

Theology and Catholic Higher Education

Beyond Our Identity Crisis

MASSIMO FAGGIOLI

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Introduction

The Great Displacement of Theology

As a lay Catholic theologian and historian, I'm fortunate to be a professor in a department of theology and religious studies in a Catholic university in the United States. I moved from Europe to the United States in 2008 in order to teach. I love having the opportunity to teach undergraduate students theology. Often the course fulfills a core requirement and they have little or no pre-existing interest on the lay level in the discipline when it doesn't directly relate (as they see it) to their area of interest. Before Vatican II that would have been unthinkable. The development of the postconciliar period since the late 1960s has transformed the way we do theology. But the future of the discipline is very uncertain. Not only the discipline, but the future of the *universitas* as such is in doubt.

Recent cuts in theology programs decided by university administrators have rattled the community of Catholic theologians in the United States and in the Anglo-American world. It is now a familiar story—a board of trustees of Catholic colleges and universities voted to cut not only the theology department, but often also the liberal arts programs. In many instances courses in these fields are no longer offered as majors, although some of them remain part of the university's course offerings in a liberal arts core curriculum.

These cuts often follow a restructuring of the university's focus during previous academic years. It is not just the board of trustees; in some cases restructuring of the core curriculum at the expense of the requirement of theology courses and the liberal arts is fueled by a suspicion of the true value of these disciplines or by a lack of interest by faculty and administrators in other departments of these Catholic colleges and universities.

Especially in the United States it is the brave new world of higher education that now is transforming the unparalleled, large network of Catholic colleges and universities that Catholicism created. Cutting previously required courses in the liberal arts is among the steps taken toward selling out to technocracy. That is not something only administrators can be blamed for. In many Catholic universities, *aggiornamento*—updating—and changes related to the study of theology have ceded ground to non-Vatican II or anti-Vatican II cultures: often, theology has fallen into the hands of the traditionalists without offering any alternative vision for the field, as theologians who are non-traditionalists harbor the illusion that it is a marketing problem and not a product problem.

What happened at these colleges is a story that has repeated itself across the country in recent years: Catholic colleges and universities that compete in a market-oriented system are cutting their theology programs in favor of more “professionalizing” courses. In part, this is due to the undeniable lack of majors and minors in institutions that have become extremely expensive to attend—where theology is seen as a luxury, a nonessential field among other, more practical ones. But there is also a fundamental lack of faith in the liberal arts and theology held by many in the new cohort of lay (non-clergy, non-religious) administrators running Catholic colleges and universities these days.

This is not new. The role of theology in the institutions of education has changed before. In the first centuries of the Common Era, an “episcopal-monastic theology” took the form of

biblical commentaries. At the beginning of the second millennium the model shifted toward a “university theology,” which became the queen of the disciplines within the newborn universities.

Theologians became professional intellectuals focused on theological questions framed with a very complex philosophical language, taking the truths uncovered by philosophers such as Aristotle and seeking to show how those truths are compatible with the Christianity of European Christendom.

Today the role of theology in the university is part of the legacy—or the remains—of that nineteenth-century model of the German university. Catholic institutions in the United States adapted that model, together with the preexisting seminary system, for the formation of ministers, in order to serve the sons and daughters of the “immigrant church” who were in need of an education on a par with offerings at Protestant universities and public schools.

This higher education system ran parallel to the structure of the Catholic Church, centered on the hierarchical role of the bishops and the superiors of the religious orders, and the inexpensive labor—the ministry—of the members of the clergy, the religious, and the nuns. Now disappearing, at least in the West, that system is meeting a time of the great displacement of academic theology. It is not clear where, if, or how it will survive except in a handful of large and endowed universities that are not representative of the whole fabric of Catholic institutions.

This is also a great moment of crisis, for among some of the achievements from the Second Vatican Council (1962–65) and the post-Vatican II period, theology finally started to be taught not just by male celibate clergy, but also by lay men and women. Another achievement of the post-Vatican II period was that Catholic theology was no longer practiced largely in Europe and the Western world, but also in the Global South—Latin America, Africa, and Asia. The disestablishment of academic theology from

Catholic universities in the Anglo-American world will *not* always help the growth of new global Catholic voices.

There is the temptation to look at the changes as the inevitable result of secularization in the Western world: a shrinking church membership and the expansion of Catholic higher education from smaller colleges to universities offering a range of professional programs. These do factor into how secularization has changed Catholic colleges and universities, but there are other factors to take into account. We live in a different world now, no longer the world of bourgeois capitalism but of technocratic globalization. The ethos of the modernizing bourgeoisie centered on the concepts of civilization (*Kultur*) and formation (*Bildung*) as necessary for reshaping a social and political system where knowledge (*Wissenschaft*) was important for the economy, but also for the formation to citizenship and public opinion. The technocratic ethos of the current generation is not often convinced of the importance of a well-rounded education. The critical thinking that one develops by grappling with questions concerning religion and faith is not seen as relevant. More so, it is often perceived as the enemy of the technocratic world.

The ongoing great displacement of theology carries many unknowns. But as we've seen, this cannot be blamed entirely on the institutional church. In many Catholic universities founded by religious orders and clergy, the old leadership has been replaced by lay leaders. Replacing the clergy with lay leadership is no guarantee of a Catholic theological ethic. And the institutional church seems to have little to say about the shift in leadership. This estrangement between Catholic universities and the hierarchical church means that bishops are unable or possibly unwilling to effect larger changes related to theology in higher education.

The marginalization of theology from the university is a significant problem for the church as a whole, and not just for those who have lost or will lose their jobs in academia or for the students who will no longer be offered a wider range of

theological and humanities courses. It also a step backward from the rise of democratization of theology faculty over the last fifty years, which included Catholic women teaching theology in Catholic institutions. And for the often self-trained and self-appointed fortunetellers masquerading as theologians or church experts all over the internet, this is considered a victory. These self-appointed voices harbor a re-clericalization of the thinking of the church. But the changes also reveal the betrayal of the promise made by Catholic schools to students, their families, and the whole ecclesial community, to provide an education to develop whole human beings, an education where the problem of God and faith is taken seriously as part of the whole person.

This raises further serious questions, especially given the situation of the Catholic Church today. If theology and the education of the whole person are being diminished, how can the work of theology, of ethics, of the humanities, of the church take place on critical issues such as the abuse crisis? How is it possible to be a discerning church if we keep eliminating theology from Catholic higher education, thus accelerating the disappearance of public engagement by and with the church?

The fundamental questions about the place of Catholic theology today include these: Where can theology be taught and studied in the church? Where can it be taught and its importance understood in the public square? Not asking these questions at a basic level means we are at the cusp of a long-term intellectual disaster for the Catholic mind. And this is not just a problem for those working in academia: professors, students, administrators, donors.

Will theology be relegated to small pockets of academia now? Will theology be possible outside academia in any engagement with public life? Will Catholic colleges and universities be *Catholic* without a visible presence of theology?

Each troubling question leads to another. But perhaps a more troubling question is, can one be a theologian *inside* Catholic

academia today? The inquisition that academic theologians working in market-oriented universities fear the most these days is not the Holy Office in the Vatican, but the office run by lay technocrats independent from ecclesiastical authority, yet very much dependent on other, less visible and identifiable, powers. Despite all the DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion) initiatives, the disappearance of theology will make our Catholic campuses less diverse and inclusive. It will also make them less Catholic and less well rounded.

This book begins with this growing set of interlinking questions. Each chapter will look at different questions and considerations. Here is a basic overview: In the first chapter we'll look at the frame of the identity crisis of Catholic higher education in the context of the massive changes in the ecclesial and theological conversations since the time of Vatican II. The second chapter analyzes the interruption and major source of disconnect between the university and the church in the theological reception of Vatican II. The third chapter focuses on the shifting position and marginalization of theology within Catholic higher education. The fourth chapter looks at some consequences of these developments in the formation of Catholics (not only of those in ministry) for a synodal church. The fifth chapter looks at the role and responsibility of Catholic theology in the wider society, the academy, and the church. And in the concluding pages, I advance some proposals for addressing the current identity crisis.

I believe this book comes at an important time in the life of the church, that is, in the context of the "Synodal Process" begun in 2021 and its reception. In this global ecclesial conversation the voice of Catholic colleges and universities has been noticeable for their marginalized role, with some notable exceptions, including preparation between 2021 and 2023 with the United States, as the largest network in the world of Catholic higher education. Their role was marginal not just due to deep-seated fears in the Vatican of the risk of injecting elitist concerns and

academic jargon into the delicate process of ecclesial discernment. This marginality speaks also to the strange, strained, and dangerous relations between the church and Catholic higher education today.

In these last two decades, as a member of both academia and the church in the United States, I have been brought into this universe of vocation and mission to be an educator, to meet the conversation of theology and education with the life of these academic communities of people and places, with their classrooms, offices and hallways, libraries, cafeterias, and chapels. This book serves as part of my work and reflection on the urgency of theological education. I offer this book from my particular location as someone who grew up Catholic but didn't have a Catholic education in a Catholic school. In Italy, I went to public schools, which in the seventies and eighties were a peculiar mixture of confessional state and anticlericalism. In high school, for example, we studied Latin and Greek for five years and read Virgil and Homer in the original, even as the Bible was absent from the canon of texts accepted as part of the classical tradition.

Then I was hired by a Catholic higher education institution to develop Catholic education, theological education, at the university level. This vocation has also served as a wake-up call for me—and I hope for those reading this book—against any sense of both complacency and inevitability vis-à-vis the huge changes in this time of transition in the history of colleges and universities.