



The Place of a School of Theology in the University

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For much of western history, the co-existence of *scientia* (or later, in the nineteenth century, *Wissenschaft*) and the education of participants in churches was both desired and undisputed. In fact, the original medieval idea of the university served the goal of a rigorously educated clergy, when scholasticism attempted to transform sapiential knowledge into a rationally disciplined, self-critical (in their sense, “scientific”) method. Many of our universities, not only the oldest of them, have coexisted with theological schools almost since their founding— Harvard, Yale, University of Chicago, Vanderbilt, Emory, Duke, and many more. Yet the segregation of religion from the public university in nineteenth-century America and the conflict of religion and science in the twentieth century has left the position of a School of Theology in the American university unclear, at best. We think this co-existence is not only good, not only mutually beneficial, but an important component of a socially engaged, globally oriented, multicultural university.

The methods, kinds of evidence, and professional and public commitments of the schools and departments of a university vary tremendously. Yet, arguably, they share basic principles of scholarship and *paideia*. A physics curriculum operates in a different way from a curriculum in business management, environmental public policy, educational leadership, African diaspora, or queer theory, and yet they share commitments to evidence, truthfulness, and accountability. A theology school, at least the kind of theology school that SFTS is, embraces these norms unequivocally – committed to principles of critical thinking, evidence, scholarly excellence, participation in academic communities, peer-reviewed publication, and so on. Like some faculty in university departments, many theology faculty members are participants in religious communities, just as a biologist may also be on the board of Green Peace or a political scientist may also be a member of the Republican party. Regardless of other affiliations, variety of methods of research, and pedagogical techniques, all members of a university, professors in a School of Theology no less than others, are committed to standards of evidence and critical thinking in their own research. They are committed to train students to think critically and freely about whatever subject is under review. Perhaps this is the most general mark of an educated person: she can distinguish evidence from propaganda or pre-critical assumptions. But a second mark of an educated person is a deep curiosity about the world in all of its dimensions: astronomy, poetry, philosophy, the diversity of human history and culture, botany –and the wisdom conveyed by

human wisdom traditions. A third quality is a general commitment to equal access to education, opportunities, resources, and respect, and thus a resistance to racialized, gendered, and class-determined systems of power.

A School of Theology is held to the same standards, without compromise. But it has a distinctive identity and cultural role. It is neither a dharma center nor a department of religious studies. A School of Theology, with its various certificate, master's, and doctor of ministry degrees is situated in a unique cultural location, at an intersection of a distinctive set of scholarly disciplines (and interdisciplinary conversations) that include sacred texts, history, theology (the critical reformulation of the tradition of living religious communities), ethics, practical skills of communication and counselling, and community leadership. These disciplines serve a particular purpose. A School of Theology is a place where religions interrogate themselves, offering a critique of institutions, beliefs, and practices which is both within the context of a tradition but also outside of it, bringing to bear the modes of interpretation available through historical critical methods of textual interpretation, historical and archeological methods, cognitive science, ritual studies, literary criticism, critical race theory, feminist and gender theory, ecological sciences—to give a few examples. It was, in our generation, within theological schools that robust feminist critiques of the past and present of religious institutions were developed, and the structural racism of white religious institutions was interrogated. Schools of Theology, together with historians, religious studies scholars, and other cultural critics, participated in unmasking the abusive relationships of Christianity to Judaism, Islam, and the religions of South and Southeast Asia. They have had a deep and sustained investment in helping Christian and Jewish religious communities reassess their traditions as constructive elements of religious pluralism and social justice.

Like the many schools and departments of a university, a School of Theology is a place where innovation occurs. Studied critically, no religion proves to be a static repetition of the past but is rather an endlessly creative encounter with contemporary cultures and modes of learning. A School of Theology offers a context in which traditions evolve through dialogue with scholarly method and wisdom. It is now a commonplace among mainstream (non-fundamentalist) communities of faith that patriarchal dynamics of power have no place within Christianity and that sacred texts should be interpreted through historical-critical methods. Interfaith dialogue and trans-religious identities have many cultural causes but these, too, are examples of the creative evolution within religion that arises at the intersection of culture, scholarship, and communities of faith. In the absence of a robust relationship between theology schools and universities, the cultural role of religion in society takes on a very different shape.

We see an ambitious and innovative university as a natural home for a School of Theology. We believe our norms are well aligned with such a school. Through the Graduate Theological Union (and other academic relationships), our school already works closely with scholars of other faith traditions and with scholars who deploy a variety of social scientific and humanities-based methods. But for us, a closer relationship with University of Redlands is a welcome deepening of our multi-religious and inter-disciplinary commitments. We imagine a creative future made possible by new relationships with the Department of Religious Studies as well as other departments of the College of Arts and Sciences, and the Schools of Education, Business, Continuing Studies, and Music, and the Center for Spatial Studies.

But what benefits might a theology school bring to the University of Redlands? Our school is already deeply related to two other institutions of higher learning (the Graduate Theological Union and UC Berkeley) through the GTU's interfaith PhD program. (The GTU is currently building out programs in Dharma Studies and Islam). We can serve as an access point to an established PhD program in religion, whose graduates have gone on to significant careers at schools like the University of Chicago, Northwestern, Harvard, Yale, Georgetown, and Loyola University, many seminaries, and many colleges affiliated with churches or not, in fields like Ancient Near Eastern Religions, Hebrew Bible, Jewish Studies, the History of Christianity, Ethics, Buddhist Studies, and Theology in its many forms.

We can contribute to opportunities for undergraduates to interrogate the living wisdom of religious traditions. The study of religion becomes more prism-like, as different approaches illuminate different aspects of a tradition. One learns something about Buddhism reading His Holiness, the Dalai Lama, that one does not necessarily learn from encountering an ethnographer of Tibetan Buddhism. One experiences Islam a bit differently when the professor of Quran is a Muslim feminist scholar. One understands Christianity differently when the professor teaching religious ritual is a queer Methodist. We can provide a milieu where critical scholarship, social engagement, and a role within a living religious community are equally respected and served. We believe the presence of a theology school within a university not only contributes to a deep, serious, and constructive appreciation for the religions and cultures of the world among those with little or no religious affiliation, but also produces religious leaders, including Christian ones, who cultivate the same in their communities.