The Case for Theology in the University

Con J. Casey

'I see theological education as education not only about the nature of God but the nature of humanity.' Rowan Williams[1]

In 2012 the board of Trinity College Dublin agreed to establish an institute for teaching and research in theology in the Catholic tradition. The institute, to be called the Loyola Institute, was to be on campus, and its academic discipline would be among the multidisciplinary academic engagements which comprised the mission and raison d'etre of Trinity College. The first task of the institute was to devise a detailed curriculum of studies in support of an undergraduate degree in Catholic studies. The curriculum required the scrutiny and approval of the powerful Undergraduate Studies Committee and then, based on its report, the decision of the Board of the College to formally establish this degree among its academic offerings.

At the Undergraduate Studies Committee serious questions were raised in objection to the whole project. Is not Catholic theology a matter for the church and for church institutions of learning? Why is it seeking a place within a secular and publicly-funded university such as Trinity is? A line of response to this objection was that in a secular society such as Ireland (and in other secular societies equally) religion remains a potent human phenomenon. As such, it raises important issues that warrant being taken up within the ordered realm of academic inquiry that is appropriate to the mission of the university. To this answer a counter position was sketched out: in a secular university should not the inquiry into religion be in the hands of the purely secular disciplines various termed nowadays 'Religious Studies' or the 'Science of Religion', or, sometimes, 'the academic study of religion'?

In the event the fledgling institute achieved both objectives: the committee reported favourably, and the board approved the degree. Yet the questions and objections raised in the Undergraduate Studies Committee retain force. They are not to be lightly dismissed. From within theology itself it is best to regard them as a spur and a prompt to seek better clarity of how it can be that the

university setting is beneficial for theology and why theology is beneficial for the university, (and perhaps also beneficial to the self-understanding of practitioners of the purely secular 'sciences of religion').

The case for theology

A response from within theology, perhaps too hasty a response, points out that theology was a founding academic discipline in Trinity. Its symbol on the campus Campanile is one of four indicators of the academic self-understanding of the college from 1592, (the others being symbols of science, of medicine and of law). Moreover, when in twelfth- and thirteenth-century Europe, a quite new and innovative institute of learning was being developed, eventually to be called 'the university', theology was a foundational discipline. This occurred in Oxford from circa 1167, in Paris from circa 1215. In Bologna, perhaps the oldest university, at first majored in canon and civil law from 1088, the faculty of theology came later on in 1360. For these universities the great new fact in the academic life of Christendom from the thirteenth century onward consisted in the integration of the Greco-Arabic corpus of knowledge and ideas. Theologians played major roles in this work, Thomas Aquinas in particular: 'It is not too much to claim that Aquinas's views redefined the relation of the sacred and the secular, and helped to change the history of western society'[2]. In the foundational years theology was a catalyst within the academic life of Christendom.

These background historical facts are certainly not irrelevant, though neither do they pre-empt the force of the modern problematics of making the case for theology in today's university which is so vastly changed from its medieval progenitor. The university is a centuries-old institution of learning. It is useful to think of this institution in terms of a 'tradition' as this term is defined by Alasdair MacIntyre: 'A living tradition is an historically extended, socially embodied argument, and an argument precisely in part about the goods which constitute that tradition.'[3] The question then is what are the goods at play in the institution of the university? In its modern iteration the university is the location for much professional training, in the many branches of medicine, in law, in engineering, and so on. Yet the self-understanding of many modern universities (and certainly in Trinity College Dublin) retains the view that the university is more than this. Alongside professional training, the university is an institution of inquiry – 'teaching and research' – into the critical and constitutive issues of human flourishing, and in all its rich

diversity. The case for theology must be that it contributes in a distinctive way to this tradition of inquiry, and that it brings specific and very powerful resources to the engagement.

Theology is best conceived as a specific and distinctive tradition of inquiry – *fides quaerens intellectum,* that is, an inquiry continually welling up out of the resources of faith. The object of this specific and distinctive inquiry is 'not only the nature of God but the nature of humanity'. In its medieval iteration this tradition of inquiry absorbed the Greco-Arabic corpus of knowledge and ideas, or at least some of its most influential practitioners did so. There was, of course, much resistance and much obfuscation along the way. Absorbing much from this corpus of knowledge, the practitioners of theology kept pressing the question: 'What is it like to live as a Christian?' 'Why is this different from other ways of conceiving humanity?' Why does it reach greater depths of humanity than, for instance, a simply tribal identity, or one that insists on its own supremacy by force of arms at the expense of others?' The responsibility of the contemporary theologian is to continue asking these questions. In what ways does the (strange) Christian way of living illuminate contemporary perplexities? Stretching back generations, centuries, millennia, focusing on Christian patterns of life and thought (as well as drawing on Jewish patterns of life and thought), the practitioner of theology brings considerable resource to these questions. It is this resource that makes the case for theology to take its place within the multidisciplinary teaching and research of the contemporary university.

A theologian navigates dangerous waters. Alongside wisdom there is plenty of ideological distortion in the theological record. To take one example, there is plenty of patriarchal bias. The theologian needs the skills to recognise this for what it indeed is. A university is where navigating 'a hermeneutics of suspicion' is a well-honed skill-set, certainly a good setting for this task. Thus, there is a benefit to theology and a benefit to society. 'The influence of Christianity on human affairs is still such as to render it dangerous (and not only for Christians) for Christian theology to be allowed to go about its business in real or imagined isolation from the forces that shape our culture and our history.'[4] On the other side of navigation of the hermeneutics of suspicion the theologian will be able to make the case still more clearly that there is indeed in Christian discourse and practice a profoundly liberative and redemptive dimension in human affairs.

The case for theology in the university is that by offering benefit to the

integrity of theology, benefit is offered to the integrity of the university's mission as a locus of inquiry into what is the human good.

A different challenge: the case for 'Religious Studies'

A different challenge to the legitimacy of theology as an academic discipline within the university arose in recent decades on the back of the vigorous pursuit, – even in some instances the aggressive, and adversarial pursuit – of entirely secular 'sciences of religion'. The separation of the secular study of religion from theological studies took place in the universities of northern Europe and America in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Today there are many different methodical branches of the secular studies of religion. Each asserts its own distinctiveness, sociological, psychological, genealogical and so on. Taken together they are referred to as 'the Sciences of Religion', sometimes as the 'Academic Study of Religion' and, sometimes, as 'Religious Studies'. Participants – some participants – in secular religious studies reject the theological legacy in its entirety. They say that theology is not an academic pursuit at all. Thus, the Irish Society for the Academic Study of Religion (ISASR), founded 2011, as 'an association of scholars and researchers devoted to the academic study of religions within Ireland and internationally …. is not a forum for confessional, apologetical, interfaith or other similar religious activities'. Calling for papers or contributions it excluded theology explicitly (certainly in the early years of the society). Because theology has roots in *fides quaerens intellectum* it cannot ascribe to being properly academic in the sense of the academic study of religion. (Try that on Thomas Aquinas or, for that matter, Moses Maimonides!) This argument is nothing but a version of the crude and quite naive implication that no committed Christian theologian can be a critical self-reflective student of Christianity. Likewise, no committed Jewish person could be a critical scholar of Jewish faith and traditions, and so on. This crude oversimplification of the relation between practice and theory would not withstand philosophical scrutiny.

It is important to emphasise that the blatant (or latent) hostility of some participants in Religious Studies is to be counterpoised with the openness of others who do genuinely wish to explore complementarity. This in turn introduces quite a deep challenge. This is the challenge of how to achieve genuine interdisciplinarity between disciplines that are defined by and work within distinct methodologies. 'It is certainly the case that every method of

inquiry must be implicitly imperialist and reductionistic. That is, it must seek to explain everything it can in terms of its perspective, and it cannot *apriori* leave anything as privileged and unavailable for analysis.'[5] The sociologist who will see everything from the point of view of social structures and social dynamics, the psychologist will explain everything in psychological terms, likewise the historian will offer comprehensive explanation in the perspective of human events in time and space. The difficulty arises when the implicit imperialism becomes explicit and denies the legitimacy of other modes of knowing. Then 'the method becomes madness'.[6] The stance of some practitioners of Religious Studies seem to have succumbed to some variation of such explicit, reductive madness. It is pointless to insist on the non-academic viability of studies of various religious traditions which are undertaken by those who self-consciously and methodologically stand within those traditions when such studies massively exist, historically and existentially. This is true not only in the Christian realm but in the Jewish, Islamic, Buddhist and others besides.

It is only fair to record that a version of the same madness can be found in (some) practitioners of theology: 'The more radical traditionalists from several religious worlds have disrupted gatherings at the annual meetings of the American Academy of Religion in recent years, threatened scholars "outside" traditions who make arguments that "insiders" find offensive or upsetting, trashed books and derailed careers'.[7]

The flourishing of theology in university discourse must envision practitioners who can negotiate properly the relationship between theology and religious studies and colleagues likewise in the religious studies fields. Interdisciplinarity, like human society itself, is not a given. It is an accomplishment. Colleagues create interdisciplinarity, colleagues alert to the dangers and temptations of disciplinary imperialisms.

Theologians and truth-claims

A theologian is necessarily concerned with the truth-claims of the tradition (or traditions) from within which he or she speaks. The concern is not apologetic. It is not justificatory and in that sense defensive. The primary purpose of the theologian working from within his or her tradition is clarificatory and interrogative. Though not of the apologetic genre, the concern of theologians with the truth-claims of their tradition is neither specious nor one of little consequence. Remarks of Nicholas Lash are exemplary:

> It is commonplace, nowadays, to insist that unity in faith is compatible with the most diverse pluralism in theology. But too often that pluralism is eclectically conceived, as if the most divergent and mutually incompatible approaches to Christianity could simply co-exist, in untroubled tranquillity, within the household of the faith. This is an illusion. The relationship between different theological approaches will often be one of tension and conflict: the position of one who seeks to stand within 'Christianity as tradition' will often be, in many respects, 'comfortless and strenuous', as he seeks again and again, to define with accuracy and integrity where it is that he does and does not stand.[8]

Within these perspectives the practitioner of theology in a university setting espouses the quite proper insistence on the centrality of academic freedom in all scholarly undertakings.

19–21 May 2022: 'A Festival of Theology', Trinity College Dublin

Teaching and research in the theology of the Catholic tradition is the academic mission of the Loyola Institute in Trinity College Dublin. It celebrates its tenth year in tenure of this academic mission in 2022. What better way to celebrate than the hosting of 'a festival of theology', taking as its theme 'Theology in the University, the challenges, the relevance, the difficulties'? What is a university for? What role can theology play in its life? What is the relevance of this enterprise for theology, for the university, for society, for church? What about the critical role of academic freedom? How does the academic study of theology differ from the various other academic approaches to the study of religion? An international body of scholars, men and women, will examine these questions over three days, May 19–21, in Trinity College Dublin. The speakers will include Professors Dirk Ansorge (Sant' Georg, Frankfurt), Sergio Bonino OP (Angelicum, Rome), Michael Conway (Maynooth), Massimo Faggioli (Villanova), Michael Kirwan (Trinity College Dublin), Josef Quitterer (Innsbruck), Sharon Rider (Uppsala), Ethna Regan (Dublin City University), and Fáinche Ryan (Trinity College Dublin).

Anyone who wishes to attend the Festival of Theology may register here: www.tcd.ie/loyola-institute.

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Notes

1 Benjamin Wayman interviewing Rowan Williams, *Christianity Today*, 'Theological Education is for Everyone', 19/08/2020.
2 Timothy McDermott, *Aquinas* (London: Granta Books, 2007), 4.
3 Alasdair Macintyre. *After Virtue* (London: Duckworth, 1982), 207.
4 Nicholas Lash, *A Matter of Hope* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1982), 6.
5 Luke Timothy Johnson, *Religious Experience in Earliest Christianity* (Fortress Press: Minneapolis, 1998), 40.
6 Johnson, *Religious Experience*, 40.
7 Robert A. Orsi (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Religious Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 9.
8 Nicholas Lash, *A Matter of Hope*, 33.