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The Problems We Face And the Theology We Need

Jean RICHARD *

No one today needs to be reminded that the cultures of the world present deep differences in basic ideas and values about the nature of human existence and our common situation. Nevertheless, we cling to the idea that we are one human race and that our common humanity can be accessed so that it may become a basis for elementary communication among all human beings. This communication is never as easy as it may be imagined: in fact, some social scientists wonder whether any deep cross-cultural understanding is possible.

One way to attempt such a communication moves through the negativities of human existence. It is surely less difficult to come to a common appreciation of what is wrong with human society than an agreement of what to do about it. A positive program relies on so many different cultural values and methods of approach that to adopt one requires negotiation and compromise all around.

With that basic paradigm in mind, this essay will follow a simple structure. It begins with a list familiar to all parties because it assembles the topics of theology that have occupied us over the past decades. All parties do not appreciate these problems in the same way; some problems so dominate a region that they virtually crowd out the others. But these problems affect us all. The second part reflects on how to go about dealing with these issues. Readers from different cultures should recognize how culturally specific this essay is and be encouraged to bring their own insights to the conversation. In the third part, I propose three qualities of the theology that we need today if we are to work *ensemble*, in communication with each other.

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The problems we face

What is the point in producing another list of the problems we face? Such a list surely does not instruct people about issues of which they are ignorant. The problems we face today have been with us for some time. I understand this list as bearing witness; I am a theologian from a particular culture, specifically the Christian North Atlantic, testifying to what I see as a web of issues that define our common field. In what follows I will note in each area what I think is particularly neuralgic, an issue within the issue that remains an open question.

Ecological concerns. By ecological concerns I refer to how the human race is dealing with the planet. Domsday scientists continually remind us of thresholds that are either near or upon us as a species that, if not addressed, will ultimately spell the demise of humanity. Most of us do not feel the immediate affects of this corporate human crisis, but it has bearing on our common future. The area for this conversation is creation theology; our new awareness of our corporate responsibility for the world appeals to a sense of stewardship.

The discussion of the problem of human resources and care of nature has as its premise the dialogue between theology and science. But thus dialogue draws us as theologians out of our comfort zone and into a new world of assumptions and, more importantly, imaginative frameworks. All our classical doctrines were formulated within a framework of classical philosophy and a naïve picture of the world. Entering into this new sphere makes the implicit premises and the use of the traditional terms of classical theology not only archaic and irrelevant but also straightforwardly deceptive. Especially on the catechetical level, but also more generally in the spheres of spirituality and basic ethics, traditional theological language needs to be overhauled.

Religious pluralism. I use the term globalization neutrally to point to the shrinking of our world so that in terms of time and space it has become a more interdependent place. We have become a more tightly interactive species. This has resulted in more interreligious contact and interchange, sometimes leading to more distrust and sometimes, especially in controlled situations that are found in large urban settings in the capitals of the world, more mutual understanding. In any case, the new situation calls for formal or intentional interreligious dialogue and interfaith understanding.

But this situation raises some serious problems for Christian self-understanding because of the absolute claims that Christians make about Jesus and the church. Different theologians have addressed these issues but the church at large is far from arriving at a consensus. The discussion raises two very deep issues relative to the very basis of Christian faith.

The one regards an understanding of the nature and character of Jesus Christ relative to other historically autonomous religions. This is complicated by a new sense of historicity where people are generally aware of the cultural bias of all understanding including religious convictions. The other dimension of this problem regards the viability of Christian mission. How are Christians able to support a Christian mission to other religious cultures that is intrinsically divisive insofar as it proposes a religious alternative? The decline of Christian mission in many parts of the world shows that this issue is being resolved by default, that is, by walking away from mission itself. This problem area thus engages fundamental issues in christology and ecclesiology (missiology) that have not been resolved.

Discrimination against women. The bias against women is clearly perceptible today and is almost universal. Moreover, because it has been endemic in the patriarchal cultures of the past, the sources of Christian theology are soaked through with it. It requires a self-conscious attention of theologians to even begin to influence the churches about how deeply Christian language has been contaminated with sexism. Beneath linguistic usage, therefore, theologians have to call into question the often assumed anthropology that lies behind many of the behaviors and statements of the different churches about life in society.

Concern for the poor and other marginalized groups. Liberation theologies began to address racism and systemic oppression of the poor in the 1960s in language that is analogous to that of the social gospel movement at the turn of the twentieth century. These theologies have revolutionized the discipline as a whole by the sheer fact that a privatized and socially insensitive theology is immediately transparent today. "Who benefits from this theology?" is a question that spontaneously operates as a norm of theology's authenticity and validity.

But this lesson has not been fully learned, and theology as a discipline remains socially differentiated by class. Moreover, the promise that social suffering would become the negative situation that might unite the churches and the religions in a common resistance to it has failed to materialize. We still have not been able to express together how struggle against dehumanization constitutes an intrinsic part of Christian faith.

Ecumenism. The development of ecumenism during the course of the twentieth century remains one of the proudest stories in the whole history of Christianity. Gradually and against all odds Protestant, Anglican, and Orthodox churches constructed the World Council of Churches. Later, with the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic Church joined the ecumenical movement and opened bi-lateral dialogues with many churches. Although no one is quite ready to say ecumenism is dead, the life and the challenge of the movement seem to be depleted. On the

one hand, several principles are almost universally accepted. For example, unity must include acceptance of autonomous spiritual traditions. But at the same time, in a pluralistic religious situation, the leadership of the churches consistently turns to conservative preservation of self-identity. Ecclesiology remains a tribal discipline with each church teaching its ministers and people how to conform to a narrow tradition and thus find an illusory safety. The challenge of ecumenism for theologians is to think ecumenically and to identify with what we share in common and unites different autonomous Christian spiritual traditions.

Animation of daily life. There has always been a distinction between what might be called “academic” theology and “practical” theology, even though they exist on a continuous spectrum and are most visible only at the extremes. That is to say, at the center, a carefully argued position drawing on the sources of Christian theology can be directly relevant for human life. It would be a mistake, therefore, to forge an antithesis between truth and relevance. Yet at the same time, one can and should continually ask theology “what difference does it make?” and “for whom?” In order to survive as a publically recognized disciple, theology has to make for sense for everyday life. Theologians must find the kernel of the classic doctrines and show how they hold out principles for confronting current problems.

Decline of the churches in the West. Theologians of the West are aware that Christianity is losing hold of people in educated, secularized, and consumer-oriented societies. It is probably apparent to Christian theologians outside of this milieu that they have less and less to learn from theologians who operate within it. Yet something is going on in the West may have universal valence, and I associate this with the lost of a religious dimension in academia. The secular disciples not only do not refer to religion, their practitioners seem to be hostile to it. This situation has contributed to the rise of a notion of spirituality that is distinct from and even separable from religion. All of theology in the West today is challenged to show the humanistic relevance of faith and to explain how the churches are servants of humanity and not themselves.

How does theology deal with these issues?

Before taking up the theology we need to address these issues, I offer a view of the discipline of theology that lies behind the qualities I highlight. Theology is a pluralistic discipline; these reflections are not meant to be normative but to be transparent about the premises operative in this essay.

Theology is frequently explained through the etymology of the word as “talk about God.” But eighty percent of a theological library

deals with other subjects. Although theology is not exclusively about God, neither do the human dilemmas that give rise to theology in the end constitute it. A more adequate description of theology would recognize that it can deal with anything, but that its method rests upon a commitment of faith whose object illumines the relationship of a person to the subject matter. Christian theology reflects on reality through the lens of God as revealed in the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. The audience of theology usually consists of those who share a given faith, but it can reach others in an attempt to give a reasonable account of that faith.

The formal quality that defines theology, namely, the faith that supports it, supplies the specific character of the treatment of the problems that have been enumerated. Some of the problems outlined above are quite secular in character, and disciplines other than theology deal with them. For example, theology is not going to offer relief from poverty; frequently the election of a socialist government or the passage of a single law will do more for the poor than the whole history of theology. The expertise of theology is not social amelioration. And theology reduced to moralizing about what human beings “should” or “must” do results in no theology at all.

But at the same time, theology deals with understanding the mutual relationship between human beings and ultimate reality. Moreover, according to Christian faith, that relationship to God entails a personal and social responsibility relative to other human beings that gets played out in action. Christian faith carries an ethical responsibility, and that responsibility is intrinsically social so that it cannot be reduced to a private interpersonal morality. Therefore these polar tensions are always in play: on the one hand, theology is not ethics, yet, on the other hand, theology serves ethics as knowledge serves human living; on the one hand, theology cannot be reduced to solving human problems, yet, on the other hand, theology that does not relate to human dilemmas is irrelevant. A formula that includes these tensions might be something like this: theology offers a transcendent vision of reality that supports constructive solutions to the human dilemmas that we encounter.

Finally, theology as it is understood here does not depend on ecclesiastical authority. It depends rather on the sources of faith, namely, scripture, tradition, and the community’s experience of scripture and tradition in the present situation. Rather than being dependent on any particular church’s authority structure, theology is meant to criticize whether that authority is authentically representing the faith in the light of Christian sources. Thus theology is thoroughly ecumenical; the corps of theologians across denominations should be the critics of ecclesial existence.

The theology we need

Given the problems we face and the broad description of the discipline just offered, how might we describe the theology that we need today. Theology of course will take on different characteristics according to various cultures and the exact contours of the problems it addresses. The qualities that are offered here, therefore, are broadly conceived. But they are not without relevance. They are meant to counter their opposites and respond to a common situation that binds not only Christian but all human beings together.

Searching. The first quality of the theology we need I call "searching." The public theology of the churches almost always appears to be too sure of itself. It lacks the questioning attitude of most ordinary and especially educated Christians. To many it does not seem authentic. The idea of a "searching theology" addresses what might appear as theological arrogance. The phrase describes what theology has to be today if it is to speak to the consciousness of Christians and those to whom we witness. A searching theology recognizes the transcendence of its object, the incomprehensible and absolutely mysterious character of ultimate reality. Because the horizon of infinite reality always recedes from our theological advances, and because other faiths surely have religious truths that are not found in the Christian tradition, theology should always exhibit the attitude of a people who are searching and learning.

But how can theology be searching if it rests on the assurance of faith in Jesus Christ as God's absolute word of truth? This is a delicate question and any appreciation of a response will be influenced by the direction one is traveling at any given time: for example, from certitude toward doubt or from doubt toward new convictions. But can we not all agree with our tradition that God is God and not readily available to our everyday language, that the many signs of God's absence rival God's presence and cannot be dismissed with ready formulas, that others too have religious beliefs different from our own that cannot be empty of all value? Can we not internalize and display in our conduct that, if we cling to Christ, to doubt is not to lose faith, and to search for more light is itself a kind of faith? "I believe. Help my unbelief" (Mk 9:24). To welcome the authenticity of others, including their religious faiths, is not to betray Christ but, as Matthew's Jesus proposes, to find him (Mt 25:31-46).

Narrative. Our theology should have a narrative character. All experience occurs in time and a place. It has a before and an after. Experiences may seem sudden, contingent, and utterly serendipitous, but they would not have happened at all without the prehistory that brought a person or a community to this time and place. Significant experiences also live on; they reverberate in a person over time; through human action

they generate effects. This is obvious in both traumatic and "peak" experiences. But protracted experiences, too, like being socialized in a vibrant liturgical community, may shape a people and their stories decisively. Our faith, then, formed in and through the beliefs of the community, is a living thing and thus has a story: it expands, grows strong, gets ill, confronts challenges, matures. The turn to experience reveals that the faith of each one has a personal narrative identity. And the faith of every church, large or small, reflects at any given time and place the conclusion of its story to date and the prospects of an immediate and long-term future.

This raising up the narrative character of faith reinforces the historical drama of the shifting faith of people. Generally the stories of a community constitute its identity. This is true of the Christian community as well. Scripture is itself a narrative, not an analytical synopsis of beliefs. The books of both Testaments in so many different genres tell the story of a community's encountering God, experiencing God as Word and Spirit within itself, and recognizing God's power and revelation in Jesus. That story continues. The discipline of history tells the story of how the bible lives and grows within the ongoing story of the church. By a correlation and fusion of these narratives with the stories of people today systematic theologians create new languages to tell the story today. Practical theologians help us to preach, celebrate, and live the story together.

This reflection on the narrative character of faith and its tradition should help us realize that being a community of faith and being persons of faith are much more fluid than is often depicted in the individual churches. It gives a new perspective on faith lived in history. We should not think of Christian faith as a fixed deposit of beliefs painfully adapting to new historical contexts and often seeming to yield ground in an undignified manner. Rather, faith should be considered a continuous existential narrative of people in history, with an identity, but always searching to find new ways to understand and live faithfully within the mystery of existence itself.

Generative of a spirituality of engagement. The theology we need should generate a spirituality of engagement. By "spirituality" I mean "the experience of conscious involvement in the project of life-integration through self-transcendence toward the ultimate value one perceives."¹ This definition of Sandra Schneiders is inclusive, it integrates all aspects of human life, it transcends religion, and applies to all people who live with self-conscious depth. Spirituality used to be a Christian term in the West, more Catholic than Protestant, but it has jumped out of the

¹ Sandra Schneiders, "Religion vs. Spirituality: A Contemporary Conundrum," *Spiritus* 3 (2003), 166.

Christian sphere and into general secular culture. The most disenchanted of people today want to be spiritual. I want to co-opt this term from secular society and put it back to work for Christianity in a new way. Christian spirituality consists in our human lives lived before God as God is revealed in Jesus Christ.

The closest description in the Reformers for what I mean by "spirituality" appears in Calvin's *Institutes* as the Christian life.² Spirituality embraces the whole of Christian life, not just prayer, worship, and sacrament. It includes the internal discipline described by a theology of the cross, the guidance of law, the use of creatures and the things of this world according to God's creative intent, and Calvin's famous formula for stewardship. In sum, Christian spirituality refers to the way Christians live, as individuals and as a group, in church, in the family, at work, in society, and more generally in the world. This is the existential reality; the discipline of spirituality studies it.

Such a spirituality must be personal, but it can never be merely private. Christian spirituality transcends individuals and becomes an ecclesial spirituality with public consequences. Such a corporate spirituality is always socially engaged, too often by silence and support of the status quo. For example, what is the church's stance and rationale for it on ecological issues, religious pluralism, women, the poor, and other marginalized groups?

But how do we get from God, as God is revealed in Jesus of Nazareth, to a social engagement that has strictly religious value? There are several routes that lead directly there, not least those developed by political and liberation theologies. But let me note the move made in this direction by Ignatius of Loyola, contemporary of Luther and like Calvin an alumnus of the College of Montaigu in Paris, succeeding him there by a matter of weeks if not days.

Ignatius had a high christology. But rather than introduce Jesus only as a divine figure, Ignatius presents him to the person making his *Spiritual Exercises* as a leader to be followed.³ Unlike the classic work, *The Imitation of Christ*, which counseled withdrawal from the world, Ignatius presents Jesus' leadership as drawing the Christian into engagement with the world. The leader proposes a cause marked by high ideals and asks for a militant active engagement in the battle between good and

² John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. by John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), Book III, Chapters 6-10.

³ Ignatius of Loyola, *The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius*, ed. by George E. Ganss (Chicago: Loyola Press, 1992). These exercises are essentially meditations on the ministry of Jesus as presented in the gospels stories.

evil. In effect Ignatius consciously and explicitly highlights the humanity of Jesus and the historical character of his mission so that we can join the project.

With this shift, Ignatius in several respects transformed medieval piety and left a lasting legacy for modernity and postmodernity as well. The rearrangement can be seen at three points. The first is the transformation of christology into a narrative form. The *Spiritual Exercises* consists essentially in following the stories of Jesus' ministry through death and into resurrection. Second, Ignatius does not suppress Jesus' divinity, but he highlights Jesus' humanity. A divine leader cannot really lead human beings. Ignatius presents Jesus as a leader participating in the hardships of those who follow. Third, these followers do not in the first instance relate to Jesus passively as their divine savior; they relate to him actively by joining and following him. The almost rote religious relationship to Jesus conceived on the model of therapist and client is broken and transcended, so that one relates to Jesus as companion and coworker. One approaches Jesus not in the first instance to get something from him but as a searcher to see what he sees in order to do what he does. The one approaching Jesus does not pose questions to Jesus who has the answers, or problems to which he has the divine solution. One comes looking for a direction, searching, and Jesus points a way; one considers the world's problems and Jesus proposes a corporate project and movement that will take them on.

* * *

Let me conclude with a summary response to the question, what is the theology we need in the face of the problems we face? I take for granted that theology fails as a discipline if it is not faithful to our originating story, attentive to the history which defines our present identity, and critically appreciative of the intellectual demands for understanding today. But we need more. The problems we face are far-ranging, and we cannot face them without ecumenical solidarity, interreligious cooperation, and collaboration with all human beings who may or may not be religious at all. We need a searching theology, critical but modest, and never triumphant before the transcendent face of absolute mystery and human suffering all around.

We need a narrative theology that merges the story of Jesus with the actual particular stories of people today. The point of the narrative character of theology lies in the concreteness of every person's and every group's story. Theology has to fit into the story of each person and resonate with the history of every group that embraces it. This forces

Christian theology to keep in view its roots in the narrative of the ministry of Jesus and how the rule of God that he preached engages concrete human life everywhere.

We need a theology that generates an activist spirituality of social engagement. The basic spirituality of Christianity is activist; it is a way of engaging life. The broad inclusive definition of spirituality given here makes it function relative to theology the way the terms “experience” and “praxis of faith” are often used. Spirituality is the basis of theology and that which theology is meant to energize. This spirituality will unite Christians with God by following Jesus Christ in service of the values of the reign of God. “See,” Revelation says, “the home of God is among mortals” (Rev 21:3).

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