

THEOLOGY AS PUBLIC DISCOURSE*

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1. Introduction: Clarifying our Terms

The topic which this paper seeks to address is 'theology as public discourse'. Both of these terms, 'theology' and 'public discourse', first need to be clarified. Let us begin with 'theology'.

1.1 The Notion of 'Theology'

Between 1996 and 1998, the Faculty of Theology at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, Belgium engaged in a lengthy and at times painful process of reconstituting its Theology programmes with a view to achieving two goals: first, bringing those programmes into line with Belgian government reforms of university education in general; and, second, increasing the presence, in those programmes, of so-called Religious Studies components, by which was primarily meant the study of comparative religion.

Meeting the first goal meant abandoning the centuries-old insistence on the study of philosophy as a prerequisite for the study of Theology.¹

Meeting the second goal generated a long and intense discussion on the specificity of theology with respect to Religious Studies. That discussion made it clear that theology, unlike Religious Studies, is a reflection on the phenomenon of religion from within a particular tradition of faith. That tradition shapes, to a large degree, the focus of one's reflection and research. In our case, it became clear that being a theological faculty involved an unequivocal decision to opt for a particular tradition of thought, namely, the Roman Catholic theological tradition. One might say that the Leuven Faculty of Theology "declared an interest." That declaration

* Prof. Terence Merrigan read this paper as the 1999 Aquinas Lecture.

1. The governmental reforms included the demand that all degree-programmes be immediately accessible to first-year undergraduates.

made it possible for the Faculty to shape its curriculum and to decide on particular areas of research. So, for example, in line with the Catholic tradition, the Faculty insists on philosophical formation as part and parcel of theological education. And it initiates research projects which have a distinctly Catholic flavour, for example, in sacramental theology and in Catholic social teaching.

In the case of Leuven, the process of reflection which was undertaken led to a reaffirmation of the Faculty's Catholic identity. At the same time, however, it brought about a more profound awareness that, in today's world, Catholic theology cannot avoid the challenges which are thrown up by contemporary experience. The decline in the influence of organized religion on Western society means that this experience is shaped less and less by the churches. In other words, theology is being called to come to terms with a world over which it exercises less and less influence.² Let us take as an example of this phenomenon the evolution in the Christian theology of religions.

Not so long ago, Christians of all persuasions shared the view that non-Christian religions were somehow inferior to Christianity, and that no religious figure was comparable to Jesus Christ. Today more and more people in the West incline to the view that no religion and no religious figure is by definition superior to any other. This view is certainly a reflection of the Western tendency to relativism but it is also the fruit of the actual encounter between Christians and non-Christians. The actual experience of non-Christian religious traditions and of non-Christian, but religious, men and women has led many Christians to question their presumption of superiority. This change in attitudes has had a profound effect on the Christian theology of religions. In the past, this theology was mainly concerned with explaining how non-Christians could participate in the salvation which was effected by Christ and mediated by the Church. Recently, a prominent Catholic theologian has described its task as searching for the "meaning" of the factual plurality of religions in "God's design for humankind."³ In other words, whereas the theology

2. This is also the case in Malta. See Anthony M. Abela, "Youth, Religion and Social Development in Malta," *Melita Theologica* 45 (1994) 157-167, especially 166; "The Socio-Cultural Milieu of Holiness: Maltese Values in a Euro-Mediterranean Perspective," *Melita Theologica* 46 (1995) 125-142, especially 129-133; "Shifting Values in Malta and Western Europe," *Melita Theologica* 48 (1997) 21-41, especially 23-25.
3. Jacques Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism* (Orbis; Maryknoll, NY: 1997) 10. I have discussed Dupuis' views on the theology of religions in Terrence Merrigan, "Jacques Dupuis and the Movement Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism," *Louvain Studies* 23 (1998) 338-359.

of religions once sought to account for non-Christian traditions simply in terms of their relationship to Christianity, it now (also) approaches them as religions in their own right. Here, we have a clear instance of contemporary experience helping to reshape theology's agenda and even its self-understanding.

As far as theology is concerned, then, I would suggest that it is best seen as a tradition-bound, reflection-in-faith on human experience. As tradition-bound, it operates with a distinctive conceptual framework; as a reflection-in-faith, it seeks to unlock humankind's history with the hermeneutical key provided by the Christian story; as a reflection on human experience, it is in principle open to the whole range of humanity's doings and undergoings. Now let us turn to the notion of 'public discourse'.

1.2 *The Notion of 'Public Discourse'*

David Tracy has dedicated a lengthy book to the notion of "public discourse" as it applies to theology. Tracy uses the word, "public," for "reasoned discourse" which is capable of "appealing to any intelligent, reasonable and responsible person."⁴ As Tracy somewhat recklessly puts it, the public realm is the realm "where only the lowest common denominator will count."⁵ We might express this rather more positively by saying that public discourse is 'communal' discourse. What is at stake in public discourse is what concerns the entire community.

One of the great merits of Tracy's work is his thoroughgoing reflection on the nature of the community for which theological reflection is undertaken. In fact, Tracy identifies three distinctive communities or publics which shape theological discourse. These are: (i) the academy, (ii) the church, and (iii) the wider society.⁶ The decision to focus on one or other of these publics results in the development of three theological subdisciplines. Tracy identifies these as, respectively: (i) fundamental theology, (ii) systematic theology, and (iii) practical theology. Each of

4. David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (Crossroad: New York 1981) 131. See also p. 63: "... The word 'public' here refers to the articulation of fundamental questions and answers which any attentive, intelligent, reasonable and responsible person can understand and judge in keeping with fully public criteria for argument."

5. Tracy, *Analogical Imagination*, 112.

6. Tracy, *Analogical Imagination*, 5.

these disciplines is characterized by its own mode of argument; each promotes its own work-ethic, so to speak; and each employs its own criteria when assessing claims to truth.⁷ Let us illustrate this by reflecting briefly on each discipline separately.

Fundamental theology is primarily concerned to relate religious truth-claims to the questions and concerns of contemporary men and women. These questions and concerns are perhaps best described as “existential.” They include such issues as the meaning of human existence, the limits of human knowledge, and so on. In practice, the main public which fundamental theology addresses is the academy, that is to say, those persons who are professionally engaged in reflection on such ‘ultimate’ questions, especially philosophers. Fundamental theology endeavours “to provide arguments that all reasonable persons, whether ‘religiously involved’ or not, can recognize as reasonable.”⁸ Accordingly, it recommends the honest, critical inquiry proper to the academy and does not insist on membership of a particular religious tradition as a prerequisite to its pursuit. Fundamental theology is characterized, above all, by the drive to universality and its model of truth can perhaps best be described as “metaphysical.”⁹

Systematic theology is concerned primarily with the reinterpretation of a particular religious tradition for the contemporary generation of believers. Hence, its primary public is the community of faith, i.e., the Church. Systematic theology is most interested in the coherence of its argumentation with the accepted tradition. This tradition is regarded as the privileged locus for the disclosure of religious truth.¹⁰ Hence, systematic theology generally presumes commitment to the

7. In fact, Tracy identifies five points of comparison, namely: (1) the primary reference group of each type of theology; (2) the modes of argument; (3) the ethical stance; (4) the religious stance; (5) the nature of the claim to meaning and truth. I have treated (3) and (4) together. See also Tracy’s earlier work, *Blessed Rage for Order: The New Pluralism in Theology* (University of Chicago Press; Chicago 1975; reissued, with a new Preface, 1996).
8. Tracy, *Analogical Imagination*, 57. Fundamental theology assumes “the most usual meaning of public discourse: that discourse available (*in principle*) to all persons and explicated by appeals to one’s experience, intelligence, rationality and responsibility, and formulated in arguments where claims are stated with appropriate warrants, backings and rebuttal procedures.” See the new Preface to *Blessed Rage for Order*, xiii, where Tracy describes a “genuinely public theology” as one which is “available, in principle, to all intelligent, reasonable, responsible persons.”
9. Tracy, *Analogical Imagination*, 65, 73.
10. Tracy, *Analogical Imagination*, 68: “‘Truth’ in systematics ... ordinarily functions in some form of ‘disclosure’ model implied in all good interpretation.”

tradition, though there is room within that commitment for critical reflection. This theology is characterized by its confessional character, and its model of truth can perhaps best be described as “disclosive.”¹¹

Practical theology is concerned primarily with the translation of religious faith into concrete and effective action at the social level. Moreover, it accords a certain priority to action in shaping theological reflection. Hence, practical theologies can also be described as “praxis-oriented theologies.” Practical theology addresses itself to the wider society, especially on behalf of those whose existence is threatened, either materially or spiritually. Here, too, personal commitment is usually regarded as essential. However, the object of that commitment is more likely to be a vision of “justice and the common good”¹² than a ‘notion’ of religious truth. This theology is characterized, above all, by its pragmatic orientation, and its model of truth can best be described as “praxis-determined and transformative”.

2. *The Perils of Plural Discourse*

Tracy’s analysis makes it clear that theological discourse is characterized by a genuine plurality. Depending on the public they address, theologians will argue in a distinctive fashion, appeal to distinctive authorities, and defend distinctive visions of what is true and good. Given this factual plurality, is it still meaningful to speak about theology as public discourse? Would it not be more appropriate to speak of a variety of theological discourses, depending on the public or “reference group” for which theological reflection is undertaken? At first sight, this proposal is rather attractive. But it is not without danger. Might not the factual plurality of theological discourse give way, in time, to a divisive pluralism? Might theology not develop into a house divided against itself?

11. Tracy, *Analogical Imagination*, 73.

12. This is the term used by Gerald O’Collins to describe the goal of what he calls “practical theology.” In his *Retrieving Fundamental Theology* (1993), O’Collins analyses three types or “styles” characteristic of post-Vatican II Catholic and, indeed, Christian theology. O’Collins describes these three styles on the basis of their nature (or object), their method (or style), their origins, the authorities they invoke and the locus within which they are practised. These styles are (1) North Atlantic Theology or academic theology; (2) practical theology; and (3) contemplative theology. O’Collins’ analysis is very reminiscent of Tracy. See Gerald O’Collins, *Retrieving Fundamental Theology: The Three Styles of Contemporary Theology* (Paulist; New York 1993) 10.

Reflecting on this dilemma, I am reminded of those celebrated lines from William Butler Yeats' poem, *The Second Coming*:

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
 The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
 Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
 Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
 The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
 The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
 The best lack all conviction, while the worst
 Are full of passionate intensity.

Can the centre hold once theology has been given license to develop multiple discourses? Is theology in danger of falling apart, of disintegrating into a loose federation of disciplines and sub-disciplines, staffed by *either* experts who lack conviction *or* devotees who lack talent? Of course, the answer to this question depends on one's conception of the centre. In what follows, I would like to reflect on both issues, the problem of theology's centre, and theology's future as plural discourse.

In the case of the first issue, I would somewhat paradoxically propose that the quest for the centre is best served by broadening theology's scope to include a whole range of dialogue partners. In the case of the second issue, I would propose that theology's future as plural discourse can only be guaranteed by *deepening* theology's rootedness in the life of faith. It seems to me that both movements are necessary if theology is to continue to exist as genuine public discourse.

Let us turn first to the issue of theology's centre. In the course of this particular discussion, I will speak of theology generically, that is to say, without any reference to the distinct theological disciplines. I will return to the individual disciplines when I turn to the matter of theology's future.

3. The Quest for the Centre: On Broadening the Scope of Theology

One of the briefest definitions I know, characterises a theologian as 'someone who watches their language in the presence of God'. This definition takes us to the heart of the challenge confronting the theologian. She must speak about God while remaining constantly aware that every word is probably one too many. It is indeed

difficult to engage in public discourse under such restrictions. The problem of finding a suitable language to talk about God is somewhat humorously illustrated by Anthony Burgess in a novel set partly in Malta. In *Earthly Powers*, Burgess describes how a Moslim manservant, employed by an expatriate British writer, is angered by the Maltese use of the word "Allah" for God. "Allah is not worshipped in churches," the servant insists, "only in mosques." The Maltese practice is not merely "strange," it is "bad." The writer explains that, while the Maltese word for God is evidently the same as the Moslim word, "it means the Christian version of the Almighty, not the Moslim one." The servant replies that though the situation is now "clear" to him, it still seems "somehow bad." Even though they presumably know what they are doing, he comments, it does "not seem right for [Maltese] Catholics in their churches to be calling on Allah."¹³

The step from Burgess's fictional world to the so-called 'real world' is but a small one. In recent decades, traditional Christian language about God always seems to leave someone feeling uneasy. And merely explaining how that tradition came to be does not seem to be an adequate response. So, for example, feminist theologians are troubled by the patriarchal character of the Christian tradition of discourse. Pluralist theologians, who demand greater respect for non-Christian religious traditions, are disturbed by the apparent claim to superiority involved in the classical christological confessions. The victims of colonization are suspicious of a tradition which legitimated their oppression. Minorities, ranging from the Dalits of India to the homosexual community in Europe and North America, insist that the tradition only really resonates to their concerns when it is 'subverted', so to speak, that is to say, when it is read from an entirely new perspective.

Closer to home, there are growing numbers of men and women who claim that the church's tradition is less and less relevant to their daily concerns. So, for example, Abela reports that, among the Maltese, "there has been a gradual decline in satisfaction with the Church's teaching on the moral problems and needs of the individual (from 70% in 1984 to 51% in 1995), the problems of family life (from 79% in 1984 to 61% in 1995), and the social problems facing the country (from 68% in 1991 to 39% in 1995)." While the Church's teaching on spiritual matters is appreciated, people are "increasingly critical of simplistic, dogmatic or universal solutions" to the complex problems affecting individual, family and social life.¹⁴

13. Anthony Burgess, *Earthly Powers* (Hutchinson; London 1980) 24-25.

14. Abela, "Shifting Values in Malta," 24.

It seems as if traditional Christian discourse, both ecclesiastical and theological, is often looked upon as either suspect or superfluous. It is as if the words spoken by Christians through the centuries now serve only to obscure the life-giving *Word* they were intended to disclose.

It is not easy to acknowledge this. Those of us who are at home in the traditional discourse, and who are nourished by it, are sometimes inclined to think that what is needed is better education in the language of faith. In fact, in the North American context, George Lindbeck has developed this conviction into a theological programme. Catholic theology, however, can never be satisfied with neo-Barthian insularity.¹⁵ As Vatican II's teaching on the "signs of the times" makes clear, we are called to acknowledge the claim that the world makes on us and we are called to respond.¹⁶

In the present situation, the initial response ought to be a willingness to listen to the voices of those who are uneasy with our traditional discourse. We know from experience that words sometimes fail us. We know, too, that this usually happens when we are confronted by the unexpected, especially by the grief of others. And we know that, when words fail us, we can only be of service by listening. This is obvious to people engaged in pastoral care. It may be less obvious to those of us who are professionally engaged in speaking words about God, that is to say, in being theologians or preachers.

A genuine willingness to listen to those who are uneasy with traditional discourse means being prepared to accept that our traditional ways of thinking and speaking may have helped to obscure the centre. It means being willing to admit that those who were once regarded as 'off-centre' might have something to tell us after all. And, of course, it means being prepared to acknowledge that the centre is not our exclusive preserve.

15. See George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Westminster; Philadelphia 1984). For Tracy's response to Lindbeck, see David Tracy, "Lindbeck's New Program for Theology: A Reflection," *The Thomist* 49 (1985) 467-468.
16. See the discussion of this theme and its relevance to Maltese pastoral planning in Benjamin Tonna, "Pastoral Planning in Malta," *Melita Theologica* 46 (1995) 3-17. The theme of the "signs of the times" was explicitly incorporated into the 1985 Pastoral Plan of the Maltese Church (n. 4.1). See Tonna, "Pastoral Planning," 12, 16.

S. Caruana has reflected on the challenge to theological faculties which is posed by the assertion of 'identity claims' on the part of hitherto marginalised groups, including some of those I have mentioned. "The issue of identity," he writes, "is at the same time the issue of social justice and human rights." In the face of the challenge posed by contemporary claims to identity, he insists, theological faculties must be sensitive to "monocultural statements" and to all forms of "theological monocentrism."¹⁷

Of course, this does not mean abandoning one's own identity or simply adopting the language of others. What needs to be developed is what Caruana calls "identity in openness," or an identity which is, at once, both "global and local, even personal."¹⁸

The acknowledgement that our identity is, in some sense, irreducibly 'local' can be most liberating. It frees us *from* ourselves and *for* others. In the first place, it frees us *from* the destructive obligation to make everyone else into images of ourselves. The history of the Church's missionary endeavour is disfigured by attempts to impose European models of church order, architecture, liturgy and theology on 'other' cultures. In the second place, the recognition of the local character of our own identity frees us *for* an encounter with the other as someone from whom we might learn. There is no guarantee that this will be the case. Difference, in and of itself, implies neither superiority nor even equality, at least not on the level of world views. But difference does require a response. And, it seems to me, the only appropriate Christian response is a willingness to listen and, if possible, to engage in dialogue.

David Tracy has observed that "true dialogue" can only "happen" where "the subject matter and not the subject's consciousness is allowed to take over."¹⁹ In the case of a dialogue focussed on the "centre" of Christianity, that subject matter is

17. Salvino Caruana, "The Role of Faculties of Theology in Face of Modern Identity Claims," *Melita Theologica* 48 (1997) 19-20.
18. Caruana, "The Role of Faculties of Theology," 20.
19. David Tracy, *Dialogue with the Other: The Inter-Religious Dialogue*, Louvain Theological and Pastoral Monographs, 1 (Peeters; Leuven 1990) 95.

“Scripture in tradition” (to use another of Tracy’s phrases),²⁰ that is to say, the Christian narrative as it has been told and lived out since apostolic times. This narrative, in all its ambiguity, is the “privileged other” whom all parties to the dialogue engage in conversation. Tracy insists that the encounter with this other can only be fruitful if all the dialogue partners are “willing to put everything at risk.”²¹ In the context of our present discussion, I would venture that what most needs to be put at risk is our “local identities,” that is to say, our most cherished readings of ‘Scripture in tradition’. I am not suggesting that we must simply abandon them. They are essential, because it is only by means of them that we can become aware of the “otherness” of the Christian narrative. But we must be prepared to revise them, perhaps even radically. We must not regard them as our home but rather as our point of departure, not so much as a safe haven but rather as a springboard.

The New Testament itself warrants this more relaxed attitude towards local readings of the Christian narrative. After all, the New Testament is itself a composite or perhaps more accurately, a tapestry, of responses to, and interpretations of, the Christ-event. Ultimately, of course, it is this event which constitutes the heart, the centre, of Christianity. But the only access we have to that event is through the plurality of testimonies which constitutes ‘Scripture in tradition’. Plurality, it seems, is not merely an accidental feature of Christianity; it is an *essential* feature.²²

This is not to suggest that anything goes. The Christ-event is not devoid of content. Throughout the church’s history, saints and prophets and reformers have been able to appeal to the “dangerous memory”²³ of Jesus Christ to effect astounding changes in the moral, spiritual and intellectual lives of Christians. As a Catholic Christian I am entitled to hope - and I have grounds for hoping - that

20. David Tracy, “On Reading the Scriptures Theologically,” in B.D. Marshall (ed.), *Theology and Dialogue: Essays in Conversation with George Lindbeck* (University of Notre Dame Press; Notre Dame, IN 1990) 37-38. This article largely reappears in David Tracy, *On Naming the Present: Reflections on God, Hermeneutics, and Church* (Orbis; Maryknoll, NY 1994) 120-130 under the title, “Reading the Bible: A Plurality of Readers and a Possibility of a Shared Vision.”
21. Tracy, *Dialogue with the Other*, 95.
22. For a discussion of the Christ-event as the unifying factor in Christian plurality, see David Tracy, *On Naming the Present*, 122.
23. This notion is most often associated with the work of J.B. Metz. See his “Communicating a Dangerous Memory,” in *Communicating a Dangerous Memory: Soundings in Political Theology*, F. Lawrence (ed.) (Scholars Press; Atlanta 1987) 37-54.

'Scripture in tradition' is possessed of an internal dynamic, a capacity for 'self-correction'. As a theologian, however, I am compelled to acknowledge that this dynamic has often been set in motion by those on the periphery, such as the ancient hermits, the young Francis of Assisi, the unlearned Jean Vianney, the dispossessed of the developing world, and so on.

It was said of the ancient quest for the Holy Grail that what counted was not the finding, but the seeking. I think that the same thing can be said of the quest for the centre of Christianity. The goal ought not to be the mastery of revealed truth, a goal which is, in any case, illusory. The goal ought rather to be participation in the communitarian quest for truth. To put it differently, if Christian theology is to engage in public discourse in a pluralistic church and world, it must first take its place at the communal table and throw in its lot with all the questers gathered round it.

4. The Future of Theology as Public Discourse: On Deepening the Roots of Theology

In the preceding section, I have spoken of the need for theology to dialogue with those 'others' who are uneasy with traditional Christian discourse, and to engage with them in a renewed quest for the centre of Christianity. In this section, I would like to reflect on the importance of dialogue among the three major theological disciplines themselves. It seems clear that there is a place for such dialogue.

One need not be an alarmist to observe that contemporary Catholic theology sometimes seems threatened by internal divisions and ideological fragmentation. In recent decades these divisions have been perhaps most evident between what Tracy calls systematic and practical theologies, with the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith representing the former and the theologies of liberation representing the latter. More recently, the growing controversy with regard to the theology of religions might be interpreted as a conflict between Rome's systematic approach to theology and the more experientially-oriented, fundamental theology of so-called pluralist theologians. Although Tracy insists that every genuine theologian "strives, in principle and in fact,"²⁴ to address all three publics - the academy, the church and society - experience has shown that it is difficult to be theologically trilingual. The danger confronting theologians is the danger confronting all of us when we no

24. Tracy, *Analogical Imagination*, 5.

longer employ a language we have learned, namely, that we lose the ability either to speak or to understand it. When this happens, communication breaks down, and we disperse back to Babel.

If we are to avoid Babel, we must learn to speak and to understand each other's language. And the first step towards achieving this, is the cultivation of the art of listening.

The need to develop this art is incumbent on all three of the theological disciplines. In the case of each discipline, there is a danger that their sister disciplines might be overlooked or marginalised. Both the so-called 'left' and the so-called 'right' can fall prey to this danger. Allow me to explain.

Fundamental theology, by its very nature, is attuned to the world, that is to say, to the questions and challenges which preoccupy contemporary men and women. The danger is that fundamental theology might neglect its roots in the community of faith, or content itself with abstract systematization. To put it differently, in turning towards the world, especially the academic world, fundamental theology risks turning its back on the community of faith and on the real concerns of society.

Systematic theology, by its very nature, is attuned to the Church, that is to say, to the questions and challenges which preoccupy contemporary believers. The danger is that systematic theology might limit itself to tilling familiar soil with familiar tools. To put it differently, in turning towards the church, especially those whose loyalty is never at stake, systematic theology risks turning its back on the broader community of humankind, and on the rich resources of human experience and wisdom.

Practical theology, by its very nature, is attuned to the sighs and moans of all those who are threatened, whether materially or spiritually. The danger is that practical theology might sow itself too thin, that it might lose in depth what it gains in breadth. In the case of practical theology, Tracy's "lowest common denominator" runs the risk of becoming some vague notion of the "humanum," devoid of any recognizably Christian content.²⁵ To put it differently, in turning towards society,

25. For a discussion of the difficulties with this notion, see Terrence Merrigan, "Religious Knowledge in the Pluralist Theology of Religions," *Theological Studies* 58 (1997) 698-702.

practical theology risks turning its back on both critical reflection and on spiritual depth.

To summarize, then, it seems to me that each theological discipline is threatened by isolationism. This isolationism need not be the product of malice, that is to say, of a deliberate disregard for the other disciplines. It is more likely to be the bitter fruit of each discipline's preoccupation with its own methodology and goals. Clearly, the threat of fragmentation is intensified in an academic setting, where questions of methodology are the order of the day.

The fundamental theologian, it seems, is in danger of losing sight of the essential relatedness of her discipline to the other theological specialisations. But this is no less true of the practical theologian and the systematic theologian.

The context within which one pursues theology is no guarantee that one will remain sensitive to the 'whole theological picture', so to speak. Neither the academy, nor society, nor the Church is a privileged locus for theological discourse. The danger of theological myopia is equally real in all three contexts.

It would seem, then, that theology's development into specialised disciplines and theology's location in particular contexts are more likely to hinder theological dialogue than to promote it. There is no point in lamenting this fact or in seeking to turn back the clock. Theological plurality is here to stay. If there is any hope of reasserting theology's essential unity, it will not be achieved by imposing a single methodology or a single language on theologians. It will only be achieved by the rediscovery, among theologians themselves, of theology's deepest roots, namely, those which have their origins in the life of faith.

The future of theology, as plural discourse in the service of a common cause, lies in the re-rooting of theology in the life of faith. By the life of faith, I mean that life which takes its lead from the Christian *story*, which is grounded in a distinctively Christian form of *spirituality*, and which comes to expression in a particular Christian *praxis*. The life of faith, in other words, is the life in which intellect, heart and will are oriented towards the God who was disclosed in the Christ-event and who continues to make Himself known through 'Scripture in tradition'.

The theologian who sees her most important task as the ongoing conversion of her mind, her heart and her will to the God of Jesus Christ will not be dismissive of any truth which promotes that conversion. Moreover, she will engage in an active

quest to supplement what she has learned, in her chosen field, by the insights of others who are engaged with the same mystery of faith. In other words, the theologian who is intent on the life of faith in its integrity, will not have to be persuaded that faith is, at the same time, cognitive, mystical, and practical. The theologian who is intent on the life of faith in its integrity will seek out, and attend to, the wisdom of other practitioners of her art, whether they be fundamental, systematic or practical theologians. She will engage them in dialogue, not simply to supplement her own research, but to promote the life of faith in all its complexity, both her own life of faith and that of the community to whom she is indebted.

In short, the only guarantee for interdisciplinary dialogue among theologians is a shared commitment to the God who calls us all to a comprehensive life of faith, one which impacts on our minds, our hearts and our wills. The ultimate ground of theology's unity, the foundational Word engendering and sustaining its plural discourse, is God Self. God is, so to speak, the 'leading idea' of theology. Where this idea is lost sight of, theology will inevitably degenerate into an amalgam of subdisciplines and, ultimately, give way to Religious Studies. In short, the heart of theology *qua* theology is God. God is also the heart of theology's claim to a public voice, its claim to be public discourse. By way of conclusion, I would like to dwell very briefly on this last point.

5. The Theological Necessity of Public Discourse

Nearly 150 years ago, John Henry Newman set himself the task of defending theology's right to a place in the modern university, that institution which is constituted with a view to 'universal knowledge'. In the course of his reflections, Newman observed that to posit the existence of God is to introduce among the subjects of our knowledge "a fact encompassing, closing in upon, absorbing every other fact conceivable." "If there be religious truth at all," Newman continued, "we cannot shut our eyes to it without prejudice to truth of every kind, physical, metaphysical, historical and moral; for it bears upon all truth Religious truth is not only a portion but a condition of general knowledge."²⁶

The theologian cannot but assent to Newman's claim. She cannot but be convinced that the subject matter of her discipline impinges on all knowledge and

26. John Henry Newman, *The Idea of a University* (Longmans, Green & Co., London 1921) 26, 52, 70.

on every dimension of human existence. Therefore, the theologian cannot remain silent. Her conviction, her 'compulsion' to speak, is not, in the first place, the fruit of scientific reflection or of the rigorous application of scientific methodology. These are simply means to make theological speech credible. The conviction and the compulsion must be forged elsewhere, in the depths of the soul, in the encounter - through Scripture in tradition - with the ever-greater mystery of the God of Jesus Christ. But once they have been forged, the theologian will not hesitate to seek the public forum. Tracy expresses this same insight when he writes that the defining element in the consideration of theology as public discourse is theology's "radically theocentric character."²⁷ In words reminiscent of Newman, Tracy contends that what distinguishes theologians from scholars in Religious Studies is the fact that while the latter may "legitimately confine their interests" to the "meaning" of religion, theologians must "face the questions of both meaning and truth."²⁸

For the Christian theologian, truth is ultimately and radically personal. By this I mean, of course, that it is vital to us as persons in a society of persons. But it is more than that. For the Christian, truth is a person and it has been personified, incarnated, in human history. This truth has said of himself that he is the way, the truth and the life. Reflecting on these words, in the context of a discussion which has identified three theological disciplines, I cannot help but think that each discipline is being addressed individually. Whether theological truth is understood as practical, as metaphysical, or as disclosive, it finds its focus in the incarnate Word. And once we have been touched by Him, we realize that silence is no longer an option. We will still have to watch our language in the presence of God, but we cannot avoid speaking.

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Belgium**

27. Tracy, *Analogical Imagination*, 52.

28. Tracy, *Analogical Imagination*, 20. For a discussion of the relationship between Theology and Religious Studies, see Adrian Hastings, "Pluralism: Theology and Religious Studies," chapter 3 of his book, *The Theology of a Protestant Catholic* (SCM; London 1990) 27-42.

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