

Taking the plunge: Immersed in theology

by [James Alison](#) in the [February 20, 2007](#) issue

One of the privileges of studying theology within the clerical formation programs of the Catholic Church is that you get to study philosophy first. For at least three years. This can seem interesting and exciting when you're immersed in it—it certainly hones the intellect for debate. At other times it can seem soul-crushing and destroying—what has this nitpicking linguistic analysis got to do with preparing me to preach the gospel?

In retrospect, the true extent of the privilege becomes clearer: when it comes time to study theology, the pupil has been primed to interpret, to be able to remove words and concepts from the meaning foisted on them by the gut, to separate them from their inherited baggage and to begin to detect where contemporary religious ideology and real thought might begin to diverge, and how to follow the latter.

For practical and financial reasons, these additional three years have only really been possible where theological education was conceived as a formation process for male celibate clerics who start young and for whom a seven-year training course is not entirely inappropriate. These years also serve to create a shared culture of discourse within which a huge amount of discussion, disagreement and range of opinions are held more or less pacifically. This culture is part of what allows for the sheer variety and difference of theological viewpoints which circulate freely in the Catholic Church on all but the few hot-button issues at which the ecclesiastical traffic cops attempt to blow their whistles.

As an aside, I would note that, paradoxically, as this male-only culture winds down—and the discipline of theology is undertaken (as it should be) by people of both sexes—the loss of prior philosophical training is likely to mean that theological discussion will become narrower, less capable of tolerating variety and less aware of the ease with which theology can fall captive to religious ideology. The task of creating a new structure of shared discourse prior to the delicate business of talking

about God or reading scripture, a structure not dependent on male-only clerical formation, is one of the great catechetical and community-building challenges for the church.

In my own case, despite having been led to the portals of theology by some extraordinary Dominican teachers—Herbert McCabe, Fergus Kerr, Roger Ruston and Timothy Radcliffe, to name a few—nothing could quite have prepared me for the shock of my first semester of the formal study of theology at the Jesuit faculty in Belo Horizonte, Brazil. As the semester wore on, I found myself feeling as though I was being drowned—and in two senses.

In the first place, I had the sense that I was probably going to have to hold on to my faith (emphasis on “my”) despite the best efforts of these slippery, overintellectualized, relativistic-seeming teachers. As the weeks went by, it did seem as though “my” faith and all that I held sacred and dear was under assault from these people. And I was drowning.

But even more significant than that my self-importance was threatened by the excellence of the teachers was the cumulative effect of the sheer volume of reading. Day after day, week after week, author after author, opinion after opinion, a sea of words were being poured on me from every angle. They were opening up new horizons and challenging bits of surety in the pit of my stomach—until the little Inquisitor General on his throne in the upper part of my skull could take it no longer. He had been accustomed to sitting there, serenely sifting through such little ideas as my reading and listening had brought before him, routinely and elegantly trashing them from a position of enormous imagined superiority: after all, someone who is right can easily detect what is wrong, and is never aware of how defensively he is proceeding.

It's not as though all these opinions and words were out to get my poor inner Inquisitor. But he was completely at sea amid the sheer volume and breadth of what was washing over him. He didn't have the staff or the time to be able to put all these dreadful books right, or the fingers to plug up all the holes in the dike. And so he drowned.

This is what I call “falling through.” And it was for me the vital experience in beginning to learn theology. It was an experience of being pulled out of my own narrow sacred world and discovering a huge, peaceful discipline that preceded me

and that had extraordinary depths, contours, melodies and spaciousness. I was being pulled into swimming around in it.

This meant beginning to see how those teachers who it had been so easy for the clever beginner to despise were doing a magnificent job of holding open a great canopy of learning within which I could indeed find things that I didn't control, things that nourished me, things that would help me build something, but also things that I didn't find so helpful and could avoid, ways of talking and thinking which tired the soul rather than giving it zest.

"Falling through" was how I moved from being someone who had an interest in theology to someone who loved theology and had found himself caught in a bigger, more open world than he could imagine. One where theology was no longer simply a discipline about which one should know for other purposes (and there may be people for whom that is exactly what it should be!) but a gift and a promise of being, and of finding myself on the inside of an act of communication from elsewhere.