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## Ken Evers-Hood: Renewing the mind without forgetting the flesh

*Mainline seminaries form future leaders as if theology were the only thing that matters. But they should take a cue from business schools, where behavioral economics is on the rise. We need to recover a more human theology, says the Rev. Ken Evers-Hood.*

by [Ken Evers-Hood](#)



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*Editor's note: This is the first in a six-part series on behavioral theology. Read part two, about the two halves of our brains, [here](#). Part three is about [checking our blind spots](#). Part four is about [whether our blind spots are sin](#). Part five explores the role of a [pastor as choice architect](#). The final part discusses what [game theory can teach about theological reflection](#).*

"You work for Exxon Mobil?" she asked my wife, as if Melis had admitted to dropping the occasional puppy in her pet-juggling act. "Well, thanks to *you* we can't watch Masterpiece Theatre anymore."

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My wife and I could only glance at one another with baffled expressions as this theology graduate student continued to accost us on our walk around married-student housing at Princeton Theological Seminary. We had made the mistake of greeting this new couple as we ambled around the '60s-era cinder-block complex, and getting to know one another wasn't going well.

"Now that *they're* sponsoring Masterpiece Theatre, we just can't in good conscience watch it anymore," she spat as venomously as any cobra. And with that, she and her husband walked off into the night, while I nursed a dark fantasy of a skunk catching them unawares farther down Loetscher Place.

It doesn't take the mainline seminarian long to figure out that few things are safer to malign in theological circles than "business." The reasons are many: legitimate concern over an economic system that blesses the wealthy few at the expense of the poor multitudes, righteous anger over ethical failures that result in widespread economic collapse, or even baser jealousy at the difference in esteem and compensation between business and ecclesial leaders. Business is a safe target.

The problem is that when the divinity school doesn't critically engage the business school, church leaders can wind up knocking down straw men only to miss out on genuinely interesting conversations.

One such conversation is the phenomenal change taking place with the rise of behavioral economics, as economists and psychologists have teamed up to challenge the orthodoxy, long regnant, concerning *homo economicus*: the rational, self-interested person.

In the classical economic model, Adam Smith sings paeans to the invisible hand that, as if by magic, works through rational, self-interested actors to bring about the common good. It's not an enormous leap from Smith's "invisible hand" to Gordon Gekko's "greed is good" speech, and theologians and other ethicists are right to be nervous about what kind of "good" such unfettered self-interest might bring about.

Today, though, few taking an economics class in an MBA program are taught that people really are perfectly rational, self-interested creatures that follow classical economic models.

Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein at the University of Chicago frame the distinction between classical economics and behavioral economics in anthropological terms. In their seminal work, "Nudge," they describe the perfectly rational, cold, self-interested Spocks of classical economic theory as "econs" and the busy, emotional, imperfect Homer Simpsons of real life as simply "humans."

Behavioral economists stress that unless we understand our full humanity, unless we understand that human beings aren't econs, no theory, economic or other, will have much value.

Of all people, church leaders might notice something interesting happening here. Scholars becoming aware that their neglect of full humanity is jeopardizing their finest theoretical understanding? We've been down this road before, too.

In one of the earliest misunderstandings of Jesus Christ, the second-century bishop Serapion grew concerned about something he called [Docetism](#) in the apocryphal Gospel of Peter being read by the

is.

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church in Rhodus. While the gospel's talking cross might have raised a few eyebrows, what concerned Serapion most was its assertion that on the cross Jesus "[felt no pain](#)."

Docetism, from the Greek *dokeo*, meaning "to seem," claims that Jesus wasn't truly human but only appeared to be -- a notion with appeal for believers both then and now. What could be better than to eliminate the messiness and weakness of the flesh?

But this temptation to lift up Christ's spirit and mind and deny his humanness was ruled out by the church at Nicaea in 325. The fleshy-ness of Christ, the humanity of Christ -- without this, the faith is lost. As Gregory of Nazianzus put it, "That which is not assumed is not healed."

And yet for all our history with Docetism, the church today -- especially in the way we train leaders -- suffers at times from a kind of "practical Docetism."

Future leaders formed in mainline seminaries are taught that theology matters. And while this is certainly true, there are times when we can make it sound as if theology were the only thing that matters.

There are times when seminary education can devolve into being merely a reframing effort designed to change starting points. Rather than starting with an intuition, the seminarian should start with Scripture. Rather than starting with the human, the seminarian should start with God. Rather than beginning with the self, the seminarian should focus on the community. Then the task is to take this reframing project to where the real problem is: the church.

Pastors are sent out in an effort to reframe church members, hoping to convince them that the seemingly mundane things they care about -- the length of church services, the familiarity of the hymns and the health of their budget -- isn't as important as the theological considerations underneath.

Yet when these attempts at reframing don't go well, [many pastors wind up feeling as if they were prepared for a church that doesn't really exist](#). "Can you believe these heathens want to sing Christmas carols in Advent?" we sigh to one another when behind closed doors. "At least your congregation has heard of Advent," another remarks, rolling her eyes.

Church leaders need to be trained in theology, exegesis and liturgics, but when we attend only the renewing of our minds at the expense of our full humanity, we run the risk of becoming "theologicons" serving a church filled with humans.

The recent reformation in business school education from classical to behavioral economics can help church leaders recover the voices in our own tradition that are full of psychological insight -- voices such as Augustine, Teresa of Avila and Calvin, who begins his "Institutes of the Christian Religion" by saying, "Nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves."

In the same way that behavioral economics has added the insights of cognitive theory to the rigor of econometrics, our seminary training must begin to link those important human insights with rigorous theological reflection. In this sense, the answer to practical Docetism is not watering down the curriculum to make it more "practical."

We need to do theology with as much rigor as ever *and* to learn how to communicate and live out this theology in congregations filled with human beings. We need a behavioral theology, if you will, that seeks to renew the mind without forgetting the needs of the flesh.

This behavioral theology will incorporate knowledge from psychology about the heuristics and biases that come with being human. This behavioral theology will be experimental, acknowledging with humility that God's world is, as Tim Harford puts it, "too complicated for anyone [even experts] to analyse with much success."

This behavioral theology will be guided by a Chalcedonian appreciation for Christ's full humanity along with his divinity, emphasizing the incarnation in a way that our practical Docetism functionally ignores at times. And best of all, this behavioral theology will be filled with wonder, creativity, openness to surprise and a sense of humor, as theologians will be freed to be human again, freed to see all the world as a source of inspiration and delight.

After three years learning the ways of the theologicon well, I trailed my wife as she entered the MBA program at the University of Texas. My honest opinion at the time was that this would likely be a kind of Babylonian exile. A school filled with nothing but business students who just cared about money?

But the reality I encountered was entirely different. The people I met were incredible. They were interesting and interested in the world, and readily welcomed my sometimes discordant views. They were nuanced in their thinking and open to new, challenging ideas.

If anything, I discovered ruefully, many of the MBA students I encountered were as alive, passionate and even justice-oriented as some of my seminary colleagues -- if not more so.

Many people think the divinity school exists to save the soul of the business school. If the behavioral shift in the business school can help us recover a more fully human theology, perhaps the reality will be just the opposite.