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## Experiences: Intelligence Shaped by Affection

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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*

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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."

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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.