

Review

Reviewed Work(s): *Theology in the University: The Irish Context* by Pádraig Corkery and Fiachra Long

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## New Books

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**Theology in the University: The Irish Context.** Edited by Pádraig Corkery and Fiachra Long, Dublin: Dominican Publications. Pp. 140. Price IR£7.99.

This recent publication, proceeding from a conference at University College Cork in 1995, is a very worthwhile and timely contribution to the discussion of theology in Irish universities.

That concern over issues such as funding and control is not confined to Roman Catholics or to south of the Border is made clear in Professor Finlay Holmes's account of the emergence of Union Theological College and the Faculty of Theology at Queen's University Belfast. Holmes's paper is entitled 'Irish Presbyterians and the "Godless" Colleges', and unfortunately, in his 'response' to Holmes, John A. Murphy does not really get beyond dealing with the title. Instead Professor Murphy sketches the debate within the Hierarchy at the time of the emergence of the Queen's Colleges up to their condemnation at the Synod of Thurles in 1850. He argues convincingly that the bishops were getting as good a deal as was going at the time and suggests that 'if the Catholic leadership had responded flexibly, then the experiment might well have worked with happy consequences for Irish society as a whole' (p. 29). Indeed! And thus we might have been spared the sad embarrassment a century and a half later of an academic of Professor Murphy's stature saying that 'I see theology *per se* as really sophisticated speculation about the unknowable ... apologetics in disguise' (p. 33). Murphy takes the view that, as there are opportunities for worship on campus, chaplaincy services, references to religion in disciplines such as sociology, history and so on, there is little justification for theology. I suggest Dr Murphy's own deficient knowledge of the subject is itself a justification.

A price is being paid for the absence of theology from all but two Irish university campuses not least by the negative effect this has on the development of an informed and critical Irish Catholic intellectual tradition. This is one of a number of excellent points very well made by Professor Dermot Keogh. He also points out the little known fact that there could have been chairs of theology at NUI Colleges within the provisions of the 1908 Act. Though written from the historical perspective, however, Keogh's paper is not just a litany of opportunities missed. He is clearly warning against further likely errors of judgment. His historical survey shows, for example, that university authorities in the past were more

open to theology and to co-operation with ecclesiastical authorities than they were given credit for. Today still there is a danger in presuming an unfavourable climate or even an antagonism which may not be there.

All the thorny issues are raised, some more than once. Should one opt for theology or religious studies, and what, if any, are the differences? Professor Seán Freyne and Dr Fiachra Long, in their contributions, tend towards theology, arguing cogently that religious studies 'lacks the context-laden character of religious questions as they arise in human experience' (Long, p. 118). Religious Studies would seem intent on an impossible task, attempting to eliminate all value judgments, and ending up as little more than a dubious 'science of comparison' (p. 117). As Freyne notes, an 'avowedly neutral position on the truth claims of ... traditions smacks of an increasingly discredited positivism ... an outsider perspective which fails to enter adequately into the subject-matter of the various phenomena, and therefore, cannot do justice to the self-understanding of the different religious traditions ...' (p. 44). Only theology, according to Long, can examine and perfect faith and broaden and deepen the religious experience of the learner (pp. 117-119). Both Freyne and Long are in favour of focusing on the Christian tradition in its varied expressions but their approach would also justify concentrating, at least at undergraduate level, on one or other Christian tradition, learning, as Freyne puts it, 'to clarify the distinctive features of one's own narrative' (p. 45) before going on to examine others. Their reluctance, then, to propose, for example, courses in Catholic theology, more likely betrays a fear that Church authorities might demand a role which would compromise academic freedom and integrity. There is ample evidence (see Holmes and Keogh) of Church authorities insisting on influence and control, and of losing out badly in the process. But there is little evidence that where such control is granted, it necessarily compromises academic integrity. Such a necessary compromise is more than hinted at by Dr Long, who seems to believe that 'denominational theology' judges academic status as less important than either orthodoxy or pastoral relevance (p. 107). But it would be a mistake to assess 'denominational theology' by what goes on in (former) seminaries where arguably some of what passes for theology is only a distant relation. Theology, to qualify as such at all, must of its nature be intellectually responsible. And there are, in fact, denominational faculties of theology which flourish, in Ireland and abroad, and in which the highest of academic standards apply. Why, in any case, should it weaken the academic status of a course if it happens to be of 'professional/pastoral relevance' By Long's own admission (academic) theology is necessarily concerned with the learner's faith. Neither this, nor the fact that theology would help prepare professional religion teachers, as both Professors Freyne and Aine Hyland would seem to wish, necessarily calls into question academic status or integrity. There are, as it happens, more serious challenges to academic freedom as universities become increasingly dependent on private sources of revenue.

For their part, it would be unwise of Church authorities to demand much in terms of control. Even the Irish Government has learned the hard lesson that state control of key companies is no guarantee of qual-

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ity and performance. Unbridled influence over religious education in primary and secondary schools has not delivered a laity well-educated and articulate in the truths of their faith. The best way to guarantee a solid Catholic intellectual tradition on this island is to support and encourage the education of the finest Irish minds in this tradition. Professor Keogh notes, 'it is frustrating to speculate what would have happened in the 1960s if the best and the brightest had been recruited to teach theology in the NUI system' (p. 100). It is only to be hoped that a historian will not have occasion again to make a similar comment.

Theology has not yet attained a distinctive voice in Irish society and for this theologians have to shoulder the blame. With few exceptions censorship has largely been self-censorship, a reluctance to express a view because of internalized critical voices, fear of one's peers, fear of standing out. We all know brilliant theological minds, well-read, who have gone to their graves without even publishing their dissertations. Part of this is a clerical failing, and as more non-ordained become professional theologians perhaps things will change but it is too simple to conclude that theologians 'keep quiet' because they are in ecclesiastical institutions. What is needed is a theological *aggiornamento*, the creative posing of new questions, a healthy atmosphere of competition between scholars, a courageous interface between theologians working in denominational, interdenominational and interdisciplinary contexts. The publication of these papers is already a valuable exercise in interdisciplinarity as theology is examined by academics skilled in history, philosophy, education and science. But theology in turn can offer insight and critique. As a zoologist strongly interested in ecology, Professor Máire Mulcahy regrets the lack of opportunities for formal and informal debate with colleagues well versed, for example, in theologies of creation (p. 105).

The process of establishing new theology departments and courses in Ireland is already under way, not least in Regional Technical Colleges/Institutes of Technology. Yet many of the key issues – funding, staffing, structures, curricula – have yet to be decided. This publication has more than fulfilled the editors' intention of charting a possible future course for theology at third level. Those who are involved in deciding the key issues, or who would like to be involved, need to read this book. Full marks to the editors for taking this excellent initiative.

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**The Way of the Lord Jesus.** Vol. III. *Difficult Moral Questions.* Germain Grisez. Illinois: Franciscan Press. Pp. 927 (cloth). Price \$35.

The agony aunt or uncle has become something of a cultural icon of the mid-to-late twentieth century. Editors of newspapers and popular magazines have learned to their advantage that the 'problems page', like the obituary notices, is among the most closely scrutinized columns of newsprint. Fluctuations of political fortune, economic booms, currency crises and natural disasters may all come and go but the decidedly more routine questions of human interaction and the complex web of inter-