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VIII.

THEOLOGY
IN THE LIBERAL ARTS CURRICULUM
OF A CATHOLIC COLLEGE OR UNIVERSITY

ALICE GALLIN, O.S.U.

The other morning I boarded my usual Metrobus en route to work. I was confronted by a new coin box. For the previous ten years I had to fold up my dollar bill into a narrow piece so as to insert it, along with forty cents in change, into the coin box. But now, we had been computerized. The coin box had two separate gadgets to receive our money: one for bills, the other for coins. "String out your dollar bill," the driver said. Bewildered as to what that might mean, I struggled to figure out what to do. How does one "string out" a dollar?

I mention this only because I was struck once again by the fact that language is both a means of communication and a barrier to it. Language uncovers meaning but also buries it. Language evolves through usage, through creativity, and through history. The title for my paper contains at least four problematic linguistic expressions in terms of definition and meaning: theology; college/university; liberal arts; Catholic. I think it important that I share with you my understanding of the way I am going to use these terms before we begin.

1. Theology. I am using the term inclusively, as I believe you do in your membership of the College Theology Society (CTS). I intend it to cover the various ways in which we communicate about questions of religious significance, whether it be Scripture studies, moral and ethical problems, or peace and justice issues. The recent issue of our journal, done jointly with CTS, presented many different ways of "doing" theology. Although conscious of the many distinctions made by those within my profession, I entitled this issue "Perspectives on Teaching Theology." 

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2. College and/or University. Again, I take my lead from CTS usage. Our program is called: “Theology and the University.” I take it that university here stands for both colleges and universities. We have this language problem because of the way that higher education developed in the United States. I shall have some reflections on that piece of history later on, but want to declare at this point that I am going to confine most of my remarks to four-year undergraduate programs whether in four year colleges or within universities. The role of theologians on a faculty of a graduate school or of a research university will be covered by others on the program.

3. Liberal Arts. I use the dictionary definition which states that they are the “arts becoming a freeman.” The term has come to mean those subjects which are specific to an academic college, as distinguished from professional or technical subjects. In current literature they are often designated as “general education” and ordinarily include literature, languages, history, philosophy, mathematics, natural and social sciences. As human knowledge has expanded, so also has the notion of liberal arts. They are considered to be the major way in which a cultural tradition is handed on to a new generation. Interestingly, we have not included religion or theology in our formal definition of the liberal arts, and that may reflect the way in which theology had related to other faculties in the traditional European model of universities.

4. And, finally, the term “Catholic.” This is, perhaps, the most ambiguous of all the terms. I use it when speaking of the 215 colleges and universities that choose to belong to the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities and of all the other twenty or so that are not members but clearly identify themselves as Catholic. So, basically, it is a matter of self-identification, but there is also the built-in notion that such institutions have been identified as Catholic by both civic and church communities over a fairly long period of time.

Now that you know the meaning of the language I shall be using, let’s begin.

The choice of my topic stems from a conviction that our Catholic colleges and universities in the United States have tried to do a unique thing—to integrate the study of theological disciplines with the liberal arts. In this effort, we were aided by the experience of American higher education itself; for, in the early days most colleges here were church related and therefore had a large component of religion and moral discipline. Unlike our colleagues in Catholic universities the world over, we evolved from Catholic private academies or else from secondary schools sponsored by dioceses, and for a long
period of time in the late 19th century it was hard to determine
where the high school ended and the college began. With very few
exceptions, our universities began with general education for under-
graduates, while in Europe universities were comprised by special-
ized faculties — law, medicine, philosophy, and theology — which
presumed that the general or liberal education had been done in the
secondary school. While it is true that many of our American Catho-
lic high schools developed strong classical programs, they were seen
by the colleges as “preparatory” to the liberal arts program for the
undergraduate student, leading to the B.A. degree.

This distinctive heritage that we have in the United States is shown
in the oft-repeated definition of our mission as “educating the whole
person.” Mindful of affective and spiritual development as well as
intellectual growth, Catholic colleges have spent time, money, and
creativity on the “environment” of the campus. By this, they some-
times mean residence halls, campus ministry, chapels, health facili-
ties, football teams, movies, tennis courts etc. Such things would be
of no concern to most universities in Europe and elsewhere. But be-
cause of this concern for educating the whole person, we have per-
haps thought more than our European colleagues about the impor-
tance of religion as a factor in higher education. If we look back
about fifty years we find that courses in religion were generally re-
quired, and the concern about the student’s faith was reflected in
compulsory chapel attendance and a host of other symbols and regu-
lations. We had “religious” reasons for almost every student activity!
The religion courses were designed to continue the knowledge and
formation begun in the preparatory school — apologetics, sacraments,
the life of Christ, moral principles, and sometimes the social teach-
ing of the church. I have not done much research on this topic of
curricula, but I think there was little or no conscious effort to relate
the courses in religion to the rest of the curriculum — the liberal
arts. The type of religion course was more directly related to the de-
sired outcome in terms of faith and Christian practice, and I have
not discovered any real effort to promote interaction between reli-
gion and the liberal arts.

In 1953, however, a program was introduced at the Catholic
University of America entitled “Theology, Philosophy, and History
as Integrating Disciplines in the Catholic College of Liberal Arts.” A
workshop held that summer and in several succeeding years promoted
this curriculum, and many Catholic colleges—especially smaller ones—
adopted it. The papers given at the workshop in the summer of
1952 are extremely important for the consideration of our topic. The more things change, the more they remain the same.” The foreword to the workshop's publication was written by Archbishop Richard Cushing, and you will smile at the title “The Necessity for Theology at the College Level.” It was his conviction that our colleges must become places where lay people could study theology; at that time only seminaries taught theology and only clerics could study there. Cushing wrote, “Why should a Catholic layman or indeed any layman study theology? I answer: Why should a Catholic or any American study biology, American history, government, literature?” He explained this further in words which may amuse us by their simplicity but may be key to our understanding the initial impulse to make theology (rather than religion) a part of the Catholic college curriculum. Said Cushing:

We study biology because it is the science of natural life. It is not the exclusive domain of medicine. We study theology because it is the science of supernatural life. This is not the exclusive domain of the seminary. We study American history because we are children of America. We study theology because we are the children of God. We study American government to learn the laws of our native land. We study theology to learn the laws of our eternal home. We study literature to know the most important reflections of human life in language. We study sacred scripture to share God’s words to us, His children.

Cushing went on to denounce, in the spirit of the early 50s, the secularism of the public schools and colleges — their Godlessness and the importance of our Catholic schools and colleges if we were to produce the intelligent, mature Catholic with “adult dynamic knowledge and love of his Creator.”

What I find significant in this introduction to the new program is the use of the term “theology” instead of “religion” and the way in which Archbishop Cushing saw the study of theology as analogous to the other courses in the curriculum. The authors of the report, of whom the major one was Professor Roy J. Deferrari, evidently thought that Cushing’s reflections were appropriate for what they were trying to do with their “Integration” of the liberal arts curriculum by philosophy, history, and theology. To play that role, theology taught to


3 Ibid., 3-4.
undergraduates had to have academic strength; from the 1950s on, that seems to have been the goal.

In the colleges where the Catholic University program took root, the integration of the course of liberal arts studies was achieved in a very structured way. The first two years were given to survey courses in all the various fields: English literature, a foreign language, history, classics, mathematics, sciences, philosophy. By the end of the sophomore year, the student had to choose a "field of concentration"; the use of the word "major" was avoided because it smacked of specialization. She then moved on to a selection of courses within that field. Requirements in philosophy and theology were heavy — 15 or 18 credits in each. Junior year had a Reading Seminar so that the student might become thoroughly acquainted with the classics in her field. The capstone experience came in Senior year with the Coordinating Seminar: readings and discussion which mandated a cross fertilization of ideas from philosophy, history, and theology with the special field. A comprehensive examination prior to graduation determined whether or not the mature intelligent Catholic had been formed! On one campus a favorite student song was "The Integrated Catholic Woman" — whatever that was. Seriously, this may well have been the best intellectual experience we ever offered our students in Catholic colleges.

But I do not merely wish to take trip down memory lane. I am not suggesting a return to a golden age. I have unearthed some of the elements of the curriculum of the 1950s only to suggest that: 1) the reason why theology began to be taken seriously in our colleges was to assist a genuine integrated learning experience; and 2) because of this function of theology, the faculty in all disciplines had to regard it with respect.

It seems to me that even though this particular curriculum device may have only been adopted in total by a very few colleges, the spirit of it was fairly widely accepted. Catalogues of individual colleges as well as programs of national meetings suggest a common vocabulary about theology and its integrating function in the liberal arts curriculum. I think this new role for theology may well have inspired those teachers of Sacred Doctrine in Catholic colleges to form their new organization — now called CTS. If theology were to play this new and important role in the Catholic college, then there was need to get state accreditation for it and to improve the profes-

sional standards for those who taught in the colleges. I would say that they achieved their purposes very well. It looked as if theology and the liberal arts could make a good marriage and secure the existence of the distinctive purpose of the Catholic college, for surely nowhere else — not Wellesley, Yale or Princeton — could do exactly the same thing. The Catholic identity now was secure; all we had to do was improve the level of theological teaching and run workshops which explained the integration process. The Catholic identity was in the curriculum itself.

What happened to all that? In a word, the 1960s. We might attribute some of the collapse of our neat system to forces within theology and the Church itself and some to forces in the wider society. Tremendous scholarly work in the 50s brought us a new vision of the Church — Congar, de Lubac, Murray and Weigel — the preursors of Vatican II. The Council itself stressed freedom, cultural pluralism, liturgical reforms, intellectual exploration. By the late sixties, the meaning of “Catholic” in reference to a college campus was already greatly changed. The Civil Rights Movement, the Vietnam war protests, and the war on poverty brought our students and faculties into far greater collaboration with those on secular campuses. Interaction on that level did much to show us the complexity of some of the assumptions we had long made and to challenge their validity. Administrators on our campuses surrendered to pressure, as did those on secular campuses, and curricula became loose and unrestrictive. Required courses were dropped in many of the liberal arts and credits were reduced in philosophy and theology. The clarity and strength of integration-concentration programs became murky at best.

As the 70s and 80s have come and gone, other factors have affected our Catholic colleges. Increasing numbers of older students, of part-time students, of those with very special career goals have changed the disposition of the receivers of our educational package. New sensitivity to other cultures and religions have made us question whether only the Roman Catholic tradition should be taught in our theology programs. The lack of structure in curriculum has led to a certain competitiveness among faculty. Increasing pressures on faculty for publication have reduced interest in developing cross-disciplinary courses. Can we see on our campuses today any evidence that the theology faculty play a significant role in the decisions made about curriculum? Is there an attempt to think through the specific contribution of theology as a discipline to the total education?

Sometimes it takes an attack on our assumptions to rouse us from the comfortable acceptance of the status quo. When the draft
Schema on Catholic Universities reached our shores in the summer of 1985 for consultation with our college presidents, we were shocked, then angry, that the "Catholicity" of our institutions was being questioned. In reviewing the responses and preparing the synthesis of them for the Congregation for Catholic Education, I was impressed by the determination of the presidents to assert the Catholic identity of their colleges. It was clear that in their view the "Catholic" character did not arise from some juridical tie to the local Bishop (as suggested by the Schema) but from the way in which the fundamental educational task of the college was carried out. While referring to the services rendered by campus ministry, by counseling staff, by chaplains, and residence hall personnel, they clearly saw the basic Catholic character in the very fabric of the curriculum. They spoke of their strong and vibrant theology departments. They recognized that the key to a Catholic college is a faculty committed to its mission. I think that some of the presidents had an underlying confidence that what had gone on in their own education — strong liberal arts as pre-professional training and Roman Catholic theology courses — was still the mark of their institutions. Others are committed to strengthen and revitalize these indicators of Catholic identity. But as you and I know, presidents (like everyone else) labor under pressures and restraints. Are there ways that we can help our presidents achieve their goal?

If you agree with me that the theological education we give in our Catholic colleges and universities should have a fundamental relationship with the arts and sciences, and that this relationship is an important characteristic of a Catholic institution, let me suggest a few reflections on the present state of the art.

1. I wonder about the continued significance of the theological enterprise in our colleges when colleagues in other disciplines seem so unconcerned about the question of academic freedom for our theologians. I am not at all sure that they understand the full range of your discipline and that they appreciate the impact of serious theological reflection on their own disciplines of anthropology, political science or literature. If you were no longer on the campus, would they miss you? Not just personally, but as essential contributors to

the educational process? How important is the ongoing dialogue that you and your colleagues engage in? Do they understand why freedom is necessary for theologians if you are to assist all of us in understanding our tradition and in reflecting on our own experience? Is there some way that such relationships can be developed and strengthened?

2. Obviously, the rationale for the old integration-concentration program will not suffice today to undergird the linkage between theology and the liberal arts curriculum. Is there some new way we can get a handle on it? If I were a theologian and had the time to do some research, I would explore the work of Bernard Lonergan in this regard. Is there some understanding of "method" which could furnish the bridge between theology and the other disciplines? Such a project might be a good way to bring faculties together to talk about the curriculum. But someone in theology needs to do the spade-work. Are the same basic skills involved in doing theology as in the arts and sciences? What are the significant differences? The exploration of the kinds of evidence used and the ways in which people go about their research in their specialties might give us some new and important insights as to the value of our unique opportunity for integrating religious experience with aesthetic, economic, and pastoral experience.

One area in which several Catholic colleges have begun to do something like this is that of peace and justice issues. Members of theology departments have joined with colleagues in political science and economics to design courses which will address some of the issues which have implicit ethical and religious dimensions. Teacher education, the arts, and many others have done the same. A book published last year, edited by David Johnson of ACCU,6 gives many examples of faculty involvement in such curriculum changes. Using the bishops' pastoral's on peace and the United States economy, teachers can find topics that are multi-disciplinary and that ought to be explored in a particular way on the Catholic campus.

Are there not also health issues, human development questions, aesthetic values which could be approached in this way? In our day and age, in other words, how do we link "The Love of Learning and the Desire for God?" That's a question that can't be asked formally on too many other campuses. Is it addressed on yours?

3. I said that presidents are aware that if the mission of their Catholic college or university is to be achieved, it will require the presence of appropriate faculty. It is true that mission statements are articulated by Boards of Trustees (hopefully only after long consultation with faculty, students, alumnae/i, etc.), but it is also true that the day to day carrying out of the mission statement rests mainly with faculty. Is your college still committed to “educating the whole person” — or some similar phrase? Does your college still speak of its heritage as that of the Roman Catholic tradition? What do these phrases mean? And who decides what they mean? When curriculum committees meet, are these the guiding principles? When new faculty are hired and others are promoted and tenured, are these items significant? If we do not have faculties interested in mediating our specific cultural values, then they will not be mediated. I think we have reached a point in our Catholic colleges where criteria for hiring, promoting, and tenuring need to be carefully rethought. In some instances, I think we have adopted AAUP guidelines as if they were written on tablets of stone. It may be that they should be regarded as minimum rather than maximum criteria and that we ought to make some additional judgements. The same is true of other elements in our reward system; it may be that we are extolling the virtues of faculty participation in “the education of the whole person” but rewarding the narrow specialist with more frequent sabbaticals.

Finally, the real freedom we need at Catholic colleges and universities is the freedom to accomplish our mission. Franklin Roosevelt inspired our country to fight for four freedoms — two were from something (fear and want) and two were of something (speech and press). Given those, the question remains: freedom for what? In our colleges and universities, the trustees and administrators must be vigilant in defending institutional autonomy. Whether the attack comes from the State, the Church, or corporate donors and alumni/ae, the trustees must guard your freedom. But you must be clear about the purpose for which you demand freedom. I hope that you want to defend your right to be intrinsic to our liberal arts colleges — not just an add-on-frill because such a role is necessary if the education we give to our students is to be a Christian education in the Roman Catholic tradition. Obviously, we cannot do that in the mode of the 1950s, nor do we want to, but I hope we can creatively work to develop a new model of theology’s relationship to the liberal arts so that we may continue to be Catholic colleges with a distinct mission. That is why our presidents are resisting strongly the proposal by some to set our theologians off in separate “institutes.” That would
simplify administrative links to Church authorities but would de-
stroy the integration we have sought.

Let me close with a reflection that stems from my work as an
historian. My doctoral dissertation was on the topic of German Re-
sistance to Hitler. I discovered in my research that although
there were cells of resistance to the Third Reich in labor unions, churches,
the foreign office and the army, there were none in universities. It
puzzled me that in the halls of academia no models were offered of
the need to resist intrusions on individual freedoms. My further work
confirmed the fact that the professors in the period before Hitler
actually prepared the way for his take-over by their refusal to deal
with violations of individual rights, realities, political realists and the
need for reform of the universities themselves. Each cadre of profes-
sors was a world unto itself; each researcher worked in splendid isola-
tion. Students crowded into classrooms but never exchanged ideas
with professors. There was no university forum for debate on signifi-
cant issues.

If Father William Cenkner is correct in his understanding of
theology when he says, “Two constants exist at the very center of
teological work: the interpretation of tradition, and the interpreta-
tion of contemporary experience,” then how can those engaged in
theological education fulfill their function unless they are in close
relationship with those who carry out the same kind of exploration
in other fields? Let their analyses of both tradition and contempo-
rary experience be shared and debated. They will thus provide a real
Catholic education for our students, an education which will enable
them to build a better human community for the 21st century.

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