

Re-thinking the theological thought police

Phyllis Zagano | Aug. 31, 2011 Just Catholic

What might baldly be called the Vatican Thought Police are after *Theological Studies*, the 71-year-old journal for professional theologians that has 2,848 subscribers in 90 countries. They've made noises about some of the journal's essays, apparently forcing it to print a rebuttal to one of them.

There is a cold wind blowing out of Rome. Has anyone noticed that Catholic theologians are running for the secular hills?

Jesuit-sponsored *Theological Studies* is just what it says. It is not a catechetical tool. It is not issued by the USCCB public relations department. It is a journal in which scholars who successfully pass several layers of peer review and a painstaking editing process publish the fruits of years of scholarship. Some of these essays eventually turn up in scholarly books published by Catholic presses.

Rome may worry about theological research published by professionals for professionals, but no one seems to care about the strain the current climate puts on Catholic research and publishing. Catholic presses are increasingly wary of writing that might raise a Roman eyebrow. So secular publishing houses offer a safe haven for scholars who ask questions the Vatican would rather not have asked.

Does anyone else see a problem here?

Full disclosure: I have published in *Theological Studies*. I write this twice-monthly column mostly published online for *NCR*. What I write, whether in *Theological Studies* or in the column you are now reading, is professionally edited by Catholics. I have also published with both secular and Catholic publishing houses. I depend on the criticism of my editors and peers.

In keeping with the best traditions of journalism, *NCR* editors watch for style and spelling and facts. They also ensure respectful discussion of issues.

At *Theological Studies* (known in the trade as "TS"), scholarship and accuracy form the bottom line. Every comma, every footnote, every word is scrutinized and scrubbed to ensure an essay's meaning is clear, or at least as clear as can be for theologians. The result is such page-turners as "Levinas and Christian Mysticism after Auschwitz" by Paul Rigby and "Christological Polemics of Maximus the Confessor and the Emergence of Islam onto the World Stage" by Grigory I. Benevich. Each appeared in the June 2011 issue along with the apparently non-peer reviewed and very lightly edited "Indissoluble Marriage: A Reply to Kenneth Himes and James Coriden" by Jesuit Fr. Peter F. Ryan and Germain Grisez.

Nearly seven years ago Himes and Coriden raised a theological question with significant pastoral implications. But the Vatican's brand of thought police (more likely only one Vatican doctrine cop) decided Himes' and Coriden's work was non-doctrinal and a danger to the faithful, who probably never heard of either one until this story hit the news.

Such is not a new mistake by non-media savvy doctrine enforcers. Think of how many books they have sold for Elizabeth Johnson. If the Vatican is concerned about scholars being popularized, perhaps it should consider how much PR it does on their behalf.

It should also consider where Catholic scholars will publish their books in the future, given the current climate. While there are many fine secular publishing houses around, they often do not have Catholic editorial staff to back-stop a writer. They do, of course, send materials out for review among Catholic specialists, but the editorial process is much different, and often more difficult, than with a Catholic publisher because often nuances of tone and technical style are lost on their copy editors.

Serious Catholic presses and journals may lean a bit in one direction or the other, but they can be trusted. The denser the book or essay, the more it will be read only by specialists. I sincerely doubt the faithful have much chance of being misled by a single article in *Theological Studies*, assuming they go to the trouble of finding it in a university or seminary library in the first place.

Theological Studies provides a serious forum for serious discussion. It does not make publication decisions lightly -- scholars have but a 10 percent chance of having an essay accepted by TS. Why go after it?

Attacking a professional journal does not protect doctrine. It mummifies it. Driving theologians into the secular streets can actually create the problem the doctrine defenders seek to avoid.

Where did this dust up come from? Is officialdom mollifying the ultra-right? Will it ever recognize nothing will ever be enough?

It makes no sense to force a professional journal to publish what may be a rejected article.

Theological Studies will remain the gold standard for scholarship. But the chilling end result of this and other actions in the name of the hierarchy is that Catholic scholars will seek more, not fewer, secular outlets for work rightly and properly discussed inside the guild.

Theologians are not the problem.

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