

IS THEOLOGY ESSENTIAL FOR THE LIFE OF THE UNIVERSITY?

During recent months, a great deal of attention has been directed, in periodical literature, to the questions of the significance of theology, not only for the life of institutions themselves, but for American culture and the level of human values in general. Questions about who is competent to transmit traditions, and how these traditions are transmitted in a pluralistic society have come to occupy center stage. The two speakers explored this question from their own perspectives.

Father Leo O'Donovan, president of Georgetown University, gave a brief history of the development of Catholic higher education in the United States from 1920 to 1950. He noted some of the negatives to be observed in this process—namely, that Catholics failed to make progress because education was subordinated to institutional concerns, and that a lack of national leadership reinforced “localism” and stymied growth. A care for the pastoral took precedence over the quest for academic excellence. In a more contemporary situation, since Vatican II, theology itself has become more ecumenical, more specialized, and more intellectual. The world in which the study of theology is now pursued is vastly different from that of the medieval world, or even the “early” modern world. A new world and a new context call for new responses.

O'Donovan concluded that for all of the above reasons, theology is even more “essential to the life of the University” than ever before. The critical human issues demand a response from theologians. The injustices, the threat of meaninglessness, the misuse of power all demand that theology serve as both servant and dialogical partner, seeking and not possessing, not able to assure certainty or harmony, but providing reflection and alternatives.

James T. Laney, president of Emory University, continued this note by naming the university as a “community of conviction,” helping to establish a “habit of being.” He chose to reverse the terms of the original question, and asked whether the university is essential to the life of theology. In one very real sense, he finds the answer to be negative. “Theology depends on the questions and needs and work of the faith communities out of whose experience and reflection and practice it grows.” Laney drew on Newman's *Idea of the University* and the role of theology as that branch of knowledge which ultimately illumines the other disciplines. The distinction between schools of theology and religious studies, and departments of religion was made quite clearly. In the former, theology, however practical, is still critical reflection and pastoral word. In the latter, the study of religion is pursued with cool objectivity, and the light of faith is filtered out. Laney expressed the hope that there might be a blending of knowledge and vital piety.

In a stirring and impassioned conclusion, Dr. Laney offered the following thought.

Fostering moral orientation, sense of transcendence, solidarity with people and with nature, dedication to fulfilling obligations to those from whom we have received much—this is a more ambitious undertaking than having students march through the distribution requirements and receive their credentials for the next stage of their careers. Such a comprehensive goal for education requires some sort of unifying insight, as Cardinal Newman pointed out. It is difficult to see how any discipline other than theology can comprehend the others so fully and inform them as intelligently. This is not to say that theology ever speaks—or should speak—with one voice. Precisely because of its critical, even prophetic potential, theology recognizes in itself as well as in other disciplines what H. Richard Niebuhr called “pre-tension to deity.” For most of us, I think, our hope is, if not religiously based, then based on something so high and so deep that it can pass for religious faith lived out in practice. We need to find ways to speak of these things in the university again. For that reason, theology remains essential to the life of the university.

The presentations were followed by animated discussion and questions addressed to the panelists. The general conclusion of this workshop was that theological studies as such, are essential to the life of the University in contemporary society.

EMILY McKAY BINNS
Villanova University