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Theologies in Dialogue: The Place of Religion in the 21st Century University

Sally Vance-Trembath

*Santa Clara University
San Francisco, California*

Newman's biographer Ian Ker summarizes the Cardinal's understanding of the university this way: "The object of a university education is to produce thinking people, no more and no less."¹ As a person of faith, Newman would have presupposed that one of the things one ought to be able to think clearly about is religion, its practice and the truth claims it makes about reality. An over-arching stipulation of any discussion of "Faith, Freedom and the Academy" that intends to celebrate and build upon Newman's important text is that Newman would expect a university to produce people who know how to think critically about religion.

There are two points I would like to make regarding the legacy of Newman's *Idea of the University* for our universities today. The first is a description of Religious Studies as a discipline in search of a methodology; I shall describe how I think we got here. My second point is to propose a different approach for Religious Studies departments. I suggest that we use the methodology of theological reflection, that is, critical reflection upon faith, in our Religious Studies Departments. The reason for this is that many Religious Studies departments have moved towards models and methods that belong to the intellectual family of the Social Sciences. I believe we would do well to return explicitly to the humanities branch of the University. We made the shift to the Social Science models in the interest of objectivity, because we feared we would ignore the softer, or even previously silenced voices in religious discourse. This shift brought with it problems that have overwhelmed its more positive effects. I am convinced that we can return to an explicitly theological methodology without privileging one voice.

Theology, which used to be the center of gravity for the university's purpose, at least when the university was invented, has been either relegated to the fringes of the academic disciplines or in

some cases, banished altogether as though it were a kind of alchemy that has been superseded by modern and thus, true, chemistry. In the midst of pondering how theology resided in the Medieval university, how it was then the “queen of the sciences” and thus the center of gravity for the university’s mission, Michael Buckley recommends that the today’s theology will necessarily pose a new set of questions other than those described by figures like Aquinas and Bonaventure, two scholars of the Medieval period who were people of faith and people who would meet any standard of the words intellectual or scholar. The study of any discipline can be summarized in its own central questions. Buckley suggests questions that summarize the study of religion for our time. They are: Where are you, you God? How shall we find you? How shall we find each other in you?²

These are questions that do not currently reside easily in public higher education. I am convinced that they can and that they ought to. Not only can they rest in the matrix of disciplines at public universities, it is urgent that we find such a place for them. The human community needs the university’s rich tradition of deepening human knowledge and the handing-on and consequent application of knowledge for the greater good of the whole community. In the last several years especially we have witnessed what happens when religious questions are left in the hands of people who do not apply university-level discourse to them. If we members of the academy do not “do” theology, it will be done unconsciously, or poorly or even maliciously.

In his book, *The Catholic University as Promise and Project: Reflections in a Jesuit Idiom*, Buckley describes how, historically, the disciplines of philosophy and theology provided “an architectonic” framework for the entire university.³ These disciplines can be characterized as an architecture because they provided the critical foundation as well as the scaffolding of the entire intellectual and affective enterprise. By foundation I mean the critical tools for judging and formulating arguments and by scaffolding I mean the various collections of pieces or bits of knowledge in the specific disciplines and judgments (and eventually theories) by which we cluster them. Further, both foundation and scaffold contribute to a building; the university creates a new space; it serves a purpose; it accomplishes tasks and contributes to the life of the wider society. Thus it becomes a living space not just another structure, the

distinction is akin to the difference between and house and a home. In a home, the personal is embedded in the space. In a university, one component of its architecture is the community of learners who created the space and who continue to build it. In this way universities are not merely structural but are indeed, Buckley's kind of "architectural."

And we know this from our personal experience. We have been on campuses that are more akin to factories; but we have also been on other campuses that are tucked away and do not have the funding that draws lots of attention. Places without grand buildings or Nobel faculty members but places nonetheless where we breathe in scholarship and the formation of students as we breathe in the air and the local scents. This is because good teaching and well-crafted curricula and careful research, however specific and local, can happen even when the resources are few. The grand tradition of the University of California at Berkeley, which is near where I live, is precisely architectonic in that its lovely campus, buildings and towers and labs, are nothing without a deliberately shaped and delivered curriculum that is the product of scholar/teachers.

Indeed, Cal Berkeley is a good place to focus the situation of religion's place in the academy, especially the academy chartered and funded by the government. Cal is such a place; many claim it is the very best public institution in the U.S. At Cal, as at most universities in the U.S., "Theology" is now located in a department called Religious Studies, if it exists in the university at all. (A cursory perusal of a handful of Religious Studies departments reveals that there are rarely courses in "Theology" at all.) And further, at Cal, Religious Studies is placed under the division of interdisciplinary studies. In the academy, such a location is often code for courses that we think are important but do not fit inside one of the central disciplines. In other words, interdisciplinary studies, as pedagogically important as we might say they are, are the first to go when funding is cut and often, the practitioners of such courses are looked-down upon by scholars in "true disciplines." All of this is to say that the difficulty for Theology in the university cannot simply be blamed on the separation of Church and State in the U.S. Even in Catholic schools, Theology no longer occupies its central place in the academy except in a very few places, (my alma mater, the University of Notre Dame, is, happily, one of them). How did Theology arrive at its

current state? It is necessary to address this question, at least in a cursory fashion, before I build my case that Theology must find a new place in the university curriculum and, further, that that place must have architectonic features. (In a Catholic University, it can return, in new ways of course, to its central place; I would argue that a university could not retain its Catholic character unless the Department of Theology has such curricular status. This is not the case in a public institution; Theology will not become the center of the curriculum at Cal anytime soon; it can however, cease to be an academic step-child as it is now.)

Some definitions and distinctions are necessary. Theology involves a body of knowledge that arises from critical reflection upon people's experience of God, of those transcendental experiences human persons have described throughout their history. Religion involves practice. The source of our word "religion" is the notion of restraint, of being controlled by a set of values and of being "bound" to those values. While the two can and do involve each other, they are distinct activities. Theology will be involved in other locations, by other groups that are religious, for example, seminaries, churches, organizations that seek to apply Theology to concrete human problems, groups that gather for reflection etc. But Theology itself is the study of human reflection upon the depth experiences that are identified with God's self-communication to the individual human person and the human community. William J. Sullivan S. J. offers this description: Theology is the "study of, the reflection on, the systematic construction of and the communication of the sources, insights, and expressions of religious activity." Religion is "the activity itself, that is, the level of action, of experience, of praxis. Liturgy is religion, not theology; so is prayer. Biblical source criticism and method of correlation and hermeneutics are theology, not religion."⁴

We all recognize the problems presented by the explicit use of religious categories. I shall not ignore those problems; we shall have to work them out. I believe our tendency to give them too great an institutional valence has contributed to the current situation. What Newman presupposes is that university education is an act of formation; it is not the transfer of data nor is it the activity of collecting information. By the same token, the last 100 years have taught us to take care with institutional, let alone governmentally

sponsored “formation.” We understand the risks that places like the *University of California at Berkeley* taught us. Mario Savio was right, students are not commodities that the government has the right to produce; they are persons. I grant that in the 1960’s we needed to “subvert the dominant paradigm” as the slogan said. The university needed to re-invent itself with greater attention to the dignity of the student’s personal and intellectual life. The emphasis upon technological skills that formed students for jobs in the corporate and governmental sectors was changing the nature of the university in the U.S. The center was not holding. Now we need to move back towards a re-configured center. While students are not widgets, they do stand in need of skilled teachers who can challenge them to be their humane and human best. I find it ironic that we do not hesitate to “form” excellent athletes or musicians but we are leery of attending to the most basic of artists: the human person, fully alive and functioning as a complex matrix of faculties that shape the world and its history. In the history of the university’s own life, the study of religion has been a central concern of this humane matrix.

Currently the discipline of Religious Studies is often one of the adjacent disciplines; one of the things students take only if they are interested in the content, rather than as a central part of their education. This vacancy will be filled by other humane disciplines such as Literature, Music and Art as Elizabeth Sutton has argued.⁵ Religion is such a central part of human experience that it will find its place in university education; it is better for the university and for our students if we find it a proper home rather than expect it to emerge on its own like a seed that lands in a place where it may sprout and take root but where it will never grow properly. Such plants will always fight for light and air and water, their most basic requirements. In many of our universities, religious discourse looks like such a plant. Some history will help show how we have come to this place.

Many Religious Studies departments study religion from the “outside-in”, as a cultural phenomenon. Indeed, Religious Studies is often identified with Cultural Anthropology. For example, I have many colleagues who describe themselves as cultural anthropologists or sociologists of religion. How did we arrive here? The most obvious reason is because in the American public system we could not privilege any specific religious tradition so we avoided critical

reflection upon faith, which is theology, and chose instead to inspect religion as a phenomenon or as a set of behaviors. In addition, in the Catholic system, where I teach, we wanted to embrace the Second Vatican Council's call for greater sensitivity to other Christian churches and other faith traditions. These moves, however, came about in the second stage of the formation of university level study of religion. I believe if we pay more attention to the early emergence of the study of religion in the academy, we can formulate a methodology for our next stage of development.

In 1972, for a short volume called *Religion in the Undergraduate Curriculum: An Analysis and Interpretation*, (Claude Welch, ed.) then provost of *The University of Notre Dame*, James Burtchaell gave succinct expression to the underlying issue: "do religion departments teach their subject academically or do they advocate religion in a partisan sort of way?"⁶ It is instructive to note that the University (for which Burtchaell was the chief academic officer) is a university that sees itself as an R-1 level American University and as a Catholic University. I shall argue that places like Notre Dame can explore religion with academic integrity and I am convinced that public places like the University of Iowa can do it too.

The early history of religion in the academy discloses several misconceptions about the place of religion in the university. The institutional churches are not a threat to religion in the academy; the greatest threat to the place of religion in the university is to re-define it as cultural anthropology that we inspect in some impossible (even if so claimed) and value-free description of the phenomena of religious practice. Our haste to protect our students from advocacy has created another set of problems. Let's turn again to Prof. Burtchaell. In pondering the place of religion in an undergraduate education he wrote,

American public policy has been hostile toward affording the shelter of public institutions or the support of public monies to any enterprise which would propagate religion. By extension, this same policy is asked to cast an unwelcoming shadow over even the study of religion.... Religion departments in state universities have been correspondingly cautious. One finds in their catalogues, for example, courses on 'The Bible as Literature.' Often this is a purely diversionary rubric for a serious course in scripture study. But why does one never see courses in other departments on "Seneca as Literature," or "*Das Kapital* as Literature," or "Clausewitz as Literature?"⁷

Why is suspicion of advocacy reserved for religious studies?" Ninian Smart puts it another way: "Theology was once looked upon as the queen of sciences; now it is often regarded as the knave of arts."⁸

The notion that Religious Studies departments were more prone to propagandizing ignores how Religious Studies departments came to be in the U.S. Professors from divinity schools and seminaries that were connected to colleges and universities sought ways to emphasize the intellectual aspects of their religious traditions.⁹ D. G. Hart argues thus in his study *The University Gets Religion*: "Though naturalistic accounts of religion have influenced the curricula of many religion departments and informed the investigations of many scholars of religion, a factor of even greater importance to the history of Religious Studies is one often overlooked, namely, the formal emergence of the field in the period from 1925- 1965. (It is worth noting that the AAR emerged from the National Association of Biblical Instructors.) These four decades witnessed the formation of a body of scholars with a common interest in teaching religion in an academically respectable manner. This was also the time when religion emerged institutionally as an academic department at most colleges and universities where it is now studied and taught."¹⁰ As religion made its way from the seminary and into the university proper, it did so with Protestantism as its center of gravity. The first scholars of religion in the academy did not inspect religion from the outside in; they came from the inside. In the next phase, Religious Studies departments moved unto state university campuses.

As the move away from specific confessional traditions was made, the center did not hold and methodologically Religious Studies became a patchwork of humanities, social sciences and other disciplines. The emphasis upon a history of religions and cultural anthropology emerged. In 1986 at a symposium sponsored by the Religion Department at *The University of California at Santa Barbara*, Professor of Religion, Jonathan Z. Smith from *The University of Chicago* argued that religious studies did not constitute "a coherent disciplinary matrix in and of it."¹¹ He called Religious Studies "a would-be discipline" and said that it did not have either the "methodological consensus" or "corporate consciousness" that are essential in the academy.¹²

After surveying several studies on the state of the discipline from the 1960's on, one of Hart's conclusions is this:

Without the older centripetal forces providing spiritual guidance and adding humanistic depth, religious studies lacks a center. It is now little more than a collection of those academics who have inherited the older Protestant structures and rationales for religion, conceded that the old way was too exclusive, and added to the mix non-Christian religions. ...Postmodern posturing to the contrary, the modern university is still committed to the Enlightenment ideal of the rational, autonomous individual following human powers of observation and reasoning wherever they lead, irrespective of tradition, revelation or existing structures of power.¹³

Thus, the very people whom Cardinal Newman would expect to marry reason and faith are the people who separate them.

In many circles, there is a pervasive presumption that a person of faith cannot, in the nature of the case, be a careful scholar, cannot actually be an intellectual. This is an idea that is part of the atmosphere of the academy; it would make Cardinal Newman cringe. By way of personal experience, when I made the move from the Midwest to the “liberal” Bay area of San Francisco and its environs I never expected to apologize for a my degree from Notre Dame; surprisingly I have been treated as though my discipline of systematic theology is suspect simply because Notre Dame is a Catholic university. Does commitment to a body of knowledge, a tradition, makes one a less credible scholar? Or might Religious Studies’ failure to articulate a coherent methodology actually flow from its detachment from such a commitment?

Many Religious Studies scholars report that they feel marginalized in the university community; that they feel like second-class citizens. And yet, surely any thinking person recognizes how essential the understanding of religious traditions and behaviors is to the very survival, let alone flourishing, of enormous numbers of human persons. Most other disciplines, even the bench sciences are on the growing edges of new paradigms where the “humane” is considered as a central aspect of even the most technical disciplines, one thinks of ethics and computer science or the exploration of the relationship between the brain and the mind in medical schools. Berkeley philosopher John Searle writes as often for scientific journals as he does for traditional philosophical journals. The university is moving away from a more narrow understanding of human knowing into a much richer one that has a more expansive understanding of the intellect. We see the intellect or consciousness

not as purely “rational” but instead as imaginative and emotional. When we train physicians we, of course, want them to become technically skilled. But, we also hope that in the course of their training they have stood in awe of the human body and its capacities for strength, endurance and healing. We do not want mere technicians; we want healers. And we are discovering that surgeons who recognize the mystery of the body are actually better surgeons for it. Newman would not cringe at this “discovery.” Not would he shy away from helping students to think critically about it.

This brings me to my second point. The human community needs the university to explore the mysteries of human life and experience. What I mean by mystery is not the same as provisional knowledge; our bodies of thought and our understanding of them develop and change and new discoveries are always being made. We do grow in knowledge and we need the university to help us do that too. But all bodies of knowledge have another aspect: their mysterious character. By that I mean we recognize that no matter how much we know about the human community, there will always be more than we can say. We have all probably had one of those teachers who so over-analyzed a poem for us that she stripped it of all wonder and beauty. What we recognized in such teachers is a negative disclosure of the mysterious character of poetry. Mystery is hard to define; it is easier to describe. The best definition I know come from the sociologist and ordained priest, Andrew Greeley. A mystery is “that about which we cannot come to the end of understanding.”¹⁴ I suggest that we honestly recognize what we are doing when we study “The Bible as Literature” as Professor Burtchaell observed. We *are* creating a diversion; what we are actually doing is exploring a human tradition that has developed about the mysterious character of human life and experience. I suggest we come clean and admit that we are inspecting theological traditions, not just cultural phenomena. I am convinced that we can do this without inappropriate advocacy. After all, all education is a form of advocacy. Any university worth the name advocates for all kinds of things. Newman recognized this; many 21st century thinkers have recognized it too.

There are several scholars who have helped to shape these growing edges in the university’s new contours. Michael Polanyi’s description of the role of commitment in any search for knowledge and Thomas S. Kuhn’s observations about how world-views have

both invited and impeded scientific advances are but two examples. We would not criticize a Shakespeare scholar for a passionate commitment to the Bard that leads her to claim that Shakespeare is superior to Moliere. We would surely expect her to be conversant with Moliere's work before making such a claim; we would expect a scholar to be respectful of other dramatists and we may even expect her to teach the basics of drama in a first course offering. But we would surely not disdain the Shakespearean who "loves" the Bard, who sees Shakespeare's work as a structure for passionate, meaningful, critical intellectual activity.

In the 21st century we must bring all of our academic tools to bear in order to put to rest the myth that the Enlightenment rescued the university from religion. The Enlightenment privileged detachment to too great a degree; we must bring critical reasoning back into a more proper alignment with other aspects of self-consciousness. If the global community has learned anything in the last 10 or so years, it is precisely that our institutions absent themselves from university-level discourse about religion at their peril. If universities do not bring the same kind of attention and scholarly care to this central area of human experience, the vacuum will be filled by others who will not do it as well or who will cultivate the kind of un-reflective theologies (and ideologies) that have fueled recent international violence. I propose that instead of Religious Studies, we return to Theology proper. Perhaps we shall even call our departments Comparative Theology departments thus signaling that we are willing to look at religion and religious expression from the inside-out.

As I indicated, there are issues to work out. However, as a start we can draw upon the work of Bernard Lonergan to help us construct a methodology. In his book *Method in Theology* he proposed that there is a distinct pattern of operations that human persons use when they grow in knowledge. He breaks this pattern into four steps that are actually movements: Experience, Understanding, Judgment and Decision. Richard McBrien translates these into categories that help us inspect Religious traditions. His four categories are Faith: a personal experience of God; Theology: critical reflection on faith; Creed/Tradition: the content about or the codification of the insights of theology; Discipleship: active participation in a tradition of faith that informs ethical actions and stances. I have used Lonergan and McBrien's frameworks to teach both theology and writing for several

years and have found them to be flexible and resilient as well as stabilizing. They create a scaffold upon which students can hang arguments; they also provide a framework upon which to arrange the human religious expressions, ideas, and claims so that as we talk about religion, students are better able to discern coherence or the lack in discourse about God.

Not only can religion be explored with the same level of academic integrity we expect from chemists and literary critics, and perhaps more importantly, the global community gravely needs the work of theologians. The world is on fire; some of its fuels are best understood through the discipline of theology: critical reflection upon faith.¹⁵ I am arguing for a shift away from studying religions as either the history of human religion or the more naturalistic approach of cultural anthropology and back towards what I am calling “comparative theologies.” I am acutely aware that I work at a Catholic institution and thus deal with different issues than do my colleagues from places like the University of Prince Edward Island. I do not pretend to have all the answers. What I can say is that very often the present methodology does not help in the formation of students who possess and make use of the characteristics of a university education when they talk about religion. If the popular culture is a good indication, the university does a poor job of equipping the human community for religious discourse.

Theologian and philosopher David Burrell argues, “All intellectual inquiry is fiduciary and so not merely tolerating but actually requiring commitment.”¹⁶ A scholar involved for decades in dialogue among Muslims, Jews and Christians, Burrell argues, “There is no such thing as a *university*, full stop. There are different kinds of universities, beholden to diverse educational traditions.”¹⁷ Burrell provides us with a felicitous pairing for the fiduciary component of education: it should be communitarian and pluralistic. If a department has representatives of both, it can achieve a center of gravity while also remaining open to the influence of the cross-fertilization among traditions that leads to greater understanding. He points of his own department of philosophy that was able to privilege Aquinas while at the same time to develop credibility with the wider philosophical world by hiring scholars whose concerns were rooted in other “traditions” in philosophy. Indeed, for Burrell the center of gravity shifts from one among many “philosophies” towards a new

center: conversation. This brings us much closer to Newman than it does to post-modernity's particular brand of pluralism. In other words, we can make use of "tradition" without blindly accepting a particular one. For example, I recognize that the history of Jesuits is not without its failures. But the tools from a variety of disciplines have shown us that the abuses have not overwhelmed the contributions. The Jesuit tradition continues to be a life-giving one all over the world; the Jesuit tradition is one of the most effective traditions with regard to formation of "minds and hearts" in the history of pedagogy. I would fail to meet the standards of the academy if I ignored the contribution of a tradition because I was preoccupied with its shortcomings. Ignoring the contribution of Ignatius Loyola and his companions to educational theory and practice can only come as the result of a kind of negative advocacy.

Katherine Tillman argues that Newman's life long "central intellectual preoccupation" was the relationship among religious faith and human understanding and knowledge.¹⁸ Newman rebelled against what he called the "gentleman" who is a person who may be educated but whose knowledge has no moral valence, that does not shape his behavior in any significant way. For this kind of person knowledge is bits of information that are unrelated. Today we might call him or her smart but unwise or to use the jargon of Newman's day, the "gentleman" is not intellectually curious, does not exercise critical thinking skills.

The place of religion in the academy is alongside the other great disciplines that explore human experience. All the disciplines are components of the University's larger goal of formation. We relegate religious questions to seminaries at our peril. Religion should not be "added on" but a part of intellectual inquiry at the highest levels. We must test religious ideas and the religious imagination with the same care and rigor with which we tests all ideas. Re-labeling these ideas "cultural anthropology or other names" does not constitute doing so because it disconnects these religious ideas and insights from their own moorings. Every body of knowledge that is worth inspecting at the university level has developed a tradition of some kind. We would do well to study religion from the inside out, that is, describe the tradition with attention to its own center of gravity. Theology can be done in the University without a "theological imperialism." The 21st century will surely bring challenges to how we teach and learn about

religion. We can however move beyond the challenges of the last century with a new way of proceeding. We have learned how to negotiate many voices within the central disciplines in the Arts and Sciences. We would do well to apply that kind of pluralism with a center to the study of religion.

Notes

- 1 Ian Ker, *The Achievement of John Henry Newman* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), p. 6.
- 2 Michael J. Buckley, *The Catholic University as Promise and Project: Reflections in a Jesuit Idiom* (Washington D. C.: Georgetown University Press, 1998), p. 181.
- 3 Ibid., pp. 172-82.
- 4 William J. Sullivan, S. J., "The Catholic University and the Academic Study of Religion," in *Religion in the Undergraduate Curriculum: An Analysis and Interpretation* Claude Welch, ed. (Washington D. C.: Association of American Colleges, 1972), p. 39.
- 5 Elizabeth A. Sutton, graduate student at the University of Iowa, Department of Art History, "Re-Incorporating Humanism into the Humanities: The Role of Faith and Religion in Academia," Conference presentation at *Faith, Freedom and the Academy: The Idea of the University in the 21st Century*, University of Prince Edward Island, October 1-3, 2004.
- 6 James Tunstead Burtchaell, "Hot Gospel in a Cool College? The Question of Advocacy," in *Religion in the Undergraduate Curriculum: An Analysis and Interpretation* Claude Welch, ed. (Washington D. C.: Association of American Colleges, 1972), p. 19.
- 7 Burtchaell, p. 22.
- 8 Ninian Smart, *Secular Education and the Logic of Religion* (New York: Humanities Press, 1967), p. 1.
- 9 D. G. Hart, *The University Gets Religion: Religious Studies in American Higher Education* Baltimore, MD (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), p. 24.
- 10 Ibid., p. 10.
- 11 Ibid., p. 223.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Ibid., p. 232.

- ¹⁴ Andrew M. Greeley. *The Great Mysteries: An Essential Catechism* (New York: Seabury Press, 1976).
- ¹⁵ Richard P. McBrien, *Catholicism: Completely Revised and Updated* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1994), p. 20.
- ¹⁶ David B. Burrell, C. S. C., “A Catholic University,” in Theodore M Hesburgh, C. S. C., ed., *The Challenge and Promise of a Catholic University* (Notre Dame, IN and London, UK: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), p. 37.
- ¹⁷ Burrell, 38.
- ¹⁸ Mary Katherine Tillman, “What, Then, Does Dr. Newman Mean? Visions and Views,” in Hesburgh, p. 40.