

NOVATE  
VOBIS  
NOVALE

# FURROW

*The*

A JOURNAL FOR THE  
CONTEMPORARY CHURCH

Michael A. Conway

‘Break Every  
Mirror in the  
House’:  
The Place of  
Theology

April 2021

# ‘Break Every Mirror in the House’: The Place of Theology

---

Michael A. Conway

*In memory of Enda McDonagh*

The number of students taking theology as a subject at third level in Ireland is in decline for many institutions that have taught the subject for some time.<sup>1</sup> The trend is worrying, not just in terms of the discipline in the academy, but also in terms of an educational service to wider public life, where the religious dimension of the human person is necessarily an abiding reality (however one might relate to it for oneself). Some of the major shifts in terms of the discipline in the university are relatively easy to explain (on a basic level) such as the declining number of seminarians over the last thirty years, leading to the closure of seminaries and, derivatively, an equivalent drop in the numbers of those who study theology as formation for priestly ministry. Over against that trend, however, from the mid to late sixties large numbers of so-called lay students began to study theology and in doing so completely changed the landscape of the discipline. A typical degree course is the BA.Th (Theology and Arts) programme in Maynooth, which, even though officially obliged to limit its intake, welcomed upwards of eighty students each year in the seventies and eighties. Today, the number of students interested in taking this programme has dropped significantly, and this is not specific either to this programme or to Maynooth. Seeing this, one might be forgiven for surmising that young adults are now a good deal less interested in religion and faith than previous generations. But such a judgement might be premature and seriously mistaken. In this paper, I'd like to reflect precisely on this development that is impacting many

1 I am mostly dealing with the context that is Ireland and that from within the wider dynamics of European culture. This is not, however, true for all Irish institutions where theology is being taught.

---

Michael A. Conway is a priest of the Diocese of Galway. He is Professor of Faith and Culture at St. Patrick's College, Maynooth, Co. Kildare.

institutions. My primary interest is not in providing a strategy for increasing numbers (an agenda that for theology is both suspicious and, perhaps, even, pernicious), but in seeking to respond to a developing situation that could, in time, leave our society illiterate in terms of being able to address a vital dimension of the human condition.

I am not concerned here with the classical theology degree – that is more usually limited to a small number of students, mostly seminarians – but with those programmes that include theology as part of a suite of subjects in a humanities degree.<sup>2</sup> This is not only the major cohort of students who now study theology (here in Ireland), but it is where change in more recent years is most remarkable in terms of students opting for (or not) theology as part of their course of study.<sup>3</sup> If we are to speak of a crisis (and the word, I believe, is apropos), it is not just limited to the issue of the *number* of students taking theology in such humanities programmes (even if this is what is evident on a superficial level of reflection). That there is a crisis, I think, is clear; it's knowing what exactly this crisis might be; and then, how one might respond to it that is problematic.<sup>4</sup> This article is the first part of a more expansive study: it is the more negative initial material, the *pars destruens*, so to speak; and I will follow later with a second study that will make more positive suggestions (the *pars construens*) with regard to the crisis.

THE PLACE OF THEOLOGY (*LE LIEU DE LA THÉOLOGIE*)

Theology is a complex reality that is indebted not only to faith-life, thinking-structures, and great theological minds, but also to special places that have for their own specific reasons supported, and continue to support, the endeavour that is theology. Indeed, place is a rich resource in terms of memory and identity, be it personal, communal, or ecclesial. Some of these places of theology have deep roots in history and enjoy a long tradition of teaching, research, and reflection on theology. Others are more recent sites and, being so, are often highly creative in their approaches, have considerable energy around the subject, and are opening up new possibilities for the discipline. I happen to work in a 'place of

2 Here, I have the specific Irish situation and our Education system in mind and less the broader European context, where different models of third level education and different traditions of teaching theology have led to great variation in how and where theology is taught.

3 It would take a separate and equivalent article to reflect on the more classical degree in theology (e.g., BD) in the current climate.

4 Clearly, it is not possible to respond comprehensively to all the issues involved; I am merely sketching some ideas that I believe are important in terms of meeting this crisis.

theology’ that has a long ecclesial tradition; that, in itself, has great advantages; but there are serious disadvantages, too. The most important realization, however, is that there continues to be ‘places of theology’ in our Irish landscape that might serve wider society at the community and national level. Those of us who are charged with the care of these sites (physical, intellectual, and spiritual) need to reflect carefully at this point in time on what it is that we do, how we do it, and how we prepare these very same sites to continue to be enriching places in the future for everyone. There is a theology of responsibility that complements a theology of place. The geography of faith life and reflection is written into our Irish landscape in a significant cultural patrimony of ecclesiastical ruins, and even these continue to speak, still; but it is vital, too, that places that are populated by the living continue to explore and voice explicitly the depths of the human condition. How we respond and care for these places now will be a significant factor in determining, which of these two options will be the future for any particular site.

It needs to be understood that theology is very different from all other disciplines in the academy.<sup>5</sup> It is vital when reflecting on theology to be fully conscious of its specificity as this has definite implications for reflecting appropriately on the discipline in a university setting. To some degree, it retains, ironically perhaps, the ‘status’ of being ‘queen of the sciences’ in the sense of not being subject to the epistemological norms and structures that are operative in the various other disciplines. It is not, however, ‘sovereign,’ neither in the sense of having an absolute power over other subject areas (that have long since been liberated from its tutelage and enjoy their own legitimate autonomy), nor in the sense of benefiting from a substantial independence so that it might flourish in sublime freedom.<sup>6</sup> Its specificity is its strong or weak point, depending on the perspective that one takes on the university as an institution that serves all of society and culture. It is important, too, to see that theology cannot be equated with either religious studies or the philosophy of religion (which have their own fate as disciplines in the academy).<sup>7</sup> Someone who is qualified, for example, specifically, in religious studies or in the philosophy of religion is neither a theologian, nor, I might add, equipped to

5 This paper should be read in conjunction with Michael A. Conway, ‘Theology going Somewhere and Nowhere,’ *The Furrow* 67 (2015): 375-386 and Michael A. Conway, ‘Intercommunion of One and All: Theology and its Future,’ *The Furrow* 69 (2018): 460-73.

6 The theological issue here is the connection between the creative and redemptive orders, which is one neither of elision nor of separation.

7 There is some proximity between Fundamental Theology and *Religionsphilosophie* as understood in the German university system.

## THE FURROW

teach theology.<sup>8</sup> There is some confusion in some faculties about these boundaries (even from within the faculty personnel), and this very fact underlines the widespread ignorance vis-à-vis theology as a discipline in the academy. It has specific parameters, contours, modes of thinking and engagement that are utterly distinct in respect of all the ancillary disciplines. Nonetheless, in retaining this specificity, it is, necessarily, closely connected to a range of disciplines that include history, philosophy, sociology, linguistics, and the cultural sciences.<sup>9</sup>

I wish to reflect on ‘the place of theology’ itself as the locus of crisis, and I will examine a number of responses that I deem inadequate not only in terms of addressing the subjacent dynamics that are at play in the ‘place of theology’ and originating of the aforementioned crisis, but also in terms of respecting the specificity of the subject that is theology in the academy. I do this, as I say, with a view to offering some suggestions in a later study toward what I hope might contribute toward a more wholesome response.

## GHETTOIZATION

The first response that some institutions have adopted is to retreat into a smaller world and seek to respond only to a more limited cohort of students than the one encountered in the wider public space. The place becomes a place of exclusion, often implicit. One targets an ‘ideal’ student type and seeks to address and attract a specific student cohort, often along a particular ideological line, which may well be a denominational one (e.g., Church of Ireland or Catholic or Muslim), or, even, from within a specific denomination (e.g., a precise ‘type’ of Catholic student, etc.). What we have here, really, is a disguised sectarian response.<sup>10</sup> The idea is that by doubling down on particular markers of identity (especially religious ones), one appeals to a targeted ‘type’ of student in the wider culture, which then, in turn, supposedly, will lead not only to an increase in one’s student numbers (that is the hope), but also to a classroom space that plays out within the parameters of a more limited common mindset (making life easier, presumably, for both the teacher and the student).<sup>11</sup> This is a kind of theological eugenics that is destined to ensure the survival

8 It goes without saying that one’s personal faith life does not automatically confer theological competence.

9 Karl Rahner is worth reading in terms of the specificity of theology as a discipline.

10 I am using the word “sectarian” here in its widest sense, not necessarily in its narrower religious meaning (although this applies, too).

11 It would of course be interesting to reflect on the kinship between these dynamics and those of new religious movements (commonly called ‘sects’) that are set up as ‘places of contrast’ to the wider culture.

of one’s own brand of theology (or denominational identity), and, importantly, exclude, albeit by default, the sceptic, the seeker, and the stranger. The other in its otherness is excluded (surreptitiously, perhaps) so as not to disrupt the world and comfort of the self. This price is, presumably, deemed worth paying, since it will, supposedly, secure the future of the self and the self’s worldview. This is unhealthy for theology as a university discipline in that it isolates ‘theology’ as a specific discipline in the academy and removes it from the universal conversation that is the university.<sup>12</sup> It is, further, a profoundly disturbing response to the crisis from the perspective of theology per se.<sup>13</sup> It may, indeed, ‘work’ in terms of raising student numbers, but, in any case, the effect will be short term as the cohort of students itself changes in time (as it inevitably must), and one finds oneself back at square minus one. The best that this strategy can do is put off the inevitable for a while and give the impression of being an adequate response; it cannot, in fact, and does not, address the crisis. It is like palliative care that shields one temporarily from the full intensity of the pain, without, however, being able to deal with the inevitable. Specifically, from the perspective of Catholic theology, it is utterly unacceptable, given the essential universal character of Christian faith. The contrasting attitude was put very well by Pope Francis in a recent address: ‘Openness to others, whoever they may be, must always be cultivated: the Gospel is meant for everyone ... it is a leaven of new humanity in every place and time.’<sup>14</sup>

#### SLEIGHT OF HAND

A second response that is sometimes used to address the crisis is simply to lower the entry requirements for the programme in question so as to maintain the number of students taking theology. In most institutions in Ireland this amounts to accepting students through the CAO system with lower admission points than in previous years. This is very obviously an artificial response to the crisis in question, often masking the problem for the

12 I am using the substantive ‘university’ to signify the concert of disciplines that reflect the most complete configuration of this institution as a socio-cultural product. For various discussions on theology as a university discipline, see, for example, John Coulson, ed., *Theology and the University* (London: Darton, Longman, & Todd, 1964); and, of course, John Henry Newman, *The Idea of a University* (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1996).

13 Given the limitations of this article, I cannot discuss the full range of problems that go with this position from the perspective of theology.

14 Pope Francis, ‘Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to Participants in the General Assembly of the Focolare Movement,’ 6 February 2021, [http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2021/february/documents/papa-francesco\\_20210206\\_focolari.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2021/february/documents/papa-francesco_20210206_focolari.html), accessed 24 February 2021.

external observer. Might this strategy be ‘helpful’ when it comes to presenting, or, better, not presenting, the evolving situation to outsiders (prospective students, trustees, donors, boards of directors, etc.)? But, of course, it is not an innocent response; it is a short-term solution with enormous implications long-term. And, more usually, someone else will have to deal with the consequences of such a decision later on down the road. It has a significant impact on the quality of the classroom exchange and, perhaps, even experience. The intellectual encounter and the competency of discourse cannot but be affected, and the expectations that one might have in terms of the outcomes for a particular course often need to be adjusted to accommodate the level of change in student ability. Having classroom objectives and aims is one thing; knowing that they have been, are, and can be realized by every student in the classroom is quite another. One would need to be conscious, too, of the implications of such a response in terms of the competency of those who graduate entering later the wider working world, be it as teachers, or ministers, or pastors, or whatever. It is about the quality itself of a degree programme, which can over time very easily lose something of its integrity and value; movable standards and grade inflation are, alas, all too real. The issue is that of the consonance between what one does and what one says that one does.<sup>15</sup>

As far as the place of theology itself is concerned, the real impact of this move is experienced up the line, so to speak, at postgraduate level. It impacts on post-graduate work and research on two fronts. Given that the postgraduate cohort of students is (for the most part) derived from the undergraduate programmes, the number of students, who are capable of continuing on to studying theology from the undergraduate programme is greatly reduced.<sup>16</sup> And when the standard of intellectual work and engagement at undergraduate level is weakened, it inevitably has an impact on the standard of postgraduate work in general. The number of students with the necessary intellectual ability, linguistic and writing skills, and general theological literacy is greatly impacted. And when, to compensate for this, students are accepted onto postgraduate programmes, who do not have the necessary wherewithal to undertake research at this advanced level, then the whole calibre of

15 One might apply to the ‘place of theology’ Wittgenstein’s comment: ‘You cannot write more truly about yourself than you *are*’ (Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, ed. G.H. Von Wright, tr. Peter Winch (London: Blackwell, 1998, 38, emphasis original).

16 I am not considering the related complex problem of the significant number of international students, mostly from the African and Asian continents, who join postgraduate programmes here in Ireland and bring with them a whole series of particular needs with regard to academic equivalence, social support, problems of learning a second (or even third) language, cultural isolation, and so on.

## 'BREAK EVERY MIRROR IN THE HOUSE'

the academic experience and the intellectual ambiance of a faculty or a school is impacted. This is no small matter.

Having said this, I think that it is vital, too, to underline that students themselves ought not to be in any way reproved or taken less seriously as a consequence of what are in effect decisions made at management level. The classroom space is an entirely relative one (no matter what might be the personal capabilities of students), and the cohort of students that are present in the place of theology are precisely the ones that need to be met in their existential reality, encouraged in terms of their intellectual growth, and enabled in terms of developing appropriate skills that will serve them well when graduating from a programme.

### WASHING ONE'S HANDS

A third response to the crisis is to see it as being one *exclusively* of administration, marketing, and engaging competing forces in the culture. This displaces the crisis to an outside of the 'place of theology.' It is the most superficial response of all, as in its responding, it denies essentially that there is a problem. It sidesteps the crisis in the 'place of theology' by turning it into what a marketing person, wittingly and rather wittily, described as 'putting lipstick on a pig'! And this, it turns out, can be an expensive endeavour. The illusion is unmasked in time when, within a number of years, it is evident that there is no substantial inflexion in the developing, underlying trend, while, meantime, of course, the newly forged administrative apparatus stays in place. It is remarkable in some institutions how, even though the number of students in a given cohort is decreasing, the number of administration personnel for that same cohort increases; this is a sure indication that something major is amiss in terms of decision making at management level. What you really find here is a kind of compensatory response, which produces a parallel world (in every sense) of ancillary expertise with its own meta-discourse that gives the illusion of being a 'professional' response to the crisis.<sup>17</sup> It also, unfairly, imposes on those who work in the marketing department a burden of address, which, in fact, is not theirs at all. You ought not expect anyone to market coal in Newcastle! This is not a response to the crisis; it instrumentalizes the crisis in order to respond to other agenda (usually hidden), and it may be very costly.

17 Pope Francis explicitly critiques this dynamic of creating 'parallel worlds' and 'constructing slogans' (See, for example, his 'Message of His Holiness Pope Francis to the Pontifical Mission Societies,' [http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/pont-messages/2020/documents/papa-francesco\\_20200521\\_messaggio-pom.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/pont-messages/2020/documents/papa-francesco_20200521_messaggio-pom.html), accessed 24 February 2021. You find an equivalent dynamic in terms of the use of technology in teaching and learning.



## THE FURROW

The reality is you cannot ‘market’ theology any more than you might try to market air. It is vital to see this: you can market bananas, or sugar, or even knowledge, but not theology. And if you do ‘market’ theology, you’ve turned it into something else (that it is not, and, which is, inevitably, self-serving), and you are in a performative contradiction with your own reality. And, of course, to some degree, you are being dishonest.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, Pope Francis remarks that ‘Many ecclesiastical establishments, at every level, seem to be swallowed up by the obsession of promoting themselves and their own initiatives, as if that were the objective and goal of their mission.’<sup>19</sup>

This does not mean that it is not right and proper to ensure that the wider culture knows that you are, indeed, ‘a place of theology’; and, thus, it is even essential that you set up the structures of appropriate promotion to ensure that this is widely known. Theological places with a long institutional tradition have a real advantage here. Modest resources are, usually, more than adequate, especially in today’s world, where the internet affords the easy dissemination of information. Such modest resources include now, not only, and obviously, the internet, but also school visits, open days, basic advertising through diocesan and parish structures, and, indeed, ordinary ‘word of mouth,’ all of which contribute to this task. It is, perhaps, wise, here, to listen to Pope Francis’s advice: ‘Do not waste time and resources, then, in looking at yourself in a mirror, devising plans centred on internal mechanisms, functionality and the efficiency of your own bureaucracy. Look outside. Do not look at yourselves in the mirror. Break every mirror in the house!’<sup>20</sup>

It is extraordinary that in such responses there is often little awareness of the underlying principles in terms of the operative theology. It is obvious, I hope, that it is completely inappropriate to use direct marketing strategies to entice young people into religious life; yet, ironically, it is often deemed perfectly acceptable to inflict these same strategies on ‘lay students’ in terms of studying theology. It’s as if one vocation weighs differently to another; the implicit clericalism is barely disguised. The deeper theological reasoning is isomorphic to the difference between healthy mission theology and proselytizing. Pope Benedict XVI puts it this way: ‘The Church does not engage in proselytism. Instead, she grows by “attraction”:

18 There may, of course, be subterranean motivations at play that are hidden and reflect a lack of transparency and uprightness in the decision-making structures of an institution. This is a way of furthering particular agenda, while shielding those same agenda from open, competent, critical, theological assessment.

19 Pope Francis, ‘Message of His Holiness Pope Francis to the Pontifical Mission Societies.’

20 Ibid.

just as Christ “draws all to himself” by the power of his love.”<sup>21</sup> It seems to me that it is incumbent on a theology faculty to ground its *modus operandi* in a sound, critical theology, not as perfunctory accommodation to the discipline, but as a serious engagement with the life dynamics that are subjacent to all movement and change on a human level, including those of young adults, who may wish, in their own way, to engage with theology. It is a matter of what Pope Francis called recently “a dynamic fidelity, capable of interpreting the signs and needs of the times and of responding to the new demands of humanity.”<sup>22</sup>

#### THE ILLUSIONS OF ACTIVISM

Each of these responses reflect desperate attempts to deal with a crisis, but in ways that are unsatisfactory, and this on multiple levels, not least as regards the integrity of what is expected in a ‘place of theology.’ Ironically, they reflect an ‘activism’ that is rooted in a fideistic mindset, that is often characterised by an attitude of it being better to do something, rather than nothing (in pursuit of ancillary goals). The responding, however, is undertaken for its own sake and with little critical engagement, and, as such, is very often of no real consequence and bears no lasting value. It does not secure a future, since it merely reflects what Seamus Heaney calls ‘industriousness.’ It works to the detriment of responsible, creative action in the fullest sense of this term (as you might find, say, in Blondel), which is, indeed, much more in the realm of poetry than expedient prose. This ‘activism’ can lead to an enormous waste of resources (in terms of failed projects) that could have been used for other life-engendering ventures. This is exacerbated when actions are precipitated without due process and reflection (under an artificially induced dynamic of urgency). The pseudo-optimism that this same ‘activism’ might generate may well mislead many short-term, but long-term it leaves everyone even more dispirited and with less energy to invest in the real work of doing theology in a contemporary setting. Pope Francis speaks of ‘functionalism,’ where one tries to imitate what he calls ‘secular models of worldly efficiency.’ He observes, astutely, that ‘Opting for functionalism gives the illusion of being able to “sort matters out” in a balanced way, keeping things under control, maximizing one’s own relevance, and improving the everyday management of

21 Pope Benedict XVI, Homily at the ‘Holy Mass for the Inauguration of the Fifth General Conference of the Bishops of Latin American and the Caribbean,’ [http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/homilies/2007/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_hom\\_20070513\\_conference-brazil.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/homilies/2007/documents/hf_ben-xvi_hom_20070513_conference-brazil.html)

22 Pope Francis, ‘Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to Participants in the General Assembly of the Focolare Movement,’

## THE FURROW

existing structures.<sup>23</sup> This, he observes, is a pitfall to be avoided in terms of the mission of the Church, and, I might add, of theology as a university discipline, which cannot ever be separated from its intrinsic connection to ecclesial life and community.<sup>24</sup>

## CONCLUSION

In her magnificent installation address as the new President of Harvard University in 2007, Drew Gilpin Faust pointed out that ‘Truth is an aspiration, not a possession. ... We must commit ourselves to the uncomfortable position of doubt, to the humility of always believing there is more to know, more to teach, more to understand.’<sup>25</sup> This statement in itself captures very well the fundamental characterization of ‘the place of theology,’ too.<sup>26</sup> It is not a secured, closed space in the landscape that survives intact in an ever-changing world. Drawing on a living tradition of faith, the historical contours of a specific place, and an honourable intellectual heritage, the place of theology itself changes as those who visit it have changed, and, in creative fidelity, it welcomes, equitably, the person of faith, the neighbour, the sceptic, the seeker, and the stranger with the same enthusiasm, knowing that it is only in this way that it remains the privileged place that it is in the landscape of human history. In does this in respect for each person’s unique path (which is never comparable), and, assuredly, with a God, known to be Father *of all*, through the Son, and in the power of the Spirit.<sup>27</sup> When all is said and done, ‘truth’ for ‘the place of theology’ is nothing less than *vita caritatis in Christo*.

23 Pope Francis, ‘Message of his holiness Pope Francis to Pontifical Mission Societies’

24 It is for this reason that theology as a discipline can never be equated with religious studies (and cognate disciplines), which enjoy a separate integrity.

25 Drew Gilpin Faust, ‘Installation Address: Unleashing our most ambitious imaginings,’ <https://www.harvard.edu/president/speeches-faust/2007/installation-address-unleashing-our-most-ambitious-imaginings/>, accessed 1 March 2021. It is interesting that Pope Francis said recently that ‘there cannot be faith without doubts’ (‘Ma una fede senza dubbi non va,’ as quoted in *Corriere della Sera*, [https://www.corriere.it/cronache/21\\_febbraio\\_28/papa-francesco-libro-verra-nuovo-diluvio-se-non-cambiamo-strada-clima-ghiacciai-40967eb8-7959-11eb-bd61-f38514671054.shtml](https://www.corriere.it/cronache/21_febbraio_28/papa-francesco-libro-verra-nuovo-diluvio-se-non-cambiamo-strada-clima-ghiacciai-40967eb8-7959-11eb-bd61-f38514671054.shtml), accessed 1 March 2021).

26 More formally, Pope Francis puts it this way: “The good theologian and philosopher has an open, that is, an incomplete, thought, always open to the maius of God and of the truth, always in development according to the law that Saint Vincent of Lerins described in these words: *annis consolidetur, dilatetur tempore, sublimetur aetate*’ (*Veritatis gaudium*, No. 3).

27 One might recall the thirteenth century French proverb: ‘Comparaison n’est pas raison’!