THE FUNCTIONS OF THEOLOGY: LOOSENING THE NEXUS BETWEEN THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION AND MINISTERIAL FORMATION

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Introduction

Among the issues included in the rationale for the colloquium at which this article was first presented as a paper, was that of the nexus between theological education and ministerial formation. In Australia, this nexus is an historically long-established and tight one. The tightness of the nexus has, in my view, impeded the discussion about the multiple roles of theology in and beyond the church. In what follows I will explore the tasks and functions of theology when it is not bound by that nexus. For reasons of space, I will limit myself to the roles of theology in the church, not denying in doing so the importance and urgency of debates about the roles of theology beyond the church.

To attempt to loosen the nexus between theology and ministry formation is not to say that the relationship between theological education and ministerial formation is unimportant or that debates about that relationship should not be vigorous. This is especially true as the mainline churches in Australia chart unfamiliar waters in their ministries of witness and service in a world that variously reflects indifference and hostility towards, and ignorance of, the faith, practices, and many of the

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1 For a brief account of the history of theological education in Australia, see Charles Sherlock, Uncovering Theology: The Depth, Reach and Utility of Australian Theological Education (Adelaide: ATF Press, 2009), 31–38. It could be argued that the relatively recent emergence of Christian tertiary education institutions (as detailed by Sherlock) where theology is taught in the midst of other disciplines has loosened this nexus. Yet it remains the case that even in such institutions, theology is taught for the purpose of forming Christian people for ministry (however broadly “ministry” is understood).

2 Famously, David Tracy spoke of theology’s three “publics”: the church, the academy and society. See David Tracy, The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism (London: SCM, 1981), 3–31. Max Stackhouse has proposed four publics: religion, political, academic and economic. See Max Stackhouse, “Public Theology and Ethical Judgement,” Theology Today 54, no. 2 (1997): 165–79. Of course, the distinction between different publics can be pressed too far: ecclesial theology can never be for itself alone.

3 Of course, to advocate loosening this nexus is not at all for the sake of freeing ministerial formation from theological education. Rather it is to free theological education for other parallel relationships alongside its relationship with ministerial education.
institutions of Christianity. Not only are those waters unfamiliar, they have also been deeply muddied by the church’s sin, failure, hypocrisy and lack of love. Even though this is not the full story of the church’s public impact, it remains the case that ministry is occurring in a context where no assumptions can be made about either the good name of the church or of good will towards the church. Accordingly, any form of ministry in Australia today requires careful preparation and support, and in these circumstances the processes of forming ministers for these churches are rightly subject to rigorous scrutiny.

Frequently, and for mostly obvious reasons, that scrutiny is directed to issues of money, institutional structures and pedagogy. And so, because of the existing tight nexus between theological education and ministerial formation, the debates about money, institutions and pedagogy can appear simultaneously to be debates about theology when in fact they are not that at all. On the other hand, when theology is more explicitly made the presenting issue, discussions tend toward a focus on the diversification of theological horizons and styles. For instance, “theologies of ministry,” “theologies of mission,” or “theologies of leadership” are discussed and promoted in order to orient ministerial formation to contemporary circumstances. These generate necessary and entirely legitimate debates but, if anything, such debates tend to reinforce rather than loosen the nexus. They tend to assume the importance of theology rather than argue for, or attend to, the functions of theology so understood. They are still not the broader debates about theology and its functions which I propose to explore.

That is not to say, however, that the existing nexus—even if still tight—is unchanging or straightforward. Indeed, even the emergence of the above-mentioned “theologies of…” at least represents the diversification of theological discourses. Even the three mentioned, each in its own way, represent a shift away from what might be termed classical academic theology, focused on accumulation of information and development of certain intellectual skills, towards theology as a practical and transformative

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4 Even as recently as 2009, Tom Frame endorsed Hugh Mackay’s view that Australian attitudes towards religion were characterized more by lack of interest than antagonism. See Tom Frame, Losing My Religion: Unbelief in Australia (Sydney; UNSW Press, 2009), 103. I would suggest that in the intervening years antagonism and hostility have become more conspicuous through, for instance, the overt and organized opposition to both federal funding of chaplains in Australia’s secondary schools and the presence of special religious education in primary schools.
discipline. They reflect an understanding of theology more as *phronesis* than *scientia* or *theoria*, a shift which theological education has shared with many other disciplines.\(^5\) In fact, even the terms in which I have defined the nexus, that is, as that between theological *education* and ministerial *formation*, is another reflection of this shift. The emergence of the word *formation* as a corrective to *education* also reflects the broader horizon which has been placed before theological education in recent decades. Although the concept of formation resists easy definition and its use in this context continues to develop, it is noteworthy that the term “theological formation” is relatively recent and what currency it has is largely confined to Catholic circles.\(^6\)

Of course, there have been two notable—and related—areas where the nexus has already been loosened. They are the development of the discipline of Public Theology and the move of theology into Australia’s public universities. Both are significant developments and represent further instances of the broadening horizon of theology.\(^7\) Both have generated significant discussion and debate.\(^8\) Nevertheless, even the fact of the wider horizons before which theological education is pursued does not by itself address the question of the *roles* of theology within the horizon of the church—which is the presenting issue for this article. To that question I will shortly turn, but it will be necessary first to consider some definitions of theology.

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7 For further detail, see Sherlock, *Uncovering Theology*.
Defining Theology

What is theology? Anselm’s, *fides quaerens intellectum* is almost inevitably the first point of reference in any attempt to answer this question. It has pride of place in many theological text books. Nevertheless, it has come to be deemed inadequate because (even if this was not Anselm’s intention) it has been seen to licence a certain intellectualizing of theology (although for that very reason, the Anselmian insistence on the *intellectus* has often been invoked as an important point of leverage against theological obscurantism and unreflective piety). Nevertheless, in line with the move towards practical wisdom mentioned above, various definitions which incorporate this practical and transformative note have been canvassed. For example, Douglas Ottati has recently proposed this definition: “Christian theology is a practical wisdom that articulates a vision of God, the world, and ourselves in the service of a piety, a settled disposition, and a way of living.” Another trend in the proliferation of definitions of theology has been that of internally differentiating it. For example, David Kelsey has drawn a distinction between primary and secondary theology as that between the “self-critical dimension of every practice” of the life of Christian communities and “an analytically descriptive, critical and revisionary practice.” Even definitions of theology which continue to press the primacy of its cognitive and discursive functions recognize that it does not stand alone from the other practices of the church. John Webster, for instance, argues as follows: “Set in the midst of the praise, repentance, witness and service of the people of God, theology directs the church’s attention to the order of reality declared

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9 *Fides quaerens intellectum* was the first title Anselm gave to the *Prosligion* when it was published anonymously. On Anselm’s explanation of the changed title, see St. Anselm of Canterbury, *Prosligion—Including Gaunilo’s Objections and Anselm’s Replies*, trans. Matthew D. Walz (South Bend: St. Augustine’s Press, 2013), 17. The argument which the formula summarizes goes thus: “For I do not seek to understand so that I may believe, but I believe that I may understand. For I believe this also: that unless I will have believed, I will not understand” (23).

10 Although not explicitly drawing on Anselm, see Mark A. Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004).


in the gospel and attempts responsibly to make it a matter of thought.” Yet it remains unclear from this statement what precisely is the nature of the relationship between theology and the other practices in the midst of which it is set. A similar question could be put to Ottati’s definition: What is the “service” that this practical wisdom offers piety and faithful living? Likewise, how do Kelsey’s secondary tasks of description, critique and revision relate to the primary task of self-criticism undertaken by the whole church? However construed, these relationships of theology to the life and practices of the church warrant further specification (and the failure so to specify them may well be one reason why theological institutions often find themselves marginalized within the church).

There is also another question to ask of these definitions. Granted that theology has at least some kind of analytical and critical function, what are the various tasks, activities and disciplines that constitute it? For the purposes of this article, I include among such tasks, activities and disciplines the following: the work of exegeting biblical texts; analysing historical doctrinal developments; debating contested interpretations; generating constructive theological proposals; writing and presenting papers and preaching sermons about such matters; critically articulating the faith in public fora. I mean all those activities so frequently described as “theoretical” or “technical” or “intellectual.” I mean those activities whose performance requires at least basic levels of disciplined expertise. It is important to think of them as activities: they are not waiting to be made practical; they are already practices of the church. I propose that they are not generated by the demands of academic culture, but by the character of the gospel and the nature, identity and mission of the church. They may be part of forming ministers, but even if eliminated from ministerial formation they would (almost) inevitably emerge elsewhere in the church.

If these are the tasks and disciplines of theology, then how do they relate to the broader life of the church? To develop a broad framework in which to pursue this question, I will draw on Charles Taylor’s idea of the “social imaginary.” According to Taylor, the idea of the social imaginary refers to the “ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with

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15 I have developed this use of Taylor’s idea in “The Doctrines of Practical Theology and the Practice of Doctrine: Re-imagining the Relationship between Practical Theology and Systematic Theology,” *Pacifica* 26, no. 1 (2013): 17–36.
others, how things go between them and their fellows”; it is what is “carried in images, stories and legends.”\textsuperscript{16} It is not, however, abstract social theory. The social imaginary entails a more existential dimension by which it provides an implicit, “largely unstructured and inarticulate understanding of our whole situation, within which particular features of our world show up for us in the sense they have.”\textsuperscript{17} In summary:

Our social imaginary … incorporates a sense of the normal expectations we have of each other, the kind of common understanding that enables us to carry out the collective practices that make up our social life. This incorporates some sense of how we all fit together in carrying out the common practice. Such understanding is both factual and normative; that is, we have an idea of how they ought to go, of what missteps would invalidate the practice.\textsuperscript{18}

This idea is, at the very least, suggestive of ecclesiological application (even if it has some critical limits). The church is called to be a society whose members are variously shaped and formed by a collective sense of how they “fit together in carrying out its common practices” or, if you like, carrying out its \textit{mission}.

In invoking this analogy, my point is not that theology controls, or by itself constitutes, the church’s social imaginary. Rather my suggestion is that the work of theology—precisely as defined above—is one of the more significant formative elements in its development. Precisely as people in the church exegete biblical texts, analyse historical developments, contest divergent interpretations, generate constructive theological proposals, write and present papers and preach sermons about such matters, articulate the faith in the public forum, they sustain, develop and provoke the ways people imagine their shared Christian existence. They sustain, develop and provoke decisions on which shared practices they are called to, of how they fit together with other Christians, of what stories and texts they trust and learn from, of which beliefs they deem authoritative, and on how they interpret and engage with the world beyond this particular shared social existence.

Such then is my summary account of the ultimate horizon of theology’s specific tasks. I now want to explore what I think are three penultimate functions of theology which variously involve one or more of the specific tasks I have named. Many more such functions could be named, but

\textsuperscript{17} Taylor, \textit{Modern Social Imaginaries}, 25.
\textsuperscript{18} Taylor, \textit{Modern Social Imaginaries}, 24.
within the limits of this article, my constructive suggestion is that the church’s social imaginary is being variously formed and reformed as theology: (i) explores the faith, (ii) cultivates a culture of debate, and (iii) exercises ideological critique of itself, the church and the world. Whilst each of these penultimate functions might be paralleled in the critical discourses of other societies, I will argue that as they do their work of forming the Christian social imaginary, they are propelled by the nature of the faith itself to do so.

Exploration

Theological tasks variously combine in ways that allow theology to be understood as exploration, precisely because the gospel itself invites exploration. Consider these words of Karl Barth: “[T]he good news of Jesus Christ is not a dead commodity handed over to us so that we can ‘have’ it. Beware of this capitalistic conception of Christianity in any form, old or new! The gospel must ever again be explored and sought and inquired into.”¹⁹ Note here that Barth is suggesting that it is a false conception of Christianity—in this case what he calls a capitalistic conception of Christianity—which suggests that we can appropriate it without enquiring into it, or at least appropriate it in such a way that we deem no further inquiry is actually necessary. In contrast, he says that the gospel must ever again be explored and sought and inquired into, implying thereby that a true conception of Christianity invites such exploration and inquiry. The implication is that the meaning and truth of Christianity is not self-evident.

The Christian gospel does entail various seemingly straightforward, apparently unequivocal claims: “From that time on Jesus began to proclaim, ‘Repent for the kingdom of heaven has come near,’” “Jesus is Lord,” “Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures,” “God is love,” and so on. These are the sorts of claims which prima facie could well be presented as “commodities which can be handed over to us so that we can have them.” Yet they can only be regarded as such if they are abstracted from the narrative in which they are set. Central to that narrative is the person of Jesus of Nazareth, and the events of his life, death and resurrection. As with any human life, its meaning and significance were vulnerable to multiple interpretations. But something more than a mere platitude is at stake in this observation of multiple interpretations which warrants further exploration. It is a striking fact of Christianity’s authoritative texts that there is no

¹⁹ Karl Barth, Learning Jesus Christ through the Heidelberg Catechism (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 19.
attempt at all to obscure the repeatedly displayed confusion, error and even vanity of some of those regarded as its leaders. Of course the narratives also reveal how those once confused and mistaken became convinced and assured—or at least entered into a certain kind of conviction and assurance. It is only the events of Jesus’ death and resurrection which provide the hermeneutical key for seeing in the life of Jesus the unexpected Messiah and which give this nascent movement a universal horizon and mission.

Yet even this point of resolution, this apparent moment of clarity, does not yield a “commodity that can be handed over to us so that we can have it.” It is not that the Easter faith produces a transition from error and confusion to certainty and clarity, but rather that error and confusion have given way to a nuanced dynamic of faith, questioning and hope. Alongside the moment of recognition at Emmaus, or the confession of Thomas behind locked doors, are those among the Eleven, in the immediate presence of the risen Jesus receiving his commission to make disciples, who instead of worshipping him are said to have doubted.

It is important to define this activity of exploration in terms a dynamic of “faith, questioning and hope.” Without this wider dynamic, “exploration” may easily lend itself to the discovery of final knowledge and objectified certainty. To reinforce Barth’s fear of commodification: the issue at stake can perhaps be more fully elaborated through reference to Augustine’s distinction between the “studious” and the “curious.” For Augustine, “every love of a studious mind, that is, of a mind that wants to know what it does not know, is not the love of that thing which it does not know but of that which it does know.” The “curious,” on the other hand, are “carried away, not on account of something already known, but by the mere love of knowing the unknown.” Indeed, according to Augustine, the curious “hates the unknown, because he wishes nothing to be unknown, while he wishes to know all things.”

Paul J. Griffiths comments on these very remarks of

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23 Griffiths, Intellectual Appetite, 22.
Augustine: “The curious inhabit a world of objects which can be sequestered and possessed; the studious inhabit a world of gifts, given things, which can be known by participation, but which, because of their very natures can never be possessed.”

The Easter faith does not rest on knock-down evidence: it invites exploration. So in certain combinations of exegesis, analysis, construction, writing and debating, theology does exploratory work, thereby fine-tuning, perhaps unsettling and even reconfiguring the church’s social imaginary.

**Debate**

Contemporary Christianity is characterized by what could reasonably be described as irreducible theological and doctrinal diversity. Under the pressure of, or in reaction to, the West’s legitimation of pluralism, churches have developed various discourses about unity-in-diversity. For example, some invest in theologically developed accounts of unity-in-diversity; others celebrate a general sociological principle of unity-in-diversity as a means of managing ecclesiastical conflict. These two possibilities are not identical. The latter can actually stifle debate. This distinction warrants explanation.

Appeals to a general principle of unity-in-diversity can obscure genuine disagreement and stifle genuine dissent. Where a general principle of unity-in-diversity prevails, genuine difference and even dissent can be explained away. For instance, confronted with radical diversity, this generic principle can be invoked along these lines: “I disagree with you, but I believe that our disagreement is simply a function of operating out of different perspectives, each of which is equally valid. It is not possible to critique either position, or grapple with the differences between them with intellectual seriousness.” The risk of such an appeal is threefold. First, it can render the church’s theological discussions frivolous. Secondly, it relieves us of mutual accountability for what we believe. And thirdly it provides undeserved protection to some very poorly developed theological positions. As Rowan Williams has written:

> The very potent liberal reluctance to say that something is an inadmissible or incomprehensible move in theological talk has … sometimes left an impression that such talk is answerable to nothing but this or that theologian’s sense of his or her own inner integrity. We need to say that it is … possible to be a bad, silly, or mistaken theologian.”

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On the other hand, a *culture* of argument commits us to a very intentional culture of mutual accountability. In this instance, confronted with radical diversity, those finding themselves in serious disagreement might address each other as follows: “I disagree with you, and here are the reasons by which I find your arguments unpersuasive, and I invite you to scrutinize and critique my counter-arguments.” The outcome of such exchanges may not be the immediate or even longer-term resolution of the disagreement. Instead, the outcome is the cultivation of a certain culture of conversation and discernment. Once again, here is a claim that risks being a mere platitude. But what is meant here is an ecclesial culture which surrounds debate with both particular virtues (such as humility, honesty and vulnerability) and particular intellectual commitments (such as generally realist approaches to Christian truth claims). In such a conversation, participants are committed to distinguishing between truth and falsehood in the shared conviction that both are real possibilities. It is also a conversation which proceeds with the shared assumption that any of its participants is open to being *corrected* by the others. It is only when we can acknowledge that our epistemic and cognitive capacities are limited and flawed that we can open ourselves to the insights of others.27 Only with such openness to correction is it possible to resist the epistemological silos of irreducible diversity. This openness to correction is itself a virtue which needs to be practiced and reinforced in order to sustain both this culture of debate and the church which seeks to hear and respond to God’s call. The nurturing of such a culture of debate can be understood as a spiritual practice; it entails a “community involved in the friendly exchange of calls to …penitence before—a community of mutual compunction … ; a community of peaceable but serious disputation.”28

Thus, theology sustains a culture of debate and mutual correction where truth is received and falsehood rejected. So, in yet another way the church’s social imaginary is fine-tuned, unsettled, or perhaps even renewed as the

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27 For a developed account of the links between a critically-realist epistemology and the virtue of intellectual humility, see Christopher J. Insole, *The Realist Hope: A Critique of Anti-Realist Approaches in Contemporary Philosophical Theology* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), esp. 70–96.

28 Mike Higton, *A Theology of Higher Education* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 41. Higton is actually describing features of the University of Paris at its origins in the twelfth century. In the emergence of the University out of the previously disparate schools and their received intellectual practices already shaped by their Christian inheritance, Higton sees a particular institutional configuration of *lectio, meditatio* and *disputatio* (see 22–41). Framed by *lectio* and *meditatio*, *disputatio* was (at least in intention) pursued with “the peace in which to hear and take seriously opposing arguments; peace in which to hunt for the articulations which will clarify, resolve or decide disagreements; peace in which to undergo self-examination and penitence” (38).
church engages in the theological work of exegesis, analysis, construction and writing in the mode of disciplined debate.

**Ideological Critique**

In turning now to theology’s work of ideological critique, I draw on the writings of Nicholas Lash, beginning with this observation from his book *Easter in Ordinary*: “[P]art of the theologian’s responsibility is to help discipline the propensity of the pious imagination to simplify texts, demands and requirements that are resistant to any such simplification.”29

This resistance to simplification could be the mantra of any critical scholar. Yet Lash is developing a specifically Christian argument for the theologian’s work. For him, the propensity to simplify things which properly resist such simplification is a symptom of indulging in an illusory faith, a faith that seeks to resist scrutiny by the ambiguities of circumstance. Of course, there is a theological term for this: idolatry. Or, in Lash’s own words: “[T]he critical dimension of the theological task is to be sought in the direction of the critique of idolatry—the stripping away of the veils of self-assurance by which we seek to protect our faces from exposure to the mystery of God.”30 In other words, the human condition is such that it is prone to substitute some other more finite reality for the infinite reality of God revealed in Jesus Christ, and indeed, to substitute more amenable, less disturbing images of God than the God revealed at Calvary.31

The suggestive term in this line of argument is “veils of self-assurance.” It forms a bridge between idolatry and ideology. Both are forms of “veiling.” If idolatry is often explicit and visible, ideology veils individuals and communities from various unacknowledged and hidden institutionally-mediated prejudices and powers. It is that which, in the words of Terry Eagleton, “happens wherever power impacts upon signification, bending it out of shape and hooking it up to a cluster of interests.”32 It hardly needs saying that the church is not immune to the distorting effects of such ideologies, many of which have been unveiled

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31 For Lash, the knowledge revealed in the gospel is knowledge which “bears all the hall marks of ignorance; it is knowledge of him whose presence is felt as absence; whose touch is perceived as torture; whose approach is experienced less as the rising of light than as the gathering darkness of our dying.” Lash, *Theology on the Way to Emmaus*, 8.
in recent decades. Inevitably theological discourses and institutions have been exposed as particular locations of various ideological forces, with patriarchy and class being prominent examples. But its own experience of being the object of such criticism should not prevent theology from understanding itself as a discourse of ideological criticism. Its task of stripping away the veils should not be applied merely to the “pious imagination.” It can also be applied to the structures, institutions and procedures by which the Christian community can be held captive. The theological community is, however, confronted with a particular challenge if it is to exercise such a role. In most churches, theological expertise is located in structures and institutions of at least influence if not power. It is not simply a matter of theologians potentially using their expertise to bolster their own authority; their expertise can also be used by others as legitimation of the different sides of various ecclesial disputes. This role of ideological critique requires of the theologian both self-criticism and vigilance.

So, in particular combinations of exegesis, analysis, construction, writing and debating, theology will destabilize and critique the various veils by which the church consciously or not protects itself from God. In this way, the church’s social imaginary can be reformed, renewed and strengthened as its ideological captivity is unveiled.

Conclusion

There are certain aspects of the Christian faith—its Easter claims, its textual witness, its realist sensibilities, the nature of the knowledge of God, and its vulnerability to ideological captivity—which give rise to theology and its specific, differentiated tasks. It is not that theological enquiry makes us aware of such aspects of the faith. It is those aspects of the faith which generate theological activity. And when those theological tasks are clustered together in certain ways, theology explores; it debates the contested nature of its truth claims; and it engages in ideological critique. In so doing, it forms the church’s social imaginary in certain ways.

At the outset of this paper, I suggested that the nexus between theological education and ministerial formation has impeded discussions of the functions of theology in the church. It has been easily truncated to an educative role; and truncated even more to the education of those performing certain ministry roles, be they lay or ordained. This nexus between theology and ministry formation is not invalid. But the church needs to develop a greater variety of such nexuses if theology is going to ful-
fil its multiple roles. This means that the expertise which presently tends to be gathered in denominational theological colleges needs to be more explicitly tied to a variety of goals other than ministerial formation. It might be that a nexus is established between theology as ideological critique and church leadership. It might be that a nexus is established between theology as debate and the church's participation in the public square. It might be that a nexus is established between theology as exploration and local communities of worship and witness.

The community which finds its identity and purpose in the proclamation of Jesus, crucified and risen, will form a particular social imaginary. Christian theology emerges from the character and substance of that proclamation. In doing so, it assumes a range of specific differentiated tasks which combine in a variety of ways to determine the contours of that social imaginary.