

Columbia Theological Seminary

Office of Admissions

Alternate Writing Sample

All prospective students who apply to Columbia's master's degree programs are required to submit an academic writing sample. This should be a recent sample of the applicant's writing, written in the last seven (7) years, that clearly demonstrates the applicant's ability to write and critically engage an argument. If a recent sample is not available, applicants may choose to submit an alternate writing sample as outlined below.

Please critically read and thoroughly engage the following excerpt from a collection of essays entitled *Thinking Theologically*. After reading, write a four to seven (4-7) page reflection using the following guidelines:

- Write at least one-full to two (1-2) page summary of the author's primary and supporting claims
- Select one of the author's supporting claims – e.g., thinking theologically is as embodied as it is cerebral – and write at least two to three (2-3) pages critically engaging the claim. Applicants must correctly cite at least one quotation from the excerpt – i.e., *Thinking Theologically*. Applicants must also correctly cite at least one additional source in this section. Additional sources may include the Bible, an article, a book, film, podcast, or other intellectual source
- Write at least one-full to two (1-2) page reflection that clearly outlines your responses to the article. This can include your perspective, questions that emerge after reading, and/or short vignette(s) from your personal or communal experience

Writing samples should adhere to the following format: 4-7 pages, typed, double-spaced, 12-pt font (Times New Roman required), 8.5" x 11" paper, one-inch margins on all sides, saved as a PDF prior to uploading.

EXCERPT FROM THINKING THEOLOGICALLY (BARRETO)

Thinking poignantly reflects God's own image. And so, our thinking can help us participate in God's reign. At the same time, we know that our thinking can be flawed, errant, unduly biased, prejudiced, sinful. Thinking theologically requires training and education certainly. But most of all, we lean on the Spirit when we think theologically. This is the Spirit God has promised will accompany us whenever we call on God. Paul writes in Romans 8:26: "Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with signs too deep for words." ... thinking theologically is a prayer, a yearning for the Spirit to help us, as much as it is an act of the intellect.¹

1. *Thinking theologically is as embodied as it is cerebral.* Thinking is not the exclusive domain of the brain. Certainly, the neurological work of learning and contemplation happens between our ears. But our brains are not severable from our bodies. Our brains are very much a part of our bodies. And so, thinking is not just a cerebral act but also an embodied interaction with the world. Thinking theologically does not just deal with abstract thoughts and theoretical notions. Thinking theologically also requires us to see and touch and taste the world that God has created. In short, we think not only with our brains but also with feet that guide us to strange places, hands that serve our neighbors, ears that listen to songs of joy and regret alike.
2. *Thinking theologically is as emotional as it is intellectual.* When we think theologically, we exercise the whole breadth of human experiences. Thinking theologically is not just a matter of learning facts, reading arguments, or writing informative essays. Thinking theologically also involves our spirits and our hearts.

¹ Amy Marga, "Thinking Systematically," in *Thinking Theologically* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 3.

Thinking theologically calls us to love what we learn and grieve that sometimes our answers are wholly insufficient to the task of ministry. Sometimes all our thoughts will culminate in a faith that asks for God's help. Thinking theologically means that we see failure as a painful but indispensable part of following a path of faith, that we can measure ourselves not just by the grades we receive but also by the relationships we can foster with the help of a God that draws us together.

3. *Thinking theologically is as relational as it is individualistic.* To put it bluntly, you can't think theologically by yourself. We don't measure our theological acumen by participating in some sacred version of Jeopardy. Instead, thinking theologically drives us to our intellect in order to draw us to our neighbors. Thinking theologically does not require us to retreat into our studies and dwell in our minds; instead, it compels us with an insatiable curiosity to know and love one another--even and particularly those who differ from us.

In short, thinking doesn't just happen in that intricate collection of nerves and nodes in your skull. Thinking is not just a matter of dwelling alone with lofty thoughts. Thinking is not just a matter of accumulating bits of trivia or even collecting a wealth of theories. Thinking theologically also draws us to others, for how else will we know the world and know God? Thinking theologically draws us to our deepest fears and hopes, to the depths of despair and the heights of joy, to failure and risk. Thinking theologically, that is, thinking about God, is as human as anything else we do. And for this reason, God draws near to us when we think in this way, for God's spirit dwells whenever and wherever we gather together in faith and seek the face of God. Thinking theologically is about discerning a God who loves, cherishes, and exults in all particularity: who shares our deepest griefs; who tastes our pain; who will not be limited by our imagination or hide from us.

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

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

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Barreto, Eric D., ed. *Thinking Theologically*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2015.