

THEOLOGY AND PUBLISHING

- Topic: Theology, Publishing,
and the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian
- Convener: Paul Crowley, Santa Clara University
- Moderator: Michael Fahey, Marquette University
- Presenters: Robert Schreiter, Catholic Theological Union
Frank Oveis, Continuum International Publishing Co.
Thomas Reese, Santa Clara University

The commonly held wisdom that theology has a threefold audience—church, academy, and society—carries with it the implication that theology is written from different locations (not only seminaries but also universities, both Catholic and non-Catholic, religious and secular), and that some theology is intended for audiences wider than the Church itself. The Roman magisterium, however, understands that the theologian has primarily an “ecclesial vocation,” a position that may invite a narrower presumption of the theologian’s audience. Thus, those theologies that exercise a critical hermeneutical methodology by posing questions that publicly probe doctrine may find variable reception among potential publishers. This variable reception may be especially evident when authors themselves have become controversial, and publishers may be wary of publishing their work, or are forbidden to do so. The repercussions for theology itself may be serious, shaping the kinds of questions and methodologies some theologians are willing to pursue. The panel, moderated by Michael Fahey, former editor of *Theological Studies*, explored this problematic from different perspectives.

According to Robert Schreiter, the situation today, as measured by sheer numbers of theologians affected by Roman discipline and the types of discipline imposed, is serious, but not as dire as it was in the period of the Modernist crisis. Nevertheless, certain patterns can be discerned in the current situation. When Roman authority does address theologians, the focus is largely on religious priests and institutions or journals connected with their orders. Priests in general are more vulnerable to Vatican observation than are lay theologians. It is noteworthy that two of the three top positions in the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith are held by citizens of the United States, suggesting that English-language texts may receive more scrutiny now than in earlier times. One might also observe some characteristics of recent Roman approaches to theologians and the publishing of their work. Among these are a focus on propositions taken out of the larger context of a written piece (a characteristic of neoscholastic methods), a concern over the interpretation of the Second Vatican Council for the life of the Church and of the role of theology in particular, and a “neo-Augustinian” approach to theological questions. The media plays a role that can magnify the effects of Roman actions. In all of this, Schreiter observed, we must be wary of falling into “binary” thinking, as though the Roman magisterium were always at odds with theologians who engage in exploratory work.

Senior editor at Continuum and veteran publisher of theological works Frank Oveis noted that “censorship” is exercised not only by religious authorities, but also by publishing companies themselves, partly because of market forces. Highly specialized (*fachleuter*) theology reaches a very small number of readers, and very few Catholic presses in the United States can afford to publish this type of work. The market leans toward more general theology, including works on spirituality. But, even with these works, publishers face an era where the library market has shrunk and the future of the monograph itself is in question. In addition, the era of theological “superstars” seems to be finished, for the time being, so that theological publishing has entered its own “wintry season” (pace Rahner). All of these factors contribute to a situation where some publishers will not take the same kinds of risks that they might have in the past. But this situation is also forcing publishers and theologians to look to other ways of publishing their work, particularly through electronic means. The internet allows for the rapid dissemination of writing, and the era of the electronic journal has already dawned. These developments will change the state of the question about the “publics” of theology and how theologians and publishers can be monitored.

Taking polite issue with Schreiter, Thomas Reese, former editor of *America*, held that the situation for theological publishing is, for various reasons, actually worse today than in the era of the Modernist crisis. The centralization of authority in Rome is now more clearly at issue than it was in the past. The current ecclesiastical climate is counterproductive for theology as well as for those elements of the Vatican that monitor it. Censorship is undertaken with the best of intentions, but too often is beset by a mentality that still seems defensive and secretive. There is a tendency on the part of Vatican monitors to view tradition as a treasure chest, and to adopt a posture of suspicion toward contemporary thought. When Vatican authority does act publicly against theologians or their publishers, the vitality of theology for the Church itself suffers, not only because the voices of certain theologians may be decertified, but also because the work of a theologian who is marked by Church censure is not as likely to be subjected to critique by other theologians. Yet theologians and publishers must continue to offer the Church serious theology in a forthright and nonprovocative manner.

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