Professor Alain Blondy, in his recently published *Nouvelle histoire des idées du sacré au politique* (Perrin, 2016), writing on the Paleolithic period of prehistory remarks that one of the distinguishing characteristics of humanity is the way that human beings consider the phenomenon of death. They bury their dead; they would wish to find a reason for their existence and the fugacité of human life. Then Blondy quotes Émile Durkheim:1 “La Religion est donc le premier endroit où les êtres humain pouvaient expliquer rationalment le monde autour d’eux.” The consciousness of his uniqueness makes man think of another reality parallel and above that of other beings and things in existence around him, and in which the spirits of the dead continue. Religion was, and is, an attempt at explaining being, and seeing what the explanation imposes on one’s conduct. It is the beginning of human culture. The Italian poet Ugo Foscolo in his poem “I sepolcri,” translated by Dun Karm as “L-oqbra,” sees civilization as beginning “dal di che nozze e tribunali ed are, diero alle umane belve esser pietose di se stesse e d’altrui,” (from the day that marriage, tribunals [Law] and altars [Religion] gave

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1 In *Les forms élémentaires de la vie religieuse*, 1912.
to the human beasts a feeling for themselves and for others = minn mindu Żwieġ u Liġijiet u Artali nisslu ż-galb il-bnedmin horox xi bniema lejhom infishom u għal għajrhom). The concept of pietas is antithetical to that of crude egoism. Religion prompts the cultivation of man. Most human and humanizing activities have a great debt to this very particular way in which homo sapiens considers the significance of his existence and the existence of everything else. Man’s mind turns naturally to metaphysics, but then goes back into tangible realities infusing them with intellectual ratiocination and emotional expression. As a matter of history, the arts (architecture, painting, sculpture, music and poetry), as well as the social sciences, can trace much of their development to religions.

The theological faculties in the old universities, including ours, have inherited from Religion this cultural dynamism directed towards other disciplines. The contributions made by academicians of our Faculty of Theology have indeed been remarkable. The contributions are still arriving today. Abundant proof of this is provided by this festschrift in honour of one of the Faculty’s brilliant minds, Professor George Grima on his seventieth birthday, compiled by two other stars of that firmament, Emanuel Agius and Hector Scerri. The book is aptly entitled The Quest for Authenticity and Human Dignity and is part of the Melita Theologica Supplimentary Series. It is not just a feast of celebration, it is a feast for the intellect. Article after article, from Archbishop Charles J. Scicluna’s introduction to the end, bear witness to the research, as well as to the profound intellectual dialogue that goes on within the theological discipline in Malta and abroad. Professor Grima has friends overseas and has always been in contact with foreign theological scholars. Indeed theological studies have, necessarily, a marked “catholic and ecumenical” universalist exchange.

In this volume one finds a variety of contributions, as befits the different ranges covered by the authors. Some are historical, some belong to pure philosophical speculation, others are reflections on doctrine, some are existential. Most are combinations of all this. Thus, for example, Roger Ellul Micallef’s study on the visitations of the plague and their influence on religious practice and devotion; Simon Mercieca’s study on the cult of the Immaculate Conception of our Lady, with references to its acceptance in the Quran, the Scholastic disputations involving, among others, Bernard of Clairvaux, Aquinas and Duns Scotus, and its ‘definition’ as dogma by Pius IX; Joseph Lam Cong Quy’s comparison of the views of Augustine of Hippo and Cyril of Alexandria on Revelation, Christology and Salvation; and Raymond Mangion’s review of some aspects of our first experience of responsible government.

The collection, of course, has a good number of studies on specifically theological themes and others where difficult problems of moral theology or
ethics are analysed in dept. While Edward Farrugia examines the problems of tradition, translation and interpretation from a dogmatic viewpoint, Terrence Merrigan discusses how Newman’s theory of development has withstood the test of time, and its significance in the contemporary Church. Jimmy Bonnici writes of “renewal” as understood by John XXIII; Joe Friggieri delves into “Intention and the Explanation of Human Actions”; while Stefan Attard attempts arranging for a friendship between the contemporary entrepreneur and Moses. One of the most spiritually enlightening contributions is René Gothóni’s “Experiences and Interpretations of the Uncreated light.”

There are also very purely existential studies, such as Donia Baldacchino’s on the perceived impact of a heart attack on life; Laura Palazzani’s on “Il dolore: teorie bioetiche a confronto”; Marie Thiel’s on “Donating and Receiving an Organ”; and Günter Virt’s “Ethische Überlegungen zur palliativen Sedierung.” Within the same bioethical field there is Professor Emmanuel Agius’ authoritative and pertinent contribution entitled “Safeguarding the Unconscious Patients’ Overall Benefit: Towards a ‘Consensus-Building’ Approach.” When reading these and other contributions one moves from the medical, to the legal, to the ethical, to the pastoral approaches, realising that the approaches converge. Indeed John Anthony Berry, in his contribution on Pope Benedict XVI’s Eucharistic ecclesiology, refers to Professor George Grima’s own insistence with his students on “convergence of the contrasting lines of thought and study.”

The book contains not only a biographical note but also an elenchus bibliographicus of all the publications by Professor Grima and a list of sixty-eight dissertations supervised by him from 1979 to 2015. Both the elenchus and this list are illustrative of the wide gamut of matters that the theological discipline touches upon and enriches. The biographical note also makes mention of Professor Grima’s extra- academic life: his work in his parish and his invaluable assistance to his Archbishop and the Maltese Church in times of need.

Theology is not abstract. It influences our daily lives in many directions. The religious existential angst is still and will always be present. Social ethics are bound to the beliefs and the pietas of the Maltese people. The Faculty of Theology is not irrelevant on the cultural, intellectual, social and ethical plane. It is vital for the spiritual life of our nation, in our quest for authenticity and the dignity of man. Professor Grima’s life and works are ample proof of its relevance. The firmament in which this humble intellectual giant shone, contained and contains other stars.

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