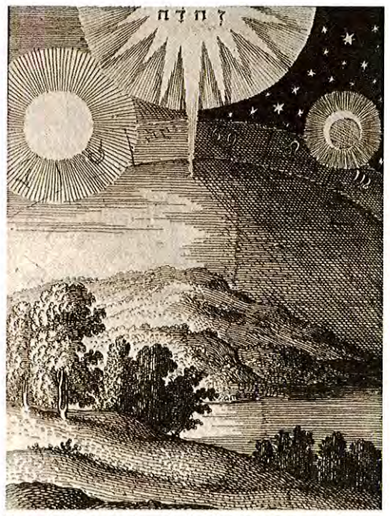
Why Study God?

The Role of Theology at a Catholic University

John C. Cavadini

Why does Notre Dame require all undergraduate students to complete theology courses and why do other Catholic universities and colleges sometimes have similar requirements? What is theology, anyway? How does it benefit students? How does the university benefit from having a faculty of theology? What benefit, in turn, does such a university offer the world of higher education? The presence of a theology department is unique to religiously affiliated colleges and universities, though certainly far from ubiquitous there, and even at Catholic schools theology requirements have dwindled over the years, and are often challenged to justify their existence. What does it mean to accept a faculty of theology as an academic unit in a university community? Its presence implies something about the whole academic community because other academic communities exclude such departments. Secular universities and colleges do not even recognize theology as an academic discipline. What, then, does the fact that a Catholic university welcomes theology tell us?



Thursday, *Wenceslaus Hollar (1607–1677)*

"By its very nature, each Catholic University makes an important contribution to the church's work of evangelization. It is a living institutional witness to Christ and his message, so vitally important in cultures marked by secularism." This passage from John Paul II's apostolic constitution *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* provides a characterization of the distinctiveness of a Catholic university. It is, he says, a kind of "witness." This term can sound somewhat strange in an academic context, and I draw attention to it, in part, for that reason. Witness is not a category that one finds applied to secular universities very often, if ever, though I imagine that even secular universities would count themselves as bearing witness in some way to values such as social justice, equality, and inclusiveness. According to *Ex corde*, however, the witness of a Catholic university is connected to the church's work of evangelization, and that seems to up the ante. A Catholic university, though proceeding "from the heart of the church," is still not the same as the church itself, and its witness can't take exactly the same form as the witness of a parish or a diocese. So what would that witness be—"so vitally important," as the pope says, "in cultures," such as our own, "marked by secularism"? Of course, this witness may take many forms in various campus activities, but here I am looking for the "institutional" witness, the witness that must be encoded into the very thing that makes a university a university—namely, its intellectual life, its mode of intellectual inquiry. Here, we find a crucial connection to theology as a discipline.

Theology is the "study of God" (*Theos-logos*). That sounds weird and pretty subjective. After all, God seems rather reclusive, not normally offering the divine self as an object of study. How could God be studied? How could one ever control such study? How could one keep it from becoming hopelessly subjective and fanciful? The study of God (as opposed to the study of religion) might sound like the study of an illusion of our own making. Unless, of course, one believes that God has in fact presented the divine self to us. It is God's self-presentation, God's "revelation," that is the subject of theological study. Theology begins from faith in God's self-revelation and moves toward "understanding" what God has revealed. It is in that way the study of God—or, as St. Anselm famously put it, "faith seeking understanding." Theology is the only discipline that has as its proper object God's revelation.

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One might wonder whether there's really a need for a special discipline to study God's revelation. Can't we just read it in the Bible and leave it at that? For Catholics, though, "revelation" is not only what is in Scripture; it is also contained in the apostolic tradition of the church. There was no New Testament around when Jesus lived, died, and rose. The church preceded the New Testament and only gradually accepted its writings as Scripture, just as Israel preceded the Hebrew Bible, and only gradually ratified it as Scripture. The church's struggle over how and (even) whether to accept the Hebrew Bible as Scripture was itself complex. There is no book that dropped out of heaven with a self-verifying label reading "FROM: GOD; TO: WORLD; CONTENTS: CERTIFIED INSPIRED SCRIPTURE." Whether the Book of Revelation is Scripture was contested until the fifth century in some churches, and in fact Christians still disagree about what constitutes inspired Scripture. The Bible is "the church's book," and Catholics have always valued the oral traditions and the living liturgical practices in which it was used. Not every practice or homily is as valuable as every other, and the magisterium of the church—its teaching authority—is there to clarify what is and what isn't authentic tradition, as well as what is and what isn't an acceptable interpretation of Scripture.

Studying God's self-revelation is therefore not equivalent to studying Scripture. But even if it were, one encounters problems in the scriptural texts—what St. Augustine called *quaestiones* in his sermons. Many of these problems or questions are posed by the learned disciplines, the arts and sciences, which one finds at any university. To take a simple example, if according to science the earth seems much older than the six thousand years or so the Bible reports, then we have a problem. Do we give up faith in revelation, or do we "seek understanding"? Are we so sure we understand what Scripture is saying, or how it is saying it?

Nor are these questions limited to the modern period. Sophisticated intellectuals both Jewish and Christian have for the past two millennia wondered about difficulties in the Book of Genesis: What kind of God creates supposedly precious human creatures and then loses track of them in the garden, having to walk around calling out and asking where they are? For that matter, what kind of a God walks around in a garden at all? One doesn't have to be a Scripture scholar to notice that, in the first few verses of Genesis, God divides the light from the darkness and calls the light day and the darkness night, but the sun and the moon are not created until a few verses later. Where was the light coming from? We moderns think we are the only ones burdened with such questions, but learned Jews and Christians of the first, second, and third centuries were possibly more troubled than we are by these passages, and yet they pressed on, "seeking understanding."

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What was the "day" created before the sun and the moon that define our days, and what was the "light" that preceded these heavenly bodies? Was it the light of created intelligence (the rational incorporeal spirit, not mentioned anywhere else in the narrative)? Was it the light of understanding, which pervades the text as a whole? Is God's creation of the first "day" a way of saying that God created time and that time is older than the sun and the moon?

No matter how they answered these particular questions, theologians of the early centuries agreed that the most important truths contained in these scriptural texts were that the origin of the world is God's creative act and that creation is not simply a matter of mechanical origin but of God's "speaking." God doesn't just create the world as the first in a series of mechanical causes. Rather, he creates it in his "word," or intention, which continues to sustain the world ever after. Another crucial truth: Everything God created is good—indeed, the whole of creation is "very good." And one more truth: Human beings have the special dignity of being created in the "image and likeness" of God.

Have we fully understood the "goodness" of the cosmos and all that is in it? Or what it means to be in the "image and likeness of God?" Of course not, but the "seeking" never stops because, for one thing, the questions never stop. Today we have, in addition to biblical texts, the benefit of this tradition of consensus, built up from the earliest centuries, about the central meaning of these texts, and we can study that consensus, along with the texts themselves, as we attempt to further our "understanding" in light of modern versions of the ancient questions.

How, then, can we square the texts of Genesis with what science tells us? We can do so primarily by noticing that the elements that the traditional consensus finds central—the dependence of the world on God, the goodness of the world, and the dignity of human beings as God's "image and likeness"—are none of them measurable or empirically observable. In other words, Genesis is not a scientific text at all, primitive or otherwise, and cannot in principle be replaced by one. Science cannot determine or measure the goodness of anything, no matter how sophisticated the instruments of detection. These are not statements proposed for scientific verification, but truths proclaimed unto faith, in the context of the rest of revelation. One responds to them by faith and by seeking, in turn, to understand what one has come to believe, not by observing and testing and verifying the hypothesis of goodness, as would be appropriate for a scientific theory. Faith in the goodness of creation proceeding from God's love is precisely that—faith. And if our faith is challenged by the obvious presence of evil in the world, that is grounds for working to understand further what is meant by the "goodness" we believe in and how the doctrine of creation fits into the broader revelation of God's love.

Once we stop thinking of the text as some kind of primitive science, we might glimpse how self-consciously it proclaims that its subject is a mystery too great for words. The six-day creation scheme is obviously a construct intended to underscore that very fact. No one can have observed the creative "speech" of God. Isn't that the point of reserving the creation of the only possible observer until the sixth "day," after all the speaking is done? The fact that the framework of "days" precedes the creation of the sun and moon is the text's way of telling us that the six-day scheme is a construct, used to direct our attention past the text to the ineffable mystery it proclaims. The text makes itself a vessel containing the great light of a mystery that can shine through it, casting the very words of the text as its shadow. The six-day scheme, oriented toward the seventh day of rest, is of course a liturgical construct, which proclaims that creation itself is oriented toward rest—that is, toward the praise of God's goodness. No science can prove, disprove, or even observe this mystery. It transcends scientific questions without denying their validity.

It is important to observe that science is affirmed in this example, even as its results inspire questions pointing to something beyond science. In this way, science itself becomes oriented toward an integration of knowledge transcending science. One learns to recognize that some concepts, such as "creation," are irreducibly theological: they can't be reduced or translated into scientific categories because they arise from mysteries, such as the goodness of the cosmos, that are proclaimed to, and apprehended only by, faith. Language of "transcending" science is not meant as an insult to science, but only as a way of affirming it in its own methodology. A culture of "faith seeking understanding" is not a culture that holds that there is a Catholic or Christian science or that faith alone offers a sufficient answer to all questions. The very point of theology is to engage the truths of faith in a "dialogue with reason"—that is, with all the other disciplines that arise from the questioning human spirit and our observation of the world. Theology affirms the truths of other disciplines even as it integrates them into a discourse that transcends their methodologies. This discourse generates a kind of thick intellectual culture, in which faith generates new questions about what we learn through scientific research rather than replacing or preempting such research.

Nor does this apply only to the natural sciences. If research into other cultures of the world discovers religious teachings of undeniable and exquisite beauty, these results are left standing, but they also occasion new questions. How can we understand their truth relative to revelation? "Faith seeking understanding" can afford to acknowledge truth wherever it may be found without fearing that the universal significance of God's self-revelation in Christ is somehow threatened. Truth cannot be threatened by truth. Seeking in this case means deepening our own understanding of revelation even as we deepen our own thinking about other religions.

Now we can see why a university community that accepts in its midst a theology department is not different simply because it accepts one more discipline than secular universities do. In accepting that discipline, a university isn't just adding another element to the paradigm already in place at secular universities; it is accepting an altogether different paradigm of the intellectual life—a paradigm of intellectual culture as a dialectic between faith and reason, to use the traditional expression. Having a theology department means accepting a commitment to the intellectual life as oriented toward an "understanding" of something that integrates and transcends all the disciplines. Such an understanding keeps each discipline from closing in on itself and proceeding as if the truths it discovers were incommensurable with the truths discovered by other disciplines. It means openness to a conversation that necessarily transcends each discipline but is not merely "interdisciplinary." If the disciplines converge at some point, it must be at a point "above" them all, in a discipline that has as its explicit object of study the mystery that transcends all other objects of study. Otherwise one must either force nondisciplinary solutions of questions onto the disciplines (e.g., claiming that faith is an adequate answer to scientific questions), or declare that knowledge is hopelessly fragmented into incommensurate disciplinary truths.

The task of seeking an integration of knowledge has been called a "sapiential task"— sapiential because it is a search for the ultimate and overarching meaning of life. The Catholic intellectual life is never finished or settled. It is, as John Paul II put it, a quest: "Integration of knowledge is a process, one which will always remain incomplete." This quest tends toward wisdom, and so the Catholic intellectual life, in its open-endedness, can be thought of as a wisdom tradition. It is inescapably theological because it grows out of faith in the God of revelation, and because theology performs the essential integrative function. Philosophy is a partner to theology in the integration of the intellectual life, since it, too, asks questions that transcend the disciplines—questions about the nature of knowledge itself, for instance, or of language, or of meaning, or even, as St. Thomas Aquinas points out, of

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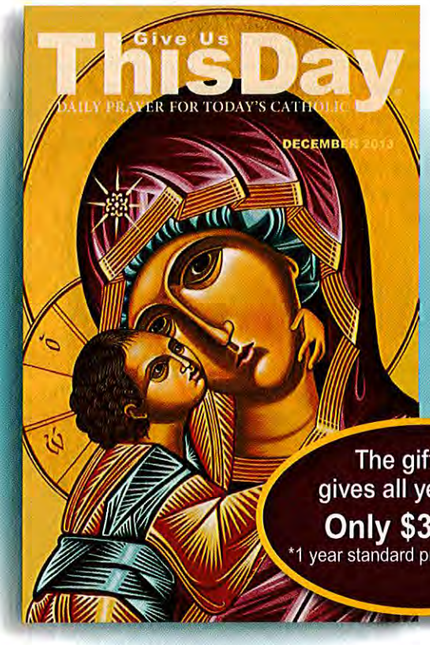

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God. Still, philosophy does not in the end have as its defining object of study God's self-revelation and everything as seen in the light of God's self-revelation, as Thomas also points out in the first article of the *Summa Theologiae*. Philosophy can remain philosophy without asking the question of the relation of its own results to revelation; and if that question is asked, it cannot be answered without theology. Further, much contemporary philosophy does not even concern itself with questions of transcendence or ultimate meaning, and yet it remains philosophy. But if theology ceases to address itself to God's self-revelation, it ceases to be theology.

Yet theology achieves no understanding apart from the other disciplines (because, as John Paul II puts it, "reason discovers new and unsuspected horizons," because "faith and reason mutually support each other; each influences the other, as they offer to each other a purifying critique and a stimulus to pursue the search for deeper understanding"). Thus, the Catholic intellectual life, as a theologically integrated wisdom tradition, provides a middle ground between secularism and sectarianism. This is the "witness," specific to a university, that a Catholic university can—and does—provide in our culture.

What benefit does this witness offer to the American academy in general? Without this witness, the intellectual culture in our country will remain dominated by, and limited to, the increasingly sterile polarity between aggressive secularization and aggressive anti-intellectual fideisms. These two poles are equally unattractive, and they tend to perpetuate each other. Seven years ago, Stephen Pinker famously observed that "universities are about reason, pure and simple," and that "faith—believing something without good reasons to do so—has no place in anything but a religious institution" (*Harvard Crimson*, October 27, 2006), by which he meant a church, synagogue, mosque, or the like. Such a caricature of faith is itself anti-intellectual, but persons of faith may be tempted to respond to such hostility by turning to a self-isolating fundamentalist position that finds in faith an intellectual world sufficient unto itself. But that position is so narrow and anti-intellectual that it prompts a kind of intellectual revulsion, and so feeds the growth of the opposite position—secularization, which at least seems open to all questions (if not all answers). Part of the Catholic university's mission is to provide an alternative to these two extremes, to heal an intellectual imagination wounded by the antagonism between secularism and sectarianism, where these are understood as the only two options. The "witness" of a Catholic university involves offering another option.

It should be noted that this witness may appear to "pinch" both faith and reason. It will appear to pinch reason because of its commitment to faith in God's self-revelation as entrusted to the church. This requires links to the church. Without these links, the intellectual culture of the university will, beyond any doubt, be secularized. Apart from the community of believers, no one will care whether faith seeks understanding or not. In a way, the church protects this intellectual environment. On the other hand, the dialectic between faith and reason has to be free enough that real thinking is possible, and so to some this freedom will seem to pinch faith. Academic credibility is a sine qua non of any witness appropriate to a university, while fidelity is a sine qua non of any real witness to the church's distinctive intellectual culture. The question for a Catholic university is: Are its connections to the church accidental and occasional or programmatic and consistent? Is its project rooted in the church, linked to ecclesial persons, and accountable in some way to authority in the church? Is dissent the default mode of its theological culture? Or is refusal to tolerate critical reflection in the public domain on various magisterial positions the default mode? If the answer to either of these last two questions is yes, then the appropriate balance has not been struck.

Now we are in a position to answer the other questions this article began with. Why should undergraduates be required to take courses in theology? An undergraduate course in theology is essentially different from, say, an undergraduate course in history. Even if both courses use some of the same texts, they will use them in different ways. The history course will examine the circumstances of their production, the culture behind them, the social situation for which they provide evidence. But the point of a theology course is to find out about God, in and through the properly disciplined study of these texts. If a student asks a question about God in a history class, the instructor is free to answer, "That's not a relevant question in this class" (or, as it was put to me somewhat indecorously in a class at the non-Catholic institution where I studied as an undergraduate, "Please leave your theological baggage at the door"). But for a theology instructor to reply in the same way would be to violate the very identity of one's discipline. Students are right to ask about God, and all matters related to God, in a theology class, where the question is not finally "What influences were operating in Julian of Norwich's social setting that caused her to have visions?" or "What did Thomas Aquinas think about God?"—though such questions are certainly and necessarily involved—but rather "How has this study helped me think about God and God's self-revelation?"

From theology classes, students can also learn that faith in revelation isn't something that has to remain purely private, a matter of individualistic piety without reference to the intellectual life. Rather, faith—the very faith that connects them to all believers, learned and unlearned—can acquire a level of "understanding" as sophisticated as that of any other discipline of study in the university. I find that this is the single most important benefit of the study of theology for undergraduates: the discovery of the sophistication of the "science of God," of the perspective of faith. It comes to

ny of them almost as a shock. If anything is likely to bind em more fully to their faith—or, if they are not believers, make them take the faith of others more seriously—it is is discovery, and not unchallenging courses that seem to eplace teaching with preaching. I intend here no devalua- on of preaching, but the special witness of the university kes place in the context of a classroom. The witness of a niversity is not the same as that of a parish or a diocese, here preaching is the proper modus operandi.

Through required courses in theology, students are exposed a mode of inquiry that belies the false dichotomy between ecularization and sectarianism, a mode of inquiry in which ith is not excluded as irrelevant to reason but is itself the pening to a rich intellectual world. What Augustine calls e *initium fidei*, the starting point of faith, drives this inquiry ther than cutting it short. Nor are we talking about faith the abstract, but a specific faith: the basic doctrines or ysteries of the Catholic faith, considered as part of a living adition and not an artifact of the past. Basic knowledge these teachings, and exposure to a mode of inquiry that either opposes faith to reason, nor reduces faith to reason, a benefit to any student no matter what his or her own rticular "starting point" may be.

As students come to understand the sophistication of the atholic theological tradition, I find that their sympathy r it increases. They see riches where before they saw only d, irrelevant texts. They come to appreciate that there ere difficult challenges in the church long before our own me, controversies much more heated than some of those we bserve today. They discover a beauty they had not expected, variety where previously they had assumed there would e only uniformity. They find out that Scripture is not as rimitive" as they had thought. They learn that, while not ducible to reason, faith has its own logic. They learn to tinguish between what is reasonable and what is provable. ey learn some of the basic doctrines of the Catholic faith, t as doors that close off all questioning, but as openings lifelong reflection on the ultimately ineffable mystery of od's love, which is the ultimate referent of all doctrine. It the formation of an intellectual life continually engaged ith this mystery that is the principle benefit of theology a field of study.

Thus a Catholic university that welcomes a theology de- rtment and requires theology courses for its undergraduates dorses an academic approach that is essentially integrative. ven without any specific integrating programming, the niversity thereby identifies its whole intellectual project as istinctive. In such a university, the other disciplines remain emselves; their different disciplinary methodologies are not rased or homogenized. But each disciplinary conversation experienced as part of a larger whole. Since one part of e curriculum is explicitly oriented toward understanding e mystery of God's self-revelation, the whole is thereby nplicitly oriented toward such understanding. The kind

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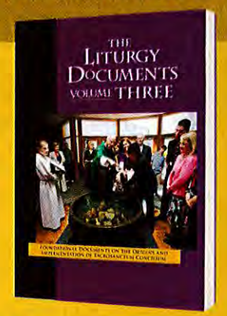

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of integration such an approach makes possible is never complete, always a work in progress. It is the character of a conversation, rather than a settled intellectual accomplishment or system.

Let me offer a small example of how the integrative potential of the conversation might be actualized in a specific way. Contrary to popular belief, the "preferential option for the poor" is first and foremost a doctrine about God, and not about the poor. In his book *On Job*, Gustavo Gutiérrez writes, "The ultimate basis of God's preference for the poor is to be found in God's own goodness and not in any analysis of society or in human compassion, however pertinent these reasons may be." If the poor and the "little ones" are "the privileged addressees of revelation," this is "the result not primarily of moral or spiritual dispositions, but of a human situation in which God undertakes self-revelation by acting and overturning values and criteria. The scorned of this world are those whom the God of love prefers."

All good universities want to be committed to social service of some kind, and the Catholic university most of all. But it is important to note here that, from a Catholic point of view, the reason for such service is first and foremost found in God's manner of self-revelation. We are, in the first place, confronted with a mystery of God's transcendent love that cannot be reduced to human reason, because it is a "preference" based in God's "goodness." It cannot be derived from any notion of justice based on human reason alone, on the supposed merits exhibited by the poor (or lack thereof). Theology is a contemplative discourse that is defined by its attempt to understand this goodness as well as it can be understood, and to arrive at a notion of justice that flows from it. The language appropriate to theology, according to Gutierrez, is the union of the contemplative and prophetic, of the contemplation of God's love and the "overturning" it implies in its very mode of revelation. Isn't this language—which could only arise in a department oriented by definition to the mystery of God's self-revelation—itself an example of the integration required of a Catholic university? Other disciplines can then contribute to an understanding of this language of contemplation and of justice, spoken as it must be in a world of science, technology, law, literature, social studies, and art. A Catholic university might even offer clusters of linked courses, each speaking its own disciplinary language, but all integrated theologically into the language of contemplation and prophecy.

Thus does the mere presence of a theology department orient a university, quietly and almost imperceptibly, toward the transcendent mystery of God's solidarity with the "little ones," the mystery of the Cross. Is there a better way to prepare students for a lifetime of active, conscious immersion in the mystery of God's love? ■

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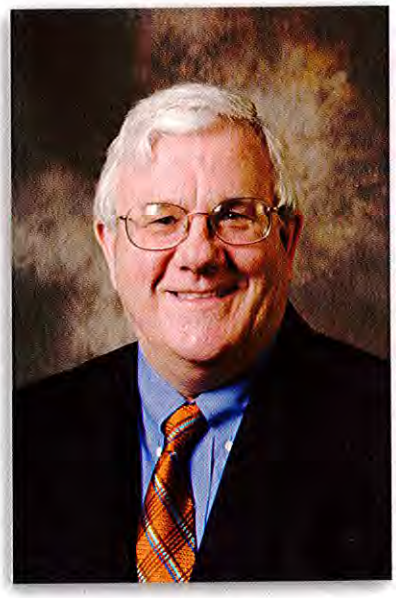

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