasoned theological reflection.<sup>16</sup> Courtney Goto, in her article “Thinking Theologically by Creating Art,” captures this unbalanced prioritization of the abstract and verbal well when she writes, “Unfortunately, ministry, as well as seminary training, suffers from an overdependence on verbal, cognitive approaches to theological reflection . . . aesthetic practices have often been marked as something different from and other than ‘theological reflection’ . . . the arts have often been kept separate from (and therefore treated as marginal to) the heady business of theologizing, even though artistic expressions of faith *are* theological statements” (Goto 2016a, 80-82).

Goto’s observations concerning the “limitations of the sayable” (2016a, 80) and the artificial divide between artistic creation and theological reflection are particularly perceptive when it comes to thinking about how the sensory and concrete relate to agile thinking. Koutstaal, in a chapter called “Thinking with Our Senses,” questions common conceptions of thinking as an internal activity that occurs “largely independent of the physical environment” (2014, 125). She argues, instead, that the physical world, rather than ancillary to thinking, supplies the material from which all abstract thoughts are birthed (125, 161-66).<sup>17</sup> Stressing the sensory roots of concepts and ideas, she writes, “Even thinking that appears to proceed without any overt reliance on such external aids—such as thinking that is highly abstract—nonetheless builds on foundations of mental concepts that are, at least in part, forged through an individual’s interactions with the concrete world of sights and sounds, and embedded actions within it” (125). Some of the clearest expressions of the physicality of our concepts that Koutstaal describes are in common phrases like “jumping to conclusions” or “trial by fire” (137, 170).

Koutstaal is not alone in her claims regarding the sensory roots of knowing.<sup>18</sup> Interpersonal neurobiologist Daniel Siegel similarly underscores the environmental and material influences on our thinking.<sup>19</sup> He argues that learning, at its most

13 Koutstaal distinguishes agile thinking from dual-process theories of cognition precisely because she views the intuitive and automatic process of thinking as indispensable for agility (2014, 17-23). See Kahneman (2013) for someone employing dual-process theory. Koutstaal ultimately argues for the “essential role of intuition, not only in exceptional cases but, rather thought the warp and woof of human cognitive endeavor” (2014, 22-23).

14 Koutstaal’s central claim in *The Agile Mind* is that overdependence on one mode of thinking or kind of representation reduces agility and comprises creativity, problem solving, and critical thinking. This overuse can occur in relation to all four poles. Excessive control can stymie imagination, foster rigidity, and lead to rigid concept-formation (2014, 64-66). Thinking that relies too heavily on automatic or intuitive reason leaves us unable to envision a world beyond the model we have already set (79). Likewise, overly abstract thinking disconnected from specific experience impairs our problem-solving abilities (60-70), while thinking that is too specific inhibits the creation of “rules” that we can transfer to other contexts (55-56).

15 As I mentioned in the outset, this paper hones in on one corner of the quadrant, not because I believe the sensory-perceptual bears the most significance for Christian education, nor because I think focus on the sensory-perceptual is always a good thing, but because the senses are typically underutilized as channels for knowledge-building in theological education.

16 Although I do not directly engage the dimensions of highly deliberate and more automatic modes of thought, they nevertheless surface throughout, since we can engage the sensory and material from either highly controlled or more automatic states depending on the context.

17 Also, see Mareschal, Quinn, and Lea (2010) for a helpful introduction to concept-formation, especially chapter 2.

18 Cognitive scientists studying the relationship between vision and cognition similarly point to correlations between the situational context and the categories and abstract concepts people create. Other cognitive scientists looking at concept formation identify material dimensions to abstract construals. See, for instance, Henderson and Ferreira (2004) and Mareschal, Quinn, and Lea (2010).

19 Interpersonal neurobiology (IPNB) is a relatively new interdisciplinarity field that brings together research from neuroscience, human biology, and psychology to theorize human relationality, well-being, and psychological development. On the one hand, IPNB, in seeking to join often siloed domains of study, offers a much-needed integrative approach to understanding human development. At the same time, while IPNB seeks to address a gap in understanding as regards the impact of human biology on relational and psychological experience, it can be critiqued, like many interdisciplinary fields, for a lack of conceptual clarity around key ideas (e.g. intrapersonal attunement; neural integration; and mindfulness), as well as its mixed methods approach. Additionally, Jarmie and Harris’ work critically analyzes IPNB from a hermeneutical perspective; she argues that the field’s main theories can be understood as cultural artifacts, reflective of and helping to solidify cultural “truths” about human connectedness (2018, 10). While she does not seek to undermine IPNB basic theories, her work suggests that it is necessary to situate IPNB research in relation to a wider cultural context focused



basic level, represents the multiplication, pruning, and transformation of the brain's neural pathways,<sup>20</sup> which are constructed and altered by means of environmental input (Siegel 2010, 40). In other words, the material aspects of life—our experiences at home and work, our interactions with objects and the environments in which we live and move—impact the neural pathways in our brains. Siegel's definition of the mind as an “embodied and relational, emergent self-organizing process that regulates energy and information flow” (2017, 62), underscores that thinking is not a disembodied activity. On the contrary, generating thoughts entails “a remarkably subtle interplay” between brain, body, and environment (Koutstaal 2014, 125). In short, human beings are organized for touching, tasting, feeling, hearing, smelling, and acting our way towards knowledge (2014, 125).

That words and ideas rely on sensory inputs for their construction ultimately means that theological educators cannot divorce materiality and reasoning, the sensory and sensible, the logic of art and the logic of God. Yet how, specifically, does engagement with the sensory and concrete contribute to agile leadership? In the following, I highlight four ways that sensory thinking and concrete engagement contributes to the agile thinking required for leading with agility today.

**Flexible Noticing.** First, sensory thinking and attention to the concrete helps learners develop “flexibility in noticing” (Koutstaal 2014, 143). Flexibility in noticing involves an ability to look at a situation, idea, or reality from diverse angles and perceive the diversity feature comprising the reality itself. In theological education, noticing practices tend to involve texts. Students approach a theological idea or historical topic by noticing the features of an argument—the logic, the coherence, the validity of the author's claims—or notice in a writing or lecture the words the author or presenter uses to describe her topic. Less often are learners given opportunities to approach a theological issue by means of sensory engagement. Unfortunately, prioritizing verbal and abstract representations can restrict learners' “orienting sensitivities,” namely the extent to which they are “sensitive” to different features of an idea, situation, or topic.<sup>21</sup>

Sensory engagement, on the other hand, allows students to expand their perceptual frames so that they literally see more of reality (Koutstaal 2014, 144-46). For instance, rather than begin a class on the Hebrew psalms by inviting learners to analyze a psalm's structure, learners might listen to selections of psalmody and pay attention to their features: the cadence, length and sound of words, tone, its concordance or dissonance. In this case, using one's senses cultivates greater flexibility in learners' noticing. The details that seemed salient when they read the texts may no longer be the ones that catch their ears when they hear the psalm performed.

Greater flexibility in noticing contributes to agile thinking in a number of ways. First, using one's senses and body helps learners perceive situations, people, or objects in novel or enhanced ways (Koutstaal 2014, 144-46), and this, in turn, leads to richer descriptions and higher theoretical understanding.<sup>22</sup> Just as a hearing the psalm may have shifted the learner's conceptions of it, abstract ideas are enriched when we approach them from multiple angles and by means of multiple modalities (2014, 141). Second, greater flexibility in noticing can help learners arrive at new strategies for solving problems. New details provide new leads, and like detectives who unearth clues in inconspicuous and unexpected places, flexible noticers often see commonalities and solutions where others perceive confusion (142). This is, in part, because flexible noticers do not simply “accept the way events have been perceived, and conceived, by others” (142); rather, like the Jesuits who “find God in all things” (Barry and Barry 2009), flexible noticers rely on multiple senses to draw a more comprehensive picture of what is going on in a given situation.

For theological educators concerned with helping learners accurately assess future ministerial situations, guide congregants through challenging problems, or devise creative ways to meet a community's needs, providing avenues for them to closely examine concrete granular details through physical, sensory, or imaginative engagement is essential. Practicing such sensory and concrete thinking allows them to generate more precise “maps” of their context, a person's

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on understanding “human trauma, growth, and development” (10). Despite these critiques, IPNB remains a rapidly growing field with the potential to help religious scholars conceptualize the role of relationships and the material world in human growth and development. For more of Siegel's work, see *The Developing Mind* (2015). For an example of a scholar bringing IPNB into dialogue with spirituality, see Hollingsworth (2008). For a hermeneutical conceptualization of IPNB, see Jarmie and Harris (2018).

<sup>20</sup> See Siegel (2015, 47); for further study, see chapter 2.

<sup>21</sup> Koutstaal links orienting sensitivity to insight, reflection, and imagination (2014, 143).

<sup>22</sup> One reason flexibility in noticing is so crucial is that humans are “cognitive misers”: we rely on sparse abstract and verbal information to construct concepts. When we fail to notice in greater detail or use our senses and bodies to examine the world or ideas, we end up with “depleted concepts” (Koutstaal 2014, 137-8, 143).

life, or even how the Spirit might be working in the midst of their or their community's lives. Moreover, by noticing a wide variety of details—for example, where mothers with children gather in the community, how a parishioner looks when he shares about his family life—learners engage in a kind of cognitive and spiritual attentiveness similar to what Simone Weil calls “*attente*” (2009, 59, 71-72).

***Fine-tuning Ideas.*** Second, sensory and concrete thinking can help correct concepts and refine ideas (Koutstaal 2014, 40, 151). This is because paying attention to concrete or sensory details—whether physically or imaginatively—halts automatic processing, and this processing “pause” provides an opportunity to more clearly perceive inadequacies in one's ideas (2014, 93, 99). For instance, a learner might, based on previous encounters with Calvin's theology, conceive that Presbyterians are restrained in their worship, focused on critical thinking and uninterested in charismatic connection with Christ. Yet, were that learner invited to attend an animated Presbyterian worship service, she might find her categorical assumptions about Presbyterians and their theology challenged and her ideas re-formed.

Using sensory and concrete engagement to “pause” learners in their thinking processes is especially useful in light of humans' propensity to be “sensory-perceptual misers,” overly reliant on abstract and sparse verbal information in the construal of an idea or concept (Koutstaal 2014, 137). Fuzzy-trace theory describes how this miserliness manifests in abstract concept formation: humans reduce cognitive taxation by recruiting limited fragments of information, which they then convert into “minimal representations” just sufficient to allow successful behavior” (2014, 14, 40). This ability to rapidly generate simplified pictures of reality—called “gists”<sup>23</sup>—allows us to quickly size up a situation, often within milliseconds,<sup>24</sup> identify potential threats, categorize what is occurring based on abstract ideas, and quickly decide how we want to respond (Henderson and Ferreira 2004, 12-13). In generating gists, we often “gravitate to the lowest, least precise level in this ‘hierarchy of gist’ that the task will allow” (Koutstaal 2014, 40). In other words, while gists save us valuable cognitive energy,<sup>25</sup> they often inaccurately capture reality.

Thinking concretely or using one's senses to revisit the reality one seeks to describe, however, can sharpen and refine theory. Just as paying attention to the details of a map when one is lost helps a person discern other possible routes, so using all our senses to attend to the material and specific features of a situation contributes to problem solving (Koutstaal 2014, 71). and enhances flexibility of action (73). In this way, sensory and materially-grounded thinking both dis-orient and re-orient us. The lost person does not simply tune into the topography of her surroundings once she is aware that she is lost. She becomes aware that she is lost precisely in the act of paying attention! Indeed, only when the shop fronts and street signs no longer look familiar does re-orientation become possible. Yet it is by continuing to attend to the details—this time both the concrete details of the map and the surroundings—that she creates a more comprehensive and complex “gist” from which to abstract a new course.

In sum, returning to the concrete and sensory details of reality—particularly the lived reality of faith—keeps Christian leaders epistemologically humble, cognitively agile, and spiritually “tuned-in.” Rather than assume that what one is saying, doing, or thinking matches reality, material and sensory thinking helps learners re-vision theologies and revise plans of action. This re-visioning and revising of concepts and action through sensory attentiveness is particularly relevant for preparing Christian leaders building communities of faith in a climate of increased political and religious polarization and division. Indeed, such leaders must be able to place themselves in others' shoes, relax narrow constraints, nuance their opinions based on new information, and identify avenues for collaboration without dissolution of diversity. Moreover, they must be able to discern the movements of the Spirit, to find in the mundane details the presence and provision of God.<sup>26</sup> These skills of creative problem-solving, mutual understanding, and spiritual attentiveness require attending to

23 Henderson and Ferreira describe gists as a “general semantic interpretations,” that include, “establishing the identity of a scene . . . some semantic features of that class of scenes, and some aspects of the scene's global spatial layout” (2004, 12).

24 Henderson and Ferreira argue that, “the evidence is overwhelming that gist can be apprehended very rapidly and can in turn influence various other visual and cognitive processes (e.g., biases about the presence of particular objects) and behaviors (e.g., eye movement)” (12). The research they cite finds “gists” can emerge with 30-50 milliseconds of “scene onset” (2004, 12-13).

25 Siegel's research on memory suggests that not only do we try to reduce mental energy by automatizing ideas, we actually engage in “selective forgetting” so as to not overwhelm the mind with unnecessary details (2015, 82). Christina Cleveland's work on stereotyping and its effects on disunity within the Christian community are particularly insightful. She too highlights how our biological desire to reduce “cognitive taxation” connects to biasing (2013, 47-49).

26 That the Spirit indwells creation and that God speaks to us in the ordinary details of life is a recurring theme in Christian theological reflection. See for instance, Brown (2006), Moore (2004), Wolfteich (2010), and L Johnson (2015).

the particulars of material reality (Koutstaal 2014, 152). By incorporating avenues for learners to exercise sensory thinking, theological educators can equip learners develop more accurate theological, contextual, and spiritually-attuned “gists” that can, in turn, guide them towards agile leadership.

**Fostering Psychological Proximity.** Third, sensory thinking can help learners cultivate kinship:<sup>27</sup> *kinship* with information and the realities that information aims to describe. Such kinship is crucial for Christian leaders, for one cannot truly know God unless one feels *kin* with God. One cannot truly know a community without seeing its members as kin. In short, when one’s subject matter is God, God’s people or God’s world, psychological proximity is of essence; true competence coincides with kinship.<sup>28</sup>

Sensory and concrete engagement fosters this kind of kinship, because it requires learners to get intimate with the subject matter, whether physically or through imaginative simulation. For instance, creating a sculpture as a way to reflect on a “significant theological question,” as Courtney Goto invites learners to do in one of her classes (2016a, 86-87), allows people to practice “interiority,” presence to oneself (Frohlich 2005, 75). This presence to oneself—a kind of deeper knowing of one’s own internal thought life—by means of art allows learners to physically see how they construct theological ideas out of material realities, as well as invite them into a “revelatory experiencing” of the Spirit.<sup>29</sup> Goto stresses that in using physical materials to reflect theologically, learners “create a bridge that expresses some of the complexity of their faith. The bridge provided by art can bring together disparate, discordant, or even nascent bits and pieces . . . it can express in the moment, for example, what is in the making, as well as what has been lost yet remains” (Goto 2016a, 86).

Abstract concepts, by contrast, can foster psychological distance from ourselves and the reality, object or person we desire to know. Indeed, this is the basic claim of construal level theory: namely, that level of concept formation—abstract or specific—affects how physically or psychologically distant a person feels from concept’s subject (Lieberman and Förster 2009). Lieberman and Förster describe psychological distance as what occurs when we are confronted with an idea or concept that “is not part of one’s direct experience” (2009, 1330). The more abstract the concept or generalized and non-specific the language, the less connected the subject seems to one’s direct experience and thus, the less proximal one feels to the person or thing (2009, 1331; Koutstaal 2014, 103). The converse is also true: the more specific, concrete, or sensory the concept, the more psychological proximity experienced (Lieberman and Förster 2009, 1337).

Koutstaal notes how time and space also inform concept-formation. She observes how greater physical distances in space or time “implicitly and unintentionally elicit effects of psychological distance,” and this psychological distance, in turn, results in more abstract construals of the person, object or event (Koutstaal 2014, 105). Objects or persons that are physically or temporally near or with which we have had experience, however, foster psychological nearness and lead to more specific descriptions. Koutstaal sums up well why this is so when she writes, “physical distance actually changes our perception. What we can “see” and “know” when physically near to, versus far from, objects or events, differs, and this learned experiential knowledge, based on our physical senses and ways of acting in the world may be mirrored or analogically extended into our mental and conceptual world” (2014, 105).

This relationship between physical distance, psychological distances and abstract conception formation challenges educators who often rely on abstract language to talk about God or the life of faith. For instance, how might conversations about concern and care for the “Other” inadvertently limit love for such Others if the discourse remains theoretical and abstract? While it is helpful to name and examine the linguistic and symbolic practices by which humans establish us-them dichotomies and notions of “otherness,” if our discussions fail to engage specific situations, issues, or communities

27 I am drawing on Jesuit Gregory Boyle’s (2005, 2011) use of the term “kin” to describe intimacy, a way of relating to other that includes them into our circle people we “family.” Using “kin” is a way to convey, in a more sensory way, what it is like to truly understand something (see Koutstaal on deep understanding, which is cultivated by drawing on various modalities, including the senses [2014, 389-90]).

28 This idea of kinship is also connected to Parker Palmer’s understanding of how truth and community are related. For Palmer, “to teach is to create a space in which the community of truth is practiced” (2007, 95). This vision of teaching stems from a fundamental claim that reality is communal; moreover, we can only know that reality by being in relationship with it (95-97). This model has the “Great Subject” at the center, with the “knowers” creating an interconnected and dynamic web around the center. By means of their dialogue and engagement with one another around the subject, they come to practice and discern Truth. One does not ascertain this truth by mastering “the conclusions”; rather knowledge is gained through “our commitment to the conversation itself, our willingness to put forward our observations and interpretations for testing by the community and to return the favor to others” (104).

29 Goto defines revelatory experiencing as a destabilizing experience that allows learners to experience the divine mystery in new ways (2016b, 3; also 2016a, 87).



where such love of Other is practiced or afford person opportunity to practice love for others themselves, the psychological distance may very well remain. Materially grounded, specific thinking or sensory engagement—whether in the form of case studies, actual physical interaction, observing or participating in a dramatic performance, or reflecting verbally about particular moments one has experienced this love for Other—can reduce the actual and perceived physical distance between the learner and Other they aim to know and love.

**Fixing Functional Fixedness.** Fourth, sensory and concrete thinking can counter functional fixedness. Functional fixedness “occurs when we become stuck or fixed upon one way of looking at an object, particularly a way of looking at an object that is in accord with its usual function or purpose” (Koutstaal 2014, 127). It does not take much effort to imagine how this occurs in churches; indeed, controversies concerning “who moved the chairs?” and “why are we having sleepovers in the sanctuary?” afflict congregations across the board. Clearly, agile leaders must help their congregants reimagine how worship spaces, pulpits, and even entire church buildings function in light of God’s call upon a given community.

Yet, functional fixedness need not only occur in relation to objects and spaces. On the contrary, functional fixedness often features in our thinking. Koutstaal describes how we can adopt excessively narrow construals of reality that restrict our perception, both of reality and of possible alternative (Koutstaal 2014, 132-34). Abstract concepts, as “broad, general notions” that shape how we interact with objects and interpret new ideas, can contribute to this limiting of perception (2014, 132). This is, in part, because abstract ideas connect to the categorization systems we use to organize reality, which may or may not be sufficient for addressing current situations (132). For Christian leaders and the communities they serve, this conceptual form of functional fixedness often manifests in how we define what is or is not of God, how we interpret Scripture, the way we think worship spaces work, or who counts as Christian. Such ways of thinking—when resistant to critical reflection and refinement—make us unable to “freshly perceive and conceive new possibilities” (133).

Inviting learners to “take a long, loving look at the real,” can help them counter functional fixedness, both in themselves and their congregations (Burghardt 1989, 14-17). This is because the “real”—real people, real poverty, real pain—broadens our conceptions of the truth. They force us to get intimate with reality rather than define it from a distance. Jesus is perhaps one of the best examples of what this “long, loving looking at the real” really looks like. He spots Zacchaeus in the tree (Luke 19:1-10, NRSV). He points to lilies in the field and birds flying through the air (Matthew 6:25-34). He dreams up poignant parables based on present day particularities. He touches the sick and turns with love towards a bleeding woman tugging on his cloak (Luke 8:28-48). He uses mud and spit to heal the blind man’s eyes (Mark 8:22-25). By “going granular” through sensory and concrete engagement, theological educators help learners develop more comprehensive ideas of the real that is God’s world. Moreover, if permitted to use their senses not only to think theologically about God but actually encounter God in the classroom—say, through imaginative prayer or *lectio divina*—they might even re-perceive who God is, how God works, or what God wants for themselves and this world.

**Summary.** The above has underscored the significance of the sensory and concrete for agility. This narrow focus is not intended to disparage the value of abstract representations for theological learning. On the contrary, educators want learners, especially those who lead the Church, to develop theological accounts that go beyond particular, context-bound expressions of Christian faith. We may desire them to “automatize” formal systems of doctrines or acquire a knowledge of significant biblical themes and historical events in both the church and wider world. We hope that leaders will, likewise, be able to articulate that God is Triune, however abstract the notion might be, and understand the significance of this claim for Christian faith. We sincerely desire that our learners will possess the theological breadth to discuss difficult topics of theodicy, atonement, death, resurrection, violence, and love. We want them to have automatized practices of prayer and habits of discipleship, including patience, joy, compassion, service, listening, and honesty.

Yet the internalization of such knowledge and practices can, if engaged from an overly abstract mode, result in a theoretical knowing of God increasingly divorced from lived experience. Learners might become automatic in their prayers and even have a rich understanding of what prayer “does.” Yet if they don’t actually engage in praying, practice it in our classrooms, or encounter it concretely in the context of theological reflection, their ideas about prayer may linger at the level of the abstract. We can help them develop theologically rich, abstract understandings of grace. Yet, if we do not provide opportunities for them to experience grace on a sensory level, we not only diminish their understanding, we allow one of their most basic and most pivotal avenues of knowing God—their bodies and senses—to atrophy. This is problematic

since abstract ideas, as we saw, when decoupled from the experiential knowing acquired through the senses, grow brittle and inaccurate. By contrast, the more frequently we engage learners in theological reflection at the level of sensory and concrete experience, the more likely they are to develop richer concepts of who God is, what the life of faith ought to look like, as well as the skills to translate those concepts into the arenas of life and ministry.

## Incarnation and Incarnate Knowing: The Sensory and Concrete God

It is clear from the above that the senses are significant for fostering nimble, cognitively agile leaders. Yet are the senses and concrete world truly indispensable for knowing God?

A quick glance through Christian history suggests that humans have long found the senses an avenue for encountering and worshipping God. Images and icons, sensory-laden Sunday services, metaphorical methods of reading Scripture, and bodily participation in prayer: cultivating Christian understanding and faithfulness were aesthetic and sensory acts (McGuire 2005, 124). Erik Palazzo's observations about medieval Christian worship helpfully capture how the sensory and theologically sensible manifested Christian worship.

The sensory dimension of medieval liturgy, in which the images and all the artistic creations fully participated, was a major component in the anthropology of the rituals of the medieval church. [central to this the sensory dimension were] not only the artistic creations intended for the ritual itself, but also all kinds of liturgical expressions that appealed to the senses . . . the liturgy in general—but more particularly medieval liturgy—constituted “synthesis of the arts” par excellence, so much so that “sacred art” itself could become “liturgy.” (Palazzo 2010, 25-26)

Palazzo argues that the aesthetic dimensions of the liturgy prioritized the senses as primary channels for knowing God; the “auditory,” “visual,” and “tactile,” as well as olfactory and gustatory elements of the liturgy, rather than auxiliary to theological proclamation, “signified truths of faith” (2010, 26). Yet the liturgy was not the only arena in which sensory knowing proved central to faith formation and expression. Ornate church buildings and the commissioning of cathedrals served as channels for expressing commitment to the Divine. The five senses, influential in Western mysticism, also provided a way to “integrate the sensory with the spiritual dimension of human experience . . . to counteract any tendency towards a purely intellectualist understanding of consciousness of or union with God” (Sheldrake 2013, 573-75). Reformation era pageants and tableaux: these too brought together sight, sound, and the sacred (Ehrstine 2002). To this day art, music, liturgies, festivals, prayers, buildings, banners, websites, and icons continue to give form to Christian faith.

Yet, the fact that Christians have, throughout history, employed the sensory and aesthetic as a way to worship and know God does not necessarily communicate something intrinsic to our or God's identity. Is there something more fundamental to who God is and how God relates to God's creatures that would implicate our senses in the knowing and loving of God?

If we hone in on how God repeatedly chooses to relate to the creatures God crafted and calls God's own, we cannot escape God's inordinate commitment to revealing Godself through the material, sensible world.<sup>30</sup> From the theophanies threaded through the Hebrew Scriptures, the signs and wonders performed in Egypt, and the creation of the Temple to the angel's visitation to Mary, Jesus' resurrection appearances, and the physical outpouring of the Holy Spirit, God elects to be seen, felt, heard, and ultimately, more fully known (Savran 2009).

Yet, it is in the scandal of the incarnation—a baby born in Bethlehem—that God's intentionality in revealing Godself visibly and tangibly is most manifest (Loades 2013). Ann Loades describes the incarnation as “the most signal exercise of creative initiative” (2013, 555), the avenue by which we behold the “image of the invisible God” (Colossians 1:15). As the author of

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<sup>30</sup> The following is a selection of resources highlighting material reality as a plane of divine revelation and a means by which God reveals Godself. It is not intended to be exhaustive but demonstrative that God is, in fact, intentional in relating to humans through the physical and sensory world. Not included here are those resources from early Christianity that simply prioritize the sensory as a means of knowing God. I include those in a footnote below. See Balthasar, Fessio, and Riches (2009, 59–51); Brown (2006); L Johnson (2015); Schmemmann (2003).

John's gospel reminds us, the Word—a concept—became flesh (John 1:14). In other words, through Christ, God declares the abstract insufficient. Bones, breath, a beating heart, and body: these are the vehicles God chooses to reveal Godself and restore communion with God's creatures.

That God becomes incarnate implies that our senses are crucial channels for clearly perceiving God's identity. In other words, the incarnation does not simply affirm God's commitment to revealing God's self through sensory and concrete modes. The incarnation and bodily resurrection of Christ affirm that it is our material nature and sensory capacities that permit humans both now and in eternity to most fully commune with God (see especially L Johnson 2015; Wright 2008). We see this prioritization of our senses and the material world for knowing God in Jesus' ministry. Indeed, Jesus repeatedly invites people to "come and see," to encounter him rather than simply talk with him from a distance. We observe this when, instead of minimizing physical bodies, Jesus makes them central to his ministry. Indeed, we rarely learn what Jesus says without seeing first what he does for specific, concrete human beings: he heals people's eyes, mends broken bones, alleviates ailments, anoints the sick, and even raises the dead.

We see this this prioritization of the senses again when the author of 1 John reminds us that the first followers' concrete engagement with Christ proved pivotal for their convictions: "that which was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—this life was revealed, and we have seen it . . ." (1 John 1:1). Even the apostle Paul, king of theological abstractions and occasional disparager of the "flesh," does not ultimately despise the senses or body. On the contrary, it is he who urges the congregations under his care to enact the love of Christ by attending to one another's physical needs. It is he who praises the churches of Macedonia for their collections for the struggling saints in Jerusalem (2 Corinthians 8:1-3). It is he who pays close attention to who gets to eat at the Corinthians' communion celebrations (1 Corinthians 11:17-34) and uses earthy metaphors and imagery to communicate his vocational identity (1 Thessalonians 2:7; Galatians 4:19; 1 Corinthians 3:2).

Of course, this physical experience of beholding, touching, smelling, hearing, and tasting God in the flesh that profoundly nourishes the first followers' insights into the reality, nature, and desires of God, is not something we in the twenty-first century can replicate in full. Nor did beholding Christ in the flesh necessarily translate into right understanding of who Christ was. Time and time again we witness the disciples waffling, as they literally walk with their teacher along the road, about Jesus' identity and purpose. Yet, the disciples' difficulty in discerning the Divine does not declare the sensory and material inessential.

While we who follow Jesus today cannot behold him physically, the Gospel accounts, the sacraments, and the Spirit who speaks to us in the ordinary material of life bring us into connection again and again with the sensory and concrete Christ who makes God known (L Johnson 2015; Farley 2001). This continued affirmation of our senses for knowing God is perhaps most obvious in our celebrations of the sacraments of baptism and the Eucharist (Zizioulas 2011; Schmemmann 2003; Saliers 1994). Indeed, these "visible means of invisible grace" enable us to encounter the risen Christ again and again in a concrete-like form. Moreover, the formal sacraments and the "informal" sacrament of every-day life remind us that God takes seriously our material lives and chooses to remain engaged with us in them.<sup>31</sup>

Highlighting God's commitment to being known via the material world is not to say that God is only committed to the sensory and specific. On the contrary, God, like a good agile leader, "oscillates." This agility is on display at Creation, as God moves between high control and "under-control,"<sup>32</sup> specific representations and more abstract claims. God begins with great focus and granularity: shaping the stars, ordering the seas, forming the animals, separating day from night, and crafting humans from the very *humus*—the dust of earth (Kindschi 2017). That said, after surveying all God has crafted, God stands back and abstracts from the particulars: "God saw that it was good." All of this creating, of course, takes immense concentration and control, and so God chooses, on the final day, to revel in "under-control": to Sabbath. That this balance

<sup>31</sup> Moore develops a theory of "sacramental teaching" based on an understanding of the sacraments as mediating God's grace and "enabling the community to participate more fully in the grace of God that is everywhere revealed" (2004, 9). Her central assumptions are that "God is the primary Teacher and that God's sacred creation is a source for learning. The relationship between God and the world is primal. Ordinary reality mediates God's grace, and ordinary people, situations, and objects are vessels of the Holy. Thus, all aspects of life—even the margins of society—are imbued with God's presence" (Moore 2004, 4-5, 9-13, 49-53).

<sup>32</sup> By under-control, I mean "automatic" or defocused attention, which is on the extreme range of Koutstaal's levels of control (the "how" of thought). On the Sabbath, God is "less" focused than during the last six days of high intensity work (Koutstaal 2014, 117-20).

between particularities and generalities, intense activity and rest, reflects God’s way of relating to the universe and the conditions under which both humans and the natural world flourish communicates the significance of moving between “poles” of specificity and control.

On the other hand, humans are sensing creatures, and our God is a God who wills to be known “in flesh, dwelling among us” (John 1:14). Lest the point be missed, then, abstract ideas about God uncoupled from sensory and concrete engagement with God and God’s world will inhibit a deep and full understanding of Christian faith, the Subject of it, and the agility required to make both known in faithful, creative ways in the world. Indeed, excessive reliance on the abstract not only distances learners from the concrete sources and means that allow them to interact with the world and expand their theoretical ideas (Koutstaal 2014, 126); it also distances them from the God we hope they will come to more deeply know and love. The danger that theological education must seek to avoid, then, is the abstracting-away of God. By helping learners use their senses, theological educators facilitate communion with the God who became concrete so that they can better use their knowing and loving to lead in agile ways.

## Taste and See: Cultivating Agility through Sensory and Concrete Engagement

The notion that humans come to know the world through interaction with it and that God reveals Godself by taking on flesh has important implications for how theological educators think about how the material world, sense perception, and learning connect. Specifically, if thinking involves all three spheres—the brain, body, and environment—and it is through these that we encounter God, this means that cultivating agile Christian leaders must pay attention to the material and sensory.

In the following, I provide three principles for theological educators seeking to incorporate “thinking with our senses” into their classrooms, with a focus on the benefits such principles have for nurturing creativity and agility of thought.

First, educators can focus learners’ attention on the concrete manifestation an idea, object, or specific memory. For Christians, this kind paying attention to the concrete reflects an attitude of “wonder”<sup>33</sup> and is not unlike the discipline of attentiveness to God essential for Christian faith. As noted above, this attunement to the sensory-perceptual properties of objects and ideas can occur physically or imaginatively (Koutstaal 2014, 132), and might include rearranging or re-categorizing objects and ideas within a material space or via our imagination (2014, 143). For example, a course on the Gospel of John might involve students in performing a dramatic readings of Jesus’ “high priestly prayer,” with a focus on how the concrete details of the text translate into different sensory, tonal, and contextual choices in different student groups. This tuning into the sensory aspects of Jesus’ prayer and articulating them in a concrete, non-verbal way can help learners reform or nuance their understandings of what the gospel writer seeks to communicate. This is, in part, because engaging with objects and ideas through scene construction supplies us with a robust fund of particular experiences that enrich our concepts and train us to look for insights in a variety of places (64).

Second, educators can incorporate mindfulness-based activities that allow learners to focus their attention on a bodily activity, scene, memory, or object. Koutstaal describes mindfulness as a “process of focusing on present experiences, paying attention in a particular way” that typically involves “intentional and nonjudgmental awareness of moment-to-moment experience” (2014, 91). Mindfulness activities, by strengthening of persons’ abilities to monitor and alter automated ideas, can lead to re-“perceiving” (95): a meta-mechanism by which learners can refine ideas and thoughts (98). Mindfulness and contemplation with the Christian tradition similarly invite people to re-perceive God by focusing upon God through mind and body (Keating 2009, 2010; Gallagher 2008; O’Brien 2011; Fleming and Ignatius 1996). Mindfulness practices in theological education might take several forms.<sup>34</sup> Learners might mindfully attend to icons in a course on Eastern Orthodox Christianity in order to develop richer understanding of this particular branch of Christianity. A

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<sup>33</sup> Moore describes this orientation towards God’s transcendental immanence as “a hermeneutic of wonder” (2004, 54–55).

<sup>34</sup> The following are also helpful for thinking about contemplation, mindfulness, and education generally: Lichtmann (2005) and Barbezat and Bush (2014).

teacher might invite students studying Exodus to mindfully pray imaginatively through specific texts. Holy listening might provide pastoral students a way to deepen their understanding of attentive presence. When practiced from a posture of holy wonder, such mindfulness and contemplation can lead to deeper knowing of God as well.

Third, educators can provide platforms for learners to “enact their thinking” (Koutstaal 2014, 149-54). Koutstaal describes the enactment of thinking as using one’s imagination or physical body to engage with external objects or spaces (2014, 141). Enacting one’s thoughts, rather than expressing them in speech, can bring clarity to internalized ideas and highlight new connections (141-45). This is because words, while they convey certain aspects of reality, cannot capture the messy, unruly thing that is lived life or faith. Acting out one’s thoughts might take the form of concept-mapping a pastoral-parishioner interaction with physical materials, or art. It can include dramatic reading, creating a physical depiction of a Biblical text and moving around characters in a scene, or drawing a picture. It might involve sculpting or music creation. Regardless of the method, allowing learners to bring into form their internal thoughts can invite them into a “revelatory experiencing” that awakens them to Spirit’s movement in their lives or brings new insight into the life of faith.

It ought to be clear at this point that the sensory and material are not intended to replace critical analysis and abstract theologizing. Nor are they the only ways to cultivate agility, knowledge, or love. Rather, incorporating the senses into our curriculum and pedagogies balances theological education’s over-dependence on abstract concepts and contributes to the agile thinking Christian leaders need.

## CONCLUSION

### Christian Agility in a Constantly Changing Age: Cultivating “Sense-sational” Leaders

My claim has been that agile Christian leaders pay attention to the real: the sensory and material world encountered through touch and taste, sight and sound, hearing and imagination, so that they might more deeply know God and how to guide communities in God’s ways. This capacity to “taste and see” the sensory is crucial for Christian leaders who will compose liturgies, shape worship or communal spaces, select garments, collaborate with musicians, develop promotional material, design curricula in theologically conscious ways, and much more. It is crucial for leaders who will blur boundary lines, foster forgiveness, revitalize ailing communities, and lead people in ways and justice and peace. While abstract thinking certainly serves a vital role in helping such leaders ascertain commonalities across particulars, develop categories, and abstract rules for transfer (Koutstaal 2014, 56), failure to engage with the sensory or material will inhibit the theological depth, spiritual imagination, flexibility of vision, and creative problem-solving agile Christian leaders require (2014, 63).

Of course, cognitive agility is not all that Christian leadership entails. Lest we confuse the means with the end, agility is not the final telos towards which theological education points. Rather agility is a penultimate goal that serves the ultimate telos of communicating Christ’s death and resurrection in loving, faithful, and contextually-attuned ways. Cognitive agility, then, must partner with and enhance “spirituality agility”: an ability to notice and tune into the Spirit who remains at work in our world. Yet training learners to use their senses and think concretely can assist them in cultivating this spirituality agility and allow them to begin “seeing God in all things.” By learning to look long and lovingly at the real that is God’s concrete and sensory world, future leaders of the Church can cultivate both the cognitive and spiritual agility to proclaim and pursue God’s reign in ways that are theologically reflective, innovative, and in step with the Spirit’s voice.

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