

Interview with *Le Délit*

Questions from Louise Toutée; responses by Douglas Farrow

23 January 2021 (full text)

https://www.academia.edu/44981766/Interview_with_Le_D%C3%A9lit?email_work_card=thumbnail

1. Have you been contacted in the past by students or student groups about the issues mentioned in the open letter?

No. Despite the fact that this (undated and unsigned) letter has existed in draft form for about a year now, not a single representative of the associations endorsing it has made any attempt to speak with me about it.

2. One of the criticisms raised by the letter is that you provide students with "a very particular perspective both on Christian theology and Christian understanding of gender and sexuality". What is your opinion on this statement? If you agree, do you believe it is legitimate to provide one particular perspective on Christian theology in your classes (versus, for example, covering different perspectives that might be contradictory)?

In the classroom, I consider it my responsibility to do three things primarily: first, to introduce students to key authors and texts that shaped the Christian tradition over two millennia; second, to teach them how to read these texts (and others like them) with understanding; third to help them learn the disciplines of theology and theological ethics in that context. Every one of the people we read, from Paul to John Paul, has a distinct perspective, as of course do I. Mine is learned from the great patristic, mediaeval, and modern theologians I have engaged closely.

Theology, like philosophy or physics, is no stranger to controversy. It requires accurate accounts of controversies over two millennia. But it is quite absurd to suppose that a particular theologian or philosopher or physicist would consider it his or her job to do nothing but outline controversies, past or present. I have an international reputation as a theologian, and no reason to be shy about actually doing theology in the classroom rather than simply pointing out that there is such a thing.

As for theological understanding of gender and sexuality, I teach on this very little, though I sometimes write or speak on it, as anyone who visits my [Academia](#) page knows. It is dishonest to pretend that my public writings on such topics are the stuff of my classroom. They are not, though in principle they might be. The real problem is that those behind this letter don't like the anthropology of the mainstream Catholic tradition which is reflected in my work; indeed, they won't tolerate it or anyone who affirms it. It must also be borne in mind that most of those whom the letter represents are operating on hearsay, never having taken a class with me or read more than a line or two I have written.

3. One of the demands of the open letter is that additional professors be assigned to the mandatory classes you are exclusively teaching. What do you think about this demand? Do you believe it is in the right of students to demand not to have classes with a particular professor?

No, I don't. Most universities cannot afford to supply students in any program, much less a small program like ours, with such an array of choice that each and all can study only under professors or lecturers they find congenial. Nor can professors or lecturers demand only students they find congenial. Moreover, to accede to such demands would effectively eviscerate both academic rigour and academic freedom by turning all teaching posts into popularity contests.

I too, however, wish there were more options here. Which is to say, I wish I had more colleagues in theology. At McGill there are three full professors in different disciplines of theology: philosophical, systematic, and historical. That's it – a couple of adjuncts but no junior appointments. We are always looking for creative ways to make the best of that situation, but there are limits to what we can do.

4. Could you elaborate on how these works (mainly, I imagine, "Nation of Bastards: Essays on the End of Marriage") are misrepresented in the open letter? How does the intended understanding of these works differ from the one presented in the letter?

That is much too large a task, I'm afraid, but I will offer three illustrations.

First, the letter claims that the book "refers to same-sex marriage as a 'casualty' that has reduced both the institution of marriage as well as the family" and that it amounts to "a deliberate homophobic attack." In point of fact, the casualty to which it refers is the traditional legal understanding of marriage and, with it, the integrity of Canadian law. It explains why that is so, how it happened, and what must happen consequently. Subsequent events have borne out the analysis and the predictions. The book is not about homosexuality but about the altered political and legal standing of all Canadians after Bill C-38. That is why I chose Rousseau's phrase, "nation of bastards," as the title of its leading essay, which engages figures ranging from Augustine to Rousseau to our own Beverley McLachlin.

Second, the essay and the book grew (like several other books) out of the Pluralism, Religion, and Public Policy project which saw then Chief Justice McLachlin come to McGill for a major lecture. Its website, which the University did indeed take down last year without notice or discussion, had been in place since the inception of that project in 2002. It was not, as the letter claims, the product of the protest that proudly hurled invectives at a visiting ethicist from Toronto and (to a lesser degree) at myself. The product of that event was twofold: increased attention to the topic on the website, and a careful explanation of my own views, unhindered by airhorns and chants, which interested parties may listen to on [NewTube](#).

Third, the "outrageous" remark to which the letter alludes belongs to a philosophical dispute with the Dean of Law. The hypothetical "Dave and Renée" are his creations, not mine, and the hypothetical modifications I introduced were again for the purpose of enquiring about the integrity of the law, to say nothing of the (marked if unwitting) cultural appropriation to which the article points. Since the authors of the letter did not see fit to link to that article, I'll do so [here](#).

The [letter's](#) "resources" page calls, in effect, not for more chants and airhorns, but for a mobbing through the complaints process. This process, as I have pointed out to the Administration more than once, is full of procedural injustices, including the possibility of such mobbing, where misrepresentations and falsehoods such as the letter itself contains go altogether unpunished. I fear that the University is

becoming a “safe space” for everything but reason and decency and basic justice. I hope that both students and professors who share this concern will speak up and be counted.