

THEOLOGICAL TRENDS

Convergences in Theology and Spirituality

AT THE END of *The soul's journey into God*, Bonaventure advises his readers:

If you wish to know how these things come about, ask grace, not instruction; desire, not understanding; the groaning of prayer, not diligent reading . . .¹

Far from preaching anti-intellectualism, Bonaventure was merely recognizing the limits of human knowledge in the face of mystical realities. He, Aquinas, and the other great scholastics knew that theology could not be divorced from experiential knowledge of God.

But by the end of the sixteenth century, the movement towards specialization which marked the end of the medieval synthesis and the beginnings of the modern era had had its impact on theology.² Even though based on the soundest theology available to them, the writings of Ignatius Loyola, John of the Cross, Teresa of Avila, Francis de Sales, are of a different genre from their thirteenth-century forebears. Ascetical and mystical theology emerged as a new discipline separate from dogmatics, morals, or later, apologetics. Though both 'the groaning of prayer' and 'diligent reading' rested on the bedrock of faith, they marked two different, and not always compatible, ways of seeking the truth of God.

With the growth of scientific inquiry, theology no longer came to hold a monopoly on questions of knowledge and truth. The Enlightenment found in science a way to attain absolute certainty, or so it thought. Such a promethean discovery was not without price. It resulted in what T. S. Eliot called a 'dissociation of sensibility', a sort of lobotomizing of western culture which effectively severed the connection between thought and feeling, between mind and heart.³

The consequences of this radical surgery have taken many forms, but of most interest to us is the way it was reflected in the split between christian thought (theology) and christian living (spirituality), a split which continues to plague us. What earlier generations knew as a single way to God was in modern times divided into two paths, that of knowledge/thought/theory, and that of love/prayer/action, the *itinerarium mentis* against the *itinerarium cordis*.⁴

Yet the traditional injunction to 'do the truth in love' surely presupposes that the doer is able to recognize truth, distinguish it from illusion, and embody it in concrete choices. Neither prayer nor praxis is mindless, any more than faith and the theology that seeks to understand it are heartless.

Contemporary theology wants to affirm that the work of the rational intellect, though necessary, is not sufficient, when faith searches for meaning and expression. Theology is an *affaire du coeur* as well, and probing that heart will bring us into the territory of spirituality.

In a recent work Andrew Louth arrives at a similar conclusion about the nature of theology, in a way that lays careful philosophical and methodological foundations for the task of integrating theology and spirituality.⁵ A scholar of patristic and medieval spirituality, Louth draws from the work of two modern philosophers, Hans-Georg Gadamer and Michael Polanyi, both of whom challenge the Enlightenment's claim that only science leads to objective truth, and both of whom stretch our concept of the dynamics of human knowing.

One of Gadamer's main concerns is that, in an attempt to imitate scientific method, the humanities (Louth includes theology) neglected the formative influence of history. For instance, I may try to approach a first-century text by seeking to enter into the mind of the author, bridging the historical distance between us. But in doing so, I forget that the very questions I bring to that text are shaped by the culture in which I stand, the tradition which I inherit and pass on. I cannot so divorce myself from my rootedness in a time, a place, a culture, and from the mindset to which that predisposes me, that I achieve a purely objective knowledge, whether of the 'other', or even of myself, any more than I can shed at will the skin of my historicity (pp 32-37).

Polanyi, in examining the structure of scientific knowing, not only underscores the impact of tradition but also uncovers what he calls the 'tacit dimension'—the intuitive, contemplative, non-problem-solving, element at the heart of all knowing—which is less a grasping of facts than a presence to mystery. Returning to the question of theology, Louth suggests (pp 64-71) that this foundational kind of knowing, common to sciences and humanities alike, is of a piece, methodologically speaking, with the sort of contemplative wonder that we associate with patristic theology (i.e. theology before the great head/heart split).

So a theology which is sensitive to recover its unity with spirituality is one which attends to 'the importance of the inarticulate'. What language does theology speak when it attempts to give expression to this inarticulate, 'tacit' dimension?

I

Theology today speaks a language long familiar to seekers of God, the language of *openness to mystery*. In large measure, this reflects the profound influence of the work of Karl Rahner, for whom God is named the 'incomprehensible mystery', from whom we arise, within whom we exist and toward whom we are drawn in the self-transcendence of our knowledge and love.

We become aware of mystery not directly at first, but by picking up its subtle traces in the lines of our own lives. This attentiveness to human

experience, a major characteristic of contemporary theology, emerges clearly in Rahner's *The practice of faith: a handbook of contemporary spirituality*.⁶

Rahner has his finger on the pulse of real men and women; he understands their pain, knows their questions, pursues the twisting road of their dreams and words and actions back to its source and forward to its goal. He does this, not with the clinical detachment of a zoologist observing the habits of some exotic species of primate, but with the compassion of one who recognizes in the faces of his brothers and sisters the same features that inhabit his own inner landscape.

Rahner theologizes from an experiential starting point, but he does not deal simply with human experience in general, in the abstract, nor yet even with the experience of *others*, 'those factors with which life confronts the concrete in his own personal and unique situation'.⁷ Even more basic is his willingness to plumb the depths of his *own* human and christian experience, to put his finger on the 'pressure points of his own spirit'.⁸ Typical is this excerpt from the close of his essay, 'Why am I a Christian today?':

Both in my life and in my thinking I keep finding myself in situations of confusion which cannot be 'cleared up'. At first even I feel that one just has to carry on, even if one doesn't know where it's all leading . . . But then I find I cannot avoid or keep silent about the question of what underlies this carrying on. What I find when I ask that question is the hope which accepts no limits as final.⁹

The progression is recognizably rahnerian: naming one's experience in order to embrace it more fully, standing back from it in order to probe its foundations. In the name of *homo quaerens*, the being whose innermost drive is to question, the voice cannot 'keep silent': what does this mean? why is it so? how did it come to be so? what does it lead to? what light does it cast on our ordinary ways of thinking and acting?

But Rahner never forgets that all our questions, especially those which take theological form, reverberate against the horizon of mystery. For him, 'theology is theology only when it becomes the acknowledgement of God's incomprehensibility; before which we can only fall dumb in adoration . . .'¹⁰ Far from pretending to have all the answers, theology should rather provide a counterpoint and a corrective to our human passion for clarity and definition.¹¹

Theology, in the vivid phrase of John Shea, is 'faith scrambling for respectability'.¹² But in its scramble it must beware of the subtle temptation to master the mystery. Theology ought never to lose sight of its primary task, to 'prevent us, the Church, from dissolving the mystery that lies at the heart of the faith—dissolving it, or missing it altogether, by failing truly to engage with it'.¹³

II

Lonerger's proposal that theology finds its foundations in reflection on *conversion* provides us with a key insight in the movement toward integration of theology and spirituality. For what is in question is not some abstract concept called 'conversion' but the flesh-and-blood reality of the person who is in the process of conversion, whether on the intellectual, moral or religious level. And that person must be pre-eminently the theologian him/herself.¹⁴

Through his work on theological method, Lonergan has transposed the focus from *what* theologians produce to *how* theologians go about their work. That 'work' of interpreting the mystery of God is inseparable from knowledge of themselves precisely as subjects undergoing conversion. Thus two cardinal principles of spirituality, knowing oneself in relation to God and giving oneself over to the discipline of transformation, emerge as prerequisites and not just as frills for one who would do theology. In the words of one commentator, Lonergan forces us 'to see the augustinian *noverim me, noverim te* as a principle not merely of spiritual growth but of theological method'.¹⁵

A recent work by Wolfhart Pannenberg approaches this conclusion from a slightly different angle.¹⁶ Behind even the most abstract and speculative theology, he says, there is an 'emotional commitment', a definite spiritual orientation. The theologian is one whose personal search for God has traversed many crossroads, who has applied his/her intellectual resources to refine the raw material of the heart, who has learned about God and about persons as they stand—irreducibly alone yet inescapably together—before God, whose speech about God, if it is not to ring hollow, arises out of the wordlessness of prayer and worship. In short, one theologizes out of one's spirituality. Thus 'the emotionally committed theologian' (and Pannenberg seems to suggest that there is really no other kind) 'enacts the correlation of doctrine and piety' (p 14). If its words are to ring true to a world hungry for meaning, theology needs to probe the data resident in the theologian's own heart-in-process-of-conversion.¹⁷

To speak intelligibly the language of conversion, theology has to ask some questions about the setting where conversion takes place and the shape it assumes.

One's commitment to conversion takes shape in concrete decisions, actions, patterns of behaviour; this is the territory of christian praxis. In former, simpler days that territory was clearly demarcated. One was to avoid sin, cultivate habits of virtue, pray faithfully, participate in the Church's sacramental life, give oneself in loving service to others. The arena in which one did this was defined and circumscribed by the category of one's 'state in life'.

In a society whose stable structure reflected the supposedly unchanging order of the cosmos, such a religious framework adequately described the

situation of Christians seeking to live out their continual conversion to the ways of God. But with the fluid social structures of today, with the possibility of daily upheavals on every level from individual to cosmic, the boundaries of christian praxis are far from fixed. Guidelines for living the christian life within one's given situation no longer suffice; as Rahner says, 'Today we have to have instructions for changing our situation itself'.¹⁸

And so the language of conversion, spoken by spirituality and theology as well, raises a major point at issue today: what kind of 'doing' is involved in the conversion-task of 'doing the truth in love'? Where is the locus of that 'doing'?

In answer, some would emphasize the specifically religious as the sphere of christian praxis—prayer, liturgy, sacraments, ascetical and devotional practices. For others, faith is expressed primarily in action on behalf of others, especially those in material or spiritual need.¹⁹ Obviously, the division, stated so baldly, is not only misleading but unfaithful to the christian reality.

Failure to understand how these two spheres interpenetrate has resulted in a 'dangerous privatization of spirituality', in the judgment of peruvian theologian Gustavo Gutierrez.²⁰ With other theologians of liberation, he criticizes the individualistic tone of much traditional spirituality, which reduced communal life to a formality, the central precept of charity to one virtue among many, and involvement in the secular world to an unfortunate distraction from the real business of saving one's soul.²¹

Underlying this approach was an anthropology which might be termed 'isolationist'. It concentrated on the individual as the object of God's transforming action, without always remembering that one's life, and the character of God's action in its depths, was necessarily enmeshed with the lives of others.

Theological anthropology, to be complete, has to take with complete and utter seriousness the whole landscape of the human. To be human is to exist with others, not accidentally but radically. The degree and intensity and quality of our relating to one another is indeed a matter of our choice, but the *fact* of our being related, on interpersonal, societal and historical levels, is not.

Theologically speaking, being related to God is of a piece with being related to neighbour, to such an extent that Rahner can maintain, 'Only one who loves his or her neighbour can know who God actually is'.²² It follows then that a spirituality which does not attend to the multi-levelled complex of relationships with the neighbour cannot be authentic in its search for the face of God. Rather, spirituality must become

far more than a science of interpreting exceptional private experiences; it must now touch every area of human experience, the

public and social, the painful, negative, even pathological byways of the mind, the moral and relational world.²³

In sum, the theologian must be committed to continual conversion and to the praxis which gives it flesh and blood. The structure of that conversion and that praxis is inescapably relational. Thus, theology and spirituality, in their attention to conversion, must be involved with the interpersonal, social and historical dimensions of conversion.

III

One who is engaged with the mystery of God, of oneself and of others, and who is committed to the journey of conversion soon comes to know the feel of inner fog, of deserts seemingly without horizons, of circling round puzzles with too many or too few pieces. The classic literature of spirituality speaks of these as 'dark night' experiences.

In a provocative essay,²⁴ Constance FitzGerald reinterprets her carmelite tradition to suggest that many people today may be undergoing such dark night experiences in conjunction with social situations of impasse, for example, the fear, despair and powerlessness engendered by the nuclear threat, or the feelings of women in the face of long-entrenched patterns of thought, speech and relationship shaped on patriarchal models.

How does theology seek to understand such dark nights of faith? How are such personal and social experiences of impasse appropriated and articulated theologically? One has to speak the language of paradox, of conflict, of the cross.

Some may protest against attending to this dark side of theology, in the name of retrieving the more positive, life-affirming, creational elements from a tradition too long preoccupied with categories of sin and redemption.²⁵ Yet one must beware of tipping the scales too far in the opposite direction. Contemporary evidence seems to corroborate both our human eagerness to evade the marks of our mortality and our need for a theology and spirituality which can help us come to terms with them.²⁶

In 1979 the Leadership Conference of Women Religious analyzed the religious experience of thousands of american sisters. Asking when and where sisters experienced God, LCWR learned:

Most religious women are conscious of God at work in moments perceived as positive and growthful but find it difficult to articulate the presence of God in suffering and defeat.²⁷

And a speaker at a recent convention of the Catholic Theological Society of America noted:

Confusion, ambiguity, and powerlessness are prevalent experiences in our cultures today. The Church and theology are not dealing with those as they should.²⁸

Though drawn from sources in the United States, these reactions might just as easily have come from any First World country.

The rhythm of Christianity moves in a constant tension between affirmation of *life*—the goodness of all that is, even as it strives to become fully what it was created to be—and affirmation of *death* as the way to life. The Christian always stands where two roads cross, where life is crossed by the shadow of death, where death is broken open by life. A religion which glories in one who is crucified as well as risen cannot, it seems, too facilely dismiss the 'draining and crucifying conflict' at the heart of its life; it cannot too readily 'countenance any joy or celebration which has not faced this conflict and endured it'.²⁹

Theology, asserts the feminist theologian Dorothee Soelle, is born out of pain. It 'originates in our need for more, in our sense of failure, in our awareness of life destroyed. Its locus is suffering . . .'.³⁰ To short-circuit this connection is to succumb to the temptation of seeking a God apart from the face of the Crucified One.³¹

On the personal level, one place of encounter with suffering (and thus one starting-point for theology) is in the unmasking of one's illusions. With each faith experience, if we are true to its inner integrity and to the tradition which sustains it, we are confronted by the demand to leave behind our illusions and self-deceptions. This, to be sure, is no easy process—learning to 'suffer', to undergo, to be done unto, to be divested of the false selves and universes we have constructed, even of the God we have turned into an idol. Such moments of disillusionment have profound theological import as well. For, as stages in 'the continual contemplative purification of the person', can they not be seen as revealing 'a progressive hermeneutic of the nature of God'?³²

On a larger, societal scale, liberation theologians also reflect on the 'dialectic of death followed by life',³³ in the experience of struggle for deliverance from sociopolitical oppression. Gutierrez speaks movingly of this 'time of martyrdom' in the latin american Church and of the spirituality of 'paschal joy' which pervades it (pp 114–121).

The theology born of the suffering of a martyr Church takes a distinctive shape as well. It must grapple with a God who allows evil seemingly to overcome good, and with the ways that God hears and is present to the poor in their pain.³⁴ Out of its experiences of suffering, solidarity, and struggle for liberation, such a theology must rethink the meaning of christian discipleship, the shape of praxis, the place of prayer.

For the martyr Church of Latin America, the core of christian identity—and christian theology as well—lies in following Jesus; we come to know and understand him only to the extent that we follow him.³⁵ Today, the call to conversion implies a turning to the poor; becoming followers of Jesus demands that we join him in 'liberating service to the poor', in whom he is mysteriously present.³⁶

In their search for an organic integration of prayer and action, liberation

theologians speak of the need for 'political sanctity', of 'passion for God in passion for the poor', of being 'contemplative while working toward liberation'.³⁷ Segundo Galilea defines the modern contemplative as

the one who has an experience of God, who is capable of meeting God in history, in politics, in our brothers or sisters, and most fully through prayer (p 53).

The victimization of the poor, who inherit the consequences of the sins of the mighty, is indeed a place of suffering which gives birth to theology. The poor suffer and die, or are put to death, for no other reason than that they are faceless, voiceless, expendable in the eyes of the powers of the world. They are in this sense innocent victims, whose suffering is linked irrevocably with that of the Innocent One.

But the scandal of the cross goes even deeper than the mystery of innocent suffering, though this paradox would be more than deep enough. The cross offers the promise of ultimate vindication for those who are perennially downtrodden, but it offers yet more. The cross is saving (and this may be the *real* scandal of Christianity) for the oppressor as well, for the guilty one, for the one who wallows in evil. Otherwise, why would the Good News begin with a call for repentance?

In their profound awareness of the burdens which the poor have been forced to bear, the theologians of liberation have built a new understanding of God and humanity upon their people's experience of victimhood. But it is not so much the innocence of the poor which bears a message of revelation to us, for we are all, rich or poor, First or Third World, one in a more universal solidarity, the solidarity of our humanness.

The poor show us the face of being human that we would rather not see. They mirror the powerlessness that is the aspect of creaturehood which we fear the most. Even in the muteness of their suffering, they speak of how some act out their rebellion against finitude by a perverted attempt to play God over others.

By retrieving the social dimension of sin and salvation, liberation theology has pricked the conscience of the individualistic West. By reflecting on the death-life mystery as it is lived out in sociopolitical and historical terms, it offers a new perspective on the dis-illusioning journey along which theology and spirituality lead us.

Conclusion

It may well be, as a recent commentary states, that the effect of the theological revolution of recent years—the shift in the *way* theology is done—is most evident in the area of spiritual literature.³⁸ But the influence is decidedly mutual, for, as this article has attempted to show, the presuppositions underlying spiritual theology—among others, that we are beings radically open to mystery, that the journey of conversion is the

pattern of the journey to God, that the cross is at the centre of the transformation process—are being rediscovered as those which also must inform *all* theological effort. This kind of ‘spiritual’ theology, or perhaps theological spirituality, seems to speak more deeply to the hearts of many today than the cut-and-dried, scholastic form of spiritual theology which analyzed the nature and means of christian perfection.

We humans have the taste of mystery on our lips and we are hungry for more. The process of tasting, hungering, losing the scent and finding it again, and finally being fed beyond all imagining, is faith’s autobiography. It is the role of theologians to ponder that story of faith and conversion as it transpires in themselves, as it has taken shape in the history of the believing community, as it is played out in the whole range of human experience.

Without being grounded in a faith that is tasted and touched, theology becomes a pretence. But without at least the movement toward reflection in search of understanding, that faith experience remains unexpressed and inexpressible. To some extent, of course, it always remains incommunicable. Rosemary Haughton likens theology to poetry:

Poetry is not ‘illustration’ of prose by adding imagery; it is rather the most accurate way in which some inkling of an incommunicable experience can be communicated, and theology is exactly that also.³⁹

The language is there, no matter how stammering or inarticulate our attempts to speak it. By once again tapping into its roots in ‘an inarticulate living of the mystery,’⁴⁰ contemporary theology is acknowledging that it speaks the same language as spirituality, a language of mystery, and conversion, and passing through death to life.

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NOTES

¹ Trans. and intro. by Ewert Cousins (New York, 1978), p 115.

² Cf Congar, Yves: *A history of theology* (New York, 1968), pp 116ff. In ‘Spiritual theology today’, *The Way* 21 (1981), pp 55–67, Eugene Meyer traces the historical roots of the split and makes some helpful distinctions between theology, spiritual theology and spirituality.

³ Louth, Andrew: *Discerning the mystery: an essay on the nature of theology* (Oxford, 1983), p 1.

⁴ The relationship of prayer to action, as two forms of expressing the love that springs from faith, has of course its own history in christian spirituality.

⁵ Louth, *op. cit.*

⁶ Ed. by Karl Lehmann and Albert Raffelt (New York, 1984).

⁷ Rahner, Karl: *Theological investigations VII*, (New York, 1971), p 57.

- ⁸ Egan, Harvey: 'Mysticism and Karl Rahner's theology', in William Kelly, SJ, ed., *Theology and discovery: essays in honour of Karl Rahner SJ* (Milwaukee, 1980), p 143.
- ⁹ Rahner, Karl: *Practice*, p 17.
- ¹⁰ Rahner, Karl: *Theological investigations XVII*, (New York, 1981), p 61.
- ¹¹ Cf Louth pp 135-36, 143-46.
- ¹² *Stories of faith* (Chicago, 1980), p 50. ¹³ Louth p 71.
- ¹⁴ Cf Lonergan, Bernard: 'Theology in its new context', pp 55-67, in the author's *A second collection*, ed. by William Ryan and Bernard Tyrrell (Philadelphia, 1974), p 67. Cf also B. Lonergan, *Method in theology* (New York, 1972).
- ¹⁵ O'Donoghue, Noel D.: 'Lonergan's notion of being in relation to his method', in Corcoran, P., ed.: *Looking at Lonergan's method* (Dublin, 1975), p 52.
- ¹⁶ *Christian spirituality* (Philadelphia, 1983).
- ¹⁷ Cf Reiser, William, SJ, 'The primacy of spiritual experience in theological reflection', in Lawrence, Fred, ed.: *Lonergan workshop IV* (Chico, CA, 1983), pp 99-113, for an excellent development of this theme. ¹⁸ Rahner, Karl: *Practice*, p 274.
- ¹⁹ Cf Lehmann and Raffelt, 'Introduction', in Rahner, *Practice*, p xiii. They also suggest that the classic compendia of spiritual theology prove inadequate because their methodological approach cannot handle this tension inherent in christian praxis today (p xiv).
- ²⁰ *We drink from our own wells: the spiritual journey of a people* (Maryknoll, NY, 1984), p 15.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, pp 14-16, where Gutierrez also finds fault with the 'elitist' character of much of the spirituality we have inherited.
- ²² Rahner, Karl: *Practice*, p 136. Cf. also his *The love of Jesus and the love of neighbour* (New York and London, 1983).
- ²³ Williams, Rowan: *Christian spirituality: a theological history from the New Testament to Luther and St John of the Cross* (Atlanta, 1979; english ed.: *The wound of knowledge*, 1979), p 2.
- ²⁴ 'Impasse and dark night', in Edwards, Tilden, ed.: *Living with apocalypse: spiritual resources for social compassion* (New York, 1984). Cf. also Burrell, David: 'Contemplation and action: personal spirituality/world reality', in Eigo, F., ed.: *Dimensions of contemporary spirituality* (Villanova, PA, 1982), pp 156ff., for a similar retrieval of the terminology of John of the Cross.
- ²⁵ Cf Matthew Fox, *Breakthrough: Meister Eckhart's creation spirituality in new translation* (Garden City, NY, 1980), and *Original blessing* (Santa Fe, NM, 1983).
- ²⁶ Throughout this section I am indebted to William Frazier MM, my colleague at Maryknoll School of Theology, for his insights on the thanatological shape of salvation.
- ²⁷ *Steps in the journey*, Report of LCWR Contemporary Theology Project, (Washington, DC, 1979), p 47.
- ²⁸ Nilson, Jon: 'Local theologies for a world Church', *CTSA Proceedings 39* (1984), p 105.
- ²⁹ Williams, p 177.
- ³⁰ *The strength of the weak: toward a christian feminist identity*, trans. by Robert and Rita Kimber (Philadelphia, 1984), p 90.
- ³¹ Cf Williams, p 10, quoting Soelle. Williams speaks of Christianity beginning and continuing in the contradictions of 'God's purpose made flesh in a dead and condemned man' (p 3).
- ³² Buckley, Michael, SJ: 'Atheism and contemplation', *Theological studies 40* (1979), pp 696-97, quoted by FitzGerald. Buckley continues: 'The self-disclosure of God is finally only possible within the experience of the contradiction of finite concepts and human expectations'. ³³ Gutierrez, p 30.
- ³⁴ Williams, p 14.
- ³⁵ Cf Galilea, Segundo: *Following Jesus* (Maryknoll, 1981); Gutierrez, pp 1, 35-53, 136.
- ³⁶ Galilea, pp 1, 14, 32. The brazilian theologian Leonardo Boff speaks of Christ as having 'a sacramental density among the poor'. 'The need for political saints', *Cross Currents 30* (1980-81), p 373. ³⁷ Boff, pp 375, 373, 370.
- ³⁸ Cf Lehmann and Raffelt, 'Introduction', in Rahner, *Practice*, p xiv.
- ³⁹ *The passionate God* (New York, 1981), p 6. ⁴⁰ Louth, p 95.