

What is the good of your discipline? Sophie O'Mahony

Sophie O'Mahony

I shall begin this essay by stating two unconventional truths: it was never my intention to study Divinity, nor am I a Christian.

Originally I had applied to read English. I liked books; I liked reading them even more. It wasn't until I studied John Milton's *Paradise Lost* that my theological yearnings revealed themselves to me. I became enthralled by the poetic unravelling of Genesis 1:1-28, I loved the sudden revelation that the situation of Adam and Eve was something that I could understand: a context of love and lust and break-up and make-up. As the weeks progressed, I came to realise that I wasn't so much interested in Milton's structure of God's arguments as the arguments themselves; my essays reflected a student looking for answers to questions that were both beyond the words written down on those 17th century pages. And so I made that important decision: I exchanged books for the ultimate Book, one whose words are a source of influence for what feels like everything else today. For that was something else that I noted during my school years: the relevance of Christianity in all of my subjects. To not understand the role of Christianity in its different spheres was to not understand the spheres themselves. The history of England hung in the balance as Henry VIII and his theological advisers which Biblical passage, Leviticus or Deuteronomy, took precedence in the context of his marriage to Catherine of Aragon. One of the good of my disciplines, therefore, is that it promotes further understanding and knowledge of other social phenomena. I honestly believe that it is my study of the religion which ensures my better comprehension of life in all its different phases.

I am not a Christian; yet I cannot deny its constant presence in my life. I have seen a terrible absence of God in the Haiti earthquake, yet a surprising presence in a Thai Buddhist temple that I explored bare-foot. On a personal note, my heritage is Jewish, my ancestry is Roman Catholic. My parents, stuck between the Menorah and the Crucifix, left me unbaptised and void of any religious labels, deciding that I would make my own spiritual choices. As a result, I feel that I am accountable to any religious decisions that I make. Consequentially, these decisions must come as a result of intense theological examination. This is not to say that I resent it.

I love how my subject brings people together, taking on many forms in an attempt to engage dialogue. I can think of many occasions with many purposes: the Council of Nicea of 325 was there to establish Orthodoxy and strengthen Christianity; the 19th century saw Dr David Livingstone launch permanent relations between Africa and Britain; in 1966 the Vatican reached out to its followers in their modern setting; in 2009 Pope Benedict XVI declared his ambition to bring Anglicans into communion with the Roman Catholic Church. On Oxford Street, London, there is a man with a placard who will tell you that God loves you, and that you will be saved if you accepted Jesus into your heart. You may or may not want to hear what he has to say, but he has given up his time to save you anyway.

I see in the subject of Christianity both passion and debate: perhaps the two most vital elements of academic study. The passion stems from the students' desire to find an understanding, be it religious, historical or sociological; the

debate plays out not just between Christians and Atheists, but between Christians themselves over scriptural translation and doctrinal interpretation. Divinity is not simply for the religious; nor is it simply a mathematical study that can be completed and walked away from. It is an all-encompassing degree, which demands private reflection. For me this is the good of my discipline: it requires, ultimately, a personal response, independent of one's religious standpoint.

I was advised to avoid taking on a degree in Divinity for career reasons; were it not to serve a vocational purpose, those graduating in any religious subject were considered null and void in the business sphere. However, since accepting a place at the infamous New College at the University of Edinburgh, graduates of Divinity has since become one of the most successful recruitments, employers having realised the benefits that come with a degree in the subject. Aside from the religious aspect, Divinity has taught me many skills which I consider to be invaluable, both as a student and as a prospective worker. Listing the abilities in this essay would be tedious - analytical techniques, language aptitude, historical acuteness to name but a few - but I believe that these are the necessary elements that graduates must carry into the world if they wish to make a change for the better. Currently we are in the shadow of global tension; this conflict will worsen if things continue as they are. However, there is the potential for improvement if the candidates of the future bring with them a profound understanding: of other religions, cultures, societies, historical inheritance. The good of my discipline is that its students are united in toleration; there is a commitment towards seeking out the truth, and for relaying it back to its audiences in an appropriate manner. Students of Divinity are not interested in the isolation of others, in marking others as 'in the wrong' because of differences in opinion. Instead we strive to understand the source of these varying beliefs, and to incorporate them into whatever context they find themselves in. Divinity is about acceptance, not rejection. What better way is there to bring about the ultimate and necessary change that is demanded by so many?

To deny the place of Christianity in today's secular society is to profess ignorance. Whether we are Christian or not, the beliefs that we express will almost certainly have a religious element to them. In the case of a terminally ill patient, those who deny her euthanasia out of respect for the sanctity of life echo Isaiah 46:3-4: "...I am He, I am he who will sustain you. I have made you and I will carry you; I will sustain you and I will rescue you". In contrast, those who appeal out of mercy for her assisted suicide are in collaboration with Joseph Fletcher's Situation Ethics, which give prominence to Christian love above all other moral paths. Twelve Anglican Bishops sit in the House of Lords. Every ethical matter that is debated over today will have an argument proposed by a religious representative. The legal courts face numerous cases dealing with the denial of a person's religious rights, such as the sacking of the nurse Shirley Chaplin for refusing to remove her crucifix necklace. Buses are at war with each other: those who proclaim "There's probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life" are now being met with the wrath of Psalm 53: "The fool hath said in his heart, there is no God". Christians must now assert themselves in this time of tolerance of other religions. To proclaim yourself an Atheist is to, arguable, proclaim a religious belief. Religion is all around us: it is something which we face, if not personally, in our media, schools, legislation, even our relationships.

Divinity is a subject of acquiescence and insight, and it worries me that that it faces cuts as a result of the actions of others who lacked these vital qualities. It seems obviously wrong to me that Divinity and other Humanities subjects should suffer because of the wrongs are others, particularly as, already expressed in this essay, Divinity would ensure a future where these mistakes would not be repeated. It is nonsensical. I am not dismissing the other degrees that students might study whilst at university - mathematics and chemistry are essential to any Utopian society - but we need something else alongside the equations and the formulae to ensure that they are of benefit to the people of today and the generations that will follow us. The Atomic Bomb was a work of genius, a remarkable creation produced by the efforts of students of Physics; yet with creation we must have a code of responsibility. Divinity teaches us ethics and morality, provides a history of right and wrong that is relevant in both a religious and non-religious setting, challenges our perceptions of things and demands that we think. Think: how many campaigns and slogans has this single word dominated? Divinity requires us to think. John Locke distinguished humans from animals because of the former's rationality. Thinking provides a *homo sapiens* with a personhood. Perhaps from a biological view it would be best if we wiped out every gene which caused an element of deficiency in our proud species; but I have learnt about the horrors of Hitler's Euthanasia programme when the church in Germany submitted

to the authority of the Nazi state, and it has made me think twice about Eugenics.

To assert the importance of Divinity is not to undermine the importance of other degrees; rather my course recognises the importance of other subjects, and my timetable is filled with the study of languages, history, and other religions. But I believe the same regard should be taken towards Divinity itself. It is perhaps dangerous to think of degrees as mutually exclusive from one another - I am a Linguist, I am a Chemist, I am a Medic - because it denies the purpose of compatibility that I believe is central to our studies. I began my study of Christianity with a study of Judaism. In order to understand the Bible fully, I have gone back to the origins of scripture and started learning New Testament Greek. When someone studying Medicine graduates and becomes a doctor, they must identify the patient as a person, not as a clinical study. A historian should not be allowed to judge until the full context is realised.

I am not a Christian. But I remember sitting by a pond and seeing an insect skate across the surface without going under. My friend, who studies Biology, told me that if humans were able to reach a speed of 40 mph, we too could walk on water. His brother-in-law, a priest, said after about ten seconds of silence: "Jesus must have been a really fast guy."

Divinity teaches us a lot, yet shows that there is so much more to be learnt.

Created on: May 12th 2010

Updated on: May 12th 2010