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The Role of Theology in Public Life: Some Reflections

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I. INTRODUCTION: THEOLOGY, THE PRECARIOUS DISCIPLINE

Theology is distinctive among the disciplines for speaking to and from three distinct publics: academy, church, and the general culture. And therein lies much of theology's strength and no little of its confusion. For every modern discipline speaks to the academy and, through its academic work, to the general culture as well. Theology is distinctive, I repeat, in adding a third public, the church—here understood as a community of moral and religious inquiry and commitment.

To discuss, therefore, the role of theology and the public becomes a welcome occasion to try to clarify first why theology should be a part of the discussion in that wider public. Yet it is imperative to try to do this in a context which "sorts out" what theology is and is not before recommending it for such inclusion in an already difficult situation. For the fact is—for theologians like myself, the unhappy fact—theology is understood in different, sometimes even contradictory, ways both by those within the churches and by the wider public. Indeed there are not a few voices both within the churches and in the wider public who view theology as exclusively a church preserve—and that in a narrow sense unworthy of both theology and the church. On that view theology is considered solely a self-expression of the church's own self-understanding. Theology belongs, therefore, exclusively within the churches, not in a modern university, nor in the discussion in the public realm.

Like most partial views of a complex subject, this view does include a half-truth. For theology does speak to and often from the church. And yet the proper understanding of theology, even on the church's own grounds, cannot allow theology to remain exclusively in the church, any more than the church itself can really be church and ignore its responsibilities to the wider culture. The church when faithful to its own self-understanding is not a sect. As the Lutheran tradition has demonstrated throughout its extraordinary history, the church cannot

simply withdraw unto itself. The relationship is sometimes not an easy one, to be sure—but then what serious relationship ever was?

And thus do we find theology as a discipline precarious, it would seem, on two fronts. Theology is substantively precarious by trying to think the seemingly impossible. For theology dares to speak of all reality—persons, history, self, *all*—in relationship to the whole of reality. That whole is believed in by Jews, Christians, and Muslims as God—i.e., as like a who—the radically monotheistic, the living and jealous, the hidden and revealed, the comprehensible and the incomprehensible reality we dare to name God. And theology—precisely as *theologos*—

attempts to speak this word about God in fidelity to the demands and disciplines of three publics, not one: of church, academy, and the wider society. It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that much confusion can perdure about this precarious yet precious discipline which, at its best, attempts to think the seemingly impossible—a word of thought about the whole—and attempts to think that thought in a seemingly improbable way—in fidelity to the sometimes conflicting canons and demands of all three publics. Noting this series of difficulties from afar, some critics of theology can quietly or loudly proclaim that, at best, theology undertakes an impossible human task, at worst it is simply an obscure way of propagandizing a sectarian view or of articulating an early stage of cultural activity—rather like alchemy or astrology. Like them, theology must now yield to more modern and more modest modes of thought—like psychology perhaps.

It is perhaps small wonder, then, that the splendid Jewish Marxist literary critic, Walter Benjamin, can write his fetching parable of the fate of theology in the modern period:

> A puppet in Turkish attire and with a hookah in its mouth sat before a chessboard placed on a large table....Actually, a little hunchback who was an expert chess player sat inside and guided the puppet's hand by means of strings. One can imagine a philosophical counterpart to this device. The puppet called "historical materialism" is to win all the time. It can easily be a match for anyone if it enlists the services of theology, which today, as we know, is wizened and has to keep out of sight.

Perhaps theology is not only precarious but must often keep out of sight. And yet, as Benjamin knew, and as every person involved religiously in the struggle for social justice knows, the questions of theology are questions that will not down. The demands of the human spirit will insist upon asking these seemingly impossible questions. If the theologians will not ask them, then others surely will. However seemingly impossible these questions, however precarious a discipline theology may be in attempting to ask these questions in relationship to all three publics, the questions of theology will continue to be asked by any reflective human being, especially by those who come for aid from the struggle for justice. Like traditional questions on the nature of the true, the good, and the beautiful, theological questions—on the whole, the ultimate, the holy—remain questions worthy of a free mind and worthy thereby of any profession like the ministry which accepts the challenge to aid suffering human beings in the light of the gospel.

My basic thesis is a straightforward one: theology should play a role in the

public realm because theology helps us all to ask the kind of questions which all reflective human beings ask. Like all the other liberal arts, like psychology and sociology, theology attempts to ask these questions in a disciplined way faithful to the canons of inquiry of modernity. In the churches and in preaching the gospel week by week, therefore, these questions can and do take the form of a self-interpretation of the religious classics of the tradition for the tradition's own self-understanding and thereby for its understanding of that tradition's resources for contemporary persons. In the wider culture, however, that interpretation can also take a different but related form: not the self-interpretation of a religious tradition but the self-

interpretation of the religious dimension of a culture or of an individual in that culture. More exactly, in the wider public realm, theology can also serve as the interpretation of the religious classics of the culture for a given individual. The interpretation of the religious classics should be disclosive of those religious questions which human beings, as human beings, ask and provide critical reflection on the kinds of responses which the religious classics suggest.

Religions characteristically provide responses to questions at the limits of human inquiry and human experience. These questions—these limit-questions, if you will—remain relatively stable across the wide and often conflicting responses of the religions. Since we do not really receive answers to questions we have never asked, it is important for all of us to find disciplined ways to formulate the peculiar kinds of questions and experiences to which religions typically appeal. Indeed, the questions abound: What, if anything, is the meaning of the whole? What, if any, is the significance of such positive experiences as a fundamental trust empowering the fact that we continue to go on at all, as distinct from all our other trusts? What is the significance of such profound negative experiences as a fundamental anxiety in the face of no specific object (No-thing) as distinct from fear in the face of some specific object? What is our primordial response to finitude, to contingency, to death as our ownmost destiny, to radical oppression or alienation, to joy, love, wonder and those strange experiences of a consolation without a cause?

What is the meaning of the fact that our best reflective enterprises seem to disclose limits at the edge of their inquiry and, in that disclosure of a limit-to the inquiry itself, seem to suggest some other dimension, perhaps even some glimpse of a whole: the sense that some order must exist at the limit of all scientific inquiry, the disturbing question of why be moral at all at the limit -of all moral inquiry? In my own work I have called these religious questions "limit-questions."

To choose the category "limit" to describe the kind of questions which religions address is to recall, of course, Kant's definition of limit as "that which can be thought but not known." Insofar as we try to describe "what can be thought but not known," we need not even do so initially with the Western religious term of "God" or the Western philosophical category of the "Absolute." We can choose, as I did above, the more flexible category of "the whole" and thus find some initial way to use this Western category of "limit" without precluding its use for non-Western religions as well. To be able to think the whole, even when we cannot know the whole, suggests anew the need, within

any person, for modes of inquiry upon these limit-experiences and limit-questions. As I have argued at the needed length elsewhere, it is a proper use of language to speak of a religious dimension of ordinary experience and language as a limit-dimension to both experience and inquiry. Such religious questions are available to all persons. This kind of religious dimension to our ordinary experience and inquiry is not, to be sure, an explicit religion. Yet there is a religion; as limit-to dimension, disclosed most graphically in the limit-experiences proper to every human existence. Those experiences, to repeat, include the kinds of experiences which psychology, for example, studies: such positive limit-experiences as fundamental trust, joy, peace, love, and such profoundly negative human limit-experiences as anxiety (as distinct from fear), guilt, death, bereavement, alienation, and oppression. Moreover, the same kind of religious-as-limit-to the ordinary is present in a more reflective, less existential form by reflection upon the limits-to

disclosed in the "limit-questions" of scientific, moral, and aesthetic inquiry. These questions and experiences manifest a dimension of human experience and language that suggests limits-to the ordinary. These limit-questions, when reflected upon in the context of the limit-concept of the "whole," can disclose as well an openness within every person to risk an interpretation of the religions themselves. For the religions are the classic expressions of some response to just those limit-questions.

At that point, a theological journey can begin for any inquirer. More exactly, the contemporary interpreter, in whatever profession, once attuned to the religious questions and religious dimension in *ordinary* experience and language, becomes willing to risk an interpretation of the extraordinary as well, the religious classics. Thereby does every interpreter become willing to risk a theological interpretation including a theological interpretation of psychological and social-economic realities. This remains, as Paul Ricoeur correctly observes, a *risk,* a kind of Pascalian wager since one does not know but, alert to a possibility through reflection on the limit-as-religious dimension of existence, one is willing to risk. To risk what? An interpretation. An interpretation of what? The religious classics. Why? Because in the religious classics we *may* find some expressions of the whole disclosed through the power of the whole, some classic response to these questions which we find we cannot abandon. There we may find what Jews and Christians will name "revelation"—now understood as a self-manifestation of God by the power of the God witnessed to in the classic religious expressions (symbols, myths, rituals, events, images, persons, doctrines). Even those who cannot accord the word "revelation" to the religious classics can nonetheless recognize these expressions as classic human responses to perennial human questions-responses whose disclosive and transformative illumination of our common lives demand the critical attention of all, especially those in the caring and helping professions.

If we are willing to risk an interpretation of these religious classics, moreover, we shall also recognize that the risk is inevitably great. For the religious phenomenon is also an ambiguous phenomenon in human thought and history. Religion is cognitively ambiguous as necessarily approached and expressed indirectly (e.g., through limit-language). That cognitive ambiguity yields positive fruit for thought and life (like its most natural analogue, art). Yet that cognitive

ambiguity also yields, as the psychology of religion shows, such negative intellectual fruits as irrationality, obscurantism, and mystification with their attendant psychological damage.

Moreover, the cognitive ambiguity of religion is more than equalled by a pervasive sense of the moral ambiguity of religion as well. Religions release not only great creative possibilities for the good in individuals, societies, and whole cultures; religions also release frightening, even demonic realities—as the tragedy at Jonestown disclosed anew. Yet this cognitive and ethical ambiguity of religion, this disclosure of the true and the false, the good and the evil (even the "beyond good and evil" possibilities of the "holy" and what Luther did not hesitate to name "demonic") should be sufficient evidence to warrant the belief that religion is a crucial phenomenon for all in the public realm to risk interpreting. How theology may enter into conversation on this subject, I shall now attempt to address.

II. THEOLOGY IN THE PUBLIC REALM: THE METHOD OF CORRELATION

The kind of pluralism which so clearly exists in the contemporary public realm is, indeed, matched by a similar pluralism in contemporary Christian theology. In principle, pluralism is an enriching, not an impoverishing reality. In fact, pluralism is both an enriching and often an unnerving reality. For unless we latter-day pluralists—in whatever discipline—are willing to converse and argue with one another over appropriate models and criteria for a discipline as a whole we are in danger of allowing the enrichments of pluralism slide into a sheer chaos. More colloquially, the kind of pluralism we do not need in either public life or theology is a Will Rogers pluralism—one where you never heard an opinion you didn't like! Any responsible pluralist has heard such opinions and, when pressed, should be able to say why these opinions are wrong. As one of the great defenders of pluralism in politics and culture, Sir Isaiah Berlin, once observed, a responsible pluralist will always be able to tell the better from the good and the good from the bad and the downright awful.

So it is, clearly, in our highly pluralistic public life. So it is as well in theology. For all responsible theological pluralists—among whom I count myself—have two fundamental convictions. First, the very nature of the subject-matter under study in theology—the mystery of the whole of reality construed in and through Jesus Christ as the Pure Unbounded Love who is God—demands a pluralism of interpretations and ever new reinterpretations for an ever changing personal, social, and historical situation. Second, it is not the case, however, that any interpretation is acceptable. Rather, each theologian must try to set forth a model of theology and a set of criteria which can help the wider community spot the better and worse interpretations of the same reality of mystery.

Many theologians, including myself, have defended a revised correlational method as the best model for contemporary theology. More importantly, for our present question, a correlational model of theology seems the best available for an understanding of the possible function of theology in the public realm.

Bear with me, therefore, as I attempt to describe the most important characteristics of that model of theology. If the correlational model for theology is as

sound as many of us have come to believe, then it not merely allows but demands that theology enter into serious conversation with all others in the. public realm.

Theology can be described as the attempt to establish, in both theory and practice, mutually critical correlations between two sets of interpretation: an interpretation of the Christian tradition and an interpretation of contemporary experience. There are several claims in this model. First, the theological task demands the working out of criteria for the interpretation of the Christian tradition as Christian. This means, minimally, that Christianity is not something anyone invents. Like Mount Everest, it exists as sheer fact. Unlike Mount Everest, Christianity is in fact exceedingly difficult to interpret. For Christianity includes classic texts—the Scriptures, confessions, doctrines, theological writings—classic events, rituals, symbols, persons, and institutions, all of which have undergone inevitably a series of reinterpretations, and each of which demands careful and deliberate attention. Even the founding document of Christianity, the New Testament, includes a pluralism of ways of being Christian. That pluralism is not easily harmonized into one single way. There is no end in sight to the struggle among Christians to

interpret that extraordinary religion. There is the hope, however, that Christians may come to embrace their own pluralism more wholeheartedly while still insisting that each different way prove itself recognizably Christian. There is no escape from the need—as individuals and as community—to demand that this struggle include the development of hermeneutical criteria of appropriateness. For we do need hermeneutics to show how our contemporary interpretations are appropriate to the Christianity we find in the classic documents, especially the Scriptures. Theology interprets, it does not invent, the Christian fact.

And yet when we face the full implications of that task of interpretation, we also recognize that the interpreters, we ourselves—as we are now—inevitably enter into every interpretation. For every Christian interpretation of Christianity is, in fact, a correlation—a correlation of the disclosive and transformative truth of the Christian gospel to our own contemporary experience. We open ourselves to the challenge of the Christian fact to our experience. And yet it is equally important not to forget that it is *our* experience which is thus challenged. There is truth in Karl Barth's noble cry that "revelation comes, hurled at us, like a rock." But there is equal truth in Paul Tillich's response that human beings do not receive answers to questions they have never asked. Each of us—with her or his own personal and ecclesial histories—asks those questions. Each of us tries to hear those revelatory answers. But we can only hear them as ourselves—those selves whose quirks and turns, whose hopes and fears, whose needs and desires, enter into all our questioning, all our listening, all our quests for truth, all our interpretations of Christianity.

There is no doubt, therefore, that theology should function in the public realm even to fulfill *its own* task of interpretation *as correlation.* For what is that task? It is nothing less than the risk of an interpretation of the Christian tradition for this, our situation. We cannot but interpret as the same selves we are—now open to the challenge of Christianity and thereby open as well to the challenge of all other insights into who those listening, questing, questioning, interpreting selves might be.

For that central reason, therefore, theology needs to articulate its beliefs in public life in order to fulfill its own correlational task of interpretation. And yet that theological task was also described as one which attempted to establish "mutually critical" correlations between an interpretation of the Christian tradition and an interpretation of contemporary experience. The key phrase is the qualifying phrase "mutually critical." The phrase suggests, indeed insists, that the concrete subject-matter in a concrete situation of a concrete individual or community must always rule the interpretation. Sometimes the correlation between theology and beliefs in secular life could be such that the quest for truth and a model of the good life for the wider public are fundamentally identical. In yet other—and, I suspect, the majority of cases— the correlation will yield similarities-in-difference or analogies. In yet other cases the correlation will disclose a radical confrontation between the conflicting visions of religion and the good life in the wider public.

Let us consider some examples of each. It is possible that the final vision of truth for human beings in relationship to the whole in a theology of personal salvation and a psychology of self-fulfillment through self-transcendence may so correlate in a given individual that they become practically identical. Theologically such "salvation" will be recognized as "healing"

through a profound and creative sense of the giftedness of all reality. In a concrete individual, what she or he may have learned through the insights of both theology and psychology may so cohere, so correlate, that both disciplines seem to bespeak the same healing, transforming insight of releasement, from their distinct but now complementary points of view.

Such a correlation as the practical identity of the experience and interpretation of both disciplines is, on this model of theology, possible in principle. My own belief is that, although possible in principle, such radical practical identity is rare in fact. Most of the time something more like an analogy (a similarity-in-difference) is likely to occur. Consider, for example, the genuine analogies which Don Browning has established between Erik Erikson's notion of "generativity" and Christian understandings of a transformed life-in-grace. Browning is careful not to affirm an identity. Yet he does, through a use of a revised correlational method, show how real analogies as similarities-in-difference do obtain between Erikson's notion of generativity and Christian construals of a transformed life. Consider, as a second example, Bernard Lonergan's creative theological use of Antoine Vergote's work to show how Christian interiority and psychological wholeness do bear genuine analogies. Or consider, as a third example, how James Fowler's excellent description of the stages of faith does bear genuine analogies to, yet is not identical with, Piaget's analysis of cognitive stages, Erikson's analysis of affective stages, or Kohlberg's analysis of moral stages.

The meaning of analogy as similarity-in-difference is worth dwelling upon. For an analogy is just that—an analogy, not an identity. It is important to correlate by showing both the differences and the real similarities-in-difference which do obtain between psychology and theology. It is equally important to recognize that difference—real difference—does remain. I would not be honest if I did not state that I share the hesitations expressed by many observers about

some of the practice and theory of pastoral counseling (which is an interpersonal situation with profound public effects) in the churches at the present time. More concretely, unless and until we really believe that the results of religion and psychology are identical, we should all recognize that what we ordinarily find are correlational analogies, similarities-in-difference.

I hope it is not presumptuous of me to suggest that just as theology needs psychology as it clearly does for its own correlational task of interpretation, so too psychology as practiced in the churches needs theology. Pastoral counseling, for example, needs theology to challenge any too easy identification of the gift, promise, and demands of the Christian gospel with any psychological theory or practice. It needs theology to remind it of the reality of grace as both gift and trust, the reality of a demanding morality as not identical with a neurotic moralism, the actuality of the gospel of Jesus Christ as transformative for individuals by both healing and judging them. On the theological side, the correlational model firmly insists that the psychological reality of the interpreter must be considered in every genuine theological act of interpretation of the Christian fact. This means that it is theologically inappropriate for any religious person who is suffering from a psychological difficulty, which can yield itself to therapeutic aid, to refuse that aid under the banner of a theology which fails to recognize its own correlational reality. Correlatively, from a correlational theological viewpoint, it is equally inappropriate to consider only the psychology of the interpreter and not the demanding subject-

matter of the reality—the Christian gospel—that is being interpreted. This means in turn that any pastoral counselor should not refuse, when appropriate, to help the patient to hear the challenge of the Christian gospel to radical self-transcendence, not only mere self-fulfillment, the reality of the sheer giftedness and trust of grace and life itself, the promise and the judgment of that gospel call.

What we usually find from the theological side when we try honestly to correlate are, I believe, analogies, not identities. We theologians need to become far more aware of our responsibilities, precisely as theologians, to be informed by the extra-ordinary results in both theory and practice of modern psychology, political theory, and sociology. Without that aid, we theologians cannot claim really to correlate the Christian tradition to the contemporary experience. For without that aid, we may well misinterpret the religious dimension of that experience by ignoring the psychological, sociological, and political-ethical realities involved. Thus will theology give stones to those who cry in pain for bread. On the other side of the correlation, the same kind of mutual need seems present for, without theology's aid, the struggle in personal, interpersonal, social and political life—in a word, the whole "public" are in danger of removing the challenge of the Christian gospel from the correlational situation. We are all always in danger, as H. Richard Niebuhr once suggested, of a domestication of the gospel so that we teach: "A God without wrath who brought human beings without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without across."

As you have no doubt noticed, in the discussion of the difference between identities and analogies, I have already spoken of the third final logical possibility in the correlation between other analyses of our lives and theology: the reality

of a radical confrontation. I hope I have indicated clearly enough that the correlation even here must be, in principle, a "mutually critical" one. This means that the concrete instance, not any theoretical fiat, whether theological or psychological or sociological, must decide every concrete case. There are many instances where false theological notions have been and should be challenged, indeed confronted, by sociology (consider political and liberation theologies). Consider, for example, how feminist thought, including Christian feminist theology, has helped us recognize the not infrequent instance where the great Christian ideal of "self-sacrificial" love is misinterpreted to suggest that many persons, especially women, effectively have no rights to genuine self-affirmation and a necessary self-fulfilment in the public realm. Then, this very ideal and gospel demand for genuine self-sacrifice (for myself, the highest demand of Christianity) is quietly perverted into its caricature: a psychological self-destructiveness which bears no real resemblance to the gospel call to self-sacrifice and an effective departure of women from the public realm.

On the other side of the correlation, if in our own society whose public ideal of the "good life" can too often be modelled on mere self-fulfilment interpreted as the real meaning of the Christian gospel, then theology and any pastoral care informed by religious and theological concerns must challenge that model. For the Christian gospel's call is one to radical other-concern; its call for the self-fulfilment is a call to self-fulfillment and self-transcendence; its call is one for a recognition of both gift and command.

It is not by chance that both theology and public life find themselves needing one another.

For both are peculiar. Both emerge fundamentally from the need to respond to human suffering. Both attempt to transform that suffering through models of the good life as grounded in justice or love—indeed, both.

On this reading, the resources of the public realm and the resources of theology are brought together in ever-shifting patterns of mutually critical correlations. There the reality of the *concrete* suffering individual and the systemic distortions enforcing that suffering must be primary. The Christian gospel does not hesitate to declare its prejudice, its preference for the suffering—for all the poor, the oppressed, the marginalized, the repressed, the tormented suffering in both the social, political and the personal orders. Insofar as Christian theology remains faithful to its call to interpret Christianity for real human beings, it can never avoid its need to become a correlational theology which is also apolitical theology. For the public and the private live and die together. As Christians, we cannot simply choose one over the other. Suffering exists in both individual, and group, historical forms. The aim of all correlational theology is to help alleviate that suffering with the resources of the Christian gospel and any other resources that help. When the cry of suffering is principally political or social, theology as a correlational discipline will turn into a political and liberation theology correlating the Christian call for liberation with political, social, and cultural liberation. When the cry of pain is principally individual and personal, theology as a correlational discipline will turn into a psychological theology correlating the Christian call for healing and transformation with the results, in both theory and practice, of contemporary psychology. Both are *public* theology on the correlational model.

We cannot pretend to hear the gospel call and attend only to personal psychological suffering or only to political and cultural suffering. We are called, as Christians, rather as a community, to respond to suffering in every form. It is only as a community that such healing can finally take hold. But it is only as an individual theologian that I provide these brief reflections on the need for a correlational model to formulate theology's responsibilities to the public realm. It is the praxis of commitments, theories, and social-justice practices of those in the Christian ministry which should inform, far more than they have done to date, all contemporary theology, including my own. Insofar as theology attempts to be faithful to its correlational task, it will listen. The conversation, which in truth we are in, is the public reality that all of us need to realize yet more fully. Publicness is not a luxury for theology; it is intrinsic to the whole task.