

Theology Going Somewhere and Nowhere¹

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In Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, chapter six, there is a very interesting exchange between Alice and the Cheshire Cat:

‘Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?’

‘That depends a good deal on where you want to get to,’ said the Cat.

‘I don’t much care where—’ said Alice.

‘Then it doesn’t matter which way you go,’ said the Cat.

‘—so long as I get *somewhere*,’ Alice added as an explanation.

‘Oh, you’re sure to do that,’ said the Cat, ‘if you only walk long enough.’

This particular dialogue is most often paraphrased as: ‘If you don’t know where you’re going, any road will take you there.’ And this, which is a line from a song, is sometimes given, incorrectly, as a quotation from the book itself. If you take the question of Theology and its future as your *Leitmotif*, then, I would suggest that this paraphrase is far too simplistic, and I would like to unravel the complexity of the original dialogue. Where have we come from? Which way ought we go from here? Where is somewhere? And what about the possibility of going nowhere? As I reflect on this activity that we call ‘theology,’ questions, such as these, spring to mind.

What I would like to suggest today is that in terms of the workings of the academy, there are two ‘modes’ in operation that are having an enormous impact on Theology; they cannot be separated out from one another and, yet, they are distinct.² These modes I will designate as ‘descending’ and ‘ascending.’ If one pictures them in terms of an upright triangle, the first mode descends from on high in a downward direction from the apex to the base; and the second ascends in an upward direction from the base to the apex. For the first mode, the ‘descending,’ everything is *received* from above, objectively, passively, graciously, and as being given to the self. For the second mode, everything *emerges* from below, subjectively, actively, creatively, as the giving of the self. These two ‘modes’ are always in practice found together,

¹ This is the text of an address given at the *Milltown Institute* as part of an academic conversation, entitled, *Towards New Horizons: On Reading the Signs of the Times*, 5-6 June 2015.

² And although what I am suggesting is particularly true for Theology, in fact, it holds for all disciplines; the difference is in the accentuation, and in how one negotiates the two modes.

mixed in different proportions according to the social situation, the hierarchies at play, and the issues at hand. The crucial insight is that we have witnessed and are witnessing a major shift from one mode to the other, and my suggestion is that Theology has been slow in accepting and effecting this change (which is now well established in other disciplines). There are good reasons for this delay in terms of the specificity of the discipline of Theology, but it is incumbent on it to integrate appropriately this change in terms of how it operates in the near future.

We are witnessing a major change in theological reflection that is moving away from a period in which the descending mode dominated to the virtual exclusion of an ascending one. In our contemporary university and culture it is the ascending dynamic that is given prominence, and it cannot now be ignored or neglected. This is precipitating a tension not only in teaching and research, but it is being felt particularly acutely in the classroom.

Whence Have We Come?

From the high Middle Ages the Church marked out and mapped a total living space. It was a comprehensive topography of the social, cultural, legal, political, educational, and the geographical landscape. Positioned in this living space the individual person and the wider community had a certain guarantee of inhabiting the place of truth. It permitted a uniformity of vision, of understanding, and of practice. Not only was there a monopoly on place, but also, and significantly, there was no real need to be concerned with, or to go beyond, the boundaries. Indeed, the declaration, *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*, was deemed sufficient to maintain and secure a vital boundary. Exiled at the margins of this identity of mapped-out-space and truth were the most vulnerable of the social order, Jews, witches, heretics, schismatics, and, later on, others on the margins of the culture, all, of course, potential scapegoats.

Theology, as we now have it, emerged in the operation of mapping; it was the essential intellectual tool, honed through centuries of policing boundaries between the inside and the outside, belief and unbelief, presence and absence, word and action, salvation and damnation. It was an instrument of surveillance, of construction, and of limitation. As the language of a total space, its central power was that of ‘defining’—it announced the categories *from above* in a descending dynamic, it directed the discourse of place, and it controlled the grammar and the performativity

of language, denouncing the deviant definition, correcting false syntax, and anathematizing the ‘other,’ the heterodox, in all its manifestations.³

In more recent decades the privileged setting for theology was, of course, the seminary or the university (when recognized by the Church), where the key task was preparing young men, in relatively large numbers, for priesthood: i.e., for leadership at parish level and for maintaining the moral and faith life of the Christian space. It was universal in scope and deemed adequate in depth. It was a monolithic formation both in terms of the socio-cultural type of student presenting (which I will come to later) and the material that was presented. One of its most defining features was ensuring that what students received was in harmony with Church teaching as understood by Church authorities. As a descending discipline, it was a controlled, and, perhaps, even controlling, exercise. No doubt, professors themselves exercised a certain freedom in how and what they taught, but the playing pitch was not an open academic field as would be understood later in other disciplines that had long been secularized with respect to Church authority.

Given the cultural setting of the seminary or university, this descending mode in Theology, which was virtually exclusive, would in more recent times, increasingly, become problematic. Up until lately, in line with the earliest emergence of the university, theology had remained for the most part in the mode of a ‘descending discipline.’ Formulated and structured by those with academic authority, mostly clergy, it was dispensed in a downward gesture to the student, the learner: one active, the other passive. This was not, of course, unique to theology. Many, if not most university disciplines, up to the mid-twentieth century, followed this same pattern. The hierarchy mirrored other hierarchies in society and was assumed to be ‘natural.’

³ In the place of the dynamic of a closed and closing ‘definition,’ I would suggest—at least in terms of Christian reflection—that we need a much more open understanding of ‘definition,’ along the lines of a principle of historically conditioned ‘discernment.’ Karl Rahner, for example, observes: ‘It follows from the nature of human knowledge of truth and from the nature of divine truth itself, that any individual truth, above all one of God’s truths, is beginning and emergence, not conclusion and end... The clearest formulations, the most sanctified formulas, the classic condensations of the centuries-long work of the Church in prayer, reflection and struggle concerning God’s mysteries: all these derive their life from the fact that they are not end but beginning, not goal but means, truths which open the way to the—ever greater—Truth’ (Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, vol. 1, 149). The policing of language and above all the control of those definitions that regulate social space is a definite power-over others. This same power is exercised today by the sciences and technology—in their own attempt to enclose us in another tightly controlled language game, itself an expression of an untethered and, at times, dangerous power-over others.

The difficulty with this is that a theology that understands itself in exclusively descending terms is in real danger of becoming utterly alien to the culture within which it has emerged. It will have great difficulty in becoming a partner in dialogue with the culture, and will inevitably prove itself to be highly uncreative. Indeed the descending mode as a model for teaching in general completely collapsed in the twentieth century for a series of complex reasons that went well beyond matters of faith and belief. It reflects a seismic change at the socio-cultural level.

And this brings me to another drama in the mode of doing Theology. This, we have witnessed in a pronounced way over the last decade, and it is an explicit recognition of the mode of ascent—the rising up of something new. Specifically, and from the perspective of religion, faith, and belief, something extraordinary is taking place. In an unexpected way the mode of ascent itself is changing how theology is thought about and practised in the academy. And for the sake of today’s presentation, I’d like to highlight just three areas, where I see this same mode of ascent at play.

Theology Going Somewhere

i) A New Discipline: Religious Studies

The first instance of this mode of ascent that I would like to draw your attention to is the emergence into the full light of day of a new discipline. Over against and largely separate from Theology, in many universities, a relatively new discipline is exploring religion, faith, and belief from a perspective that is in many instances independent from a commitment to an explicit faith community. The characteristic feature of this new discipline is that it studies religion from within the parameters of the academy, without an external reference. The significant moment in the emergence of this ascending dynamic in terms of Catholic Theology was just prior to the modernist crisis at the beginning of the twentieth century, when in France the secular university begins to explore from the perspective of ‘*la science*’ areas that were long thought to be the preserve of Theologians alone, some of whom reacted quite negatively on finding what they saw as trespassers on their property.⁴

⁴ An early example of this would be the discussion of mysticism in the French secular university at the very beginning of the twentieth century and the controversy that surrounded Jean Baruzi’s monumental study of St. John of the Cross. See, for example, Michael A. Conway, ‘With Mind and Heart: Maurice Blondel and the Mystic Life’ in *Mystical Theology: Eruptions from France*, ed., Louise Nelstrop (London: Ashgate, 2015).

By the end of the twentieth century this new discipline is well established. It is perfectly at home in the modern academy, where it satisfies the standard conditions of academic enquiry. In its self-understanding, it is squarely ascending: it does not originate explicitly with faith, although, perhaps inevitably, and despite its own parameters of enquiry, it ascends in the direction of faith. The more usual designation is 'Religious Studies,' and it is particularly well established in the United Kingdom and in the U.S., often with very different background traditions and founding rationale in terms of origin. In various institutions in the US, for example, it was originally set up as an alternative to theology (or as a watered down version of theology) for lay students as opposed to mainline theology, which was deemed to be suitable for seminarians.⁵ And now, ironically, as theology is diminishing because of falling numbers wishing to study for the priesthood, religious studies departments are beginning to thrive and in themselves are morphing into a new way of exploring religion, belief, and faith. As a discipline, it is embedded in a variety of institutions with varying traditions. As a study, it seeks to explore multiple issues that were traditionally dealt with in theology, but from what might be termed an external and ascending point of view. It seeks to answer questions that arise within and between specific religious traditions, often through a variety of disciplines, and not usually in view of contributing to the normative position of any particular religious tradition. It recognizes the importance of bringing a range of disciplines to bear on the questions that arise in society in regard to religion.⁶ Indeed, David Ford of Cambridge sees a new paradigm being worked out that will characterize the exploration of religion, belief, and faith at the academy for the future, which he designates with the telling expression: '*new theology and religious studies*.'⁷ The point that I am interested in underlining today is the emphasis on the mode of ascent that we find at the heart of the discipline. It begins in the concrete, historical, phenomenological order, and from that position explores religion. It is autonomous in the terms of its inquiry, and in its self-understanding is concerned with the immanent order, often suspending judgment on religious affiliation or faith commitment.

ii) *Ascending Disciplines and Religion*

⁵ See Thomas P. Rausch, *Being Catholic in a Culture of Choice* (Collegeville, Minn.: 2006), 71-75.

⁶ For a good discussion, see David F. Ford, *The Future of Christian Theology* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 148-67.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 148, emphasis original.

Since the Enlightenment there has been a steady growth of new disciplines in the university, beginning with the philosophical sciences, and followed by the historical sciences (and with that, for example, biblical criticism), the natural sciences, the social sciences, and most recently, the environmental sciences. Broadly speaking, this is the order in which they have come to prominence, and they have brought with them a series of revolutions, each one, almost consecutively, upturning the established order to bring into play a new order of goods. Each has brought too its own set of difficulties, of ethical issues, and of instabilities. But on the whole the various achievements of these 'revolutions' cannot be undone.

As these emerging disciplines have reached a certain maturity of method and purpose, they have begun to explore confidently material that once belonged to the realm of theology in an atmosphere of freedom and autonomy that is provided for by the modern university. This is a significant development and has seen, in about the last decade, a whole series of disciplines begin to study religious material (for want of a better term), from within the boundaries of the respective disciplines or subject areas. The ascending exploration is no longer threatened in any real way by an ecclesial authority that would claim to be the only legitimate cartographer of the human condition.

As the claim to totality is rejected, other sites are opening up in terms of an ascending exploration of the human condition. A remarkable feature of late is the number of disciplines that from within the parameters of their own competency are discovering the very questions that have animated theology for centuries. In literature, the arts, psychology, law, medicine, geography, there is a new visibility of the religious, which is being explored in all kinds of interesting and exciting ways. I understand this to be in the mode of the ascending disciplines in that they begin in the phenomenological order and move in the direction of belief or even faith. It is clear that they do not study religion from the perspective of faith as theology does, but, rather, explore religion and religious phenomena as a constituent and often vital component in the human drama of self-understanding. These ascending disciplines begin squarely in the immanent order and discover in an autonomous inquiry the trace of a possibility of the transcendent. This may be, for example, in a work of art or in a piece of poetry, in texts, particularly in designated sacred texts, and preeminently from the Christian perspective, in the bible, but also in medieval town planning, in the interior dynamics of the human psyche, in the mystery of the biological or

microcosmic order, in the breadth and depth of cosmic space, in the human drive to benevolence and charity, and so on. This means that for the near future the ‘material’ of theology will be explored to some degree in a more dissipated fashion in the academy; but what is interesting, from my perspective today, is that *it will be studied*. One of the most exciting developments in this regard is that the ascending disciplines are developing a new language in which to explore and discuss faith and belief. They also proffer new structures in which to think about religion.⁸

This brings me to my third and most important instance of this mode of ascent, namely, in the classroom.

iii) The Student and the Classroom

Up to about twenty years ago, going to third level education was a relatively elite affair in the best sense of the word.⁹ It was the means by which a highly hierarchized society maintained its stability. There was a predictable similarity among students, and very definite and clear expectations about why they were there. The academy was charged with preparing them to take their places in society as doctors, solicitors, teachers, priests, etc. And the ‘qualifications’ that they received were a licence to become leading figures in the wider culture. They were destined to be the makers and shakers of their generation!

This has radically changed in the last number of years, and significantly so in the last decade. Changing demographics, a more equitable education system, the general raising of the standard of living, and so on, has led increasingly to a wider spectrum of people demanding to be participants in the ambient culture (political, economic, social, etc.) and not mere receivers and consumers. We have witnessed and are witnessing a mass enrolment at third level, with students coming from a spectrum of diverse backgrounds, with a range of academic abilities, with different expectations for their time in the academy, and with few common reasons for being in the university in the first place. It is this mass diversity that is new; a group of students can no longer be seen or treated as a group that is held together by a set of common concerns or characteristics. There is diversity in terms of age, life experience, previous education, and even in reading and writing ability, and this has an enormous

⁸ A towering example here would be Charles Taylor, who in his work has introduced a whole range of structures and categories to permit reflection on religion in a contemporary setting.

⁹ From the Latin, *eligere*, meaning ‘to choose.’

impact on how the student body is constituted in the academy. This diversity, justly, reflects the culture from which it emerges, in which it is set, and to which it is answerable.

In concrete terms Theology at the academy cannot consider itself to be autonomous and separate from the very culture within which it is embedded and out of which it draws its primary resource, namely, the student. The radical change in student admission is having an enormous impact on how the classroom now functions. The structures, *raison d'être*, and methodologies of the past are no longer *ad rem* for the contemporary student body. The Jesuit, Michel de Certeau, who had a prescient awareness of this upcoming reality, suggests that given the changing university environment, we need what he terms a 'maximal elasticity' (*l'élasticité maximale*) in the various projects (teaching, research, etc.) that are elaborated in terms of the educational site, so as to be able to meet the multiplicity of students' needs.¹⁰ Theology needs to become a new laboratory that is capable of contributing to the wider culture, in general, and to Church life, in particular, *through* its students.¹¹

Contemporary student academic life advances through 'collage,' juxtaposition, and anthology; and the breadth of what they digest corresponds increasingly to their own interests and to how they wish to chart their own futures. They are no longer restricted by the evaluations of academic hierarchy, canonical material, or the boundaries of disciplines. Meeting this changing world is enormously challenging for every discipline and this includes theology and religion. Louis Vogel remarks: 'The university of the twenty first century ought to be more turned to the student than to the professor, because, in a complex society, the conditions of reception of ideas are more important than those of their emission.'¹²

Nowhere is this changing reality more visible and relevant than in the changing dynamic of the classroom itself. Traditionally, the large lecture hall was the most expeditious structure in which to transmit knowledge to a large group of students at the lowest cost. The teacher or professor was the one who amassed, synthesized, and presented material to the student, who received the same in a spirit of repetition and reproduction. The transmission of material was the primary objective for the simple reason that it was the most effective way of disseminating knowledge

¹⁰ Michel De Certeau, *La culture au pluriel* (Paris: Du Seuil, 1993), 93.

¹¹ This, of course, is true for other subject areas as well.

¹² Louis Vogel, *L'Université, une Chance pour la France* (Paris: PUF, 2010).

and information. This system still lives on, on the one hand, while, on the other, the technological and cultural environment has completely changed: the communication of knowledge takes place easily and freely along a multiplicity of paths: the most powerful and most effective one now, clearly, is the internet. This, of course, means that at least a significant measure of the original *raison d'être* of the lecture hall is no longer valid.

But there is a more serious problem. In this model, teaching itself was a descending discipline, voiced from the podium by the professor, and received in silence by the student in the bench. There was a certain and clear hierarchy, the teacher and the student, the one with knowledge and the one without, the one who gives and the one to whom is 'given,' the one with permission to speak and the one condemned to silence. The student often understood the material dealt with in the classroom to be an obstacle to be surmounted, a wall to be scaled, and one's final degree was just a licence to escape. Being at the university and doing theology, for example, was more often than not experienced as a period of trial, of ennui, and rather remote from personal experience. Many left, even in my generation, declaring that they would never again open a theology book!

There was, indeed, a tacit recognition that this was not a satisfactory situation, and in Maynooth up to about 1964 there was a curious system, whereby if a student had a question, he could write it on a note and pass it up via the other students to the professor, who would then open the note, read it, and decide whether to answer it, to ignore it, or to defer answering until some other day. This took place in silence. This very primitive counter dynamic of ascent remained, however, in reality, a token gesture in a one-way system, where students had no real voice.

These two factors, the easy access to material and the need to reexamine the conditions of reception of knowledge, now mean that the dynamics of the classroom are changing rapidly, and, perhaps, even more so for Theology. The direction is away from the mode of exclusive descent, which is built on a hierarchy, to a valuing of the mode of ascent, which is built on mutual exploration, critical dialogue, personal interest, and student need. The classroom can no longer function in the mode of descent alone, but now requires a new type of interaction that encourages, enables, and actively seeks to promote the ascending dynamic. It needs to be a place where students find their own voices, where they learn to express and, in this way, come to appropriate the material being explored, and learn to assess critically the diversity of

material that is available to them and which they research according to their own interests, the programme being followed, and the ends to which they aspire.

The unilateral transmission of knowledge in a lecture hall setting to a multi-complex student body leads only to frustration and boredom. University learning can no longer be a matter of a passive, uncritical reception of knowledge (that is now readily available to the student in multiple forms); it is much more a matter of learning methods of critical reasoning and active participation in creative dialogue and discussion.¹³ You could say that there needs to be a shift from an emphasis on content (still important, but no longer the primary reason for being in the classroom) to one of method, exploration, research, communication, and dialogue. Freud makes the distinction between learning *about* something and learning *from* something: the first is concerned with content, the second with the action itself of learning, the process; the first is directed primarily to the mind, the second to the action of the person. In the classroom we need to move gradually from a laboratory space that prioritized the content to one in which the experience of being in the classroom engages the student.¹⁴

The professor or teacher is no longer there as *the one* who knows (Google may well trump you in the classroom!), but the one who enables students to assess material, who directs them into possible avenues of personal interest, who points out the features that are necessary to a good argument, who contextualizes material, who demonstrates how disciplines have evolved, and who enables students to express in cogent and ideally elegant style whatever it is that they wish to contribute to the common project that is the university. The emphasis needs to be away from *a priori* control and direction and towards *a posteriori* evaluation and appreciation.

It is now *methodology* and *practice*, which takes precedence over *material content*, and the questions with which the classroom grapples need to be those of the students themselves as co-creators of the emergent culture and of Christian life. It is principally about their present, and not about their future. The academy must work with, not against, the student body as language and practice, but without compromising the intellectual integrity of the shared endeavour. It is a matter of creating a space that reconnects theological reflection with the *practice* of thinking,

¹³ See Vogel, *L'Université*, 53.

¹⁴ See Sigmund Freud, 'On the teaching of Psycho-analysis in University,' in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. 17, 171-73, at 173.

and conceptual objects with the *subjects* who use and create with them. Michel de Certeau observes: ‘*Meaning* today cannot be detached from a *practice*, nor knowledge (les connaissances) from a reference to the knowing subjects.’¹⁵ This is enormously important for Theology, where mere rote repetition and reproduction of the same by the other at a cost to otherness is the death of the mind of faith. Repetition and reproduction are consonant with an implicit demand for uniformity; and in this, they paralyze student initiative and creativity, and work against the self-appropriation by the student of the material at hand. In a way, in the classroom, *brilliant teachers don’t teach* as Socrates personifies at the beginning of pedagogy.¹⁶ They realize that at the heart of real learning, it is not the teacher’s but the student’s voice that counts.

Theology Going Nowhere

It is important in all this to realize that Theology per se cannot be replaced by other disciplines. The act of believing, in the sense of Christian faith, is never exposed definitively in discursive, abstract and reflective language. The self cannot step back to open an objective space, but is always thoroughly implicated. Theology is the integral reflection on the lived experience of faith from within. Indeed, the ascending disciplines are from the point of view of Christian faith always derivative and cannot reflect on this lived completeness of faith. There is a kind of ‘fullness’ at play that is an explicit acknowledgement of an original creativity that cannot be subsumed into the categories of phenomenological investigation. As opposed to being an archeology of religious faith, theology is a science of the fullness of life. The ascending disciplines have a critical function in that they help clarify human dynamics and so contribute to a richer and more wholesome understanding of the dynamics of faith. It is not a matter of either/or, but of both/and. There is no dualism at work that would instigate on either side an ascent or a descent. One needs to be particularly attentive to this because as someone once remarked: ‘you can always fall off a horse from either side!’

Theology in the mode of descent will, almost certainly, in the near future have a smaller role to play, but it is, nonetheless, absolutely necessary. In being rigorously answerable to the richness of a specific church tradition (without being a slave to that tradition), it harbours a life and a richness that will continue to nurture its own

¹⁵ De Certeau, *La culture au pluriel*, 89-90, emphasis original.

¹⁶ See, for example, Plato, *Meno*, 81e.

operation and the life of faith as lived in the Christian community. Undoubtedly, it is Christian churches that will be most inclined, out of a vital necessity, to support this operation. And the financial burden that this entails will continue to fall mostly on churches. This is not, however, exclusive of the academy, and there are many instances of theology being supported in the more secular academy both in conjunction with churches and in a more independent fashion. Examples would include faculties of theology in Tübingen and Freiburg in Br. in Germany, or say Durham and Cambridge in the United Kingdom, and the Loyola Institute closer to home.

As regards theology as a discipline, it is important to recognize what is distinct about it. There is a circumnavigation of infinity that is not ancillary to the task of theology, but is at its very centre: in other words, the centre is mystic. Here the mind is arrested in a dark night of the ideas, and it cannot but go nowhere. This *ad nusquam*, to nowhere, is the disquiet of theological discourse; a fundamental weakness that both undoes all doing, and, yet, is that nowhere towards which we walk in the endeavour termed theology. We walk without ever arriving: despite going nowhere, we keep walking in the certitude that we will get somewhere, sometime, but just not yet. It is this humbling of human endeavour and the latent power in this very exercise that is at the heart of theology. It is little wonder that it can appear to be an enormous threat in the academy, not because of any authoritarian dogmatism that might undermine the freedom and autonomy of research (although this is often given as the reason for excluding it), but because in its very fabric it touches a fundamental human vulnerability, namely, our vulnerability to the divine. This is *the* origin that we cannot access and that normally we repress, precisely and to some degree necessarily, in the academy. Theology does not enjoy the stability of other disciplines; but therein lies its specificity. It is concerned with that which belongs nowhere and, therefore, cannot be positively pointed to, delineated, and understood in the conventional sense of the academy. Exploration of this fundamental weakness is specific to Theology; other disciplines ignore it. For theology, there is no stability because it knows and it explicates that there can be no stability in the exclusive terms of this world. There is, however, a name without a place, a call that cannot be traced to an origin, and a life that requires a dying to be known.

I'd like to finish with a poem by Antonio Machado that might just resonate with the Cheshire Cat's response to Alice.

From Cantares

Antonio Machado

Traveller, the road is just
Your footprint, and no more;
Traveller, there is no road
the road is your travelling.

It is walking that makes the road
And looking back
You will see a path
That never will be trod again.

Traveller, every path
Leaves its wake upon the sea.¹⁷

¹⁷ Antonio Machado, from 'Proverbios y Cantares' in *Campos de Castilla*, 1912, trans. M.C.