Theology as Knowledge – A Reply

A political scientist in academic circles is expected to be anything but naïve, yet I naively feared the wrath of the much-fabled *odium theologicum* when I ventured to write on theology and the modern university – and so it was a pleasant surprise to meet such gracious response. The issues are serious and the range of differences among us is great, though maybe not as great as my interlocutors suppose. Leaving aside the greatest difference – that they are experienced professional theologians, while I am a best an amateur and beginner at theology – I think at issue are questions concerning the character of the modern university, the nature of the modern state, and the relation between the two.

Paul Griffiths finds “dubious” my suggestion that the absence of serious theology in the university distorts scholarship in other fields. “There is no interesting connection between an inability to take theological claims seriously and an inability to recognize that others do,” he writes, and cites Stanley Fish’s work on Milton as an example. Moreover, theology itself would not fit in the university, because God transcends all human knowing: “God is like neither politics nor birds,” both of which he concedes the university can examine. I was glad he cited Weber’s “Science as a Vocation,” the *locus classicus* of the fact-value distinction. I, the scientist, can treat your valuation as a fact without, as scientist, feeling any obligation to evaluate your claim, for valuation is a task that reason cannot perform – something Weber’s lecture supposes but hardly proves. Something like the fact-value distinction surely explains or reinforces the very attitude I was addressing, the separation of religious belief (value) from knowledge (a deposit of fact) or reason (its accountant).

I would have thought that if anything had become dubious in the latter half of the twentieth century it was the fact-value distinction: not that plenty of social scientists don’t suppose it, only that philosophers of science don’t defend it. In the words of one critic, those who hold to this distinction are too confident in their ability to know facts and too skeptical of the capacity to know value. Actually, Griffiths knows this; since he’s a professor, he has met post-modernists who hold that “all intellectual disciplines rest their claims to knowledge on axiomatic truths accepted on authority,” just as theology does. He casts his lot instead with Weber, but I don’t know what he means when he says “orthodox Catholics (at least those of a Thomist bent)” will do the same. Sure, they are not with the post-modernist doubters of fact, but they emphatically do not share the Weberians’ pessimism about the knowledge of value: From John Finnis and Robert George to Ralph McInerny and Russell Hittinger, whatever their differences, the Thomists I know are confident that knowledge of the human good can be attained, at least within the limits of certainty that human affairs are permitted to achieve.

Nor – whatever can be said of ornithology – is political science so completely different from theology as Griffiths says. Even Machiavelli does not present an analysis of power that is devoid of all considerations of justice – he is eager to excuse actions taken out of necessity and to condemn those undertaken out of enthusiasm – and even the most purportedly “value-free” political science has normative evaluation built into its very language if that language is to be comprehensible to political men at all. But if justice is inevitably at play in political analysis, then surely it matters whether or not there is divine justice. Political theorists call this the theologico-political problem, and while much political science proceeds without attention to it, it
lies in the background of all we do and sometimes bursts forward. It is unlikely that political scientists will understand political claims made on behalf of divine justice if we have no access to serious treatment of those claims: To take only the most obvious example, can we really comprehend Islamist terrorism without some awareness of the theology of jihad? In a university without serious Christian theology, do we even think to ask about the consequences of the exodus of Christians from the Middle East?

I do not mean my suggestion of the need for serious theology as a field of study in universities to be a wily trick to lure theologians into the university in order to enslave them to standards hostile to their own, but to remind them that the question of academic authority is complex in every field. Whatever might be said of natural science, where progress in understanding seems to make uncertainty temporary and discovery imminent, in the study of the human things there are degrees of knowledge, and it is wrong to think that, in the absence of perfect clarity, we cannot distinguish better from worse or true from false. That we cannot know perfect justice is no argument against the field of political science, only counsel that we pay attention to the limits of what we know. That we cannot know perfectly what human love is does not suspend research in psychology nor the study of literature. That we are limited in our knowledge of God does not excuse theology to stand aloof from the scholarly conversation – what I called in my essay, the good, clean fight. How are we who study the causes and consequences of justice or love to come to knowledge in our own ways if on these topics and surely on others we cannot hear theology’s voice?

David Hart draws a beautiful image of the depth of theological learning and the consequent impoverishment of university education without it, but in the end, it seems, he finds theology too proud to share its gifts: “it is not natural to theology that it should function as one discipline among others, attempting to make its contribution to some larger conversation; as soon as it consents to become a perspective among the human sciences, rather than the contemplation of the final cause and consummation of all paths of knowledge, it has ceased to be theology…. ” Very well, but one finds plenty of other proud disciplines in the academy – Aristotle called my own, political science, “architectonic” – who among themselves think their field especially fundamental or paradigmatic and yet who consent to play in the same arena and compete for the brightest students. From the outside pluralism seems bland, especially in comparison to memories of the days of queenship, but I had in mind a vital pluralism of competing disciplines, who accept a sort of constitutional order among themselves, not a rigid secular frame. Moreover, there remains a pluralism of institutions of higher education in America, and at least in my longer essay in *Theology Today* I was clear that I expected the relative position of theology as a discipline to vary among them. Not every school leads in physics, but no university is complete without it; if the same were true of theology, the culture of the university generally would, I think, be improved. I do not think that Hart and I disagree on this; it is only a question of what can be done “at the moment” and “for the time being.” If theologians insist they need more time in the desert before coming home, very well, though I regret their absence now. Though we sometimes talk of the “academy” as a Platonic grove outside the walls, the university, however monastic its former staff, was an urban institution; it was always only partly removed from the world, and partly engaged with it.
I appreciate Stanley Hauerwas’s kind praise and even more his gentle corrections or elaborations, especially in pointing toward the role of German university reform in defining modern academic life in service to the secular state, a point also made by David Hart. While the German model was influential in America, it has also met resistance here, and we have settled on an uneasy combination of British and Germanic heritages, both in our kinds of schools and in the character of their faculties: some are founded by the state and imbued with science, others are deeply rooted in tradition and preserve a humanistic perspective. What is true of universities is also true of government. While there are modern elements in American politics, I think Hart exaggerates America’s modernity; our federalism and separation of powers seem to me to establish enduring constitutional structures that reinforce a “system of political subsidiarity – with its plurality of powers, estates, spheres of competence, and obligations” – that Hart rightly admires. Indeed, to political scientists who study American political development, the key question has been why the United States never quite developed a centralized state, often to the scholars’ disappointment and frustration. As the reader can guess, I am heartened by Hauerwas’s optimistic reading of openness “to theology being done in an unapologetic mode” even or especially in secular institutions. My caution would be that theology not assume that all constitutional government can be analyzed in terms of critique of the secular state. Again, in America at least, there is an institutional complexity that imbues the political culture as a whole with legal norms that theology can still inform rather than replace and with a healthy respect for precedent and tradition that can resist unconsidered trends. I don’t mean by praising political compromise to belittle the radical depth of theological insight – rather, I think the two consistent with one another and even dependent upon one another. To compromise with one’s opponents requires faith, after all, and a secure peace is the usual prerequisite of sustained thought.

I started by speaking of my naivete – but now I realize maybe it was in thinking all was gracious. After all, even in this day when among sophisticated company the idea of heresy seems quaint, I presume the charge of idolatry is still “fighting words” among theologians. But I said the university thrives on fighting words, so to speak, on dialectic in the original meaning of the term. And maybe that’s true of constitutional liberty, too – if we know how to mingle the human contest with the message of divine peace.

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