Theological Trends

Theology after the demise of foundationalism

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'POSTMODERN' IS NOW A TERM OF questionable usefulness. It is applied so frequently and so variously across spheres of discourse and cultural production as diverse as art, architecture, music, history, sociology, literary theory, philosophy and theology that it defies precise definition. It is, however, possible to trace certain family resemblances. A postmodern stance is characteristically one that continues with the modern values of creativity and critique whilst resisting what is deemed to be an unsustainable concern for neutrality and universality. Whatever the discipline, the postmodernist challenges the assumption that there is any one privileged means of construing the world. Jean-François Lyotard refers to this as an 'incredulity towards metanarratives'.[1] In architecture the relentless linear uniformity of high modernism has given way to a preference for relaxed pastiche. In the humanities and social sciences the hegemony hitherto exerted by white, male Europeans is widely challenged by the sounding of 'other' voices and a celebration of diversity which at its most extreme threatens to unravel the quintessentially modern concern for reason and rationality.

The demise of foundationalism

A key factor in this shift to a postmodern cultural and intellectual context has been the demise within philosophy of 'foundationalist' assumptions about the nature of human knowledge.[2] Foundationalism represents the assumption that it is both necessary and possible to identify certain sure foundations for human knowledge (i.e. claims of knowledge the truth of which is absolutely certain) which underpin the rest of human knowledge by providing a firm basis upon which the ensuing edifice of human reason can be securely established. For a rationalist such as Descartes these foundations were identified with self-evident truths of reason and 'clear and distinct perceptions' of the mind, the latter in turn underpinned

by an appeal to the trustworthiness of God. On the other hand, what came to be the more dominant empiricist version of foundationalism looked to the mind's supposedly passive and hence incorrigible reception of sensory data – thus circumventing the need to appeal to the trustworthiness of God.

Standing in stark contrast to either of these positions, the work of a number of thinkers over the last one hundred and fifty years or so has collectively served to undermine foundationalist assumptions by showing the illusory quality of any hope for a pure, guaranteed access to reality and hence for any means of grounding knowledge in a context-neutral fashion. On the contrary, all human knowing is held to be variously influenced by historical location (Hegel), socio-political context and ideological commitments (Marx, Dewey), psychological factors (Freud), conceptual and theoretical frameworks (Peirce, Sellars) and shared patterns of behaviour and linguistic practice (Wittgenstein). In sum, the kind of pure appropriation of sensory data for which the empiricists sought is widely felt to be unattainable. All human experiencing and knowing is contingent upon the particular (socio-linguistic) practices and (ideologically slanted) perspectives pertaining to each knower.[3]

Theological implications

This widespread shift from foundationalist to nonfoundationalist, or what Wentzel van Huyssteen calls 'postfoundationalist' presuppositions, constitutes a significantly changed context for Christian theology.[4] The shift from the pre-modern to the modern served to set Christianity on the back foot by overturning the role that it had previously performed as the assumed norm of western thought and practice. Consequently much modern theology is characterized by the attempt to locate a point of contact with prevailing understanding with a view to justifying the tradition. This strategy finds its most imaginative and influential expression in Friedrich Schleiermacher's early *Speeches* and its most obviously foundationalist expression in the neo-Scholastic attempt to articulate strict proofs of God as a preamble to theology proper.

In turn, where the shift from the pre-modern to the modern gave rise to a cultural context which could no longer be presumed congenial to the Christian tradition, the shift from the modern to the postmodern has led to a context which can no longer be presumed to be homogeneous and which is, in contrast, marked by plurality

and fragmentation. Where the modern erosion of Christian culture impelled theologians to seek after a justification of the tradition on the basis of commonly assumed norms, the postmodern celebration of diversity and *différance* (Jacques Derrida's term) in turn erodes all such foundationalist strategies. In practical terms the central question which this poses to the churches is how they are to live out the instinct for the evangelization of culture and society in a cultural climate in which no one human story can be told, or in which no one telling of that story will be adequate for all. In search of an answer we turn now to reflect upon two starkly differing possible options (theological 'postliberalism' and 'non-realism' respectively) before focusing upon the rich possibilities afforded by a theological appropriation of the work of the American philosopher Nicholas Rescher.

Postliberalism in theology

'Postliberalism' entered the theological vocabulary in 1984 with the publication of George Lindbeck's hugely influential *The nature of doctrine: religion and theology in a postliberal age*. In it he applied the distinctive approach to Christian theology that he and his Yale colleagues, most notably Hans Frei, had been pioneering to specific questions concerning the nature and function of doctrine. Philosophically speaking, Lindbeck aligns himself with Wittgenstein's emphasis upon the particularity of language and culture and the determining role that they perform in the shaping of thought and practice in specific contexts. Complementing this, the primary theological influence on his work consists in a retrieval of the Barthian emphasis upon the need for Christian theology to be shaped throughout in accordance with the distinctive self-revelation of God in Christ. The net effect is that Lindbeck takes the postfoundationalist emphasis upon locality and contextuality as justifying a welcome return to a situation in which Christian theology can be properly shaped by the particular narratives, practices and 'grammatical rules' (i.e. doctrines) of Christian faith.

In this perspective Christian communities simply do not need to expend their energies in self-defeating attempts to justify their discourse and practice against the supposedly neutral terms of prevailing secular reason. Such neutrality serves only to mask that which is distinctive about the Christian tradition. In short, it is both philosophically legitimate and theologically right for Christian communi-

ties to start with their own discourse and practice and to proceed to interpret the world in those terms rather than vice versa.[5] Whilst Lindbeck does not rule out any attempt whatsoever to give an account of Christian faith in terms deriving from 'other' spheres of discourse and practice, he clearly relegates such attempts to a secondary level of concern, to be pursued in a purely *ad hoc*, piecemeal fashion, as and when occasion permits.[6] The primary task is to give an account of Christian faith in its own terms. The crucial question, however, is what precisely this means.

The limitations of theological postliberalism

It is undoubtedly helpful to recover a sense of the Christian tradition as having a distinctive contribution to make to the task of interpreting the world. However, the somewhat unnuanced language about the primacy of the gospel narratives and the need to 'absorb the world' into the text of Scripture can tend, rather unhelpfully, to suggest the image of the tradition as a fixed, static entity which requires mere reception and preservation rather than ever fresh articulation. Such a view has its problems. It runs counter to the more dynamic image implied by the central belief in the risen Christ as a living personal reality who continues to make an impact on genuinely new situations.

From this perspective the continuity of Christian identity consists less in strict repetition or regulative observance than it does in the dynamic coherence of personal integrity. Alternatively stated, Lindbeck's emphasis upon the need for the faithful observance of underlying grammatical rules, whilst helpful, could be held not to do justice to the creative forward-looking dimension of Christian living which goes beyond thinking the same underlying thoughts and doing the same basic things in a variety of changing contexts.[7] As a living within the Spirit's unfolding of God's truth in Christ, Christian existence involves a continually fresh discerning of thoughts and actions which are at once congruent with the patterns remembered as having marked Jesus' own life and genuinely fitted to the contingencies of contemporary reality. This combination of continuity and creativity is perhaps better captured with the image of musical improvisation within accepted forms than it is by Lindbeck's linguistic and grammatical comparisons.

Further, this dogmatic question about the character of Christian truth and tradition is laden with significant ecclesiological impli-

cations. As any one conversant with the debate about women in
ordained ministry will recognize, an unqualified emphasis upon the
need to absorb the world into the text of received tradition can all
too easily serve to reinforce the status quo, even in the case of
issues hitherto not explicitly dealt with in the tradition. In fairness it
must be acknowledged that Lindbeck is both alert to the potentially
conservative manner in which a postliberal agenda might be applied
(p 126) and sensitive to the fact that the process of reading the par-
ticularities of life in the light of the tradition will itself lead to the
tradition being given fresh voice on occasion (e.g. pp 33, 81, 84).
At one point he even writes of the need for Christians to be open to
the possibility of learning things from non-Christian religions and
culture about which 'Christianity as yet knows nothing and by
which it could be greatly enriched' (p 61). Nevertheless, this
remains very much the minor theme. Pulling somewhat in the other
direction, the dominant emphasis is upon the danger of allowing the
tradition to be accommodated to the terms of prevailing culture (see
p 133) and it is this more cautious note which generally characteri-
zes the work of those who take the label 'postliberal' to themselves.
Whilst valid in its own right, such caution can lead to a forgetful-
ness of the way in which ecclesial existence is itself always in
danger of sinking to the level of a lived lie, so that it needs constant
exposure to the various critical questions put to it.[8] At its most
extreme, it can justify an arrogance which presumes that the
Christian tradition has nothing to learn.

Related to this, the very notion that it is possible to draw a clear
distinction between ecclesial existence and Christian tradition on the
one hand and prevailing culture on the other is itself open to ques-
tion. As a glance around the congregation in any large urban parish
reveals, questions about the Church's openness to the world are
made somewhat irrelevant by the realization that the world in all its
diversity is already present within the Church. Viewed in this man-
ner, the task of re-articulating the tradition in contemporary terms
appears as an authentic (even 'internal') Christian concern rather
than an illegitimate excursion into alien terrain. Again, the diversity
of the New Testament writings itself attests to the fact that the
Christian story never exists in some pure, unalloyed form. Rather, it
subsists in the myriad different yet recognizably Christian tellings
and performances which it supports. As such the tradition is always
shaped, in part at least, by the broader social, cultural and linguistic
contexts in which it is enacted. To sum up: we can wholeheartedly

approve of the postliberal emphasis upon the need to preserve that which is distinctive about the Christian voice. Nevertheless, theology in postfoundationalist perspective also needs to recognize explicitly the internally diverse and even contested nature of Christian tradition. It must also appreciate the way in which Christian identity persists precisely through a process of continuous challenge, refreshment and renewal. Before exploring that possibility further, we pause for a moment to consider a somewhat different theological appropriation of the postmodern to the Barthian inspired postliberalism considered thus far.

Non-realism in theology

The postfoundationalism at issue in postliberalism is relatively moderate. That is to say that it allows for the articulation of universal truth claims *within* communities provided one does not expect agreement *across* communities. Others, however, might press further and seek to follow the implications of the more radical nonfoundationalism espoused by the likes of Richard Rorty. For Rorty it is not merely the aspiration for a context-neutral perspective which must be given up as unachievable in a nonfoundationalist view of things. The very notion of there being an objective reality to be engaged with must also be relinquished as an unhelpful distraction from the particularity of things.[9] Accordingly he calls for the replacement of the correspondence notion of truth – truth as an accurate depiction of things – with the much reduced notion of truth as a merely honorific title which communities bestow upon their favoured ideas and courses of action.[10] In short, for Rorty, truth equates with whatever is considered helpful.

Leaving aside for now the various problems which Rorty's position raises in its own right (e.g. who determines what is to be deemed helpful?), it will be apparent that its transposition into the theological realm is problematic. It would result in a relinquishing of the traditional claim to be dealing in true yet always inadequate knowledge about a reality which genuinely exists in its own right and not merely in the hearts and minds of human beings. More precisely, theology would be reduced to something like the kind of non-cognitive expression of ethical commitments espoused by R. B. Braithwaite, or to the kind of purely imaginative poetry of the human spirit to be found in the more recent and more vigorous non-realism of writers such as Mark C. Taylor and Don Cupitt.[11] The

readily apparent problem with any of these positions is, to draw upon Lindbeck's imagery for a moment, that the identifying 'grammar' of Christian discourse itself militates against any reworking which seeks to retain the words whilst evacuating them of the realist force which they are routinely taken as exerting. As Nicholas Lash has commented, 'there are surely less cumbersome ways of being an atheist than to use the paraphernalia of Christian language and imagery simply to express the form of our alienation'.[12]

The limitations of postliberalism, on the one hand, and the unacceptability of non-realism, on the other, show the need for an account of rationality which is alert to the situated, partial, fragile character of all human knowing and doing; which perceives the need for a constant exposure to the refreshing challenge of other perspectives; which retains the realist aspiration of human rationality and which lends itself to theological appropriation. The final part of this essay suggests that a theological dialogue with the philosophy of Nicholas Rescher points us in this direction.

Nicholas Rescher's pragmatic-idealist account of human rationality

In his three-volume *magnum opus* Rescher refers to his work in its vast interconnected entirety as *A system of pragmatic idealism*.[13] The urge for system that is alluded to here derives from his early close engagement with the thought of Leibniz. This instilled in Rescher an expansive vision of the philosophical task as an unlimited concern for the coherence of all things which, as such, can never be brought to a point of irreformable finality. In turn, the idealism of the title represents a combination of the Kantian claim that our ways of understanding the world really are *our* ways with something like the claim by Wittgenstein that there is no possibility of our attaining to a pre-conceptual, pre-linguistic understanding of reality. Tempering each of these emphases, however, is the belief that human rationality is, to some degree at least, shaped by a process of evolutionary interaction with a world that is really there. Related to this is a conviction which derives from the influence of Peirce's pragmatism to the effect that whilst our methods of enquiry cannot be foundationally rooted, their respective worth can nevertheless be assessed in terms of their practical utility – a process which for Rescher manifests the clear superiority of coherence-based approaches to truth assessment. Whilst such methods cannot guaran-

tee the attainment of truth, their adoption does at least guarantee that one is moving in the direction in which truth is best sought.

Following on that last point, whilst Rescher readily acknowledges that 'truth as accurate correspondence' refers to a state which always eludes final attainment, he equally maintains that it should be retained as an ideal to be followed. This grants a continuing serious-ness to the concern for rationality in Rescher's own move beyond foundationalism which distinguishes it from the less nuanced non-foundationalism considered above. For Rescher it is precisely the retention, rather than abandonment, of the elusive ideal of corre-spondential truth which serves to counteract any complacency con-cerning current states of knowledge and so ensure that the conversation is kept open rather than being brought to premature closure. Likewise, the tension between a serious regard for truth and reason, on the one hand, and a constant recognition of the partial, fragile, value-laden nature of human reason and the consequent need for its continual exposure to potential revision, on the other, equally serves to guard Rescher's account from the dangers of incipient sec-tarianism highlighted earlier.

Christian theology in postfoundationalist perspective

For such reasons as these the hope is raised that a theological appro-priation of Rescher's thought will support just the kind of contex-tually rooted yet dynamically expansive account of theological reason that was earlier held to be required by an authentic under-standing of Christian truth and tradition. This hope is further kindled by the recognition that Rescher's treatment of human knowing forms but part of a larger account of the complex interweaving of human rationality in its cognitive, evaluative and practical dimen-sions. In order to ring true to the present discussion, however, any such appropriation will have to be distinguished from a theologically inappropriate and philosophically incoherent attempt to establish Christian theology on the basis of Rescher's postfoundationalist account of rationality.

In other words, any conversation between Rescher and the Christian tradition must aim to give clearer voice and a more exten-sive shaping power to key emphases already intrinsic to that trad-ition.

Paramount here is the traditional emphasis upon the unknowabil-ity of God. As Rescher himself notes, it is the very reality of the

object at issue in faith (i.e. the inexhaustibly rich mystery that is God) which itself places a permanent question mark against the adequacy of any attempt to give it expression.[14] However, at the level of theological practice this recognition is all too frequently smothered by a somewhat less humble tone more at home with certainties than it is with open questions. A theologically focused application of Rescher's account of rationality to this point will help to restore something of the ethic of continual conversion and renewal by which Christian theology, like the rest of Christian living, should be distinguished.

Likewise, a theologically engaged reflection upon Rescher's vision of rationality as a dynamic interweaving of cognitive, evaluative and practical concerns will promote a heightened sense of the way in which the concern to understand God, the world and the relationship between the two is most appropriately set within the prior context of a dual concern. That is, to weigh the world in the light of Christ and to live within it in the transforming power of the Spirit. Taken in conjunction with the previous point it would promote the view of Christian tradition as a creative, prospective impulse which continues to unfold ever anew in diverse situations. Such an emphasis by no means excludes the possibility of certain parameters of thought and patterns of action becoming recognized as essential to Christian identity. Correctly understood it requires it. Nevertheless it will represent a recovery of the sense in which the promised infallibility of the Church serves to embolden Christian communities to risk discerning new answers to new questions, and not merely to root them in what they inherit.

Alternatively stated it suggests that the appropriate grounding of Christian thought and practice in what have become recognized as the distinctive patterns of Christian faith should never justify the petrifying of theology into a self-enclosed discourse assured of its full and final adequacy and immune from all challenge and criticism from without. The cosmic scope of the belief in the risen Christ's universally particular presence to all of created reality should itself impel Christian communities to adopt as expansive a vision in the theological sphere as Rescher advocates in the philosophical. This in turn holds implications for the range of contexts and people in which and by whom this process of continuously renewed reflection upon Christian identity is properly pursued. Whilst all of this reintroduces an element of risk to the practice of Christian theology, sustaining it throughout should be the memory that the central

Christian narratives themselves identify the very truth of God with the creative embrace of risk and vulnerability.

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NOTES

1 Cf Jean-François Lyotard, *The postmodern condition: a report on knowledge*, translated from the French by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Manchester, 1984), p xxiv. See also p 37.

2 The classic text is Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the mirror of nature* (Oxford, 1980).

3 See Richard Campbell, *Truth and historicity* (Oxford, 1992). See also John Thiel, *Nonfoundationalism* (Minneapolis, 1994), pp 1–37.

4 The distinction that van Huyssteen draws is between a *post*foundationalism which acknowledges the contextually rooted nature of all discourse whilst still allowing for the force of the truth-claims which various discourses nevertheless exert on their own behalf and a *non*foundationalism or *anti*foundationalism which goes beyond a mere disavowel of universal foundations to reject the very aspiration to truth as traditionally conceived. See J. Wentzel van Huyssteen, *Essays in postfoundational theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1997), pp 2–5 and *passim*.

5 See George A. Lindbeck, *The nature of doctrine: religion and theology in a postliberal age* (London, 1984), pp 117 and 118.

6 *Ibid.*, pp 129, 131 and 135. See also William Werpehowski, 'Ad hoc apologetics', *Journal of Religion* 66 (1986), pp 282–301.

7 See David F. Ford, 'System, story, performance: a proposal about the role of narrative in Christian systematic theology' in Stanley Hauerwas and L. Gregory Jones (eds), *Why narrative? Readings in narrative theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1989), pp 191–215 at p 213.

8 *Ibid.*, pp 213–214.

9 See *Consequences of pragmatism, Essays: 1972–1980* (Brighton, 1982), pp xvi.

10 See *Philosophy and the mirror of nature*, pp 10, 170, 176. See also *Consequences of pragmatism*, pp xvi-xvii, xiii.

11 See R. B. Braithwaite, *An empiricist's view of the nature of religious belief* (Cambridge, 1955). For Mark C. Taylor see his *Erring: post-modern a/theology* (Chicago, 1984) and his *Religion and postmodernism* (Chicago, 1994). In the case of Cupitt see any of his works since *Taking leave of God* (London, 1980).

12 Nicholas Lash, 'Ideology, metaphor and analogy', *Theology on the way to Emmaus* (London: SCM Press, 1986), pp 95–119 at p 117.

13 Rescher, *A system of pragmatic idealism, Volume I: Human knowledge in idealistic perspective* (Princeton, 1992); *Volume II: The validity of values* (Princeton, 1993); *Volume III: Metaphilosophical inquiries* (Princeton, 1994).

14 See 'In matters of religion' in Kelly James Clark (ed), *Philosophers who believe: the spiritual journeys of 11 leading thinkers* (Downers Grove, Illinois, 1993), pp 127–136 at p 131.