

Motley crew: Graduate seminarians

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [August 9, 2003](#) issue

Christian Tetzlaff, superstar young violinist, charmed our town last month by playing Bach's six works for solo violin. Critic Ted Shen came up with a stereotype when he described Tetzlaff as looking like "a graduate seminarian in his rapt intensity. . . . With his eyes closed . . . he seemed in the flow, in communion with the music."

Whoa! What does a graduate seminarian look like? The picture of Tetzlaff shows him bespectacled, short-haired, bent over his violin and, yes, intense. I tried to match his image with the reality of students at the seminaries I have visited for decades. If Shen traveled with me, I'd show him that half the seminarians are women—even in the largest Catholic "seminary" in the country, our neighbor, the Catholic Theological Union. The fact that they do not look like Tetzlaff keeps these Catholic seminarians from ordination. Pope Paul VI declared that priests had to have a physical likeness to Christ.

Next, I'd have Shen follow me to the Interdenominational Theological Center in Atlanta, where the skin color of most seminarians doesn't match the Germanic hues of the violinist.

But the biggest gap between Shen's stereotype and reality has to do with that "rapt intensity" theme. I tend to visit seminary classrooms first thing in the morning or right after lunch. At the early hour I see barely opened eyes and many nodding heads. At after-lunch seminars seminarians arrive from nightlong sessions of intense Greek studies. Others have been with a child who cried through the night, or an errant teenager who set *them* to crying. In short: Shen's stereotype doesn't hold.

Reading Shen prompted me to go back to the November 21, 1951, issue of the *Seminarian* and find a column that I wrote. In it was a *Time* magazine reference to a kidnapper who had "the martyred gaze of a divinity student." Why did so many people back then spot "us" as seminarians? I admit that we had much in common. At that time, for example, we were all men. "The Germanic stock, lean appearance, spectacles, cocksure bearings, sartorial similarities, and the tendency to appear in groups" were other earmarks that identified us.

Revisit that description: Of Germanic stock? True. Lean appearance? We were all broke and hungry. Spectacles? Of course. Hebrew vowel points in biblical studies hurt our eyes. Cocksure bearings? That was a defensive posture. We were scared. Sartorial similarities? See the line above: "We were all broke." "A tendency to appear in groups"? We did enjoy each other's company, and seeing the world out there as hostile, we huddled together.

So much for the private world. My column went on to venture into the public world where there are marked discontinuities. That year President Truman sought confirmation of his appointment of an Ambassador Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary to the State of Vatican City. Every Protestant we knew treated that figure as a potential Fifth Horseman of the Apocalypse, someone who would bring the end of Protestant America and our freedoms. The ambassador's appointment was withdrawn. Then Vatican II occurred, we teamed up with the papists in the ecumenical age, and have lived happily ever after.

I quoted President Truman [*italics mine*]: "*God forbid that I should claim for our country the mantle of perfect righteousness. We have committed sins of omission and sins of commission, for which we stand in need of the mercy of the Lord.*"

Talk about discontinuity! That's not the favored form of discourse in these imperial times. Speak of our country's flaws now, and you won't just wear a martyred gaze. You'll more likely *be* martyred. Or am I stereotyping?