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Brett Hoover

Loyola Marymount University

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The Graduate Study of Theology at LMU

Brett C. Hoover, Ph.D.

As faculty director of the graduate program in Theological Studies at Loyola Marymount University, each fall I have the honor of accompanying 15-30 graduate students as together they engage in the practice of that activity we call theology. St. Anselm of Canterbury famously described theology as *fides quaerens intellectum*, “faith seeking understanding.” I usually start our class by emphasizing that the students have already been engaged in the activity of theology for much of their lives. The word *theology* in the koine Greek of the early Church literally meant “God-talk” or “reasoning about God.” In short, we do theology every time we think or talk about who God is in our lives, or what God’s presence means for our identity as human beings, our sense of the world around us, our responsibilities to that world and to one another. In the graduate study of theology, we engage these questions in a disciplined and precise way, and in keeping with scholarly traditions

My students come to do this work from a variety of backgrounds. A few teach at Catholic or other private high schools, hoping to gain skills and resources to put to work in their classrooms. Some come as seekers, often in their early to mid-twenties, looking to acquire habits of mind, conversation, and writing that will help them unpack Christian and other religious traditions to aid them (and others they encounter) in their spiritual search. A great many are involved in pastoral ministry of some sort—lay women and men working in high schools, colleges, parishes, dioceses, or non-profit organizations; Catholic deacons and their spouses; a good number of Catholic priests, Protestant ministers, and Catholic sisters, some of them students from abroad here to broaden their perspectives (they help U.S. students do the same). Finally, some of our students come with a longer term academic journey in mind, their M.A. in theology the first step *en route* to further education. A few go on to achieve doctoral degrees in theology and teach at institutions of higher learning. Some LMU graduate students in theology come from far flung places—Vietnam, India, Nigeria, China, the Philippines—and a few from other parts of the United States. The largest contingent come from the vast landscape which is Southern California. They reflect the racial and ethnic diversity of that landscape, and the learning community they form is enriched by the sharing of different cultural traditions of Christian practice and sometimes different ideological perspectives.

However they come to us, our graduate students quickly learn a few crucial things about studying theology at the graduate level. First, they learn that graduate study may demand a bit more from them intellectually than other kinds of spiritual or religious reflection (and more existentially—most students find it nearly impossible to ignore their own big questions and spiritual anxieties even as they study). I remind students that graduate theological study is not simply a more rigorous form of religious education or faith formation, and it is not apologetics, that is, defending the faith from attack. Using an automobile metaphor, I argue that religious education approximates learning how to drive, how to guide the vehicle of one’s own faith

journey. Apologetics feels more like learning to sell a car, memorizing the excellent features and showing why this make and model is the right one for the listener. Theology at the graduate level, on the other hand, functions more like learning to be a master mechanic. How does Christian faith work? What lies underneath the hood, historically, biblically, and theologically? How did current models develop over time? How do we fix or adapt the vehicle of faith when it begins to fail or does not function properly on new terrain? Graduate students must be prepared to take a deep, critical, and constructive plunge into the engine of faith.

The second thing graduate students learn about graduate study has to do with theological writing. Decades ago the famous Brazilian educator Paulo Freire argued that too many people in the world envision education as if it were making repeated withdrawals from a great bank of knowledge, an approach that lends itself to passive learning and that kind of writing which amounts to reporting back. Freire developed these insights working on adult literacy, but some of my own students admit that they started the graduate program thinking they would be reading books and listening to lectures in that way—withdrawing information and then giving back a written “account record” of what they had received. Instead they find that we ask them to write essays both critical and constructive, asking tough questions and trying out creative conclusions. We want them to engage theological scholarship, Christian tradition, and the reality of the world around us in a deep, analytical, but also hopeful way. Our own hope for our classrooms is that they will become learning communities where input, listening, and discussion lead both teacher and student on a cooperative venture that leads to a better world. That was the kind of education Paulo Freire had in mind.

Finally, students learn that our graduate program is not merely the practical, specific study of certain areas in theology or preparation for one kind of ministry work. We train people to be theological generalists. As I often remind ministry students, no one knows what kind of ministry God may call you to in the future, and we want everyone grounded and nimble if they need to switch course from youth minister to retreat director to college campus minister. Even though our program is split into two tracks, the Master of Arts in pastoral theology for those in or preparing for ministry, and the Master of Arts in theology, all our students take the same set of foundational courses across the discipline of theology—biblical study, ethics, systematic/constructive theology, historical theology—and all have the same opportunity to engage in a broad variety of elective courses, from studying the works of St. Augustine to theological reflection on immigration and borders. We do have popular concentrations in comparative theology—comparing Christian tradition with other religious traditions—and in spiritual direction, but the focus of the grad program is intentionally broad. We want everyone aware of the different ways in which people do theology rather than simply practical prepared for one kind of work or study. In today’s marketplace, even in church people must have flexible skills and multiple knowledge bases.

This, in a nutshell, is graduate study in the Department of Theological Studies at Loyola Marymount University. Though solid in its foundations, it also changes over time as faculty expertise and student needs change. For example, as our student body and faculty have grown more diverse, we have established courses explicitly engaging Latino/a theology, Hispanic ministerial contexts, indigenous Christianity, and the African American religious experience. As the “seeker” presence at LMU has increased, our comparative theology offerings have become more central to what we do. The LMU Bioethics Institute now offers graduate degrees, and

many theology students study end-of-life issues in those courses. Some grad students take courses in LMU's philosophy department, and we anticipate more focus on pedagogy and educational leadership as we attempt to address the needs of our students who teach school. Where will the LMU graduate program in theology be headed next? We hope that, as more students come from across the country and world, they will become part of that first year class I teach, and help us discover where we are going next.

Dr. Brett C. Hoover is Associate Chair for Graduate Education in the Department of Theological Studies at Loyola Marymount University. He is also Assistant Professor of Pastoral and Practical Theology.