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Practical Theology and Ethics

In the University of Edinburgh a chair was allocated to Practical Theology in the 1930s only on condition that it was linked with Christian Ethics. Christian Ethics was seen as a 'respectable' discipline, entitled to a place in the academy on the basis of an established methodology and intellectual track record; Practical Theology was still regarded as an uncritical hotchpotch of hints and tips for ministers — at best (as students occasionally amended the heading on the departmental notice board by adding two letters) Practically Theology; at worst, the tedious presentation to students by an ageing former minister of his pattern of pastoral practice of some decades before as a model of ministry. This suspicion of Practical Theology was particularly strange in a Scottish university where the tradition has been constantly maintained, against the theoretical thrust of Oxbridge, that higher education is primarily directed to professional **practice**. This distinction between Scotland and England is captured in an intriguing difference in linguistic usage: in Oxbridge one reads 'a subject, even if it is engineering or social work; in Scotland one 'does' a subject, even if it is metaphysics or literature! It used to be said that the English believed that if a student had read Plato and Thucydides, Homer and Euripides, he was perfectly equipped to govern a colony, command an army, lead a gentlemanly life of leisure, or become a bishop — which last was regarded as the explanation why some bishops seemed to understand the state of the church on the analogy of the siege of Troy, and any innovation as a Trojan horse!

Although the link between Christian Ethics and Practical Theology with us was originally adventitious, we now feel that it was almost providential, allowing us to focus on practice, approached both analytically and normatively. The ethics with which we are concerned is Christian or theological ethics, which draws on Scripture and the Judaeo-Christian tradition, and unashamedly possesses that classical conviction that ethics is concerned with goodness and character, and with helping people to be good, with 'the embodiment, in the actions and transactions of actual social life of Christian insights.'¹ Although for decades many moral philosophers in the English speaking world

¹ A. MacIntyre. *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*. Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame Press, 1990, pp.80 & 175

under the influence of the movement of linguistic analysis devoted themselves to language games and denied that they had any concern with helping people to be good or societies to be just, **Christian Ethics** on the whole successfully resisted being sucked into this cul-de-sac, and remained an engaged normative study of action, rooted in a particular tradition, narrative and community of shared faith. With us, and in some other places as well, Practical Theology for a time simply piggybacked quite happily on this kind of Christian Ethics.

Although a linkage such as ours between Practical Theology and Christian Ethics has clear advantages, and opens a range of positive possibilities, it also presents dangers. What happens, for instance, if Ethics is detached from Systematics? Is it possible that then Systematics may lose its ethical seriousness and integrity, and become increasingly pure *theoria*? And Christian Ethics linked to Practical Theology of a certain kind might sacrifice critical theological rigour, becoming narrow, no more than ethics at the service of ministerial practice, a professional ethics for clergy. On the other hand, what happens when Christian Ethics is treated more or less as an independent discipline, with a real hegemony over other theological disciplines, as in some institutions in the States? These are issues of the relationships between the theological disciplines, and other disciplines (for the purposes of this discussion primarily moral philosophy and the human sciences), to which I now turn directly.

Academic Encyclopaedia and its Limits

The modern university and even (with appropriate qualifications) most seminaries, reflect and reinforce the increasing specialisation and fragmentation of modern life. The tidy ordering of the medieval university, with theology as the Queen of the Sciences, is unrecoverable, but we are faced today with various and conflicting endeavours to give some kind of coherence to the academic enterprise as a whole. The way the definition and relations of disciplines are arranged, the way a university is structured, express implicitly or explicitly an ideology, a world-view, an overarching interpretation. In premodern days the general effort was to locate specific studies within a biblical grand narrative;² in modern times the Bible, religion, the Christian faith, theology and ethics are to be fitted into the project of an encyclopaedia, ordering all knowledge in terms of some more or less secular principle.

² So Hans Frei and others.

Alasdair MacIntyre argues that the Ninth Edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1873 ff.) pointed towards a time when '[t]he Encyclopaedia would have displaced the Bible as the canonical book, or set of books of the culture'.³ Accordingly, the Bible (and all thinking rooted in the Bible), 'is judged by the standards of... modernity in a way which effectively prevents it from standing in judgement upon that modernity'.⁴ It is here, I think, that central problems lie: is it possible for Practical Theology and Christian Ethics to be in the university, but not domesticated or tamed by the university? How can they maintain a distinctive critical distance from the increasingly secular and confused values of the university so that they can play a specific sort of constructive role? Is a dual responsibility, to church and to the academy, any longer viable?

I come from a particular Enlightenment encyclopaedic tradition in which a theologically informed and practically orientated moral philosophy was the keystone of the academic edifice, as it were. I encountered the warm afterglow of this tradition in the teaching of the moral philosopher John Macmurray in Edinburgh in the 1950s. The same tradition was for long enshrined in the old American colleges influenced by the Scottish academy, where the President, normally a theologian or philosopher, lectured to the whole student body on moral philosophy. A theologically informed moral philosophy was assumed to give coherence to the educational process, and guidance for living life well.⁵ MacIntyre suggests that in the nineteenth century there was a mounting tendency to ascribe priority to morality and to ethics or moral philosophy, on the assumption that there was a 'social agreement, especially in practice, on the importance and the content of morality', which none the less 'coexisted with large intellectual disagreements concerning the nature of its intellectual justification', although almost everyone concurred in the belief that such justification was in principle possible.⁶ General consensus about the nature of right conduct, and a bracing degree of difference about the philosophical foundations of morality were believed to give coherence to the academic enterprise.

Elsewhere MacIntyre suggest that there is a kind of tragic inevitability in the collapse of a consensus on metaphysics gradually eroding the

³ MacIntyre. *op.cit.*, p. 19.

⁴ MacIntyre, *op.cit.*, p. 179.

⁵ On this see especially George E. Davie, *The Democratic Intellect*, Edinburgh University Press, 1961.

⁶ MacIntyre, *op.cit.*, p.26.

confidence that disputes about morality may be resolved, so that we enter a stage when we have nihilism in metaphysics co-existing with a liberal consensus on morals and politics. But this liberal consensus, MacIntyre suggests, is fragile and without roots; it is already disintegrating. Yet in the nineteenth century there was still great confidence in the encyclopaedic enterprise.

An alternative encyclopaedic project to that I have outlined was contained in Schleiermacher's *Brief Outline on the Study of Theology*.⁷ This was a sophisticated and creative application of the encyclopaedia principle to theology. Although, in a much abused phrase, Schleiermacher referred to Practical Theology as the 'crown' of theological study, the real crown or capstone of his theological encyclopaedia lay outside theology in 'science'; theology itself was not a science, but a discipline or set of disciplines which deploy the results of science for the sake of the leadership of the church. Theology is thus almost parasitic upon science. It is itself a 'positive' science, 'an assemblage of scientific elements which belong together not because they form a constituent part of the organisation of the sciences, but only in so far as they are responsible for a practical task'.⁸ Unlike theology, ethics is for Schleiermacher a science, but it has no pre-eminent role in relation to theology in general, or to Practical Theology in particular.

Schleiermacher is therefore to be distinguished from the Scottish tradition in the more exalted place he allocates to scientific *theoria*, and his consequent somewhat platonic downgrading of these disciplines which deal with practice – **Christian Ethics** and Practical Theology in particular. We have all heard the story of Barth finding a bust of Schleiermacher in the ruins of Bonn University after the war, and reverently restoring it to its plinth. I believe that, at least in relation to his encyclopaedia project, Schleiermacher is irretrievably bust. We do not today have agreed maps of the academy, and I do not believe that Practical Theologians should spend their time and energy asserting a claim to a place in a non-existent atlas. After all, if the university throws us out, we can operate quite happily in the church – only, as I shall argue, the university would be the poorer for it. I think MacIntyre

⁷ F. Schleiermacher, *Brief Outline on the Study of Theology*. Trans. Terence Tice. Richmond, John Knox Press, 1966.

⁸ Schleiermacher, *op.cit.*, p. 19; See Richard R. Osmer, 'Rhetoric, Rationality and Practical Theology, typescript, 1993, pp.4-1 and John E. Burkhart, 'Schleiermacher's Vision for Theology', in Don S. Browning, ed., *Practical Theology*. San Francisco, Harper and Row, 1983.

is right in suggesting that the encyclopaedia is a failed project, with which we should not get entangled.

Theology and Ethics Today

The position both of theology and of ethics in the academy has been much challenged in recent times. MacIntyre is surely right in suggesting that moral and theological truths became increasingly regarded as belonging in the realm of privatised and arbitrary belief: 'Questions of truth in morality and theology — as distinct from the psychological or social scientific study of morals and religion — have become matter for private allegiances, not to be accorded...formal badges of academic recognition'.⁹ Ethics has accordingly been moved to the periphery of academic life, and has increasingly nervously stressed its autonomy, from theology in particular. This has left an ominous vacuum at the heart of the academy. As a consequence academics interested in issues of public policy or social responsibility have sometimes begun to look with expectation towards theology and in particular theological ethics for help and a sense of direction. We are therefore at a time of particular opportunity for a Practical Theology and a Christian Ethics which interpenetrate and inform one another.

Although there are special difficulties today in constructing an acceptable and coherent intellectual map of the university, it is still necessary to say something about why Practical Theology and Christian Ethics continue to claim a place in the academy, and what that place might be. When I was appointed to a chair of Christian Ethics and Practical Theology some of my colleagues in the very secular university in which I then taught thought that the term 'practical theology' was a joke or an oxymoron: theology, they said, cannot be practical, and practice cannot be theological — after all, theology is now commonly used as a term for irrelevant theorising! If we are to claim that the two subjects with which we are concerned are entitled to a place in the university, and have a contribution to make to the endeavours of the university, we have to spell out something of the remit and method and contribution of the subjects. If MacIntyre and others are right in suggesting that the post-encyclopaedic university in a post-modern world is in a crisis in which it is confronted on all sides with questions it lacks the resources to answer, perhaps an ethically informed Practical Theology may be able to suggest some possible

⁹ MacIntyre, op.cit. . p.2 17.

ways forward towards a greater relevance and a better sense of being a community of shared purpose.¹⁰

A leading British social scientist concerned particularly with issues of public policy, Professor David Donnison, despairs of the capacity of the modern university to provide the wisdom that society requires. At the root this is because in a culture where most people believe that God is dead, moral judgements have become regarded as 'little more than approving or disapproving noises — expressions of personal preference or taste, much like the words we use when choosing between vanilla and strawberry ice-cream'.¹¹ Since there is no academically acceptable way of resolving conflicts about moral judgements, the commonest strategy is to side-step the issue. Academics are concerned with weighing evidence and assessing logical coherence, because morals are now regarded as arbitrary matters of taste and prejudice they are pushed to the margins and deprived of intellectual dignity:

'As for moral dispute — that has been banished from the lecture rooms altogether, for it leads people to say things like "You ought to be ashamed of yourself", and this is not the kind of things you say in a seminar. To make the distinction unmistakably clear, politicians and priests are brought into such academics from time to time to conduct moral debate; but on a one-off basis, usually at the invitation of student societies, speaking from a different kind of platform — thereby exposing to everybody the unscientific status of their pronouncements.'¹²

This, Donnison concludes, leads to a narrowing and distortion of academic life, which is in many cases condemned to irrelevance or irresponsibility.

Practical Theology

In such a situation the relation of Practical Theology to Christian Ethics assumes a fresh importance. Getting this relationship right may be significant for the academic enterprise as a whole, and helpful to a range of other disciplines.

Practical Theology exists in the academy to affirm that all theology is practical, just as biblical studies reminds theology of the centrality of scripture, and systematic theology points to doctrine as an unavoidable

¹⁰ MacIntyre, op.cit., p.271.

¹¹ David Donnison. *A Radical Agenda* London, Rivers Oram Press, 1991, p.42.

¹² Donnison, op.cit., p.44.

able element in the theological enterprise.¹³ And if theology is a practical science, in the Aristotelian or any other sense, it cannot be detached from ethics. As MacIntyre writes:

'In moral enquiry we are always concerned with the question: what type of enacted narrative would be the embodiment, in the actions and transactions of actual social life, of this particular theory? For until we have answered this question about a moral theory we do not know what the theory in fact amounts to; we do not as yet understand it adequately.'¹⁴

And a similar point was made by the English moralist and social thinker, R.H.Tawney, when he said, 'To state a principle without its application is irresponsible and unintelligible'.¹⁵ For theology to be a practical science in the classical sense first developed by Aristotle it must be a form of **phronesis**, which is 'a reasoned and true state of capacity to act with regard to human goods'.¹⁶ The person of practical wisdom is able to deliberate well on what is good for the individual, and on the good life in general.

If Practical **Theology** is wisdom or knowledge orientated towards action and accordingly inevitably pervaded with the ethical, it is important also to affirm that it is theology. But what is theology? In the excellent brochure about the University of Berne with which we were supplied, we read that there are two faculties of theology. The Old Catholic Faculty declares that 'Old Catholic Theology is concerned with the question of God'; the Protestant Faculty announces, 'Theology is concerned with religion, Christianity, and the history of the church as well as its present status.' But here lies a central problem for us all. If theological discourse is primarily about religion, it is always in danger of dissolving into study of the context, and becoming a kind of sociology or psychology of religion.

But if theology is discourse about God in the presence of God, and discourse with God, we are engaged with something *totaliter aliter*. We cannot talk about God or talk to God while setting aside, even temporarily, the ethical or normative question: What is God calling us to do? How should we respond? We are also involved simultaneously in doxology, for in the familiar saying, you can't chant the psalms unless you stand up for the Jews.

¹³ On this see especially W.Pannenberg, *Theology and the Philosophy of Science*. London, Darton, Longman and Todd, 1976, pp.231-241 & 423-440.

¹⁴ MacIntyre, *op.cit.*, p.80.

¹⁵ R.H.Tawney, *The Attack and other Papers*. London, 1953, p.178.

¹⁶ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, vi.5 - p.43 of D.Ross edition, Oxford, 1954

Karl Barth was, I think, a paradigmatic practical contextual theologian. He sought to speak of God and to listen to God's command, and to discern the signs of the times. And he addressed the context of his time in two principal ways: first, by producing tracts for the times, declarations (most notably that of Barmen), and manifestos; and, secondly, by taking fundamental theological work with a new seriousness because of his conviction that bad, untrue, sloppy theology leads to unjust, idolatrous, murderous practice, and vice versa. Like any contextual theologian of discernment he provided insights of validity far beyond his immediate context, and fairly quickly he came to see that the primary issue God was posing was what Hitler was doing to the Jews, not the freedom of the church.

Karl Barth was, I believe, right to speak of dogmatics **as** ethics, and ethics **as** dogmatics. He refused to set alongside church dogmatics an independent and separate church ethics, let alone an autonomous or freefloating ethics established on an entirely non-theological foundation. 'Dogmatics itself and as such', he affirmed, 'is ethics as well.'¹⁷ It is also true, in Barth's view, that ethics **is** dogmatics, that ethical activity and reflection inevitably imply beliefs and fundamental assumptions. Ethics and dogmatics, ethics and theology, cannot be divorced; they are inseparably bound to one another. The modern tendency to subordinate theology to ethics, or to separate them, lead to serious distortions. If Barth is right that 'Dogmatics itself is ethics; and ethics is also dogmatics'¹⁸, Christians should be suspicious of the distinction between the theoretical and the practical, especially as it has been developed in the Greek and Enlightenment traditions. For the practical theologian there should be no ugly ditch between 'is' and 'ought'. You cannot name God without recognizing God's claim on you; and you cannot do God's will without in a real way knowing God. The First Letter of John puts the point with admirable clarity and boldness: 'The one who loves is born of God and knows God'.¹⁹ We are reminded again and again in the gospels that disciples are to be 'doers' as well as 'hearers', for Christianity is far more than theory or speculation — it is a way of life. Particularly in the Johannine writings there is a stress on the **doing** of the truth, and on those who love and do the truth as being the ones who know God: 'He who does what is true comes to the light'²⁰ The truth is not regarded as something to be contemplated or examined in a detached way; it is to be encountered, lived out, re-

¹⁷ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/2, Edinburgh, T. & T. Clark, 1956, p. 783.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 793.

¹⁹ I John 4.7.

²⁰ John 3.21.

lated to, but above all **loved** if it is to be truly known. theology therefore must be concerned with the doing of the truth, with what Roger Garaudy called 'the active nature of knowledge'.²¹

This means that theologians should be very cautious about buying into a sharp cleavage between fact and value, as if there were such a thing as a naked fact, and values were merely cultural constructs. Christian theology is characteristically uncomfortable with the positing of a gulf between 'is' and 'ought' or a sharp disjunction between fact and value, as suggested famously by Max Weber. Weber promoted an ethically neutral social science based on the assumption of an unbridgeable, and tragic, ditch between the 'is' and the 'ought'. Leo Strauss, in attacking Weber, argues that a refusal to entertain the possibility of true value judgements is intellectually and morally spurious; it actually distorts reality, for it

'Would lead to the consequence that we are permitted to give a strictly factual description of the overt acts that can be observed in concentration camps and perhaps an equally factual analysis of the motivation of the actors concerned: we would not be permitted to speak of cruelty. Every reader of such a description who was not completely stupid would, of course, see that the actions described are cruel. The factual description would be a bitter satire. What claimed to be a straightforward report would be an unusually circumlocutionary report. The writer would deliberately suppress his better knowledge, or, to use Weber's favourite term, he would commit an act of intellectual dishonesty.'²²

'Facts' are not part of the givenness of things; our values and our beliefs play an indispensable role in the way we construe reality, discern the signs of the times, and respond. A central academic responsibility is to be critically aware of our values and their roots, as these things deeply shape both our logic and our empirical work, the way we see reality and the way we respond to it. Although I believe that Practical Theology today must have the social sciences as its principal dialogue partners, and I feel Milbank's cautions are exaggerated, there are real dangers if a Practical Theology buys into a Weberian understanding of social science uncritically.²³

If Alasdair MacIntyre is right that the modern university is fragmented and lacks the resources to deal with the questions which confront it, partly because it has become incapable of coherent and rigorous

²¹ Roger Garaudy, *The Alternative Future*. Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1976, p.89.

²² Leo Strauss. *Natural Right and History*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1953, p 52.

²³ John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*. Oxford, Blackwell. 1990

moral enquiry, is it possible that a Practical Theology effectively integrated with Christian Ethics might have a major contribution to offer towards a renewal of academic integrity and responsibility? It is at this point that I think Don Browning's project of a 'strategic practical theology', and his successive studies of ways in which theory-laden practices relate to norms and values are so important²⁴. He constantly sees Practical Theology as an exercise in theological ethics, and Christian Ethics as a central dimension of Practical Theology. For this approach the ugly ditch between 'is' and 'ought', fact and value, has been bridged, in however tentative a way, in order to enable reflected and effective practice. Could this be our gift to the whole academy, in its post-modern disarray and uncertainty?

An Ecclesial Discipline

Both Practical Theology and Christian Ethics are rooted in, and have responsibilities towards two communities—the academy and the church. Schleiermacher famously spoke of the relation between the 'scientific spirit' characteristic of the university, and the 'ecclesial interest' which marked off theology as concerned with leadership in the church. He was right to see the subject as having two homes, and to discern a creative tension between them and their expectations and standards. But Schleiermacher's distinction is in some ways too neat. Perhaps theology can contribute significantly to the recovery of a true scientific spirit in the university. And ecclesial interest can provide both motivation and material for scientific investigation.

It is surely significant that Barth, in a context in which theology was firmly embedded in the university, saw a necessity to speak not of simply **Christian** dogmatics, but **Church** dogmatics and **Church** ethics in order that theology might recover its integrity, fulfil its vocation, and grapple with the issues of the day. In facing a modern situation in which he feels there is a danger of Christian Ethics losing its distinctiveness and dissolving into academic ethics in general, Stanley Hauerwas has developed Barth's point by arguing that the church not only has, but is a social ethic. The primary ethical task of the church, he argues, is to be the church as a community of faith, of worship and of

²⁴ See especially Don S. Browning, *The Moral Context of Pastoral Care*. Philadelphia. Westminster, 1976; *Religious Ethics and Pastoral Care*. Philadelphia, Fortress, 1983; *A Fundamental Practical Theology*. Minneapolis, Fortress, 1991

service.²⁵ In expounding John Howard Yoder, Hauerwas suggests that 'Practical reason is not a disembodied process based on abstract principles but a process of a community in which every member has a role to play.'²⁶ Such a community of character, even in its sinfulness, is both a community of moral discourse and an exemplification of the moral orientation sustained by the biblical tradition. For Hauerwas, the only theology and the only ethics that matter are rooted in the life of the church and serve the development of Christian character and faithful practice, participating in the church's function of witnessing to the truth.

This does not mean that Hauerwas sees theology as a kind of in-house discourse, the language game of the Christian community which has no claim to truth in a more general sense. He engages in his writings with issues on the public and the academic agenda, with medical ethics, war and peace, the position of the handicapped, and many others. He comes at these questions from an unashamedly theological and Christian angle, and in so doing often brings a strange freshness to tired controversies, directing the attention to commonly forgotten dimensions and neglected resources. Hauerwas has been accused by James Gustafson and others of 'sectarian withdrawal' from engagement with the moral tensions and ambiguities of what some people call 'the real world'. The charge does not, I think, stick, although I am more sympathetic to the suggestion that Hauerwas tends towards a rather romanticised understanding of the church. His position might be strengthened if he spoke more clearly of how a sinful church in a fallen world can never the less be a sacramental sign of God's love and truth. Hauerwas is determined not to allow Christian Ethics to dissolve into a general ethics of Americanism, and his increasing concentration on the churchliness of Christian Ethics has led him more and more to address the traditional problematic of Practical Theology. Hauerwas is a further sign of the welcome erosion of the boundary between Practical Theology and Christian Ethics, both affirming the crucial significance of the church, and remembering that God's purposes and God's practice encompass the whole creation. Practical Theology and Christian Ethics are ultimately concerned with discerning God's activity in the world, and learning how to respond faithfully and well.

²⁵ S.Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom*. London, SCM, 1984. p.99. The phrase is repeated frequently in Hauerwas's writings. ²⁶

²⁶ S.Hauerwas. *Christian Existence Today*. Durham, NC, The Labyrinth Press, 1988, p.73.

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I have tried to argue three things in this paper::

1. We must erode, or at least make very porous, the boundary between Practical Theology and Christian Ethics, for the sake of the Christian and intellectual integrity of each;
2. his process would make the subject(s) more critically useful to the church;
3. his would also enable a more constructive contribution from the side of Practical Theology/Christian Ethics to the confusions of the academic world today; and
4. his could encourage a more distinctive theological contribution to public moral and policy debate.