Jesuit Theology, Scientific Culture and the Challenge of Climate Change

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Abstract

Jesuit universities and theology centers have the opportunity engage larger cultures framed by science. If theology cannot engage the sciences, then it has no voice at the table concerning the significant issues facing humanity today. This pushes not only theology, but faith itself, to the margins of a culture where the natural sciences provide leading paradigms for understanding. One pressing concern, global warming, offers a challenge to Jesuit universities and theology centers for a theological address of the urgent problems at hand, particularly given the fact that climate change most adversely affects the very poor. Several specific proposals are made to bring about collaboration among Jesuit institutions worldwide.

The Problem

The earliest conception of a Jesuit university, as limned by Ignatius himself in the Constitutions of the Society of Jesus, implicitly places theology within larger contexts which today we would define as cultural, and more specifically, scientific. Theology was placed at the apex of the university structure, an architectonic wisdom that presumed a thorough grounding in the humane letters and methods for entering into the literature and thought of secular culture (grammar, rhetoric, logic, and literature), as well as in the sciences of the day (mathematics, geometry, astronomy, and, by extension, music).[1] All of this was with the aim of educating not only Jesuits, but anyone going through a Jesuit university, so that such a person would be better able to serve fellow human beings and to better life on earth. Such a person had to have a basic understanding of the natural sciences, and be able to see them in a way congruent with the religious and ethical implications of faith.

Indeed, Jesuit university theology is designed to become engaged with culture. As Santa Clara University President Michael Engh, recently stated in an address to the Jesuit School of Theology of Santa Clara University:

> Within the university and as an academic discipline, theology provides the synthetic center for the life of the Catholic university when it is engaged in a living and ongoing dialogue with all the fields and disciplines represented in the university. Theology is inherently dialogical. This means that, for example, the fields of religious studies are essential to a vibrant Catholic imagination, but in a Catholic university, religious studies standing in isolation from theology, without regular conversations with theology, cannot properly contribute to the end of a Catholic university, for theology itself is thereby diminished. In addition, theology must be in dialogue with the arts and humanities, social sciences, engineering and even sports, in order to fulfill its synthetic function within the Catholic university.[2]

But this view is rather new, for the original vision of Ignatius was largely lost from the time of the Suppression up until the mid-20th century. The truth is that theology in general, and not only in Jesuit universities, settled during the 19th century into a fairly closed set of neo-Thomistic discourses whose questions and rules were set by neo-scholastic philosophy, but few if any other intellectual or cultural sources. This situation shifted significantly in the mid-20th century with the eclipse of neo-Thomism and the emergence of transcendental projects, notably those of Rahner and Lonergan, which put theology into play with larger philosophical and cultural shifts. These were paralleled by the rhetorical project of von Balthasar, which (along with the *réssourcement* movement) returned theology to an earlier paradigm of conversation with secular culture, particularly in literature and the arts. Beyond these developments we saw the construction of political, liberationist, and contextualized theologies out of an analysis of society and history, as well as theologies concerned with the changing gestalts of human sexuality and gender, often in conversation with the social sciences. Comparative theologies, in turn, put Christian faith into conversation with other religions and traditions on the level of literature, ritual, and systems of belief. It can be said, therefore, that theology in our universities, even when housed in silo-like departments, is in many ways now in significant conversation with issues and voices of wider cultures.

But there are still limitations. To begin with, when we look at the global family of Jesuit institutions of higher education, some do not offer theology at all; their mission is more limited to technical and commercial institutes. The vast majority that offer theology usually present it as a discipline housed within a department, in effect a silo among many academic silos in the modern university. Some departments offer courses in theology and science, or similar courses, but these are usually specialties among a range of specialties.

To compound the problem we find even in Jesuit universities a regrettable lack of interest or sheer ignorance on the part of some theologians of the most elementary dimensions of the natural sciences. William Stoeger, S.J., of the Vatican Observatory, has observed:

> …there is a remarkable lack of serious intellectual interaction of Roman Catholic members of the scientific community with theologians those in ministry. …There are few theologians or theologically interested philosophers at universities where the most significant scientific work is done, and where there is time and interest and motivation for profitable interdisciplinary interaction and collaboration. Very little opportunity exists at Catholic universities—the isolation extends there—and few Catholic universities emphasize significant scientific research.[3]

Stoeger's analysis surely extends to many Jesuit universities in the world.

While the Church in fact has a distinguished history of serving as a patron to the natural sciences (despite the debacle surrounding Galileo), theology in general has become a discipline so tightly bound by narrowly dogmatic and ecclesiastical concerns that it risks becoming irrelevant to a larger culture—and not only in the North and West—that is increasingly framed by the paradigms and epistemes of the natural sciences. The challenge for Jesuit universities is not only one engaging science per se, but engaging a culture where religion as a serious voice is too readily dismissed, due in part to the hegemony of secular worldviews where a certain "scientism" prevails, even as an absolute form of knowledge. On the other hand, theology itself cannot expect to be taken seriously by the sciences if it forgets that its chief concern is the

inexhaustible mystery that we call God, and instead presents its own set of absolutes to the sciences. As Rahner put it, when this happens "it should come as no surprise to [theologians] when they are received in the circle of the other sciences of the university with a certain indifference, and endured with a somewhat quietly impatient tolerance."[4] The less theology has to contribute to an engagement with secular culture, the more readily will it be dismissed from important wider conversations, particularly those involving science.

The implications are clear: If theology cannot engage the sciences, then it has no voice at the table concerning the significant issues facing humanity today. If theology cannot engage a culture that has been framed by the paradigms of science, then theology itself risks self-marginalization. Christian faith itself is at risk of seeming irrelevant, and God increasingly distant from the horizon of human understanding.

The Rejection of Religion

Indeed, a natural consequence of this posture of theology in relation to the sciences is the ease with which an atheism linked to a hostile rejection of religion has re-emerged in recent years. It would be too easy to dismiss the emergence of an aggressive, anti-religious atheism as a product of the desiccation of "First World" cultures and their having succumbed to the lures of secularist ideology and radical individualism. While there is a grain of truth to such a view, it is far too simplistic a summary of the problem, for atheism is rife wherever in the world we find university-educated elites, the brokers of power both political and cultural, whether in post-Christian, officially atheistic, or purely technocratic societies. Ironically, some of them are even products of our own Jesuit schools and universities. What we are witnessing is an alienation of intellectuals and alienated elites from religion, and, together with that alienation, a bracketing of God from important discussions. Some of this alienation comes from the perception that religion

is haplessly benighted, and worse, regressive in its outlook and practices. Above all, it arises from the perception that religions persist in thinking in ways that repudiate the facts presented by science. Indeed, certain forms of fundamentalism feed this perception, as when their partisans reject the general theory of evolution.

This is a very different kind of atheism from the 19th century project of Feuerbach and his descendents (including Marx and Freud) who did not completely dismiss religion per se, but did recast what is meant by "god" in a way that would feed into "enlightened" scientific understandings of the world, where there would no longer be need of the hypothesis of a god except as a political or psychological expedient, an illusion that would one day prove unnecessary. One could argue, as Karl Barth did, that Feuerbach is to be taken seriously because his arguments are themselves so significant for theology.[5]

One part of the problem today is that we have few Jesuit scholars who are actively involved in this issue of engaging an atheism that is shaped by the power of natural science—too few who can engage science on its own terms. Yet, if Jesuit scholars are not going to do this, the chances are great that it will not happen in the wider Church either, except in certain isolated cases. I think that this is one area where a renewed effort is called for, a renewal of the mandate given the Society by Pope Paul VI, but updated for the contemporary cultural situations in which we find ourselves, elements of which are shared on a global scale.[6]

If theology is to engage cultures framed by scientific paradigms and epistemes, then it must first recover its primary focus, which is the mystery of God. As Rahner has argued, this is necessary if theology is in fact not to come timidly to the table of dialogue with the natural sciences, but rather with a reminder to all that there is a larger, transcendent dimension to the realities that we all face as human beings and which we are trying to address.[7] Theologians

within Jesuit universities in particular can deploy their imaginative resources as well as formidable history of dialogue with the sciences to offer a bona fide theological contribution to dialogue with the sciences in the service of human needs and of the sustainability of the earth.

A New Challenge: Theology, Science and Climate Change

One area of concern that brings all of this together is the global focus on climate change. Climate change (aka "global warming") may well emerge as the major social justice issue of our time, hence one calling for the concerted forces not only of science, but also of religion.[8] Theologians cannot stand idly by when God's creation, and particularly human well-being, is in question. Lutheran theologian Lynne Lorenzen argues that climate change moves the relationship between religion and science to a new stage, "no longer limited to a handful of aficionados and research centers who like the topic. The incorporation of science into theological thinking has become a matter of urgency. Much is at stake."[9]

If some current projections are accurate, this problem will descend upon us very soon with a force that cannot be ignored. Conservative estimates are that climate change could displace up to 200 million people by 2050 due to glacier melt, rising sea levels, floods, draught and the diminishment of fertile growing areas caused by the breakdown of the ecosystem.[10] The majority of these people most affected are already abysmally poor—in Africa, Asia, Latin America and Oceania—most with limited ability to cope with a "natural" disaster that would influence agricultural productivity, the delivery of food, the availability of water, and basic health care and shelter. Developing countries will be most severely affected and many of these people and regions are already suffering the stresses of climate change.[11] The fate of a huge portion of humanity hangs in the balance. We have already seen the effects of massive natural

disasters (tsunamis, earthquakes, hurricanes, etc.), but the potential for disaster here is on a much vaster scale.

These potential effects of climate change also raise issues for theological and social ethics, particularly of distributive justice and social conversion, as the inordinate human causes of climate change have come from the developed world, particularly Europe and the United States. China is also implicated here. The social teaching of the Church could play a serious role in an examination and adjudication of these issues.

The Catholic Church has begun to respond to this impending catastrophe in ways that are quite hopeful, most recently in Pope Benedict XVI's World Day of Peace message, in which he connects protection of creation with social justice.[12] There is already a significant body of papal teaching, going back at least to 1972, and development of Catholic social teaching on care for the environment and undertaking programs of sustainability.[13] However, climate change is a further specification of the problem, the solution to which will determine the future of the environments we wish to sustain for agriculture and human flourishing.

How can Jesuit universities, and particularly theology, help contribute to the addressing of this most urgent problem of our time?

First, as part of the construction of such a theological contribution, we need to be frank and honest about the ways in which our theology and our institutions have failed and in many cases continue to fail to place before themselves the horizon of humanity in the midst of such a massive crisis, and how this precisely as led to the marginalization of theology, and more broadly, of religion, in the larger discourses of our time, especially around the environment and sustainability. Jesuit universities have a unique role to play in this self-assessment, given our

history of involvement in the sciences, and some of the ethical demands that are thereby placed upon us, not only by the Church, but by the community of the sciences as well.

Second, as Michael J. Buckley has noted, our universities need "to encourage a theology that will both underscore its urgency and encourage its redress."[14] Such a theology would stress reverence and care for the world, but also ask how our faith calls us to act on behalf of the creation of which we are a part. This is in keeping with the most comprehensive understanding of the liberal arts that we have inherited from Ignatius, which emphasizes a knowing that leads to a doing, and action for the good. It is also in keeping with the primary focus of theology, which is the mystery of God, how God is communicating to us in and through current reality, and how we propose to respond. With specific reference to climate change, we might need to move beyond the tropes of theology-science "dialogue"—important as that continues to be—and toward frameworks of intellectual partnership and action.

Finally, as Jesuit institutions we need to cooperate with and learn from one another. We are located in various parts of the planet, but all share this common concern (as well as many others). This is one of those times when, for Jesuits and their universities, regional and global differences, as well as ideologies, must be subordinated to a greater concern for the human race and for God's creation. If we can arrive at that level of common cooperation, both by acknowledging and transcending differences, we will be better able to contribute a voice to which others will listen.

Some Suggestions for Strategic Action

If theology is to engage science on these global issues in ways beneficial to humankind and not merely academic, and if Jesuit universities are to play a significant role in this endeavor (as they are specially called to do by virtue of our heritage), then we need to imagine new models

of cooperation with one another—on a global scale. It seems that today we have the capacity (or nearly so) for communication with one another on a scale and to a depth not previously possible. The Internet has certainly changed the way we acquire information and communicate with one another, as do newer technologies such as video-conferencing (even through Skype and similar minimalist technologies).

Prior to forging formal working linkages, we need to undertake an "inventory" of what is going on within our theology faculties. This would include all our schools, not only the theology centers, and could be undertaken by the international Secretariat for Jesuit Education. It is safe to say that there are many theologians, often enough isolated in their offices, who are already engaged in work on these topics. In some places, such as Kenya, there is an institutional dedication to such work at Hekima. Still, if we had an accurate picture of what is actually going on, we would know where the real gaps in our theological work lie and where we might move strategically to fill some of those gaps. (Along with this theological inventory, we could undertake an inventory of what Jesuit universities and institutes are doing to promote sustainability on the ground).

One specific proposal that I would like to make is that our international theology centers formally cooperate with one another on these issues. These institutions are generally well-focused, small-scaled and nimble enough to arrange for forms of cooperation on a fairly rapid timetable. Santa Clara's Berkeley center, for example, is keenly interested in working with centers in Nairobi and Manila to address in common ways and through mutual cooperation issues of such urgency for theology. Much the same could be said for many other such centers around the world. We could do this through relatively simple models, such as conferences, through

videoconferencing, faculty exchange, and joint research projects funded by international foundations.

Further, we need to engage the scientific culture on multiple fronts. Jesuit theology centers in particular could, working together in consortial research arrangements, focus on presenting their findings not only at theological conferences, but also to non-academic audiences such as NGO's, international aid organizations, scientific and government bodies, and public media. Two models for this are the Pontifical Academy of Sciences and the Vatican Observatory, which sponsor international conferences and publish their proceedings. These two bodies invite scientists from around the world who do not necessarily share the Church's faith but who have much to contribute to that which concerns the Church and the whole of humanity.

Finally, and not least, we could take a page from the work of Jon Sobrino, SJ, who pushes us to consider the root of the suffering of the poor, even in "natural" catastrophes, where the imbalances between wealth and poverty, power and powerlessness, are uncovered.[15] Jesuit universities, institutes and centers for theology could make this the central organizing focus of their work on climate change, and as their signal contribution to dialogues with the natural sciences on addressing it. If we are concerned about those who are most vulnerable in the face of climate change, we have much to learn from the very people we seek to serve. Here, and not in more ideology-laden spheres, is where our work as Jesuit theologians should begin on the crisis of climate change. It will keep us faithful as theologians to the mandates of the Society as well as to the central focus of theology itself. It will also give us a distinctive voice as we enter into further dialogue with modern science on this and other issues.

NOTES

[1] See Michael Buckley, S.J., "Ignatius' Understanding of the Jesuit University," *The Catholic University as Promise and Project: Reflections in a Jesuit Idiom* (Washingon, DC: Georgetown, 1998), 55-73.

[2] http://www.scu.edu/president/publiccommentary/JST_Convocation_092209.cfm (accessed January 29, 2010).

[3] "Theology and the Contemporary Challenge of the Natural Sciences," *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America*, ed. Paul Crowley 46 (1991) 21-43 at 42.

[4] Rahner, "Theology Today," *TI* XXI, 56-69 at 68.

[5] Karl Barth, "An Introductory Essay," in Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. George Eliot (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1957), vii-xxxii at xxiv. While disagreeing with Feuerbach's project, Barth writes: "Feuerbach has had and still has, secretly, a head start over modern theology…"

[6] See Decree 4, General Congregation 32, #19, in John Padberg, ed., *Jesuit Life and Mission Today: The Decrees and Accompanying Documents of the 31st-35th General Congregations of the Society of Jesus* (St. Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 2009), 302.

[7] See "Theology Today," op. cit., 60-61 and "Theology and the Contemporary Sciences," *TI* XIII, 94-102 at 97.

[8] See Paula J. Posas, "Roles of Religion and Ethics in Addressing Climate Change," *Ethics in Science and Environmental Politics,* (2007): 31-49.

[9] "Religion and Science: What Is at Stake?" *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 46/3 (Fall 2007) 294-300 at 299.

[10] See Koko Warner, et al., *In Search of Shelter: Mapping the Effects of Climate Change on Human Migration and Displacement,* CARE International (2008) 1-26 at 2.

[11] Frank Sperling, ed., *Poverty and Climate Change: Reducing the Vulnerability of the Poor through Adaptation*, World Bank (2003). See also Syad A. Ahmed, et al., "Climate Volatility Deepens Poverty Vulnerability in Developing Countries," *Environmental Research Letters* 4 (2009) 1-8.

[12] "If You Want to Cultivate Peace, Protect Creation," see http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/messages/peace/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20091208_xliii-world-day-peace_en.html (accessed 1/30/10)

[13] See, e.g., "Message du Pape Paul VI a l'Occasion de l'Ouverture de la Conference des Nations-Unies sur l'Environnement" (www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/speeches/1972/june/documents/hf_p-vi_spe_19... (accessed 7/21/09); see also *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, Chapter Ten: "Safeguarding the Environment."

[14] Unpublished lecture, "Christian Humanistic Education and a Care for the Earth" (2004).

[15] See, e.g., *Where Is God?: Earthquake, Terrorism, Barbarity, And Hope* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2008).

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