Landas 28:1 (2014) 1–12

WHAT ARE WE DOING WHEN WE DO THEOLOGY?

Michael Paul Gallagher, S.J.

It may be useful to begin with a number of distinctions. If we can see what theology is not, we are in a better position to see its identity or what it is called to do. To begin with, theology is not a neutral discipline because, unlike "religious studies," it is grounded in a commitment of faith. Similarly, it is not an individual project only but takes place within an ecclesial community of believers, and hence it is rooted in a rich tradition of reflection. But to insist on these two contexts for theology (faith and a community of faith) should not restrict theology to narrowly religious themes or only to being an ecclesial specialization. Although its focus is on God and revelation, theology also deals with all things in relation to God (as Thomas Aquinas said). Although it is grounded in a long history of thinking, it is asked to reinterpret or mediate that tradition for different audiences today—not just for the Church, but also for a pluralist society and for a pluralist intellectual world (as David Tracy has argued). Although its foundation lies in God's Word, written and handed on, it is rooted also in the transforming experience of God's love (as Bernard Lonergan insists). Although in an older meaning theology claimed to be a science, it differs radically from modern empirical sciences which begin from external data. Theology can never claim that kind of evidence about its object which involves the mystery of God. It begins from revelation

https://publications.lst.edu/

and faith, and aims at a different and relational kind of truth: in other words, as Vatican I put it beautifully, theology seeks obscure, imperfect and yet fruitful understanding of mysteries, and it does so mainly through analogies. This also means that theology cannot be equated with doctrine alone but also with understanding the spiritual depth and cultural significance of doctrinal truths. Therefore, it is not a question of repeating "a monolithic body of doctrine" as abstract theories, as Pope Francis has said, but ultimately of serving the "freshness" of faith for today, and doing so through discerning dialogue with "human experiences" and cultures.[1]

A Secular Frame

If these are some of the general horizons and hopes of theology, obviously it has to operate within specific contexts of history. In this sense theology for nearly a century now has been acutely aware of the challenge of an increasingly secular culture. At the beginning of the first chapter of Charles Taylor's now famous book, *A Secular Age*, he asks two questions: why was it almost impossible not to believe in God 500 years ago? And why has religious unbelief become so widespread in today's Western world? His lengthy volume offers many answers, including the emergence, at more or less the same period, of a "modern" rationality and of a new self-image of the "modern" individual in quest of authenticity or fullness. Outer sociological changes such as urbanization and industrialization are less important in his eyes than the more hidden cultural changes that shape our interpretation of life. For Taylor, the crucial change lies in the inner context of our "social imaginary," in the sense of a shared set of implicit priorities of life (usually not articulated explicitly).[2] It is on this level of imagination rather than of ideas or external situations that the

[1]Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 39–40, 133.

[2]Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 146.

https://publications.lst.edu/

contemporary context for faith has its greatest challenge—and perhaps also its greatest opportunity for a new language.

From a theological perspective, Taylor is exploring a radically different context for the possibility of faith. What has changed is not really the faith-vision itself but the context where people decide for or against faith, and in fact because of a plural menu of life-options such a personal decision becomes essential. In a similar spirit, Karl Rahner suggested that fundamental theology—that branch of theology that discusses the credibility of revelation—needed to put decision rather than truth at the center of its attention. But is there a sense in which Rahner's thought on this issue is in danger of seeming [to be] culturally dated? And could the same be said of other theologians such as Alfaro or Schillebeeckx? The confidence with which they spoke of the centrality of existential decision presupposed that both the question of meaning and the drama of commitment are strongly felt in people's lives. But Taylor has become more skeptical on this point. Although he defends the "modern" ideal of personal authenticity, increasingly he has voiced worries about its descent into the narcissism of the "buffered self," suffering from "loss of meaning" but protected from much pain over that loss.[3] This form of self-identity implies a closure in indifference, a protection against questioning, a sense of immanence without much desire for anything larger. It is what Taylor also sees as "therapeutic" culture or "soft relativism,"[4] where self-realization becomes the main agenda of life. The question of God can seem to have gone asleep and the drama of decision is lost in a postmodern fragmentation of life-style. If so, an important challenge for theology lies less in the explicitly religious realms of Word, Sacrament, and fundamental option than in the pre-religious realms of self-imagination and potential spirituality. Pastoral priorities change towards initiation to desire, or towards pre-evangelization rather than evangelization. On this frontier the worlds of imagination—including art, poetry, music, and the new media—are more needed than a communication

[3]Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 303.

[4]Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 618, 484.

https://publications.lst.edu/

of theological content. Theology, faced with these inner contexts of forgotten desire, needs to develop a ministry of disposition and to create languages of attraction and of invitation. It needs to be aware of the distance from explicit faith experienced by many people today, and indeed their allergy to many perceived forms of religion. We need a creative and less austere version of John the Baptist to prepare the way of the Lord today.

Varieties of Contextual Theology

In one sense, all theology is contextual in that it is born from a specific background and seeks to make sense of faith for a particular audience in the present. But what are called contextual theologies (and the plural is significant) seek to pay particular attention to the constantly changing contexts of human experience, seeing each situation as a *locus theologicus*. Let me draw on a well-known book by Stephen Bevans in which he distinguishes six different models of interaction between context and theology. To begin with, there are two contrasting approaches: first, while seeking to *translate* Biblical revelation into the language of a culture, one gives strong priority to the Biblical vision and prefers a minimum of adaptation to the local context. Here the message of Christianity is seen as transcending cultures and the emphasis is on the protection of Christian identity. Second, a more *anthropological* model starts from listening to the culture itself: what Paul Tillich proposed as "correlation" would fit here. The assumption is that each culture has spiritual treasures calling out for theological recognition and that Christian faith can fulfill the deepest hopes of humanity. But this approach "from below" can be in danger of compromising the identity of faith by adapting the Gospel too easily to the values of the culture. A third approach attempts a *synthesis* or middle ground, involving some two-way dialogue between context and revelation, seeking to preserve both the specific nature of faith and the reality of the surrounding culture. In this spirit, some official Church discourse concerning "inculturation" speaks of a mutual or two-way traffic where theology and culture learn from one another. A fourth model stresses that faith is more *praxis* than doctrine, and

https://publications.lst.edu/

hence the relationship with the context aims at offering an alternative vision and leading to action. What are the practical and social fruits of faith in a given context? Liberation theology could belong to this school of contextual thinking which asks us to go beyond intellectual approaches. A fifth version of theology is called *transcendental*, with an emphasis on the individual experience of self-transcendence as leading towards God and on the fact [that] what is authentic in any culture can open the door towards faith. Here religious reality is seen as mediated by the human construction of meaning and not just by social situations. How are we to find expressions of our cultural and religious identity? But a temptation here is to remain within an excessively personal framework. A sixth and final version (which Bevans added in a revised edition of his book ten years after it was first published) focuses on the need for faith to be *counter-cultural*. This tendency stresses the radical difference between Christian faith and the ambiguity of all human constructs, including culture. A healthy suspicion is needed to face the contradictions and the cost of conversion. Is the impact of culture humanizing or dehumanizing? How is God present in history? Here the Church becomes a more openly prophetic or "contrast community." Obviously there is a danger that this more aggressive approach could jump to a kind of "careless negativity" without having understood the lived sensibilities of our contemporary contexts.[5] However, its basic concern is valid, reminding us that the difference of the faith vision always offers a purifying challenge to all the cultural contexts that surround us.

Theology as More than Contextual

It is too easy to say that these various approaches to theology are complementary and all equally important. There are inevitable tensions between these schools. The Belgian theologian Lieven Boeve warns us against being too innocent about the complexity of the issues here. From his perspective in a highly secularized part of Europe, he stresses

[5]Stephen Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, rev. & ex. ed. (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2002), 125.

https://publications.lst.edu/

the depth of what he calls "detraditionalization," in other words the loss of roots, of memory, of religious traditions of belonging. In such a situation, if people do not find ways of "constructing their personal identity," they will often drift, with fragmented lives, under the influence of "the media and the economization" of the surrounding culture.[6] Boeve sees religion as "interruption" of this context, and hence as offering a different theological model, one that avoids both mere adaptation, where faith waters itself down in order to be acceptable, and mere opposition to the secular context, where ecclesial tones can be mainly of confrontation, discontinuity, and negativity. Thus he acknowledges "an intrinsic bond between Christian tradition and context" and the call today for a more self-conscious faith, rooted in its own identity but "open to dialogue and challenged by otherness."[7]

In this light, it is significant that Bevans felt the need to add that sixth model of contextual theology. It is indicative of a growing awareness that faith in today's situation is called to be more explicitly counter-cultural; but in what tone? It need not mean a spirit of lamenting or of negative criticism of the idols of the world. Rather, it requires a healthy and discerning critique of the many dehumanizing superficialities that can undermine culture. How are we to embody our differentness? There is a tendency in some Church discourse to moan about the contemporary scene in judgmental or nostalgic mood. Pope Francis has spoken on various occasions of the opposite dangers of a new Pelagian pessimism or a new gnostic superficiality of faith. The Pelagians seem to live a perpetual mourning, see everything with rigidity, and lack the joy and freedom of real faith. But the gnostics float on the surface of religion and make God into a kind of vague spray to cover everything.[8] We need a wiser reading of our contexts.

---

[6]Lieven Boeve, "Religion after Detraditionalization: Christian Faith in a Post-Secular Europe," *Irish Theological Quarterly* 70 (2005): 99–122, at 105.

[7]Boeve, "Religion after Detraditionalization: Christian Faith in a Post-Secular Europe," 114.

[8]These images can be found in the Pope's homilies at Santa Marta for April 18, 2013 and June 27, 2013. This contrast was also developed in his speech to CELAM in Brazil on July 28, 2013. It recurs in Paragraph 94 of *Evangelii Gaudium.*

https://publications.lst.edu/

Pope John Paul II often repeated that a faith that does not become culture remains immature. So theology is asked to reflect not just on the differentness of faith in a spirit of defensive intransigence but with cultural creativity and openness: we have a gift to mediate and translate for now.

Genuine theology involves a complex convergence of perspectives and of gifts. Context alone is not enough. Although it is vital to listen to the questions of the culture and to discern the emerging sensibilities, that is only a preparatory phase for a delicate and demanding dialogue. If theology stays too focused on contextual questions, it can become a form of religious sociology, advocating worthy cultural positions but without putting them really into contact with the drama and vision of the Gospel. So theology needs at least two other horizons beyond a sensitive interpretation of context. Let us call them roots and disposition.

To echo the opening of Pope Benedict's first encyclical, theology is not based on a "lofty idea" or on some ethical or existential option of ours: instead, its "new horizon" is grounded in an "encounter with an event, a person."[9] This is what I mean by *roots*—all that we receive in God's Word, in revelation, and in tradition. This is the difference between theology and what many universities call "religious studies." This latter approach, valid in itself as a phenomenology of religious attitudes, does not require faith. But if, as mentioned at the outset, we see theologians as crucially people of faith, then the interaction between faith and culture, essential for theology today, takes on a more personal tone of involvement. Contexts and roots need to encounter one another within the spiritual reflection of believers. In saying this, we are already touching on the question of disposition. The limitation of "religious studies" as distinct from theology is that it usually assumes a stance of academic neutrality or safe objectivity, offering a useful survey of historical developments. But if there is no spiritual *disposition* of prayerful receptivity, can we speak of real theology? To remember the humility of negative theology is another way of expressing this essential characteristic for doing theology. This ancient tradition underlines

[9]Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, 1.

https://publications.lst.edu/

the inadequacy of all our languages before the transcendence of God's mystery. Faith involves always both presence and absence. Gregory of Nyssa in his fourth century *Life of Moses* spoke of lack of vision as a "luminous obscurity." In this "negative" tone, theology explicitly acknowledges its permanent limitations and inevitable lack of any mastery of mystery because one of its temptations is to claim to explain too much and too easily. It can become enamored of its genuine doctrinal achievements and forget the strange imperfection of faith that St. Thomas Aquinas always insisted on, claiming that the goal of believing is not found in formulations but in the reality of God.[10] In fact, the young Joseph Ratzinger, commenting favorably on the sections of *Gaudium et Spes* dealing with atheism, voiced his disappointment that there was no element of negative theology there: theology, he argued, can become too affirmative and overlook the always necessary "purification of faith and of the idea of God."[11]

Towards a Unifying Map

An important challenge for anyone doing theology today, whether as teacher or student, is to find some living convergence between its many branches (biblical, systematic, moral, historical, and so on). It is not simply a matter of recognizing an interdisciplinary ideal in theory. It is more a question of finding an existential foundation for the whole enterprise. In one of his Anglican university sermons of 1841, Newman faced this difficulty, asking how we are to find a genuine center for theological studies. He compared the fragmentation into many separate fields to a kind of intellectual tourism, like sailors who visit the world but never integrate their experiences:

> Seafaring men range from one end of the earth to the other; but … they see … the tapestry of human life on the wrong side … Nothing

[10]Actus credentis non terminatur ad enuntiabile sed ad rem (Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* II–II 1.2 ad. 2).

[11]Joseph Ratzinger, "The Dignity of the Human Person," in H. Vorgrimler, ed., *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II* Vol. 5 (London: Burns & Oates, 1969), 155.

https://publications.lst.edu/

> has a meaning, nothing has a history, nothing has relations. [Similarly] undigested reading shows us that knowledge without system is not Philosophy. Students load their minds [rather] than … enlarge them.[12]

That last expression is Newman's hope: to find a way of enlarging one's knowledge of theology so that it discovers connections with life. More than a century later, one of Newman's disciples, the Canadian theologian Bernard Lonergan, offered a more ambitious and more precise answer. It has become commonplace to claim that theology needs to rebuild bridges to spirituality (and vice versa). But where can this be found in practice? Even in recent decades, many future priests seem to have encountered theology with a focus on doctrinal content, and with little connection with the drama of faith as lived. Against this divorce, Lonergan identified religious experience as literally foundational for theology: "Fundamental to religious living is conversion. It is a topic little studied in traditional theology" but in fact "conversion can supply theology with its foundation."[13] For Lonergan, the transformative experience of recognizing God's love offers us an empirical basis for theology. Indeed, he would insist, without this new horizon of the converted self, we are not really doing theology. Obviously this emphasis can have pastoral implications: seeing a spiritual encounter with God as the basis of a living theology can help overcome a certain sacramental consumerism caused by a distorted theology of sin and grace.

Lonergan's Invitation

This new foundation stone for theology is not "out there" in the Bible and Tradition but "in here" in the conversion of the theologian and indeed of the Church as a Spirit-guided community of wisdom within history. But it is dangerous to say "in here." This could sound subjective in a misleading sense. What happens here is the work of God.

---

[12]John H. Newman, *Fifteen Sermons Preached before the University of Oxford between 1826 and 1843* (London: 1890), 288–289.

[13]Bernard Lonergan, "Theology in its New Context," in Bernard Lonergan, *A Second Collection* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1974), 65–67.

https://publications.lst.edu/

We are changed. Our meaning becomes love-rooted. The foundation of theology has shifted from texts and authorities to interiority. The old foundations for theology were externalist, logical, a question of conclusions drawn from premises. The lived horizon of the theologian was often forgotten but in fact is central. All this emphasis challenges theologians not to imitate a neutral model of academic work, one that is so naively and universally accepted in university culture today.

In this respect, Lonergan quoted an unusual text where Thomas Aquinas warns us not to reduce theology to excessive clarities, and where he speaks of the damage to students if this model of theology monopolizes the field. In his *Questiones quodlibetales*, Aquinas accepts that where the need is to explain the content of faith or to remove doubts, an appeal to biblical or ecclesial authority is appropriate. But he indicated a deeper task for theology than offering doctrinal elucidation. A more fruitful road to understanding requires "going to the root of the truth." Without this more ambitious wavelength, says Aquinas, students may arrive at clarifying some "certitude" about truths, but if they "acquire no knowledge or understanding, they will go away empty" (*nihil intellectus acquiret et vacuus abscedet*).[14] This existential emptiness can be healed if theology pays attention to the spiritual adventure of theologians and stops being falsely "objective."

In a parallel spirit, on his 2006 visit to the Gregorian University in Rome, Benedict XVI spoke without notes to Jesuit professors, inviting us to "restructure theology." This, he said, would mean avoiding "ecclesial positivism" and facing the "great existential questions of today."[15] One can interpret this in the light of what has been seen from Lonergan: unless theology pays attention to the *existenz* of the theologian, it runs the risk of a self-destructive positivism or Denzinger dogmatism, one which is unfaithful to the very nature of theology as a mediation of reflecting faith. Theology can even become

[14]Bernard Lonergan, *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan* Vol. 23 (Toronto: 2013), 531.

[15]This speech was neither recorded nor published. These quotations come from my own notes.

https://publications.lst.edu/

"irreligious," especially if "its main emphasis is not conversion, but proof," because these abstract positions can be "maintained out of individual or corporate pride."[16] Therapy for that temptation lies in a theology that keeps in touch with spirituality and with the lived drama of faith, hope, and love. Hence, Lonergan's advice to any theologian would be: pay attention to your operations and to your own adventure of believing, belonging, and of seeking understanding of faith. In this way, theology can avoid conceptualism, a mere debate about words, and discover a more costly and more existential language of reflection on religious experience in Christ.

Conclusion

Of course, there is much more that could be said about doing theology. By way of conclusion, let me at least list some dimensions left undeveloped in these pages. It has been mentioned that theology is called to mediate God's meaning in Christ. That will involve a challenging encounter with the richness of the ecclesial past in order to serve the mission of the Church in the present and the future. In other words, the theologian is a translator, standing at the crossroads of cultures, receiving a vision within a tradition, and re-imagining it so as to incarnate its transformative potential for now. The zones of human freedom and of human imagination are probably the real battlegrounds of faith today, and hence fields where theology needs to be urgently alert and alive. In the drama of human meaning, truth is married to freedom. Theology therefore cannot remain merely cognitive: since it seeks to explore God's meaning for us, it needs to

[16]Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1972), 350. With his traditional background in dogmatic theology, Lonergan's book on method does not neglect doctrine. It simply puts it in a larger operational map as dealing with theology as truth, which then has to be understood (systematic theology) for today and also inculturated in different worlds. This more complex map cannot be examined in detail here. I have described it briefly in my book *Faith Maps* (London & New York: 2010), 64–77.

https://publications.lst.edu/

develop existential and affective wavelengths. In brief, it is called to reach people's freedom through their imagination.[17]

Theology in its fullest Christian sense is born from a love-event, an encounter with a transforming Word, which then transforms the whole horizon of those who "do theology." And thus their mission is to create worthy expressions of God's revelation within the adventure of changing cultures. In Frederick Crowe's stimulating words, "doing theology" means "responsibility for the formulation of meaning." And, he adds, "we are no longer reading a book written by someone else: we are writing our own. We not only contemplate history, we must change it."[18]

[17]Here I have in mind a powerful sentence of John Henry Newman: "The heart is commonly reached, not through the reason, but through the imagination" (*An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* [London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1909], 92).

[18]Frederick Crowe, *Developing the Lonergan Legacy*, ed. Michael Vertin (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 28.

https://publications.lst.edu/