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A JOURNAL FOR THE
CONTEMPORARY CHURCH

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The Place of
Theology:
From Sphere to
Polyhedron

May 2021

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INTRODUCTION

If one accepts that there is an emerging crisis in some institutions in terms of teaching theology, then it must be asked why this might be so, and how one might respond appropriately.¹ I have already outlined what I believe to be some premature, problematic responses that neither appreciate the precise locus of the problem, nor address the crisis in a wholesome, rectitudinous manner from the perspective of theology. How one answers these questions, to a significant degree, will determine how one responds, and, derivatively, have an impact on the destiny of theology as a discipline at third level in an Irish context. In this second paper I would like to explore further the crisis and, in that light, in a third paper, present a possible programme for theology that might respond adequately in our current cultural situation. Whereas I have some precise institutional situations in mind, my hope is that anyone involved with teaching theology will find in these reflections ideas that might be helpful and that might be tailored to correspond to different situations. This, I believe, honours best the complexity of the situation in which we find ourselves as a society, as a culture, and, more narrowly, as a church community.

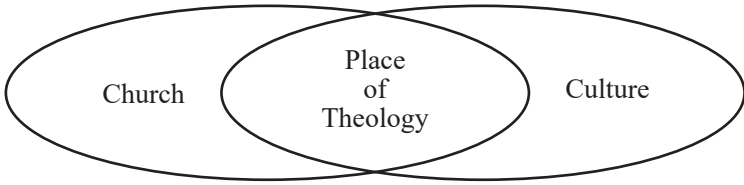
It is important to recognize clearly the distinct character of the place of theology (*le lieu de la théologie*) in any such discussion. On the one hand, it is an ecclesial activity that reflects on faith, and, on the other, it is positioned in the academy, which is itself a

1 This paper is a continuation of a reflection begun in an earlier paper on theology taken as part of a humanities degree. It is the second of three papers, the last of which will appear in the *Furrow* shortly. It should be noted that I am not dealing with the classical full degree in theology (e.g., the Bachelor of Divinity). See Michael A. Conway, "'Break Every mirror in the house": The Place of Theology,' *Furrow* 72 (2021): 195-204.

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locus within the culture, where it is answerable to the demands of critical reflection.²



Over the last thirty years or so religion, church, faith, community, and spirituality (factors that have a direct impact on theology) have all been radically transformed in wider society and culture.³ And this transformation, necessarily, impacts on the profile of student, who might choose to study theology. In fact, if it were otherwise, it would be very odd, indeed. This means that as the ambient culture is being transformed, so too, theology in the academy needs to change so as to accompany this living transformation. This in itself calls for a thoroughly renewed understanding of the academic needs of contemporary students (which is very different from even ten years ago). If they have changed, surely those of us who teach and research in theology ought to be changing what we do and how we do it to meet their changing needs. Pope Francis calls for the promotion of ‘a culture of encounter’ in open cooperation with all the positive forces that pervade human culture, and this, not least in the engagement with students who study theology.⁴

As regards the locus of the crisis, I would suggest that the most effective and empowering response is to be had, when one considers it directly and simply as being a crisis of the ‘place of theology’ itself.⁵ To put this in other terms, the problem (if I might

2 It is not possible to explore the complexity of this question of the position of theology in the academy. See Michael A. Conway, ‘Theology going Somewhere and Nowhere,’ *Furrow* 67 (2015): 375-386 and Michael A. Conway, ‘Intercommunion of One and All: Theology and its Future,’ *Furrow* 69 (2018): 460-73.

3 Derek Scally’s *The Best Catholics in the World* is a timely and insightful account of some of this recent change (see Derek Scally, *The Best Catholics in the World: The Irish, the Church and the End of a Special Relationship* [Dublin: Penguin Random House, 2021]).

4 See *Veritas gaudium*, No. 4.

5 Clearly, one could debate endlessly the causal structures of societal and cultural change (and, derivatively, the concomitant impact on theology); there is, however, only so much to be gained by indulging the dynamics of a ‘bad infinity (schlechte Unendlichkeit)’ (Hegel), when what is required is some kind of appropriate, reparative response in the present. Likewise, what emerges in the future cannot be determined precisely by any particular *modus operandi* in the present, which is not to deny the power of creative, reflected action in contributing substantially to a response that engenders life in the future. Perhaps, we have here the formal structures that ground and facilitate the work of the Holy Spirit.

call it that) is with the institutional self and not the cultural other; seeing it in this way not only is more likely to lead to an apposite and creative response (since it does not shirk the task of taking responsibility), but also resonates most powerfully with a central tenant of Christian faith as the place of theology being a place of service and mission.

BEYOND PRIESTLY FORMATION

Theology as a discipline in the university has its substantial origin in teaching with a view to priestly ministry. Furthermore, the place of theology was understood to be a place that was anchored within the boundaries of the institutional expression of church. This means that, for the most part, theology programmes in Ireland were developed as offshoots of programmes that were originally designed to prepare for priestly ministry; and this was understood to be an exclusively ecclesial activity. The basic structure, for example, in terms of the various disciplines within theology, was almost always maintained so that there were recognizable courses in the classical subject areas, such as moral theology, scripture, dogmatic theology, liturgy, etc. For as long as the *Weltanschauung* of students taking these programmes matched substantially that of seminarians, there was no real problem, and, in many ways, it was the obvious and wise path to have taken.

Now, however, given the growing diversity of students and the wide spectrum of motivation in terms of reasons for studying theology, programmes of theology need to be rethought.⁶ There is, further, the reality that the framework from within which theology is taught is increasingly much bigger than that of ecclesial belonging, so that any programme of theology in a contemporary setting needs to take this into account. The ecclesial framework is no longer the norm for more and more students, who, still, wish to take theology as part of a humanities degree. The homogeneity of the past is being replaced by the diversity in the present. This is only a problem if one is not attentive to this significant shift that has taken place. It has implications not only in terms of course content, but also in terms of how one introduces students to theology, which is less in view of ministry (although for some this is still important), and more in view of disparate motivating factors.

'OVERLAP' AND THE PLACE OF THEOLOGY

In terms of meeting the contemporary student, it is vital to pay attention to the locus of meeting. The world of the student needs to some degree to 'overlap' with the place of theology if there is

6 One obvious, significant change is the number of women who now study theology (outnumbering men).

to be an initial encounter. It is only in this way that the potential student will be able to recognize something of the possibilities that theology might open up. This requires careful consideration as it is the initial condition, so to speak, of any engagement whatsoever with theology. If what one offers is totally alien to the reality of potential students (from their perspective), then, there is little hope of connection and no reason to even consider taking up the discipline. Any viable programme in a contemporary context must begin in a locus of overlapping world views. The world of the student must clearly overlap with the place of connection to the theological tradition. If there is no 'overlap,' no commonality, then, there can be no communication. The overlap comes first, and the exploration follows. If the meeting point is not well gauged and established in each module (particularly in the first year, but not only), you are less likely to have students to begin with, and if the subsequent exploration is not connecting well with students, then, you have less of a chance of retaining them in any particular course or programme.⁷ Here you have, I would suggest, the essential issue when it comes to both recruitment and retention. If you have a decreasing number of students applying for a course, or if you have a remarkable number of students leaving a course (particularly early on in a programme), then, I suggest that a first consideration ought to be the preliminary issue of this 'overlap.' The concern is about theology per se (and how it is being taught) and not about the ancillary structures that support the work in the classroom. If there is a problem at this level, no number of cosmetic adjustments, ancillary structures, or promotional enterprise will resolve the issues that are hindering theology from advancing as a discipline in a contemporary context.

It is vital to promote a classroom experience that is rooted in real encounter, healthy dialogue, and respectful exchange with students. Pope Francis insists over and over again on the importance of such dialogue:

I dream of Theological Faculties where one lives differences in friendship, where one practices a theology of dialogue and welcoming; where one experiences the model of the polyhedron of theological knowledge instead of that of a static and disembodied sphere. Where theological research can promote a challenging but compelling process of inculturation.⁸

7 This is not a matter of 'dumbing down' theology to match a lowered threshold of expectation. The academic integrity is to be maintained fully. There is always a relativity at play in terms of the initial connection to any discipline, and it is this relativity that is in question.

8 See Pope Francis, 'Address of His Holiness Pope Francis,' Naples, Friday, 21 June 2019, http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2019/june/documents/papa-francesco_20190621_teologia-napoli.html, accessed 7 April 2021.

It is, of course, clear that it is not possible to please all students all of the time, but good connection, real choice, respectful dialogue, and actionable feedback, when taken seriously, go a long way in mitigating the dynamics of alienation (from the students' perspective) in the classroom.⁹ The greatest danger for theology in a contemporary setting is working in the abstract, the general, and the ideological without meeting the real-life situation of learners. It is only then that one can show how precisely the thought structures and speculations of theology contribute to and nourish human life, social life, church life, and personal life. Otherwise, it can easily be taken to be a parallel world that can be dismissed as, at best, irrelevant and, at worst, sheer fantasy.

STUDENT CENTRED

The crucial feature when it comes to theology in the modern university is that the discipline must be, in every way, a student-centred endeavour. The content per se that is to be explored as part of any theology programme is secondary, so to speak, to the programme itself being student centred. The main reason for saying this depends on the necessity of valuing freedom as the foundation to any credible educational enterprise (something that has been neglected up to now), on the one hand, and, on the other, the necessity of ensuring that any programme per se meets the needs of students, whose profiles change at a disquieting rate.¹⁰ This, in itself, though, ensures a certain energy in the classroom experience and, to a fair degree, secures commitment from students, who are less and less able and willing to spend long periods in activities that do not engage their interests (this, thanks to the ever cascading stimulation of the internet, I suspect).

This feature of being student centred is a radically new consideration in terms of reflection on the discipline of theology. When Karl Rahner, for example, published his 'Sketch (Aufriss)' of a 'Dogmatic Theology' (understood as a comprehensive syllabus for systematic theology) in 1954, he did not allude even once to the students for whom this syllabus was being drawn up.¹¹

9 I hope that it is clear that this has nothing to do with reducing everything down to a lowest common denominator, and everything to do with pastoral sensitivity, academic integrity, and even intellectual rigour.

10 My general sense from several decades now teaching theology is that the general profile of students changes significantly about every five years; but this may accelerate in the years ahead. And I believe that one ought to take this into account in drawing up, monitoring, and modifying any programme.

11 Karl Rahner, 'Über den Versuch eines Aufrisses einer Dogmatik,' in Rahner, *Sämtliche Werke*, Bd. 4, Hörer des Wortes; Schriften zu Religionsphilosophie und zur Grundlegung der Theologie, ed. Albert Raffelt (Freiburg in Br.: Herder, 1997), 404-48.

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Nothing of their background (religious, social, or cultural) was deemed necessary for comment, and there is no indication of any such consideration being important. This is extraordinary, when you think about it; particularly from someone as perceptive and insightful as Rahner. He, like everyone else, would appear to have assumed a 'model student' (probably a seminarian of a certain academic and religious calibre, with, to some degree, a particular socio-religio-cultural background).¹² As a teacher drafting a programme for theology, his only concern in terms of explicit reflection was on the discipline itself. This is an extremely common feature of the discussion of programmes in theology, even up to the present. The student is taken to be an anonymous, homogenous recipient, who is 'treated' as being completely passive vis-à-vis the programme in terms of content, in terms of execution, and in terms of modification and development.

It cannot be occulted that in the past students were expected to attend lecture courses that were at times of no interest to them whatsoever in order to achieve a qualification that would permit them to advance to ministry, or teaching, or whatever. There was little real choice and no build-in opportunity to express concrete dissatisfaction with the classroom experience. The only option available *in extremis* was student strikes, which did, indeed, pepper student life from the '60s onwards (something I 'enjoyed' on a few occasions!). The basic model, however, remained unchanged. This model will no longer work in our current situation, with greater respect for individual freedom, significant empowerment of the learner in the education system, and a far greater range of options in terms of choosing modules across a campus being available to students. The captive university student is less and less the norm in third level education.

THE LEARNER AND THE MYSTERY

Any programme in theology must be connected in a substantial way to the world of the student with whom it is concerned. This is not just as an offering to be appropriated by them but is a service to students in their respective intellectual journeys of exploration and discovery. It ought to assist and facilitate their intellectual growth and expansion. This means that students need to be in a real, concrete way co-creators of the classroom experience. In his address to the Theology Faculty at Naples, Pope Francis remarks:

¹² Neither did he deem it necessary to take student capability into consideration. Notoriously, he lectured at a demanding intellectual level that left many students in the dark as to what exactly he was presenting.

I am thinking of the students of our faculties of theology, of those from “secular” universities or from other religious inspirations. “When the Church – and, we can add, theology – abandons the rigid schemes and opens itself to an open and attentive listening of young people, this empathy enriches it, because it allows young people to make their own contribution to the community, helping it to appreciate new sensitivities and to consider new questions.” To appreciate new sensitivities: this is the challenge.¹³

What is explored in a programme cannot be merely handed out as a *fait accompli*, complete, definitive, and absolute as in a mathematical formula. To do that at third level is not to teach theology; it is to do some kind of religious instruction or training (dubious, at best), or, maybe, better, to teach superstition.¹⁴ More than any other discipline, theology is a ‘life-science’ in the richest expression of this term. As a discipline it requires a real exchange in the classroom that takes seriously the presence of the student in the absolute integrity of being other, not as a spectator, voyeur, receiver, or psittacist, but as a real participant in the endeavour itself that is theology. Any good teacher knows this, I would say, instinctively. Enabling students to mature in terms of their intellectual growth and in their engagement with, and understanding of, the Christian tradition requires an interaction and exploration that brings into wholesome conversation the world itself of young people and the horizon of Christian faith (whose expression is new in every generation).¹⁵ In a remarkable observation, Pope Francis speaks of the farsightedness required of those who work with young people, explaining that

It is the ability to discern pathways where others only see walls, to recognize potential where others see only peril. That is how God the Father sees things; he knows how to cherish and nurture the seeds of goodness sown in the hearts of the young. Each young person’s heart should thus be considered “holy ground”, a bearer of seeds of divine life, before which we must “take off our shoes” in order to draw near and enter more deeply into the Mystery.¹⁶

13 Pope Francis, ‘Address of His Holiness Pope Francis,’ Naples, 21 June 2019. The internal quotation is from *Christus vivit*, No. 65.

14 See, for example, Blondel’s discussion of superstition in *L’Action* (1893).

15 I am most concerned here with meeting young students as potential students of theology; although, what I am saying applies equally to any learner, of any age.

16 Pope Francis, *Christus vivit*, No. 67, English translation corrected.

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THEOLOGY AND NOT CATECHESIS

It is important, too, to recognize clearly that theology at the university (for all its intrinsic connection to the ecclesial community) is not a catechetical endeavour, and it does not presuppose a faith commitment per se. The impulse to study theology may stem from many motivations, and all of these are equally valid and welcome in terms of taking up the discipline. This should be made clear from the beginning of a programme so that all learners know that it is inappropriate to have expectations about others vis-à-vis any explicit faith commitment. It needs, further, to be acknowledged explicitly for the sake of learners so as to alleviate any fears or anxieties that they may have about hidden expectations at this level. This ensures that everyone is treated equitably whatever may be their personal commitments. There is here, too, the valuable lesson for students of learning to engage with persons of faith and none in an atmosphere that respects the other and values each person in contributing to the dialogue and exchange of the classroom space. A theology programme in the contemporary academy is in this way open to all: persons of faith, persons of no faith, those who are searching, those who are simply interested, and so on.¹⁷

It is, perhaps, worth remarking that the university task is properly an academic one and, therefore, ought to be attentive to, and respectful of, the boundary that marks off the interior forum. University theology belongs exclusively in the external forum and ought never transgress this boundary; students are not particularly aware of this, and so, it is vital that the teacher (or tutor or facilitator) take full responsibility for ensuring that this boundary is scrupulously respected by everyone.¹⁸ This is true in terms of the classroom space as a totality, in the case of each student in interaction with teachers or tutors, and in terms of individual students in their engagement with other students (in classroom discussions, tutorial exchanges, projects, etc.). A university theology classroom is not a space for proselytizing or faith development or even catechesis. One would, of course, hope that what happens in the classroom would have a real, existential impact on students (good teaching always does), but questions and material that belong in the internal forum are only ever indirectly ‘addressed’ in the theology classroom. This, too, is an important learning for students of theology.

17 There is a significant theological issue here (that I cannot explore) in the acknowledgement of the importance of the other for faith life itself (see, for example, Michel de Certeau, *La faiblesse de croire* [Paris: Du Seuil, 1987]).

18 For a discussion of the abuse of this boundary, see Dysmas de Lassus, *Risques et dérives de la vie religieuse*, Préface de Mgr José Rodriguez Carballo (Paris : Cerf, 2020).

A major recent critique of our Irish education system is that it is based on a twentieth century model of teaching and learning. Andreas Schleicher, head of education for the OECD, observes that it is ‘quite industrial in its outlook and its design,’ explaining: ‘Students get taught one curriculum, it’s quite heavily focused on the reproduction of subject matter content, and not that much focus on getting students to think out of the box (sic) and link across the boundaries of subject matter disciplines.’¹⁹ More than any other discipline in the academy, theology suffers, when it continues to operate in the mode of the student as passive recipient in such an ‘industrial’ system. The subject is in danger of being alienating right from the beginning, leaving little room for students to begin the complex process of appropriating the theological tradition for themselves on their own terms.

Some programmes of theology still oblige students to take particular modules (especially in professional degrees), but this may well do a disservice to theology per se, where tacit resentment can, ultimately, do more harm than good. It is imperative that we overcome the pathogenic classroom dynamics that perpetuate power over the learner and replace them with a healthy interaction and exchange so as to enable human growth and not just on the intellectual level. It is a matter of overcoming the monophorism of a dysfunctional hierarchical model of human interaction and of replacing it with the healthier mutuality of the learning environment. As a teacher you put your expertise at the service of students as opposed to using it as an instrument of power over them.

It calls, inevitably, for a classroom experience that encourages and promotes dialogue, exchange, and shared exploration, not as a pedagogical strategy to meet or fulfil the wishes and desires of the teacher, but as a conviction that the classroom itself is a real place of theology. In the end, this amounts to treating learners as co-equal adults, enabling them in terms of independent, critical thought and action, and avoiding the paternalistic dynamics of earlier models of third level education. In his discussion of reform of the French University system some ten years ago, now, Louis Vogel, who has extensive experience in terms of the contemporary university, points out that the ‘magisterial lecture’ can no longer remain the central axis of university teaching, and we need to restore a level of pleasure to the classroom. ‘We need to make

19 See Carl O’Brien, ‘Irish schools need to modernize “20th century” approach to learning, warns OECD,’ *Irish Times*, 22 March 2021. I take it that the referent here is to our secondary school system, although much of what he says applies *mutatis mutandis* to third level (theology, at least).

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studying more stimulating, to take the pressure off the student, to remove the vague feeling of imperfection in relation to the teacher, to prevent one from believing that everything one says is of no interest, in short, to restore the pleasure of studying.’²⁰ And writing *à propos* theology in 1964, Peter Fransen observed: ‘As soon as all that is expected of the students, and probably of the professors as well, is to repeat what is written in a classical handbook, then theology, as a living form of witness to faith, is dead!’²¹

20 Louis Vogel, *L’Université, une chance pour la France* (Paris : PUF, 2010), 74-75. He notes, interestingly, that the French philosopher Alain already critiqued this mode of teaching in 1932! ‘Remarquez que l’expérience a été faite. D’une leçon magistrale il ne reste presque rien après huit jours, et après quinze jours il ne reste rien du tout!’ (Alain [Émile Chartier], *Propos sur l’éducation* [Paris: PUF, 1967], 78).

21 Peter Fransen, ‘The Teaching of Theology on the Continent and its Implications,’ in *Theology and the University: an ecumenical investigation*, ed. John Coulson (London: DLT, 1964), 78-104, at 84.

Listening to the Word. According to the Global Scripture Access Report the Bible is available in 674 languages today. This implies that 81% of the population worldwide are able to read the Bible in their own language. When we consider Europe, however, we realise that people may own a Bible but no longer read it, and in fact may never have spend even an hour glancing through its pages. In many parish centres, rooms are booked for well-attended entertainment or social activities, but Bible study groups get less attention and only a small number of people attend. Social and political issues and human reason are more important than the Bible for many clergy as a strategy for the future of their church.

– GESA E. THIESSEN (ed), *Called to Freedom* (Dublin: Wordwell Ltd.) 2019, p. 176.