

THEOLOGY AND CULTURE

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The question posed to us is: How can theology contribute to the goals of a Santa Clara education over the next five years, particularly with a focus upon “theology and culture”? How can a focus on “theology and culture” be integrated into the curriculum for all students, graduate and undergraduate, and more broadly, into the horizon of the university as a whole?

Theology within the University

We first wish to note that theology plays an important role within the life of a Catholic, Jesuit university. This should be obvious, of course, in that the academic disciplines of theology, steeped in thousands of years of tradition, help to articulate the faith that grounds the mission and identity of the Catholic university. Traditionally, theology stood at the apex of the university’s academic ladder; today it serves as a synthetic discipline, drawing upon and contributing to the work of many other academic disciplines. And, at Santa Clara, it is situated within a department of “religious studies” that includes approaches to religion that are not strictly theological. The accent at Santa Clara is decidedly on the study of theology within the context of the study of religions. But beyond the actual disciplines of theology, a Catholic university properly has a “theological horizon” within which many other disciplines and dimensions of the university’s life and mission can be read. For theology is, most basically, faith seeking understanding, and faith comes to be understood through many avenues, academic disciplines, practices and undertakings in the modern university.

Theology and Culture

The theology-culture relation is perhaps the chief problem for theology today, both in academic life and in everyday faith. The urgency of the issue is pressed upon us as we look, from a global perspective, at the political and military conflicts today that often involve clashes, either perceived or real, between cultures and theological world views, notably between Christianity and Islam, but also between other religions and cultures. Noted writers are conjecturing about catastrophes as yet unimagined if people fail to understand one another from both theological and cultural perspectives.¹ In addition, the shape of Christianity itself is changing radically, so that increasingly it can be understood only in relation to the wider world of religions and cultural expressions that are the forces behind its reshaping.² Even Christian, and Catholic, theology must now be undertaken with an eye toward how doctrines and practices can be understood in relation to other religions and within the contexts of the cultures within which Christians live. Nor can we ignore the fact that Santa Clara University rests within a world of radical religious and cultural pluralism, and that much of that pluralism is reflected in our own students.

¹ See, for example, Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998), and R. Scott Appleby, et al., *Strong Religion : The Rise of Fundamentalisms around the World (The Fundamentalism Project)* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2003).

² See Lamin Sanneh, *Whose Religion Is Christianity? The Gospel beyond the West* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003); Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (New York: Oxford, 2003).

This partly describes the world within which our students, and we ourselves, are living. How, then, do we in a Catholic, Jesuit university talk within a specific set of discourses about the traditions that are received in the universal Church about Jesus Christ, especially in relation to other religions and a pluralism of cultures, and specifically, in relation to the religions and cultures our students represent? And how do we speak meaningfully of these things, so that what we say reflects and informs what we do? More specifically: As the forces of globalization and corporate capitalism combine to create a crisis of meaning in today=s young people, how do we help our students exercise discernment and make meaningful choices? How do we help them live with a sense of calling, making decisions about life, love, and work that reflect their deepest faith and highest values, while listening with compassionate understanding to other voices and other points of view?

Theology and Culture at Santa Clara Today

Santa Clara has always offered religious instruction to its students, at least as moral instruction. Today, however, we are called upon to help students think about even their own faith in relation to the religious and cultural problematic that they face as citizens of the world. This reflects the concern of the Society of Jesus itself, for Santa Clara=s department of Religious Studies embodies in its program structure the Jesuit emphasis, laid out by General Congregation 34 of the Society of Jesus, on an understanding of faith that is grounded in and responsive to reality and to the biblical call to justice, and the “inculturation” of faith in a pluralism of cultural situations, all undertaken in the context of interreligious dialogue.³ There can be no adequate Catholic theology in a Jesuit university that does not take into account this interdependency among the concerns for (1) understanding and living faith, (2) partly through the pursuit of a biblical justice, (3) in the context of cultural pluralism, and (4) through ongoing interreligious dialogue. For example, a course on Jesus Christ today will not only examine the historical and theological tenets of Christian tradition (a given), but try to see this from different cultural and religious perspectives. This could involve bringing specialists in Islamic or Hindu theology into conversation with the Catholic theologian and inviting students to enter into the dialogue as well.

³ See ADocuments of the 34th General Congregation of the Society of Jesus@ (1996): http://www.calprov.org/resources/docs/c34_indx.html (accessed January 3, 2005).

Practically speaking, students take three courses in “religious studies” as part of the Core of their Santa Clara education. The department of Religious Studies therefore includes approaches to the study of religion (and of theologies) that lie outside the conventional disciplines of Catholic theology. For example, we offer courses not only in major non-Christian religious traditions, but also in different approaches to the study of religion as a phenomenon (historical, psychological, sociological, etc.), and often these other approaches and methods are blended into the study of Catholic theology per se. At the same time, we have an ongoing concern that the central traditions and major streams of Catholic theology in particular, including the study of Scripture, be adequately and substantively represented in the faculty of religious studies.

All areas of professional focus within the Santa Clara department are, broadly speaking, theological, for we understand theology to be an interpretive (or hermeneutical) discipline, focusing on understanding, of not only what a religious belief system holds as truth, but of how that truth is received, understood, and lived: the implications of truth for all dimensions of human life. A Catholic theology following this interpretive model will be attentive to understanding traditions of Catholic faith in relation to the varieties of cultures in which that faith is lived, and in relation to other religions. It is distinguished from philosophy and history, which can also serve a hermeneutical function, in that theology begins with a stance in faith, at least seeking. But we look for a substantial development of interaction with the departments of philosophy, history, and religious studies in order to broaden the theological horizon at Santa Clara and the life of the other disciplines as well.

Pedagogical Goals for a Theological Education at Santa Clara

1. We aim to produce students, undergraduate and graduate, who will have a theological and religious literacy that enables them to understand the role of religion, and the basics a religious system, especially Catholic faith and traditions, in relation to cultures.
2. We aim to educate students to awareness, concern, and critical engagement with religion, especially Catholicism, and who can appreciate the complex interactions between religions and cultures and navigate the plurality and ambiguity of these interactions.
3. We aim to educate students who will be enabled to enter into a life of religious faith that critically connects with culture, so that they may become informed actors in creating a more just world.
4. We aim to educate students who, by virtue of their studies in religion at a Jesuit, Catholic university, will have the intellectual tools to help them pursue their own lives of faith.

Strategies and Proposals for Over the Next Five Years

1. In General: “Theology and culture” can be pursued at Santa Clara as a way of understanding the heart of our Jesuit, Catholic mission. As such, it refers not only to the work of an academic department, but to a horizon for understanding what, ultimately, the entire university stands for and what we hope to offer our students. This focus can be cultivated especially through various interdisciplinary programs, centers of distinction, and residential learning communities, as well as the DISCOVER Project, which helps our students find their calling, seeing their life choices in the light of faith. In light of the main thematic paper, “The Mission of Santa Clara,” the Ignatian Centers in particular

could be invited to see their missions even more explicitly in light of this concern, one which is so deeply Jesuit.

2. Specifically: At both the undergraduate and graduate levels, the department's Local Religions Project could be strengthened as the integrating center of the department of Religious Studies. This project is currently a clearing house of religious bodies in the Santa Clara Valley which we use for practical field contacts and some intellectual exchange. The entire project could be greatly expanded and turned into a major center of distinction at Santa Clara headed by a regular member of the faculty. In addition, the religious studies department can work with existing centers of distinction and other departments, as well as with organizations beyond Santa Clara, including the local diocese, to realize this integrating focus. Creative partnerships with the local church should be a natural orientation of the university as a whole.
3. "Theology" as understood at Santa Clara calls for practical engagement with, among other sectors, the new cultures represented by the sciences and technology, the broader playing fields of local, state and national politics, and the foreign policies of the world's only military superpower. In addition, migration, immigration, and cultural pluralism present new practical possibilities for students. One strong feature to be developed, therefore, at both undergraduate and graduate levels, is placing students in active engagement with these realities through theological internships and apprenticeships, research fellowships, travel, etc. With adequate funding, this could be underscored as a highly valued and constitutive element of a Santa Clara education in religion.

Conclusion

There is reason to believe that, with focused leadership and adequate financial resources, Santa Clara could carve out a distinctive niche for itself as a significant national Catholic center for the study of "theology and cultures." With the proper will, Santa Clara could position itself as the pre-eminent center for the study of Catholic theology, thus contextualized and understood, in the Western United States. Major centers for theology elsewhere were developed over a very few years as a result of institutional resolve, from both the top and the bottom, and much internal change. Santa Clara needs to muster similar determination if we wish to see theology play an integral role in Santa Clara's rise to national prominence.

Reflectors

Tom Beaudoin, Pearl Maria Barros, Diane Dreher, Ron Hansen, Jon Heit, Diane Jonte-Pace, Dennis Parnell, S.J., William Prior, Margarita Sandoval, Hersh Shefrin, Francis Smith, S.J., Paul Soukup, S.J., William Spohn