

for what they are. This does not mean a condemnation of those who advocate such views (we need not start any witch-hunting), for they too may still be serving the community by forcing that community to sharpen its consensus and to make this consensus more articulate and more conscious in the life of the faithful. But this service of the academic community does require truthfulness on its part in the elaboration of theological understandings of the faith; it requires it to take seriously its task of distinguishing differing theological understandings of the one faith from positions that are *misunderstandings*, distortions, deformations of the truths that Christians hold.

I hope that the thrust of these remarks is clear. I believe that the question at the heart of the matter is one of utmost importance and seriousness, and one that cannot be sidestepped by the academic community.

— WILLIAM E. MAY

### LET THEOLOGY BE THEOLOGY!

There is a touch of anxiety—if not panic—intruding into the deliberations of the curriculum committee of many theology departments this semester. The declining overall enrollment, the administrators' demands for "innovative curricula," the reduction or elimination of the theology requirement, the open competition with other departments for those abundant electives students now enjoy, all these factors powerfully influence the type of program designed for the coming term. Joined to these pressures are the tragic human dimensions which accompany the lower enrollment in theology courses: reduction in the number of faculty, loss of jobs with little hope of finding employment, delayed tenure and promotion, the lessening of faculty morale.

Most theology departments experience this tension and many respond to it in a typically American pragmatic way: the construction of a 'relevant' curriculum which no longer considers Christian revelation itself as its primary concern, or worse, gives clear priority to descriptive, phenomenological studies of interesting issues of the day. Since the overriding concern is to fill the classroom, attract students, and thereby insure faculty positions, new courses are invented which have "more appeal" to the typical undergraduate. (At times this also entails novel teaching methods such as class held amidst the deafening noise of the local pub.) The 'relevant'

curriculum is the only answer, so the argument runs, to the declining enrollment in theology classes and the consequent threat of the dismissal of the non-tenured faculty and/or the assignment of some of the less popular tenured faculty to counseling or administrative tasks.

The results of this stance are seen in college bulletins. The theology listings, once staid, majestic (if not triumphalistic and pompous) have gone mod. A sample: "Jung's Insight into Religion"; "The Modern Political Novel"; "Redemption and Freedom: Faith or Satori?"; "The Book of Hopi"; "Spiritual Freedom through Yoga"; "The Self in Hinduism"; "Religion in Contemporary Culture"; etc.

No theology chairman can deny the problems facing his department. But is the 'relevant' curriculum the solution? I do not think so. Putting aside the important fact that most theological faculties are ill-equipped to teach such new courses, is this THEOLOGY? Or to put it in a more practical way: is one of the main reasons why parents are going into debt to pay the \$2,000.00 a year tuition so that their children can have the opportunity of participating in this type of theology/religious studies program?

Theology is not just a study of our commitments, nor a soul-streaking three-credit interface. Nor is it a group of pentecostalists praying in tongues, nor a study of the political and sociological issues of the day, nor biography nor literature as such. Theology has its explicit norm in God's self-disclosure in history, culminating in the definitive expression of Himself in the Word made flesh, the Lord Jesus Christ. Theology is the criticism of the FAITH. We need to be reminded that it entails the systematic, methodical, scholarly investigation of God's self-disclosure in Jesus Christ, and man's response. It would follow therefore that the *primary* offerings of a theology department must be those which critically and methodically study the various elements of revelation, with all its consequences. In a pitiful, desperate attempt to be 'relevant,' some theology departments are making secondary, if not eliminating, courses on Jesus Christ, the Church, the Scriptures, the Sacraments; some have resigned themselves to the phenomenological study of religion or more interesting topics. Perhaps this is 'relevant'; however, are we dealing with theology? The 'relevant' approach appears to be an attempt to escape the difficult demands of being a theology teacher; it is the quest for popularity at the expense of the discipline itself.

There is no doubt that we do have the formidable task of "penetrating, purifying and expressing what faith says in terms that are new, beautiful, original, lived-out and understandable" (Pope Paul VI, General Audience, July 3, 1968). There is no doubt that

course offerings have to be constantly overhauled. However, in our attempt to speak to our students in their language and through their culture, in the highly competitive battle for students, there is the danger of tossing out the discipline itself: the proverbial baby with the bath water. Theology courses—the multiple study of God’s self-disclosure in the Lord, with all that entails—must constitute the core, the backbone, the primary role of a theology department worthy of its name.

We are not saying that courses on non-Christian approaches are not to be taught, nor are we declaring that theology departments are not to confront other major areas, especially in interdisciplinary courses. We are emphatically declaring, however, that even these studies must be done *theologically*, i.e., critically examined in the light of God’s self-disclosure in Jesus Christ, which is itself critically and methodically studied as the primary task of the department. We are declaring, therefore, that the purely descriptive or phenomenological study of religion and other interesting subjects cannot form the core of a theology department.

The curriculum must primarily include, therefore, the critical study of revelation itself and its consequences. Secondly, the curriculum should also include *theological* courses on non-Christian approaches and interact *theologically* with other disciplines. Finally, considering the present atmosphere existing on our campuses, there is at times the need, although not as pressing as a few years ago, for a few phenomenological, descriptive courses which must be considered as peripheral to the role and scope of the department itself. The difficulty arises when the secondary, or worse, the peripheral courses, become central and constitute the thrust of the department itself. We then have a betrayal of the discipline; we no longer have a Christian theology department.

Some theology teachers claim that if we do not construct the truly ‘relevant’ curriculum, we are planning our own funeral. How many undergraduates, so they question, want to study Scripture? Or who enrolls in a course concerning the Church, or the Person of Jesus Christ, or the Sacraments, even if we dress them up in modern, fancy titles? Or who wants to examine critically current issues in the light of God’s love in Jesus Christ? Since fewer students will register for such courses, the end result, they claim, will be an insignificant department, exercising little or no influence in the University.

The opposite is true! Theology departments which attempt to survive through total relevancy are committing suicide. An alert Dean or Academic Vice-President should easily note that the majority of the courses offered by such a theology department could well be included in other departments of the College, departments which can

easily absorb more students. Let the theologian loudly scream that his background adds an important dimension to his course on "The Psychology of Religion"; the Dean, in his crusader zeal to slice the budget, will rightfully insist that such a course be listed under 'Psychology'; the course consisting of Pentecostal prayer meetings can be included in the duties of the campus minister; the descriptive course on Hindu thought can be offered by the philosophy department and "Bible as Literature" by the English department, etc. And lo! of its own choosing, the theology department has practically disappeared.

What is an even more serious result of this death-wish of some departments is the effect on the University as a whole. According to the delegates of Catholic Universities of the world, theology is to be the hub of the institution. One of the foundations of the Catholic University, therefore, is being dangerously weakened when the theology department loses its identity and becomes, in its so-called attempt to survive, a series of bland courses in the phenomenology of religion and contemporary issues. To a great extent, the strength, the viability of the Catholic University (not to speak of its appeal to parents who pay the high tuition) lies with a strong theology department. Nothing will do more harm to a Catholic University, nothing will more quickly reduce a theology department to a shambles than making of theology a mishmash of courses which could—to a satisfactory degree—be offered by other departments of the College. THEOLOGY courses in the strict sense of the term must be the backbone of theology departments. The best teachers, the best hours of the day are to be assigned to these basic theological courses on God's self-disclosure in Jesus Christ and its consequences. Once the student participates in a full-blooded theology class, will the enrollment in the department be any worse than if the curriculum were merely a jumble of 'mod' offerings? In point of fact, chances are that students will be attracted to this new and unique discipline, which, after all, must be an essential element of any truly Christian University.

If theology departments are to survive, if they are to fulfill their role in a Catholic University, if they are to be dynamic, respected units of the academic world, then let them teach theology! If this be the death of our theology departments (which I firmly deny) then better to disappear from our Colleges than to survive as a sham, an ersatz, a facade, a catchall of 'relevant' courses, whose presence is tolerated so that the University can present the false appearance of being Catholic.

— J. PATRICK GAFFNEY, S.M.M.