

An Exchange between Terrence Tilley and Fr. Thomas Weinandy

John L. Allen Jr. | Dec. 5, 2009 NCR Today

In the current issue of the Quarterly of the Fellowship of Catholic Scholars, Capuchin Fr. Thomas Weinandy, executive director of the U.S. bishops' Secretariat of Doctrine, charges that Terrence Tilley of Fordham University, past president of the Catholic Theological Society of America, was guilty of "doctrinal ambiguity and error" in an address last June on the Incarnation.

In response, Tilley has written the following open letter to Weinandy, which is posted here with Tilley's permission.

Though Weinandy's essay reflected his own views, not necessarily those of the bishops' conference, it's nonetheless significant that the chief doctrinal advisor of the bishops took on one of America's leading theologians in such a public fashion.



An Open Letter to Fr. Thomas Weinandy

Dear Tom,

In the fall semester of 1976 we both began our teaching careers at Georgetown University. Then and now we have agreed on some theological issues and disagreed on others, both methodologically and substantially. I have followed your stalwart defense of the doctrine of divine impassibility with interest.

However, I was very disappointed by your essay, "Terrence Tilley's Christological Impasses: The Demise of the Doctrine of the Incarnation." The main reason is that you fault my presidential address for superficial scholarship. However, your essay never mentions over three decades of my published scholarship that underlies the address and was cited in the notes. This is especially disappointing coming from the Executive Director for the Secretariat of Doctrine of the USCCB and the Convener of the Christology Section of the CTSA.

First, you misrepresent my views. I affirm the doctrine of the Incarnation. See my *The Disciples? Jesus* (Orbis, 2008) especially 36-37; 224-231. I do not support adoptionism. I never say that the classic councils were "complete failures," although for reasons stated I do think that the central problem was not resolved.

Second, you misinterpret my views. I do understand the centuries of discussion and debate that led to the orthodox formulae differently from you. I simply point out the political issues were also involved. I am not a cultural relativist as you suggest (see *Inventing Catholic Tradition* [Orbis, 2000], especially 156-170, and *History, Theology and Faith Dissolving the Modern Problematic*

[Orbis, 2004]). Nor do I hold that "the present culture always trumps the content" of the gospel. I do hold and have argued that the contemporary use of terms like "nature" do not mean what "physis" or "natura" meant in the Patristic era and so cannot be used to communicate the tradition accurately today (unless, of course, one expects all believers to have graduate degrees in theology). Your inference that I challenge the authority of the magisterium is inaccurate; I do question how some magistri have exercised their authority.

Third, you fault my rhetoric, yet you tar the approach I use by rhetorically associating it with other approaches that lead to positions I never address and that you find abhorrent. In so doing, you at least neglect the maxim "abusus non tollit usum." This sort of rhetoric implying "guilt by association" is hardly fair, especially from a person of your status.

There are other issues that I find you misread or misinterpret. That contributes to my sadness at the tone and content of your essay. But they are too many for discussion in a brief note.

I hope that you will begin to emulate the theologian whose name graces the chair that I have agreed to take up in January, 2010. His practice was always to read others' work thoroughly, interpret it charitably, and report it accurately—especially when he disagreed with them.

Sincerely yours,
Terrence W. Tilley
Avery Cardinal Dulles Professor of Catholic Theology(elect) and
Chairperson of the Theology Department
Fordham University

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[UPDATE]

Weinandy has offered the following reply, which is posted with his permission.

Dear Terry,

My response to your open letter to me is quite brief. I would simply ask that all those interested in this academic debate to read your Presidential address and my response to it. After reading both the reader can make his or her own considered judgment.

Take care.

Tom

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Tilley's address and Weinandy's critique can be found here:

"Tilley's presidential address: <http://www.ctsa-online.org/0071-0085.pdf>

"Weinandy's response in the Fellowship of Catholic Scholars quarterly:

<http://www.catholicscholars.org/publications/quarterly/v32n3fal2009.pdf>

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