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From faith to faith: norm and context in Practical Theology

The question of norms and context is at the heart of Practical Theology. By its very nature, Practical Theology asks how Christian believing is related to our concrete existence in the world. But note, it is the believer, or at least the enquirer, who asks these questions: How does what I am told about God in Christ impinge on my day to day living? How can the Gospel be heard in today's world of oppression and violence? How do I „live responsibly as a Christian“ in my particular life situation? But once asked, if asked at all, it quickly becomes apparent that these are complex issues that are part of a continuing debate. They then become theological. It is these issues that we have to struggle with as theologians, as those whose task it is to respond to the questions posed by faith in the service of faith; for this is at the heart of whether faith is plausible at all.

All that can be done here, however, is to pick out a few themes that run through the debate and, in response, to lay down a few pointers as to how we may further explore the issues.

We have been given a glimpse of three specific contexts: from Ghana, Korea and Germany. This in itself is important for I believe that it is through listening to others' stories that the Gospel comes alive. In any case we can only speak out of our own experience; though, by speaking, we expose ourselves to the other and become part of the hermeneutic process of interpretation and understanding. I, too, have my historical reality: an Englishman, with all that means for my generation in terms of education and social existence, living and working in Wales for over twenty-five years, a stranger in a different, but related, culture. So, as we say, „I can only speak as I find.“

I. Contextual Panic

I want to start from a remark by Joon Kwan Un, as he responds to the changing situation in Korea which he detects as bringing in a new, more defensive era for the Churches. „It seems to me,“ he says, „that all these forces of social change challenge the Korean church and Korean theology to shift their theological paradigm ... to something radically new.“ This may, indeed, be right. We do have to examine how

our theological models relate to contextual reality. But ought there not also to be a warning here? Does the context dictate the theological modelling? Is it proper for the contextual tail to wag the theological dog?

Perhaps, in a world that appears to be radically uncertain and undergoing so much rapid change, where many ideological, political, economic and technological landmarks have been overturned, it is inevitable that we should scout around for new theological shibboleths by which to measure the new situation. Look at what is happening in central Europe after the collapse of the Iron Curtain; or in Britain and the USA as the hard-right, economically and morally, seems to carry all before it; or the undermining of Liberation and political theology with the eclipse of Marxist socialism.

But surely faith, and theology, are called to offer a word of hope within the surge of events. Christian believing must not be so locked into a particular cultural pattern or historical movement that the one drags the other down. The Gospel stands on its own foundations as a criterion of judgement within history. The legitimate task to explore forms of faith in the reality of the historical context is always a risky enterprise. Reinhold Niebuhr, long ago, pointed to the necessary dialectic between faith and human action.

II. Concreteness and Conflict

Yet there is a paradox here; for it appears that it is only in radical particularity that the Gospel becomes a driving force. Jürgen Henkys draws this out in his comparison between the way the aim of a youth training programme was presented in the then DDR and West Germany. The East German document specified the aim as „to enable young people to live responsibly as Christians in a socialist society“; whereas the western parallel only talked about „in our time“.

The former, in its greater particularity, immediately raised practical issues about how Christian faith and practice is possible in a society dominated by Marxist-Leninism at personal, community and citizenship levels. The use of I.Cor.8.4-6 (food offered to idols) in this context is fascinating and instructive. But there is also inevitable conflict among those who have to discover faith's path of obedience. There is no immediate and clear Christian response. There is only the need to live in and through the situation with as much integrity as possible. We live, Bonhoeffer insists, in the concrete present in and with „the incarnate, crucified and risen Lord.“ By contrast, the phrase „in our time“ is

anodyne, not forcing any decision because there is no attempt to define the nature of the times. Try inserting such a phrase as „a capitalist society“ or „Muslim society“.

Faith can only exist in and through the particularity of our historical reality. There is no other way for creatures of time and space to have faith or for being faithful. The Gospel is tied to history. It is mediated historically, proclaimed historically, lived out in a particular place. Grace is offered here and now. The particularity of faith has to be taken with utmost seriousness; only thus can we be met in our own uniqueness. This is the strength and weakness of the Gospel, that it is exposed to the vagaries of history.

III. The Hermeneutic of Midrash

What I hope is emerging is a theological method that is consonant both with the human reality and the Gospel to which it bears witness. The central Christian affirmation is a doctrine of radical incarnation. The first two points come together here: the beyond is always and only found in the midst. (Bonhoeffer) There is a point of reference outside the limitations of our existence but it is always understood and lived with from inside and as part of history.

Perhaps one way to relate to this in our present enquiry is to pick up another point made by Henkys. He suggests that alongside the social context and the Bible and tradition there is a third party to the discussion: the Church. I agree that this is an important dimension, often forgotten; but I, however, want to take this somewhat more radically than I think was intended.

The impression is sometimes given, often in the context of describing the „critical correlation“ model of Practical Theology that there are two almost distinct partners in the dialogue: the context and „the Tradition“ (including the Bible). To use hermeneutic language drawn from Gadamer, there are „two horizons“ that have to be fused— the text and the context. But Ricoeur lays stress on a further dimension. The text is indeed "fixed": in this case the Bible as the witness to the interpretive moment concerning Jesus. But the text itself also has a history. We stand „in front“ of the text. How the text has come down to us and the mode of its reception is as much part of the context as the rest of our historical situation. In other words 'church' stands for the story of Christian believing, faithful and unfaithful, that is the cradle for the Word of God. There is, therefore, no given, in the sense of an objective theological reality whether it be „what the Bible says“ or „the

teaching of the Church", with which we enter into dialogue. There is only a stream of interpretation that has many channels down the centuries and across the world.

Yet there is, within that stream, a primary witness—the Scriptures that enfold the faith act of those who claimed to have found the Messiah, the definitive disclosure and act of God: Jesus the Christ. The process of interpretation is forever dialectical for the Bible (and tradition) are given to each generation out of the faith of the previous generation and yet holds within itself that transcendent point of reference that asks the transmission of faith to be a rediscovery and reappropriation and not merely a passing of a baton or the preservation of a heritage.

This is in line with the Judeo-Christian notion of Scripture. The Bible itself arose from the interpretive history of the events of faith: Exodus, settlement, prophetic indictment, Exile, restoration; expressed in Torah, poetry, wisdom and history. Each generation recalled and reformulated the tradition. This is the Rabbinic tradition of Midrash which continues as the Scriptures live at the heart of Judaism. The same, modified by the place given to the Rabbi Jesus, is true in the Church where the Scriptures find their proper place at the heart of liturgy—the continuous retelling and interpreting of the story, in sermon, commentary, art and lived out in witness and service.

This interpretive history also relates to the eschatological tradition. There is a sense of pilgrimage, of a journey not yet completed. Each moment is, therefore, not self contained but a stage on the journey, partial and temporal, though really part of the story. The eschatological dimension of expectancy and hope suggests that the scattered and broken realities of faith can be brought together in ways as yet hidden, into a fulness not yet anticipated. As the English Puritan, John Robinson, said in bidding farewell to the Pilgrim Fathers: „There is still yet more light and truth to break forth from God's word.“

IV. Limitations

I want, here, to introduce a fourth point. Practical Theologians naturally wish to be wanted, to earn their keep by providing the Church with useful insights and methodologies. Indeed, it is our task to help the community of faith to live out its obedience more relevantly and effectively. We, therefore, find ourselves engaged in leading conferences, sitting on working parties, writing books or producing study guides. And yet it is frustrating when it seems to make very little dif-

ference. The Church goes rolling on blindly, challenges are ignored, opportunities missed. But is there not, perhaps, a little bit of the hubris of the expert, the assurance of the technologist? It is one of the sins of our age to put trust in methodology. If only we can get the system right then all will be resolved. Perhaps the theologians are slightly tainted by this.

We must not forget that the Gospel is lived by faith. There, however, is that simple yet necessary act of commitment between what we can see in hope and vision and the situation as it is. Kants' axiom remains: there is no necessary connection between an indicative and an imperative, or an imperative and action. Of course, what 'is' affects what can happen and, also, what ought to happen. But there is always, between an 'is' and an 'ought', an act of will. It does not have to happen; and it certainly does not have to happen the way I expect it to happen. Perhaps we should not look for too much 'success'. Rather the task of theology is other. It is to work, in a critical, reflective and challenging way at the hermeneutic tradition.

So the debate about method and methodological theory must be kept in proportion. Of course it is necessary to take up the issues of epistemology and methodology because it is necessary to understand what is at stake and to sort the inadequate from the adequate. But any such discussion inevitably deals with abstractions and approximations. It also clarifies issues and possibilities. What it cannot do is to provide a gateway into the Kingdom, a step that has to be taken in faith.

V. Living Theologically

What then is the task of theology? Edward Farley has argued for the recovery of 'habitus' as a theological task. The same emphasis is being placed in much contemporary ethical discussion (McIntyne, Byrne). That is, theology's aim is to open the mind and heart so that the Gospel reality begins to become part of one's core of being. Theology, as an intellectual enquiry, whether specifically within an ecclesial context or, academically in the market place of ideas, is at the service of the formation of the Christian community and faithful individuals. The Christian character only grows out of a long and continuous process of living with and working at the truth of the Gospel at every level of our existence. To echo the aim of the German youth programme: 'to be able to live responsibly as Christians' in the time and place in which God has set us. This is more than knowledge or method, but of insight and integrity. If I am asked what I think my task

as a theological teacher is, over and above the important business of providing theological knowledge, tools and skills, it is to quicken the imagination, to open up connections and to envision the possibilities of faith. It is always a joy, therefore, when students, sometimes at the end of the second year or in their postgraduate work, suddenly come alive. Doing theology becomes more than a technical process or the acquisition of knowledge. Rather it is about insights, about living in the world „*coram deo*“. Only then are they theologians.

Perhaps this is classically a peculiarly British, or even English, tradition. I want, tentatively, to suggest that, alongside the other models, each with their own understanding of the relation between context and norm, found in Practical Theology (theory-practice, liberationist, critical correlation) there can be a fourth model.

This has two parts which may or may not be found together. The British civil service has traditionally, in modern times, been based on a classical education (Latin, Greek, philosophy). The idea is that a mind highly trained in critical reflection can be turned to any problem from solving the Times crossword to running the affairs of state. English theology has the same tradition. It consists in studying the Christian classics in order to inform the Christian mind. Theology as an academic discipline is but one way to live in and explore the tradition, including testing its truth claims. The growing secularity of the university may have tended to put a wedge between the supposedly confessional and the academic, but most departments of Theology are self-staffed by those for whom the subject is as much a vocation as a purely academic interest.

The other dimension is expressed in a model for ministerial training, especially in the Church of England. The ideal is the apprenticeship, the indentured student, living and working with the master, learning a craft and a wisdom, on the job and under supervision, being socialised into a way of life. Even the seminary has been seen as a small household of those who live, work and worship together under the guidance of experienced practitioners.

With typical British (English?) pragmatic amateurism, distinctions are blurred. There is no real line between the academic and spirituality. There is little anxiety about principles and methodologies. Rather there is an interweaving of different levels of reflection. Perhaps this is the distinctive flavour of much British Practical Theology: less formal, more anecdotal, closer to writing on spirituality than in some other traditions.

Coda

Underlying these remarks, as has already been indicated, is the principle that theology should imitate faith. The reference in the title is to Rom. 1.17: „the righteousness of God is from faith to faith.“ This, first of all, suggests that faith depends on the faithfulness of God. This is found in the historical reality of Jesus (Rom.3) and in the interpretive activity of the Holy Spirit (Rom.8): so that God is his own witness yet in and through the contingencies of history. But, secondly, we live out of faith as we move into faith. Theology, as an intellectual and structured activity, is but a servant of that task. What is sought is faithfulness. That, however, is predated on the prior faithfulness of God who lives with us and for us in the history that is Jesus Christ mediated in the Spirit.

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