

4-1-1994

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Recommended Citation

Hellwig, Monika K. (1994) "Experiences: Twenty-six Years of Undergraduate Theology," *Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education*: Vol. 5, Article 4.

Available at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/conversations/vol5/iss1/4>

EXPERIENCES

Twenty-six Years of Undergraduate Theology

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I have been teaching undergraduate theology classes at Georgetown University since 1967, spanning a quarter century during which we have been trying to adapt to the changes brought about by Vatican II in every facet of Catholic life. The guiding principles for our theology department have been drawn from the Denver meeting of representatives of Jesuit colleges and universities in 1970. According to this, all undergraduates are required to take at last two courses in the theology department, but no one can be required to take a confessional course, that is, one that assumes commitment to a particular tradition. We have a broadly ecumenical faculty in the department.

In this context, my continuing concern has been not to let the intellectual grasp of Catholic faith and tradition slip away from the post-Vatican II generations of students. As we have all noticed, in the early 70s we were still teaching students knowledgeable, though sometimes bewildered or angry, about their tradition. This stage faded fast. Increasingly we have been teaching students almost totally ignorant but quite pleasantly curious about their own tradition. We have a large number of students from traditions other than Catholic; in varying degrees this state of ignorance and interest is theirs also. My concern, however, has been particularly with Catholic students in danger of losing their immensely rich tradition. No students are required to take any of my

courses which all fall within a broad range of choices with which undergraduates can fulfill their requirements.

Some of my courses, such as Latin American Liberation Theology, Christian Perspectives on Marxism, Jesus in Christian Faith, etc., are cycled. The two that I teach every year are a two-semester course in the history of Christian thought, intended primarily for Christian theology majors and a one semester course, Introduction to Catholic Theology offered each semester. Both attract not only Catholic students but some others who are interested for academic or personal reasons.

My goals in the history of Christian thought class can be briefly stated: to make the students aware of the immense wealth of the tradition, to give them a taste of classic texts in excerpts from primary sources, and to offer them a kind of historical "map" on which they can locate authors and texts, understanding them in their own contexts. My hope is to counter the trend in current teaching and writing which moves straight from Scripture to contemporary reflection, or from Paul to Augustine to Luther to the Enlightenment. It seems to me that one of the constitutive features of Catholicism is the treasuring of the cumulative wisdom of the past, not as a sealed package to be tossed to the next generation for safe-keeping, but as a living resource to be engaged again and again in creative wrestling with new questions.

In the Introduction to Catholic Theology my goal is to present the basic belief themes of Christian faith, unfolding their intelligibility in terms of the students' own experience and in terms of the develop-

ment of those themes in the Church. The themes I take are revelation, creation, sin and redemption, Christology, ecclesiology, sacraments and eschatology. With each theme there is a framework: experience, questions arising out of the experience, narrative foundation in Scripture (what we used to call *locus classicus*), unfolding in history of the systematic explanation, instances of loss and recovery of meaning (instances of biblical fundamentalism, or insistence on verbal orthodoxy when the meaning of the words has changed, etc.), and new questions arising in our time. I want the students to recognize this pattern in retrospect, but we actually begin with the reading of one or more biblical source texts, discussing the symbolism, allusions, meaning in the original context, and ways the text was understood by Church Fathers and others. From there I take the students back to a reflection on what kinds of questions people might have been asking to which these narratives respond, in what ways the students themselves share those questions, and what are the life experiences out of which such questions arise. After this I pick up the thread of development of the theme in Christian history—the linguistic and cultural adaptations, the debates over interpretation, the heresies, the attempts to deal with new philosophical assumptions about reality and human knowledge of it, etc. Finally, we touch on contemporary questions and leave them open, in order to convey the sense that the process continues and that Christians of today and tomorrow must accept responsibility for carrying it on.

This is obviously an immensely ambitious project for a three credit undergraduate course. I think what

has actually happened is that the students have been invited into the workshop of a practicing theologian where they have seen the enterprise going on. I hope they come away with the conviction that it makes sense, that they themselves can understand more and more of the tradition by further reflection and reading, and that as Christians they are invited to do this.

Intelligence Shaped by Affection

William M. Shea
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Thomas Flanagan, in his voluminous novel of Irish intrigue and rebellion against England in the 19th century, comments on one character who withdraws from the rebellion because of his love for his wife and her need for him. He says that the real history of humankind is to be discovered not in the succession of great events ordinarily written about by historians (Parnell or the IRA), but in the history of affection: the love between wife and husband and between friends (Parnell and the IRA included insofar as they are driven by affection).

This may relieve oneself from public responsibility, but in at least one sense it is true. Devotion to a cause, just action and the retention of sacred and shaping memories are possible only if the coals of human affection are fired and banked. Karl Rahner describes the experience of grace in terms of basic affectivity. And he himself, naturally enough, is not far from that classic of Christian spirituality, Ignatius' *Spiritual Exer-*

cises, which sets forth a process by which we may find our place in "reality," in that vast history of affection told in the Scriptures. The engine of progress in history is intelligence shaped by affection, and their absence is decline. This is what I suppose to be true when I teach.

What I teach is this:

Our religion is the chief public exercise and shaping of understanding and affection toward God, and so the chief engine of culture. To my mind, the decisive examples of this truth about humanity are the resurrection of Jesus and the survival of the Jews and of Judaism. Even against the most powerful and blatant displays of evil in human history, affection for God and neighbor proved invulnerable.

Our religion is a practice, not a theory. Christianity is not a philosophy, a theology or a cosmology. It is a social disciplining of the affections, the mind, the "spirit."

Religion is worth every bit of intellectual attention we can afford to give it, for it is historically and aesthetically fascinating, frequently intelligent, sometimes philosophically "deep."

Our religion has the potency for good and evil possessed by all individuals and societies. Religion is as shot through with sin as it is with grace. It is important that we get this straight and that students avoid naivete on the matter: religion is suffused with guilt, irony and moral ambiguity.

In the university and as a theologian, I do not suppose my work to have a special or sacred place. I do the same things that other professors of the humanities do: I recount histories, analyze texts and compare meanings. I try to teach students how to read sacred texts and acts. I

teach texts and traditions of interpretation of texts, acts and traditions of interpretation of acts. My slice of the humanities pie is Roman Catholic Christianity, but I teach facets of the other Christianities as well. I even try to think about "religion in general."

The quest for self-transcendence in knowledge and love is the university's task as well as the Church's. In the university this is an intellectual practice primarily, as well as a religious one.

The quest for self-transcendence in knowledge and love is the university's task as well as the Church's. The university exists in this regard to impart and support our knowledge of one another so that affection among us becomes a real possibility. In the university this is an intellectual practice primarily, as well as a religious one. The key to a judgment of the university in any other than formalistic and technical terms is this: has the practice of strangers come to be known and prized? If the modern university in a pluralistic setting does not accomplish this, it has not contributed to the "real" history of humanity. Intelligence and affection remain the threads to follow out of the cave.