

An Argument for Academic Theology at VU

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ABSTRACT

A consensus community stands behind the required study of academic theology at Valparaiso University consisting finally of the holy Christian church and what that community considers important as skills and knowledge for human life. As these skills and knowledge do not emerge naturally in a world lived "after the fall," while it may be arguable to remove academic theology from the curriculum, to do so would not move the university community in the direction of some vision of perfection, least of all toward the goals of the consensus community behind V.U. (Stephen C. Krueger)

No body of knowledge or its continued profession survives without a community of consensus supporting it. The insight is growing (witness the left-wing movements in the professional organizations) among the academically respectable disciplines on the American campus, that these disciplines themselves represent consensus communities of conviction. As objective and rational and scientific as they may be, they are so only on the basis of a consenting community that is logically and chronologically prior to the academic practice of the scholarly disciplines.

Christian theology, too, will not continue on its own, by virtue of some historical inertia; it must be energetically promoted by that community of consensus for whom it represents the truth about reality. Thus in a way it is in competition with other consensus communities whose "-logy" constitutes their conviction and commitment about the truth of reality.

The general tenor among academicians seems to have shifted from a skepticism, if not downright antipathy, toward theology, to a tacit admission that some of theology, at least, may be just as respectable academically as the other "-logies" (bio-, socio-, geo-, psycho-) that are taken for granted on the campus. A department of religious studies can maintain its existence among other humanistic departments simply by virtue of the empirical fact that religion is a human phenomenon. The academic study of that phenomenon is just as much at home in the university as the study and nurture of other human phenomena—literature, music, philosophy, mathematic, societies, psyches, etc. The data of Christian theology qualify for study and inclusion in the academy on these grounds of humanist consensus.

But for Christian theology the logically and chronologically prior-consent community is the holy Christian church. It is the commitment of this consent community—in this case the community rooted in the Lutheran reformation—that has been the chief reason for Valparaiso University's half-century of maintaining the study of Christian theology. This consensus community does not simply refer to that amorphous "constituency" called the Valparaiso University Association, whose corporate will is expressed in the study of theology at VU. But it is also the intra-mural

consent community made up of the resident professionals for whom Valparaiso University is a life's vocation—and that word does not simply mean “job.”

It is easy these days for us who see ourselves in that last sentence to get paranoid or faint-hearted at the empty pews in chapel, uncomplimentary epithets about the university's Christian tradition, the **Torch**'s shift away from earlier editors' “higher” goals, and similar signs of the slide toward secularism. One of my teachers once noted that the Christian consent community is regularly moved into periods of history marked by “loss of eminence”; the danger is not that loss, but the often parallel “loss of confidence.” If this loss is complete, with none left to argue for the cause, then the cause is already lost. But if all confidence is not lost, then those who still have some must stand up and make their case.

I don't know if a student majority could be garnered for the continuation of academic work in theology here at VU or not. My guess is that it would probably come out 50/50. But what significance would a potential opposing majority have? Should we be doing “what the majority of students want?” Should we follow the majority of the intra-mural consent community? The extra-mural consent community? The whole Christian church?

It is not too much to assume that freshmen and transfer students enrolling here are intelligent enough to have some sense of the Christian consent community intra- and extra-mural to VU. They are not being put upon when this community's commitment is concretized in course work on the subject of that commitment. It is hard to see how a student outside this Christian consent community is given an unfair shake when asked to work in theology as part of his degree requirement. For that is what a Valpo B.A. designates—the study of those components of human intellectual formation that this consent community acknowledges as the givens of a baccalaureate degree in arts and sciences, engineering, or whatever.

In our current pattern of baccalaureate formation, theology counts as general education along with other disciplines in the College of Arts and Sciences. I am still fascinated by the original meaning of arts and sciences in the western university tradition. They are not the fine arts and the hard or soft sciences, but originally the “skills” and “knowledges” that the consent community of the western world considered important for human life, both individually and corporately. These skills and knowledges did not come naturally but had to be pursued as a special endeavor, for apart from active discipline humanity's intellect and its person tend (like the whole cosmos) toward chaos and disintegration. For this endeavor no other procedure seemed adequate but the master/disciple, mentor/student relationship.

Some of the skills that academic theology can tutor into a student (how to read a text, comprehend the author's argument, develop canons for criticizing the argument, composing in writing one's own argument), as well as some of the knowledge (what reality is in reality), can be fostered via other disciplines; they are part and parcel of what general education aims to achieve. But the unique body of knowledge that is the jurisdiction of Christian theology is not accessible through other disciplines, and within that body of knowledge there are other skills that go beyond the general education arts of the classical trivium: skills such as detecting and practicing the distinction between theology of glory and theology of the cross, between God hidden and God revealed, etc.

In a world that is compelled to live “after the fall” as Arthur Miller shows in his play by the same name, no person or community can achieve perfection by doing what comes naturally. Even with hard work, severe discipline and the best of brains and dedication we will still only achieve “an unperfect society” (M. Djilas). To make theology optional or remove it entirely from the curriculum is an arguable proposal. But it will not make things better at VU, and it will surely not move our community more nearly toward some vision of perfection.

My argument for making theology a mandatory component of the Valparaiso University’s bachelor’s degree is rooted in the consensus community that stands behind it, both inside and outside the walls of VU. Of course many state universities and private colleges do otherwise. That is one reason many (if not most) of us have for teaching here. We are committed to be doing something different from what others may be doing. Even if we are not doing as good a job of it as we would wish, we will not get closer to our goal by adopting someone else’s.