

Scatology

My job requires me to periodically examine the undergraduate transcripts of students who apply for admission to graduate programs in my school within a university. Most of these documents are from North American institutions and are written in English, making them easy for me to read and interpret.

Sometimes, the applicant has studied in a country where English is not the medium of instruction, a situation that is typically reflected in the language of the transcript. Fortunately for me, in many cases, the original, non-English language transcript is accompanied by an English translation. I recently encountered one such situation.

The applicant had completed an undergraduate degree in a discipline of religious studies in a Latin American institution. Conveniently, the person's transcript, submitted to my university, was in English. So, I was able to both read and interpret it to determine the applicant's level of advanced standing in our program.

One characteristic of the applicant's undergraduate courses in religious studies was that some of the courses were identified not only by a broad discipline category, e.g., "Systemic Theology," but also included the specific topic or theme of the course. In one such case, the English transcript had recorded a course identified as "Systematic Theology II (Scatology)."

I have encountered some strange courses on applicants' transcripts, but this exceeds them all. Scatology is, of course, the study of feces—an interest in or preoccupation with excrement and excretion. I suppose it is possible that a student would obscenely characterize the content of a course in this way (possibly considering it to have been "BS"), but I can't imagine that it's instructor or school would so identify it.

Because my field of specialty is religious studies, I, of course, immediately concluded that "Scatology" must be a typo for "Eschatology," a common topic of Systematic Theology, especially in the faith tradition of the applicant. This understanding was confirmed by the accompanying, original language transcript, which read, "Teologia Sistemática II (Escatologia)."

However, maybe there is more going on here. Maybe the English title of the course is unintentionally inciteful. Eschatology, which derives from the Greek word for "end," is the study of end or end-time issues. It typically concerns itself with the end of the present age or world, life after death, millennium, etc. Given the wide and wild range of ideas historically and currently explored within eschatology, many of which are not only contradictory but also fantastic, outlandish, and conspiratorial, scatology may indeed be an appropriate designation for this field of "study."

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