

THEOLOGY FOR LIFE IN A PLURAL SOCIETY

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It is the contention of this paper that the way in which we construct the theological curriculum is no longer appropriate to the circumstances in which we find ourselves. I want to argue that the theological curriculum has been narrowed in the last one hundred and fifty years in a way which might have once suited a Christendom situation, but which in the post Christendom situation of a plural society, such as Australia, that curriculum is no longer helpful or even faithful to our Christian tradition. What is called for is an entirely different way of thinking about theology and of theological education. This contention arises out of key convictions about the character of Anglican Christianity, and an interpretation of our present historical situation. Those background considerations lead me to try and articulate how the principles of:

- being faithful,
- being useable and
- being accessible,

can be applied to theological education. In order to try and give some flesh to these principles, I shall speculate on an outline of a curriculum, in general and in even more speculative vein, develop a particular example of part of that curriculum.

A. BACKGROUND

First, I want to set in place two intersecting lines of thought by way of background. The first has to do with the nature of Anglican Christianity, its characteristics. In that context, the second refers to how we think about the lay clerical distinction which is so much part of our Church and our tradition.

Secondly, I want to set out the way in which Anglicanism in particular has responded to the challenge of modernity, given the categories which have

become so entrenched in our minds as Anglicans, from the reformation settlement in England in the sixteenth century.

1. Anglican Christianity

It is impossible to categorise adequately in a short space the character of Australian Anglicanism, but I want to note five marks of the Anglican religious impulse, which are embedded in our tradition.

- i. There is a sense in the **Providence of God** in the affairs of humanity. Anglicanism does not accept a sharp dualism between the church and society. There have occasionally been movements within Anglicanism, which have sought to separate them. Those tendencies are corrosive of genuine Christian faith. The Anglican religious impulse does not believe that God has departed this world. Because God is providentially present, it gives us confidence in engaging with the society where God has placed us as Christian people.
- ii. Anglicans focus on the **Incarnation** of the Son of God in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. That is at once an affirmation of the uniqueness of our salvation, and at the same time, a confirmation of the continuing providential presence of God in the human order. This central focus on the Incarnation, also produces the personal character of Anglican piety. J.B. Lightfoot once spoke of the faith of St Paul in an entirely Anglican way, as being not so much about doctrine, nor so much about ethics, as about a person and a life.
- iii. The church is the **whole people of God**. Distinctions of order, particularly ministerial order in our church, are not absolute. The greatest defence of Anglican polity, given at the time of the Reformation by Richard Hooker, was based on the grounds of the providential guiding of God through history and the principle of

utility. Church order is a theological matter, but it is a theological matter which has no embedded, privileged, absolute position, in ecclesiology.

- iv. The central focus, direction and goal of Christian discipleship, is our **civic vocation** amongst our fellow citizens. It is this concentration on social vocation, which gives significance to what is done in Church. Church activity is not an end in itself, but rather a means to the worshipping of God through the fulfilment of our Christian vocation in the society and in the world in which God has placed us.
- v. Anglicans believe in **authority which is dispersed** amongst the people of God. We sometimes talk about scripture reason and tradition, but we know of God in a variety of ways. We believe that scripture, because of our focus upon the Incarnation, is the ultimate source of our knowledge of God. That it is ultimate means that it is not alone. Anglicanism has never accepted the continental Lutheran idea of scripture alone.

These five points combine together to create a particular characteristic kind of Christian pedigree. It is about personal discipleship, it is about community life, it is about interactions, it is about bearing witness to that Christian faith and the presence of God in the world.

It is not surprising when you summarise it that way, that the Doctrine of the **Trinity**, as set out in the Thirty-nine Articles, is really the foundation to the experience of the Anglican faith. For the Doctrine of the Trinity speaks about:

- ◆ eternal creativity
- ◆ providential presence
- ◆ interacting community life.

This religious impulse was brought to Australia in the eighteenth century. It came in the form of the Royal Supremacy as an aspect of the established Church in England. The Royal Supremacy was the political form of the English Reformation settlement. It meant that the crown was supreme in a unified society which had two aspects, temporal and spiritual. The State was confessionally Christian and Anglican and the monarch was the supreme governor of the church, as well as being a Christian lay member of the church.

For one hundred and fifty years the Royal Supremacy has been dead in Australia. Sometimes, we think that we are still the established Church. Sometimes we find it easier to be imperial about our place in society, rather than being a participator in a plural society. Yet participation ought to come naturally to people nurtured in the kind of faith which I have just outlined.

In Anglican Christianity at the time of the Reformation, we maintained within the Church the three orders of ministry, bishops, priests and deacons. In this respect we were different from the Calvinist and Lutheran Reformations on the Continent. Such a distinction between clerical and lay in the Church goes back to the early church. During the course of the first three centuries, two important institutions emerged, largely in response to the institutional requirements caused by the passing of time. Those institutions were the structured ministry, focused primarily on the bishop and also developing in terms of priests and deacons in subsequent centuries, and the establishment of a canon of scripture.

The early emergence of these two institutions is shrouded in some mystery. But they represent early attempts to maintain a connection between two things. On the one hand with the origins of the faith in the life, deeds, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth and the teaching of the Apostles, and on the other hand the continuing experienced life of faith in the Church. In large measure that purpose

was achieved by the two institutions of an ordered ministry and a canon of scripture.

The purpose of maintaining that faith however, was in order that the Church might live faithfully in the society in which God had placed it. The two institutions were not ends in themselves, even though at different times in the history of Christianity some have thought them to be so. The real point was that the Church might be faithful and that Christian people might fulfil their God given vocations to live in the society in which they have been placed or, as they often said, called. John Paul II in his 1988 encyclical, *Christifideles Laici*, drew attention to the rediscovery of this truth by the second Vatican Council.

In giving a response to the question who are the lay faithful, the Council went beyond previous interpretations which were predominantly negative. Instead it opened itself to a decidedly positive vision and displayed a basic intention of asserting the full belonging of the lay faithful to the Church and to its mystery. At the same time it insisted on the unique character of their vocation, which is in a special way to "seek the Kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and ordering them according to the plan of God." ..."Vocation of the lay faithful to holiness implies that life according to the Spirit expresses itself in a particular way in their involvement in temporal affairs and in their participation in earthly activities."

Anglican Christianity historically, has had certain core characteristics to it. And has had a strong, but not absolute commitment to the institutions of ordered ministry and the canon of scripture. In the Constitution of the Anglican Church of Australia, the canon of scripture is given ultimate significance and therefore takes priority as a source for our knowledge of God. What I wish to draw from this however is that Anglican Christianity is both open textured in its religious impulse and seeks to focus the presence of God and the worship of God by his people in the fulfilment of their vocation in society.

2. Our historical situation.

The society in which that Christian vocation was fulfilled has been variously described in Anglican history. In the Saxon Church, it was construed in a particular way which related to the social structure of their society. Augustine under the influence of Pope Gregory re-ordered Anglican Christianity in a more Roman direction. What he did was conceptually an intrusion into the religious impulse. At the time of the Reformation the social context in which Anglicans pursued their faith, was defined by the theory of the Royal Supremacy. The theological rationale by which Anglicans came to accept that theory was based upon a belief in the Providence of God - God has led his people to this point - in combination with the principle of utility if what we have been led to does not do harm, then we should retain it.

An important consequence for theology however followed from this social definition. Theology now was constructed on what we have come to call a Christendom principle. That is to say, theology was conceived of in terms of the way in which Christianity was expressed in this Christian society and its social structures. The social structures of that society were conceived under the banner of the Anglican Christian profession of that society. The reasons, for example, why magistrates should do certain kinds of things and not others, flowed deductively from the religious profession of the State. Theology was in this sense a theology for Christian society.

During the course of the nineteenth century, that Christian society in its single confessional character disintegrated. It disintegrated earlier in Australia than it did in England. The result is that in Australia we live not in a Christianly professing society, but in a plural society. The theology therefore which was appropriate in the framework of the Royal Supremacy, simply is not just irrelevant, but is inappropriate and contradictory to the character of Christian living in a plural society.

Society's institutional responses to the coming of modernity, are overlaid, by the scientific, technological mentality, which accompanied that plurality. Thus public culture is thought of in those scientific, supposedly objective terms. Institutions are thought of not so much as value based relationships, but value neutral organisations. Professions emerge because knowledge can be divided up into discrete areas and can become the property of discrete groups of people. Indeed, Harold Perkins has described this whole transition as the rise of the professional society.

In theology there has been erratic reaction to this transition. Some have sought to stay in the public domain, and have found it extremely difficult to maintain what looks recognisably like the traditional marks of Christian faith retained from the period of the Royal Supremacy. There have been fads about the death of God and religionless Christianity. By and large in Anglicanism however, we have retained the Christendom mentality and theology has been concentrated within the life of the Church. Christendom is maintained as the private club of the ecclesia, or indeed the ecclesiastical community.

That trend has corresponded with a shift in the way in which theology is maintained as an intellectual discipline. Previously in the European tradition, it had been part of the University, and clergy had received basically the same kind of education as lay people did. However as the nineteenth century moved on, theology became more and more the area of knowledge which was the professional property of the clergy, and it became clericalised. As the clergy's profession became more and more directed towards the discrete and withdrawn community of the Church, so the theology which they learned, similarly was attenuated and narrowed in that direction. Theology retreated into the private domain, just as in the Church we have in general terms, retreated into the private domain. We have been a club or interest group, in the plural society, and we have a tradition of

mental attitudes and mental disciplines, which are about the club's activities and its ideology.

In the Australian environment, the detachment of theology from the intellectual discipline of the universities, has only magnified and accelerated that process.

So powerful has been that change that it is almost impossible for us even to begin to think what it might be like to have a public theology in a plural society. Yet, in the broader history of Christianity, that is the kind of theology which has been more characteristic. It is particularly the kind of theology which we find in the early church, especially in the first four centuries. That is the period to which historically in Anglicanism we have been particularly committed.

We are faced, therefore, with an interesting situation. On the one hand we are heirs, as Anglicans, of a particular kind of religious impulse, which has a clear direction towards the practice of the faith in the public domain. Yet on the other hand, because of the historical institutional pedigree of which we are also the heirs, we find ourselves in a Church where theology has been narrowed and clericalised within the club, outside of, and aside from, the public domain.

The challenge before us, is to develop a different kind of theology for life in the plural society.

B. PRINCIPLES: FAITHFUL, USEFUL AND ACCESSIBLE

I believe that it is an implication of the character of Anglican Christianity, in its broad historical sense, that any kind of theology for the people of God, must be

- accessible
- useable
- and faithful.

It must be **faithful** in the sense that it speaks truthfully of the tradition of our faith of ever belonging to Christ. Our own Anglican religious tradition, speaks to this point yet remains open. We speak in the Constitution of the Anglican Church of Australia, of Scripture as the ultimate source or authority for our knowledge of God. Historically in Anglicanism, we have spoken about three sources for our knowledge of God; Scripture, reason and tradition. We are committed centrally in our Articles and in our formularies to a Doctrine of the Trinity. The greatest creation of Christian intellectual endeavour, according to Karl Barth. In other words our tradition speaks of faithfulness, but also speaks of openness of life and dynamism, of community and interaction.

Secondly such theology needs also to be **useable**. Theology of course, as an intellectual discipline, needs to be maintained in order to feed the mind of the Church. Christian thinking is no different from intellectual activity of the kind which we see in the Universities in this respect. But it is different in that theology is always something which has to be brought into conjunction with the circumstances of Christian people in the society where they are to fulfil and pursue their vocations.

Christians in modern Australia live their lives in institutions. The institutions of work, such as the business corporation, the Trade Union, the professional group, the market place. The institutions of leisure such as Clubs. The institutions of the family, of nurture and education, the family, the school and the university. H.C. Coombs, in his Boyer Lectures, said that we live our lives entirely in institutions. We are an institution creating species. Institutions are patterns of relationships between people and things through time. They provide the continuities of life and they provide the basis for our expectations of other people, whom we may not necessarily personally know.

At the same time there are the public rhetorics of our society; those ideas and concepts, which express themselves in movements which influence how we approach our institutional life and our personal relationships. It was the conquest of such public rhetoric, which Averil Cameron has said, was the key to the triumph of Christianity in the Roman world.

Theology needs to be useable for Christians who live their lives in this kind of plural society. It therefore needs to be brought into relationship with a theological critique or account of that society.

Such a theology needs also to be **accessible**. We have often encouraged lay people to do theological college courses by correspondence, or, as if they were going to night school, by Extension. Leaving aside the content of those courses, that principle is sound. But Christian people in modern Australia live particularly time tabled lives. They have a wide range of commitments. Also they have the means of obtaining information, understanding and concepts, from a variety of technological sources. All of these means ought to be at the disposal of any theological programme.

Theology needs to be accessible.

C. AN OUTLINE CURRICULUM.

Given these kinds of principles in this kind of situation, what kind of curriculum might one imagine. I want to suggest to you, that the greater difficulty, is the conceptual difficulty of imagining a curriculum. The difficulty is manifest, when one looks at the absence of variety in the theological curricula, available for lay people, which is supposedly lay theology. There is not a lay theology programme, whose theological content is not defined or based in some way upon a clerical theological curriculum.

I want to suggest that the theology, which is going to be useable in a plural society, needs to be shaped and defined in its outline, by the realities of that society. That a theology which is going to be useable in that way, needs to be

kept faithful, not by being brought constantly into the form and shape of the theological curriculum, which we have inherited from Christendom, but by relating the truth, found in that curriculum to the realities of the society in which we are located.

I therefore suggest, that there ought to be certain kinds of discipline areas drawn from an analysis of our plural society. I suggest further, that our method should reflect the actual challenges faced by Christians in that society; and in so doing it will reflect the nature of the truth which is embodied in Christian faith.

Let me now speculate a possible curriculum outline.

1. Discipline areas.

Any curriculum needs to be divided up in terms of discipline areas. The way in which we are going to think our way through the material. The discipline areas in this curriculum, I suggest, ought to be defined by the institutions of our society. Those institutions could include:

The business corporation, institutions for employment at work, the Trade Unions, the professions. Institutions of the family. The State. The Institutions of the School and University. The media. The institutions associated with our entertainment, with sport. The institution of the market.

This, of course, is not a complete list, nor indeed is it suggested as a final list for any curriculum. But these are the kinds of things which ought to be the headings in a curriculum.

The curriculum ought also to contain a consideration of the public rhetorics of our day.

- The rhetoric of the market place, the notion that all things are susceptible of quantitative measurement and that life

can be defined in transactional terms of the delivery and acceptance of goods and services. That market mentality now infects all aspects of our society. It does not sit comfortably with many aspects of life and when it is applied to them, it distorts them.

- The rhetoric of measurement, akin to that of the market. This rhetoric is part of the notion that things can be all brought down into quantitative equations and measured.
- Feminism and its rhetoric.
- Environmentalism and its rhetoric.
- Individualism and the claim that I have the right to be myself, no matter what.

These are public rhetorics in our society. They are the powerful metaphors which give meaning to our discourse about life. They need to be part of the curriculum.

In terms of method, how the subject is addressed. There are in my opinion three important things which need to be achieved.

- ◆ **Firstly**, the curriculum should cultivate our public Christian discourse. It should address the ideas we are confronted with and Christian thought about them.
- ◆ **Secondly**, the curriculum ought to be cultivating the life of the Christian person. Here the Church as a community of interpretation, has a strategic importance. The Christian community as the provider of mentors, is something which we have only just begun to think about. Those things are important, because what we are talking about here, is the

cultivation, not only of the discourse, but of the life, of the Christian person in this plural society.

- ◆ **Thirdly**, the method ought to be about communicating the ideas. In many ways this is the cognitive end of the curriculum. It is susceptible of treatment by distance education through electronic media and literature, indeed whatever means we have available to us.

These three methods need to be brought into creative interaction with each other. None on its own is adequate.

In general terms therefore, I want to suggest that the curriculum ought to be defined in terms of the institutions and the rhetoric of our plural society and that the method ought to be diverse and interactive in such a way, that it cultivates the Christian discourse in the public arena, and the life of the Christian person and community.

2. A particular example.

Having offered that speculative general picture, let me try and illustrate what I mean with an even more speculative imagination into how one might handle the institution of the business corporation.

I would be inclined to take this in two stages.

- ◆ **First** of all the heritage of the idea of a corporation in pre modern times.
- ◆ **Secondly** the emergence of the business corporation as a particular kind of corporation in the modern period.

In each case I would want to look at the concepts which are associated with the characteristics of the corporation and then the theological

antecedents to those concepts, and how the Christian theological tradition relates to them. So, it could run something like this:

(a) **The heritage of the corporations, pre-modern.**

The Corporation indicates a body of people, some corporate entity, which is also at the same time a continuing group. So the Church is thought of as a body in the New Testament. There is Roman background to that notion; the body being thought of as the Roman State or the Roman Imperium. There is also a Jewish background which has been explored in Old Testament studies.

Coming into a more modern period, in the fourteenth century the Conciliar movement developed a notion of the Church in these body or corporate terms. The Church was not a strict hierarchy in a feudal sense, but rather there were interacting areas of internal life in the corporation, in the community. The internal life of the religious orders was part of this debate and it was connected as well to the external mission. This Conciliar movement and its notion of the corporation were subjected in western culture by the concept of the holy Roman Empire as a body politic with the Pope as supreme. It was this set of political conceptions which defined the character of the Royal Supremacy in England at the time of the Reformation.

There are certain key concepts that are associated with this notion of the corporation. Solidarity between individuals, external mission, particularly relevant in the case of the religious orders, and the internal division of power within the corporation. In the Conciliar movement, the idea is very different from the model in the Roman Empire, or the model that came to be accepted in the Holy Roman Empire with the supremacy of the Pope and the way in which that was transferred into the Royal Supremacy at the English Reformation.

The theological issues that are involved in these concepts are clearly those that have to do with our theological understanding of humanity as created, and created as sociable beings. The theological issues of the purpose of human life, of the nature of power and authority under God. So this early pre-modern discussion of the corporation, would lead us into a discussion of what we used to call the Doctrine of Creation, and Power and Authority under God.

- (b) The second phase would concern the **emergence of the business corporation in the modern period**. This begins with the emergence of partnerships. Still in the conceptual framework of the Royal Supremacy was the notion of corporations by Royal Charter. These partnerships and such chartered corporations had unlimited liability for those who were participating in them. Corporations developed for a single purpose, such as the building of a wharf or a bridge or the establishment of a colony in North America, into things which might have multiple purposes. As that happened, such corporations envisaged an existence extending over a longer period of time, and thus of changing stock holders.

The South Sea Bubble case in the eighteenth century, led to much social disfavour for the idea of corporations with multi-stock holders. However the Industrial Revolution created demands, which inevitably meant that resources had to be found to build more bridges, make more roads, build more railways. Thus in the United Kingdom and in the United States of America, a social contract was struck in the middle of the nineteenth century that gave stock holders of corporations limited liability. That limited liability social contract is being revisited in the light of modern developments and Directors of Companies are now subject to greater sanctions than was previously thought to be possible. The development of multi-national enterprises, with corporate structures add a global dimension to the power and reach of the business corporation.

What we have is an institution that has shown itself to be immensely creative, immensely powerful and flexible, and which provides the working environment for most people in our society.

The concepts that are associated with the activities of this kind of business corporation are:

- ◆ trust, in terms of commercial transactions with others;
- ◆ the position of the nation state as sovereign collective in relation to the territory in which the corporation operates;
- ◆ the social goods, which the corporation serves, by the contract struck in regard to limited liability
- ◆ the materialism which the powerful success of corporations tends to engender in our society.

- ◆ Honesty, power and authority in a strictly hierarchical organisation and their evaluation of wealth creation as a motivation force.

The theological antecedents of these concepts are related to the Doctrine of God, to God's truthfulness, his trustworthiness, his authority. That God is Creator and that people will be judged in the last time for their sins and offences. So it speaks of our theological understanding of the human condition, of sin in human relationships, of greed and materialism, of our understanding of the Fall, of sin both social and individual, and the place of grace and forgiveness in such social relationships. It also raises the subject of ecclesiology and the role of the Church in the scheme of salvation. How the church nurtures forgiveness and the new humanity.

So in a discussion of the modern business corporation, I would be looking for an extension of the discussion about what used to be called the Doctrine of God, and of the Church. Because of the social

character of the corporation, the Doctrine of God, as Trinity would inevitably come up in this discussion.

What I am suggesting here, is a totally different way of construing theology and theological discourse so that it arises out of the social realities in which we have to live our lives.

D. CONCLUSION

By way of conclusion let me try and draw out the argument that I am trying to present, by contrasting my proposal with what I take to be the present, but what I prefer to regard as the previous position in regard to the theological curriculum. I make that contrast in the light of the principle that theology must necessarily be a theology of how we live or at least should nurture how we live our Christian lives. It always is in a sense, in the terms of the old categories, “applied”. This is a principle which I believe to be quite fundamental to the character of our Anglican religious pedigree.

In the previous model we have what one might call a body of Christian truth. Characteristically the theological curriculum is defined in terms of that body of Christian truth and is usually divided into two sections. First came the Doctrine of Revelation and of God, Christology and salvation. In the second half of the curriculum was the Doctrine of Church, Ministry and Sacraments, with eschatology tacked on the end. This discrete body of Christian truth then had to be applied to life and the situations in which a Christian is called to be faithful. “Applied” is the key term here. It was not a necessary part of the doctrine curriculum.

But the difficulty is that this body of truth has suffered two radical dissociations from life. In the first place it has been clericalised, so that its point of reference has become what goes on in church. Secondly it has been conceptually privatised. In other words modernity has caused a radical and profound divide between the private and the public, and theology has opted to stay in the private. Theology therefore has structured itself on the

ecclesiastical side of the divide of modernity and that side has been seen to be the arena of the private.

As a consequence, the life principle in theology is defeated in practice by modernity, and also by the response that has been made by theology itself to modernity.

The other model sees theology as part of the way in which we live in plural modernity. It is public, by the way in which it is constructed and it demands the emergence of a living theology out of the tradition of the faith in that public domain. This model implies a monumental conceptual challenge for theology as it is customarily practised today. It calls also for a fundamental critique of the society in which we live in its public life. But this is no more in fact than the challenge of fulfilling a faithful Christian civic vocation, which lay people have to confront every day of their lives.

If the key principle of theology as necessarily about life and living is correct, the previous model is in my judgement, hopelessly compromised by modernity and by its own recent trained incompetence. In that it fails this critical test, it can be regarded as being not just inadequate, but also in a certain sense dangerously heretical.

Lest you think that this different and socially integrated way of approaching theology, is entirely novel, I invite you to think of some of the great theological works in Christian history. In the second century Irenaeus wrote, "Adversus Haeresis" . This is a great work of theology against the gnostic heretics. Throughout the book he deploys faithfully the Christian tradition and develops an understanding of God in terms which became normative for the emergence of the development of the Doctrine of the Trinity. However, the book itself in its structure and organisation is arranged precisely according to the gnostic ideas which he was attacking. In other words, his Christian theology was developed in precise relationship to those with whom he was discussing the truth of the gospel.

Augustine's "City of God" is a prime example. It is indisputably one of the great works of Christian theology. It is exactly the kind of inductive applied, integrated, theological analysis which I sought to suggest in relation to the business corporation. Augustine's subject of course was the Roman Empire.

Anselm's marvellous book "Cur Deus Homo", is not an abstract elucidation of the Doctrine of the Incarnation drawn from the internal dynamics of the Christian theological tradition. It is a missionary tract, seeking to deploy the Christian understanding of the Incarnation in the terms of and within the framework of a Muslim understanding of the world. Anselm's essay is a missionary tract to the Mohammedan invaders of western Europe.

Richard Hooker wrote on ecclesiastical polity. It was really about the nature of Christian life within the framework of Elizabethan politics. Apart from the groundwork provided in the introduction, the book is entirely taken up with an analysis of the Elizabethan political settlement, and seeks to deploy the theological tradition in strict relationship to that political settlement.

Even John Calvin structured his "Institutes of the Christian Religion" not according to the Doctrine of God and Incarnation, Redemption and ecclesiology. On the contrary his whole enterprise is defined around the question of how we are to live the Christian life. There is no section in the Institutes given over to any of the topics which appear in our currently traditional theological curriculum.

What I am calling for therefore is not unprecedented. On the contrary I suggest to you that it is a plea for genuine historic Christian orthodoxy. Orthodoxy in the way we handle the theological curriculum. We should enterprise this challenge in order that our Christian thinking and our theology should be not only accessible, but also useable and faithful, particularly for lay Christian people whose primary vocation is located in the civic structures of a plural society.

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