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# Theology Forum

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# THEOLOGY FORUM



## SLAVERY AND TORTURE; WHY NOT?

Jennifer Glancy

I am a professor of New Testament and Christian origins. When I become discouraged about teaching, slavery and torture recall me to my vocation. For a number of years my research focused on slavery and early Christianity. The good news is that in Christ there is neither free nor slave. The bad news is



that, from the humble house churches of the Pauline orbit to the basilicas of Byzantium, slaveholders were welcomed into the Church, with few if any restrictions on their behavior. Christians today are embarrassed by the legacy of Christian slaveholding, ancient and modern, just as Jews are embarrassed by the legacy of slaveholding by Jews and Muslims by the legacy of slaveholding by Muslims. In teaching New Testament and Christian origins, I want my students to be strengthened by the good news so that they can confront the bad news, the long history of sin in the world.

In the fourth century, Gregory of Nyssa denounced the hubris of slaveholding. Gregory reminds his readers that each human being is made in the image of God (Genesis 1:26-27). What arrogance, he goes on to say, for a person to think that he or she can own a human being, a being created by God as ruler of the universe. What fair price could you set for the image of God, he demands. Gregory writes, "Tell

me this: who can buy a man, who can sell him, when he is made in the likeness of God, when he is the ruler over the whole earth, when he has been given as his inheritance by God authority over all that is on earth?"

In studying Gregory's ancient condemnation of slavery, my students encounter a different notion of what it means to be human than they are likely to encounter in contemporary political or cultural discourse. I want my students to think about themselves differently. I want each student to acknowledge in herself or himself the image of God. I also want my students to act differently in the world. In an era where the U.S. government condones forms of cruel and inhuman punishment that can be characterized as torture, Gregory's words stand as a challenge to American Christians. What does it mean to subject a human being who is in the image of God to waterboarding, for example? By what right do we humiliate or degrade an icon of God?

So when I become discouraged about teaching, slavery and torture recall for me the urgency of the theological vocation, a vocation shared by both teacher and student. ■

*Jennifer A. Glancy is professor of religious studies at Le Moyne College.*

## WHAT IS THE "BEST KEPT SECRET" OF CATHOLICISM?

Mary Ann Foley

To Ignatius of Loyola, whose Society of Jesus exists for the purpose of helping others turn to God, questions about the value of theology in a college curriculum would be puzzling, to say the least. These days, however, a consumer culture has taught our students that they should "learn more to earn more," and thus far no positive correlation



Loyola Marymount University.

has been established between number of theology credits and future salary range. Thus, there is frequent resistance to universal requirements in theology among both students and some colleagues in other disciplines. All too familiar is the question, "But what can I *do* with theology?"

One of the recent trends in higher education is outcome assessment. When our theology department attempted to envision student outcomes that could be measured within a few years of graduation, we found the proposed window for assessment far too short. The most valuable fruits of theological study take far longer to emerge. Let me suggest several long-range outcomes for the study of theology for individual students, for the church, and for the world. I admit that assessing these outcomes is beyond my ability—or that of any institution.

Regardless of their religious background, if any, in theology classes students can explore questions of meaning and value for which most courses outside of literature and philosophy offer little opportunity, and they probe these issues in the light of texts from sacred scriptures and holy seekers. Thus my syllabi include a statement like the following among other more measurable objectives: *For those who choose to let it do so, the course offers students the opportunity to reflect on*

*their beliefs about themselves, their place in the world, and their relationship to the Ultimate, and on the way they integrate those beliefs into their lives.* This sort of reflection is a life-long process, of course, and one which many younger students find both daunting and frustrating, especially initially. Yet it is critical to the maturation process.

Given our diverse student bodies, theology classrooms are not the place for direct evangelization, but what happens there may be critical to the church's survival. The late Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner insisted that if there is to be any church in the future, it will be one "made up of those who have struggled against their environment in order to reach a personally clearly and explicitly responsible decision of faith." Such a decision requires not only knowledge of the tradition but also the kind of critical thinking that academic study of that material can promote.

As long as our institutions don't make religious affiliation or practice a criterion for admission or graduation, we cannot assume students' acceptance of, or even interest in, Christianity. Yet this ought not deter us from making the riches of two millennia of reflection on the nature and destiny of the human person and human society available to them. Departments of theology have a key role to play in ensuring that

Catholic social teaching will no longer be “the best kept secret” in the church. In this way they contribute not only to the service of faith but also the promotion of justice.

Needless to say, many departments of the university, academic and otherwise, contribute to forming students in these areas. Yet the theology classroom remains a privileged place for the sort of reflection that is at the core of education in the tradition of Ignatius. ■

*Mary Ann Foley is in the theology department at Scranton University.*

## THEOLOGY IS A LIBERAL ART

**Wilburn T. Stancil**

**T**he study of theology—and specifically Christian theology—at a Jesuit institution is important to me for four reasons. First, Christianity and its values are foundational for understanding the West. So much of Western culture—its history, literature, art, and philosophy, is rooted in Christianity. As a part of a well-rounded education, a graduate of a Jesuit college or university should have at least a rudimentary knowledge of the development of Christianity and its influence. Moreover, since Christianity is the religion of about 85 percent of all Americans, an educated understanding of Christianity prepares students for critical discernment of religious issues that emerge almost daily.

Second, from the global perspective, the strength of Christianity has shifted to the Southern hemisphere where rapid growth, particularly among Catholics and Pentecostals, assures that globalization will have more than simply economic implications. Increasingly, religion will be a factor in the relationships between the countries of the two hemispheres, and students need to be well informed of those realities.

Third, students often arrive at this stage in their lives with an underdeveloped, if not infantile, understanding of their faith, or a nebulous, inchoate spirituality with little or no content. While the goal of academic courses in theology and religious studies is neither to promote nor discourage faith, theology can help provide structure to the (often) inarticulate sentiments of religious experience and the major questions regarding the meaning of life. Many students arrive today on our campuses lacking even basic catechetical instruction. Others come with a faith commitment but

need an adult rendering of their faith. No university department would be content with students, who, upon graduating, demonstrate a 7<sup>th</sup> grade knowledge of their discipline. Likewise, courses in theology and religious studies can challenge students to go beyond the level of elementary religious instruction.

Fourth, at my university, theology and religious studies form a part of the liberal arts core, as I suspect is true for most of our Jesuit institutions. Many of the outcomes desired from a liberal education, such as developing critical thinking, grounding education in values, pursuing truth, celebrating diversity, developing the imagination, integrating the person, and others are reinforced by the study of theology and religious studies. Like any academic discipline, theology provides a particular mode or way of thinking that challenges students to see their education as more than credentialing for a future career. Theology, like so many of the liberal arts, prepares one for a life, not just a job. ■

*Wilburn T. Stancil is professor of theology & religious studies Rockhurst University.*

## THEOLOGY POINTS TO THE RIGHT ROAD

**Jeannine Hill Fletcher**

**C**onsider the historical location in which students ‘are’ in the world. Globalization has created places where persons are almost universally confronted by plurality, most pressingly the plurality of ideas and religions. It is not surprising that postmodern thought and pluralistic theologies resonate with our students who recog-

nize experientially the competing visions available to them. But, along with exponentially increasing the recognition of plurality, globalization has also deepened the economic divisions that have long characterized the human condition. It is these two



realities – plurality and economic disparity – that make it important for students at a Jesuit University to study theology.

The fear of the postmodern turn and its embrace of multiplicity manifests itself in resistance to relativism. If students recognize that there are so many options in thought patterns and lifestyles, they will (or so many fear) succumb to the relativistic attitude that “anything goes.” But, I think the recognition of plurality and even ‘relativism’ is incredibly important to students’ self-development and the future of our world. If it is true that human beings have the freedom to live their lives in any number of ways (as pluralism demonstrates), it becomes more and not less important that we thoughtfully choose the life-pattern that we will follow. And it is here that theology renders deep service, but again, amidst plurality.

A good course in Christian theology will illuminate the many different ways that Christians and people of other faiths have thought about their place in the world and made thoughtful decisions about how to live. A good course in theology will affirm the many different patterns of living one’s life in relation to others and God, and will provide students with a deep logic of the Catholic-Christian approaches relevant to our time.

While affirming plurality, a good theology course will also demand of students at a Jesuit University a close reading of the call of the gospel. And here is where theology must respond also to the condition of economic disparity evident in the wake of globalization. My deepest hope is that students at a Jesuit university will, through their courses in theology – but also through a vision communicated across the university – commit to a life-pattern that includes among its primary aims the good of all, and not just security for oneself.

Ignatius of Loyola articulated the goal of Jesuit mission as the greater glory of God and the salvation of souls. Allowing the glory of God to be witnessed in the plurality of the world, a theology course can further the Ignatian mission. Understanding salvation in a liberationist reading (as fullness of life and communion with God and others), a theology course can empower students to see their university education as ultimately meaningful for their life pattern, not simply proximately meaningful in their future employment. ■

*Jeanne Hill Fletcher is assistant professor of theology at Fordham University.*

## ...LET GO OF THEIR JAUNDICED AND ERRONEOUS VIEWS...

Thomas Schubeck, S.J.

My reflections arise out of a course that I regularly teach at John Carroll University, called “Introduction to Religious Studies.” Roman Catholics typically comprise seventy percent in this class; Protestant, Jewish, and Muslim students make up the rest.

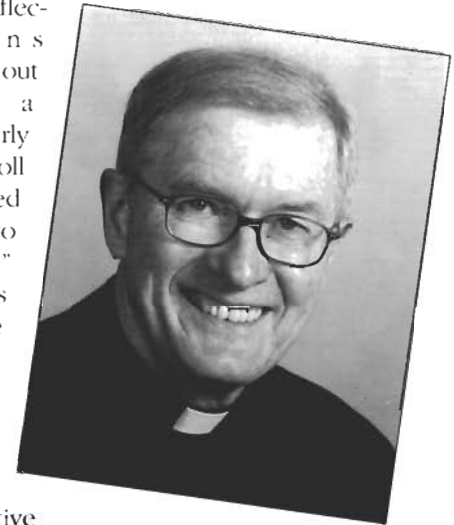
I take a comparative theological approach that focuses on the faith traditions of three monotheistic traditions—Judaism, Christianity and Islam

I identify four reasons why it is important for students to study theology at Jesuit universities: (1) theology explores issues of ultimate concern; (2) it provides an intellectual foundation for faith; (3) it intersects with other disciplines; and (4) it establishes a forum for carrying on ecumenical and interreligious dialogue.

First, theology reflects on questions that are of ultimate concern. It provides a method for critically reflecting on the meaning of God and on important religious questions that probe the meaning of belief and unbelief; monotheism and the nature of the Trinitarian God; the kingdom of God, and life after death.

Second, theology uses reason as a tool to examine the tenets of faith, whereby students gain greater intelligibility of their beliefs and eventually a solid intellectual foundation of their faith. As students acquire literacy and a deeper understanding, they can talk intelligently about what they believe and why they believe, especially in light of problems raised by scientific discovery, critics of religion, the problem of evil, oppression, and war. Integrating faith and reason helps students avoid two extremes that often evolve out of religious traditions: an atheistic rationality and a religious fundamentalism.

Third, theology helps students formulate important questions that challenge other fields of study in the university; questions that inquire about the beginning and the end of the universe, care for the environment,



stem-cell research, and the distribution of wealth. Thus, theology can intersect with disciplines by engaging in conversation about the deep causes and meaning of human policies and natural phenomena, such as international trade rules and the 2004 tsunami in the Indian Ocean that, in a flash, swallowed up almost 300,000 people.

Fourth, studying theology provides a forum for dialog between religious traditions. This comparative approach enriches the faith of the students by showing, for example, how the myths, rituals, and ethics in one religion are strikingly similar to those in the student's own religion. By acquiring greater understanding of other religions, students may let go of their jaundiced and erroneous views about these traditions. Greater openness to different faiths may someday show us Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, and people of all faiths how to live together as brothers and sisters. ■

*Thomas Schubeck, S.J. is in the theology department at John Carroll University.*

## THE EFFECTS OF STUDYING GOD

**Mark A. McIntosh, Ph.D.**

**W**hy would I wish students at Jesuit universities to study theology? The short answer would be simply because the object of the study has such a liberating influence upon its students. The object in this case, of course, is God. Now, whether one believes in the existence of God or not, as an object of research, God does affect the scholar who studies God in remarkable ways.

Let me explain. We are all used to noting the way our research object necessarily shapes our approaches to scholarship. We cannot, for example, study the geology of the Grand Canyon and the psychology of preschoolers in the same way. For while there might well be some methodological analogies - excavation or getting to the shaping forces might be important in both

cases - there would still be undeniable differences in how we habituated ourselves to the rocky strata of the Canyon and the running, cookie-crumbs-strewing, crayon artist who cheerfully refuses to sit in our labs with the stony patience of a geological sample.

All decent researchers know very well that over time the object of their study will have to become, in some sense, their teacher. We have to acclimatize ourselves to the idiomatic voice and language, habits and practices, of our research object if we are going to make any sense of the data streaming towards us. And in the case of research objects with agency, freedom, and intelligence, we can rarely acquire this deep, contextualized understanding without allowing ourselves to be profoundly addressed, perhaps surprised, sometimes even moved and changed by the object who has become to us a very living subject.

But what if this research object seemed, over time, to elicit a mysterious range of effects in its students: in the cognitive realm, for instance, a growing freedom from our natural human urge towards appealingly partial, graspable, and self-gratifying theories and a correlate patience with the sheer beauty of realities whose mystery eludes easy reduction; or in the moral realm, for example, a strange willingness to discover partnerships and collegiality where before only potential rivals could be seen? What intellectual habits, what research virtues, are called forth in those who seek to study God? Famously for Aquinas, success in this realm leads to the inflow and development of the theological

virtues - faith, hope, and love - the dispositions that helpfully attune and acclimatize one to the divine object of study. Could there be an analogy, even within the university study of theology?

In his stimulating and provocative lectures on *The Idea of a University*, Newman suggested that theology is vital to the university if we wish minds to be set truly at liberty. The human mind knows by building up its understanding piece by laborious piece. Yet, says Newman, so successfully does each discipline simulate an apparent whole and complete picture of reality, that we will always be prey to the illusion that we may reasonably settle down within our disciplinary boundaries and specializations. Theology uncomfortably exposes us, however, to a research object whose truth and meaning is sublimely universal, the truth within every truth, and who therefore sets the mind at liberty - divinely discontented with narrow partiality, hospitable and patient to serve ever more collaborative ventures in understanding. ■

*Mark A. McIntosh is professor of theology at Loyola University Chicago.*

