

Theology in its Natural Environment: Issues, Implications and Directions

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This article was originally presented (in a modified form) to the continuing seminar on Pastoral Theology of the Catholic Theology Society of America at its 1985 annual meeting. There, and here, it is intended to be the starting point for a discussion and reflection on the nature and significance of a theological process which is playing an increasingly important role in the life of the Catholic Church and other Christian bodies. We refer to it as 'theology in its natural environment'. It is also variously called indigenous theology, contextual theology, local theology, practical pastoral theology, or theological reflection. The variety of names and of methods all point to an essential quality of theology in its natural environment, its specificity or particularity in terms of a concrete community whose essential unit is the small group.¹

Our experiential base for theology in its natural environment has centered in seven years of work with the Education for Ministry Program of the Bairnwick Center at the School of Theology of the University of the South, U.S.A. Currently enrolling nearly 6000 students in six countries, this is the largest program of theological education by extension in the English-speaking world. At its heart is a model and various methods for theological reflection that enable people to do theology in their daily lives with the ongoing critical support of a small group of six to ten peers.²

Issues

Toward a Definition

In an age which aims to be scientific, and which is characterized by a preference for the uniformity of ideas and practices that contribute to bureaucracy, a variety of particular or local theologies—theologies specific to their natural environments—are suspect. These theologies, like any phenomena which cannot be transported easily to and from the

laboratory environment, whether scientific, academic, or magisterial, nearly always are considered of marginal significance by those who have the greatest resonance with the powers of the age. Yet, as the scientist and especially the engineer have come to recognize, the heuristic value of the laboratory must always give way to field experience. The 'natural environment' is the final arbiter when it is a question of testing insights or applying theories to practice. The crucial test of the adequacy of academic and magisterial theology is its 'fit' with the faith praxis of local Christian communities. Does it enliven and foster their faith in a manner which maintains the integrity of gospel and mission? Does it render their experience of life more intelligible than do other interpretative frameworks? Does it contribute to rendering the Kingdom of God more manifest in their local worlds than before?

The tension here is not so much between theory and practice as between the 'laboratory and field'. This situation is not unlike that which comes to light in the field of counselling. When family and school counselling are compared, practitioners in each of these helping professions will admit that behaviours learned as acceptable and fruitful by a given subject in one environment do not necessarily transfer to the other environment. Which is to be recognized as the 'natural environment' and which the derivative environment depends considerably upon the presuppositions of counsellors and counselees about education and family. In theology, the question of environment has tended to be phrased in terms of publics—academy, church, and world. But public carries the connotation of audience. Theology, if it is faith seeking understanding, is not produced for audiences. It is to be a participatory activity. When academy, church, and world are considered as environments rather than publics, important questions become more sharply focused: What are the sources for theology and the relative authority of those sources in each of these environments? What are the criteria for adequacy and coherence for theology carried on in each of these environments? Is there a legitimate difference among those criteria?³

For too long the natural environment for theology has been presumed to be the academy, and in some ways the magisterium of the church. This presumption has blunted theologians' awareness of the very nature of theology as a practical discipline. Theology is done, whether practiced by professionals or not. While the Church fosters professional theology, it has not attended seriously to that done by local Christian communities. Yet, the local community is the natural environment for theology. In communities of Christians in the world, theology is most naturally and intimately related to the works of the Kingdom of God in the dialectic of reflection and practice in their lives.⁴

The theology currently being done in the local communities is not

classical 'natural theology'. Natural theology is generally thought of as a process of knowing God and religiousness from the perspective of reason alone, intentionally excluding faith from the process of knowing. Theology in its natural environment will always be done by Christians in the context of their faith.

In biology a natural environment may be thought of as those conditions external to the organism which bring about and sustain the organism in question. In some conditions these conditions may comprise two rather different environments. Our concern for theology in its natural environment is with the sustaining rather than the originating set of conditions. Theology, as we are using it, is the act of persons seeking to understand further the nature of their lived faith experience. For Christians this faith is in God through Jesus the Christ. It manifests itself with and within their on-going experience of church.

There exists, then, a natural locus of theological reflection which is the small community of believing Christians who engage in various processes of relating their understanding of tradition, culture, self-understanding, and actions to the issues of their daily lives. Out of these communities, both occasional and permanent, develop the consensus of the People, the *laos*, the faithful, and finally the church on both a micro and macro level.

Historically, this is how theology developed. However, the trend in the church is once again to see theology as a timeless body of knowledge that is delivered to the people from the authorities and experts. People may be encouraged to translate this sacred knowledge into understandable terms in their lives, and some adaptation to concrete cultures is acknowledged as necessary. Yet, truly contextual theologies, those that emerge in the local communities themselves, are considered suspect.⁵

Sources

The sources for theology in its natural environment are not generically different from those customarily associated with ecclesial theology: tradition (which includes, of course, gospel), modes of reason (various sciences), and experience (sacramental and everyday). Emphases on these sources may differ, but the experiential source will generally play a much more immediate role than is the case in academic theology. This is so because experience, the stuff of everyday life, is viewed as particularly revelatory. Further, the orientation of those engaging in theology in its natural environment is toward their own living of their own faith in their own local world. The desire to know God and to live out their baptismal promises seems to motivate most ordinary Christians who engage in this kind of theology. There is an urgency and concreteness to their theology that is not always evident in academic theology. Unlike more

conventional modes of theology, committed engagement and not distanced objectivity on the part of the participants is the basic stance for theologizing.⁶

There are various models of sources for doing theology in its natural environment current in literature. We will not rehearse these here but rather will focus on some fundamental common characteristics that exist among them. Some thinkers who come to mind in making these comments are: Bernard Lonergan, David Tracy, John Dunne, Jim and Evelyn Whitehead, Juan Luis Segundo, Joe Holland, Peter Henroit, Paulo Freire, Edward Farley, John Shea, H. Richard Niebuhr, and James Fowler.⁷

Any model of sources for theology is a construct for sorting elements of experience for the purpose of reflection. Tracy refers to two basic sources: common human experience and the Christian fact. The Whiteheads use three sources: culture, tradition, and experience. We use a four-source model—tradition, positions, culture, action—because it reflects more accurately the way experience is actually divided when people do theological reflection. Each of these models has strengths and weaknesses. All presume that our experience as Christians is profoundly graced and therefore profoundly revelatory.

Much of theology in its natural environment is in a sense hidden. That is, rarely has it had a studied method of its own by which its insights came directly into the focus of academy, church, or society except perhaps in individual settings. The macro-theology of church or academy has dominated even the more participatory but individualistic training of professional theologians which has been the twentieth-century norm until very recently. In recent years emphases on various methods of 'theological reflection' in the training of men and women for the active ministry has opened up a broad and variegated landscape of theologizing.⁸ Theologians of the academy and society may have as much to learn from the processes of this phenomenon as those whose arena is church. It is likely that the fruit of such natural theologizing carries the mutated seeds which in turn produce the newer networks of faith understandings which both respond to and in time modify that tradition with new insights.

Toward a Method

It is not possible either to describe or prescribe a normative method. The literature of the last few years (nearly a decade now) offers a number of prescriptive models. Almost all are based on 'educational' experience (much of it adult learning theory), few are based on longitudinal analyses of discrete populations.

The model of method for all the authors mentioned earlier includes at least the following elements: a clear focus on some aspect of

experience; some conversation or correlation between that experience and scripture or church teaching; and, some judgments about truth yielding new actions. These three elements can be handled in a variety of ways, but all three need to be present for the kind of theologizing that changes peoples' consciousness and can lead to new behaviors. No method *causes* conversion or transformation, but theology practiced as a discipline can dispose persons to be open to conversion.

The correlation that takes place in theology in its natural environment is among two or more of the following: tradition, which includes scripture; culture, which includes the ideas and structures of the contemporary church and social institutions; positions, the beliefs one explicitly claims; and action, one's deeds and the theological perspectives implicit in them. This correlation is carried out in a variety of ways; sometimes solely on the cognitive level through the use of a set of questions addressed to each of the sources; sometimes through the use of metaphor or other imaginative devices; sometimes haphazardly. Our experience is that the use of a regular method for this correlation enhances the depth of the connections that are made between experience and the Christian fact, and over the long term results in both compassionate and effective action by the group and its members. Further, correlation among material from three sources seems to contribute to more transformative insights than correlation between two sources.

The framework for the correlation is a crucial question. Frameworks based on a one-to-one correspondence do not yield the same depth of insight that less controlled, more imaginative frameworks can offer. The former lend themselves too easily to being controlled and simply yielding a predicted outcome that all too often ends up making the theology a superficial legitimator or critic of the *status quo*. A framework that creates the space for the integration of the cognitive, affective, imaginative, and intuitional is important for theology in its natural environment. An imaginative framework, through the use of metaphor for instance, allows for studied shifts of standpoint that can genuinely lead to progressively developing horizons for those involved in the theologizing. The danger with an imaginative framework is that the insights are left in disarray. They must be summarized and brought to everyday life through identification of intentions for new actions or clear statement of what has shifted in the perspective of the participants. The integration of cognitive with affective, and the legitimacy of the imaginative and the intuitional, are necessary for that theologizing that is part of conversion.

A necessary aspect of theologizing in the natural environment is group process. Indeed, in the local church we may see more collaboration in the theological enterprise than in the academy,

something would which would not have surprised Bernard Lonergan. Intragroup critique is a necessary component in theologizing. This is especially the case where theologizing is so praxis-orientated, and therefore the biases of group members are likely to come to the surface defensively. Also, long-term commitment to a group and its process seems essential. This kind of theologizing becomes a formational process which is distinguished from others by its venue, as well as its intention. People are formed where they live, and their lives set the agenda for their theology.

It is important to note, in relation to this formation process, that theology done in the natural environment brings back the understanding and practice of theology as a 'habitus' or disposition that involves an existential, personal knowledge of God prior to a 'scientific' knowledge of God. This understanding of theology is correlative to a renewed sense of God's sovereignty over all aspects of individual and corporate activity and to a renewed sense of God's revealing love mediated through all of life experience.¹⁰

One problem faced by all theology, but particularly vexing to theology in its natural environment, is the problem of 'critical access'. How does one give people access to sufficient information relating to the situation on which they are reflecting to allow them to do justice to the subject matter, without giving them so much information that they are led away from the situation on which they are reflecting toward problems and issues presented by the disciplines from which the information came? This is a crucial question. When faced by inquiry from the academy or church, there seems to be immediate suspicion that theology done in the natural environment is by definition more careless than the other forms of theology in this regard. The problem of critical access is a significant one for any process that seeks to walk between reductionistic functionalism and a tyrannical historical-critical method, between vulgar practice and theory for the sake of theory.

Learning to walk that line requires that a discerning aesthetic sense with regard to method be cultivated in the group. We have dealt with this in our Education for Ministry program by developing an extensive system for the training and regular inservicing of group facilitators. An essential element in their training is learning to use methods of theological reflection so as to make such their own in a creative and not a slavish fashion. Group facilitators must learn and then teach through practicing in their groups the difference between technique and method.

Faith Maturity and Empowerment of Laity

Theology in its natural environment raises pointedly the interrelationship between one's life and one's theology. It is in these local theologies that the full extent and significance of praxis will be learned by the church.

Transformation of the world through the application of graced imagination to human projects will happen only when ordinary Christians are conscious and critical. Academic theologians cannot bring about an increasing depth in theology in the church as a whole. This has to come from the people themselves.

A related point is the relationship between theologizing and faith development. James Fowler's latest work, summarized in *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian*, suggests the importance of growth in critical thinking on the part of Christians today. It is not enough for people to accept blindly the truths of the faith. Effective Christian witness and ministry requires that more people than ever become theologically literate. Theology today has to be the work of the whole people of God and not just of a special group. This is a crucial insight for the church in our age. If people do not reflect on the experience of God in their own lives and its implications for their living, then faith becomes something that belonged to the forebearers of the tradition and currently belongs to the theological experts. It becomes an entity that the children of the forebearers possess. People protect fiercely the memory of the experience of God handed down from their religious forebearers, but often haven't a clue in their own experience to what it is that the religious forebearers intended to convey.

People must gain cognitive and affective insight into the connection between their lived experience and the gospel. Without this, the church's call since Vatican II to personal maturity and integrity on the part of believers is perhaps fatally flawed. Attending to one's experience and to the tradition, and reflecting on both within the context of the faith community, are essential in order for persons to mature in their faith.

Relation to Other Theological Environments

How might the theology of the academy or the church be affected if its practitioners were simultaneously theologizing in the natural environment as well? Such a prolonged experience might enhance the accessibility of their own expositions to both the 'church' and 'society'.

While theology in its natural environment may be the most authentic or 'primitive' form of church theology it is not *ipso facto* good theology. It can be just as reductionistic or anachronistic as entrenched professional theology of either academy or magisterium. It has been weighted in both directions at various times in the church's history. Whether or not it is defective in this regard depends largely upon the methods employed and the self-understanding of the individuals and groups engaged in the activity. Those laity whose orientation is toward protecting the faith will be inclined toward anachronistic theology. Those who do not appreciate the intimate relation between faith and the work for justice are likely to fall into reductionism. Yet these problems

do not negate the need for this theology, just as they do not negate the need for the theological enterprise of the academy and the magisterium.

Implications

A Theologically Literate Laity in the Church

Theology in its natural environment enhances the probability of the development of self-conscious and critical Christian commitment on the part of faithful Christians. The process of their ongoing conversion works its way through their lives and the life of the theologizing group. The implications of this for parish and diocesan life are enormous. What does the local church do when a cadre of willing, faithful, critical, supportive and formed lay Christians exercises its intramural and extramural ministry based upon its continual developing grasp of tradition, culture, self-understanding, and action implications?¹²

The authority of the Spirit behind all Christian theology is a mixture of Gospel, Kingdom, church and magisterium. Yet in order for theology to be effective, it must become incarnated as a manifest skill in the people of the local community. These are the women and men who not only pronounce the Kingdom in word, but do it in the ministry of their daily life. They not only commit themselves to the Kingdom of God, they discover how to implement this commitment in the world which they (and we) cohabit with our non-Christian brothers and sisters. The purpose of theologizing is not just to train seminarians, professional ministers, or scholars but to equip the saints for the work of bringing in the Kingdom. Theology in its natural environment is where the basic equipping occurs. Unless it is done well, the formulations of the faith lose their integrity and their capacity to render the experience of people intelligible. Further, the deeds which will follow will rarely witness to more than impotence.

The operational balance between institutional authority and spiritual power in the church is never an easy alliance, especially for those who count themselves without either. The passivity of 'the faithful' can be explained to a significant degree by their implicit appreciation of this dynamic. Theological skill is one significant kind of ecclesial power in a church which has come to prefer cohabitation with secular culture, and simultaneously prizes its esteem for specialization. Thus theological skill has become access to the specialized knowledge or tender of much of the Church's intramural social intercourse. Theology in its natural environment, when operational in a studied, disciplined and prolonged fashion, ensures that this one form of power is not concentrated in either the magisterium or the theological elite.

Directions

Professional Theology

We professing theologians are well aware of the roles which the processes of translation and contextualization play through the historical development of doctrine. The explicit theologies of past ages have contributed greatly, and at times at great price, to the accessibility and effectiveness of faith both socially and intrapersonally. In an age of expanding access to communication and information there is no way, short of the local church turning its back on the news of the rest of the church, to isolate people from the ebb and flow of theological speculation and conjecture. People will theologize. No doubt some will do it well, and some will do it badly. Theology is supposed to be a practical discipline. It is supposed to inform and form people's lives. The question for those of us in academe is whether we are really willing to engage in a process *with* and not just *to* our Christian sisters and brothers. The question for those of us in pastoral ministry is whether we are willing to make the commitment to nurture and foster this practical discipline among our fellow basic lay persons. They may not share our professional training but they do have skills and insights that are not infrequently as profound as our own. As often as not they contribute even more significantly to a revisioning of the common project we share; that of bringing in the Kingdom of God.

Given a fruitful linkage between professional theology and theology in its natural environment, issues such as contraception, womens' roles in the church, clerical isolation, social justice, and war and peace, would no doubt more frequently be perceived from points of view which rarely surface in the 'journals' and hardly at all in the private 'public' of the academic theologian—the graduate, the professional, and occasionally the undergraduate classroom.

As the number of persons engaged in this kind of theology increases, professional theologians, both clerical and lay, will be forced to consider its method and fruits in relation to their own work. Within the academy, this comparison will sharpen on the one hand the already tense relation between those who engage in pastoral or practical theology and, on the other hand, those who prefer the more scientific and compact traditional theological arenas of discourse and contestation.

The Parish

The parish community is an integrative church. We often fail to realize that it needs to be a center of innovative thought and action if it is to speak and act the gospel to and with the local world in which it is rooted. As 'theology in its natural environment' becomes more a part of

the parish scene it can be expected to raise issues of immediate and appropriate concern to that local company of Christians. It will raise those issues which are also of concern to the well faring of those who cohabit that local world with the Christian company. To the extent that such processes are not facilitated in the parish the fruitfulness of its faith is imperilled; as is the coming of the Kingdom to whose advent we are all pledged. The greater risk here is not to 'pure doctrine' nor to the ruffled feathers of some of the more common clerical birds whose nitch in the pecking order will no doubt undergo some modification. The greater risk is that unless we, as a church, are willing to promote this kind of theologizing there is less and less likelihood that Christ's gospel will be effectuated.

The work at the School of Theology's Bairnwick extension center upon which much of this article is based testifies to the way in which theology in its natural environment has been and can be a powerful catalytic element in people's lives and ministries. Theology's claim to be a practical discipline is most frequently belied by the implicit 'trickle-down', or 'hand-me-down', assumptions about it as someone else's fruits which are to be consumed in the parish. When theology takes root in its natural environment people will be effectively enabled to produce and live a Christian theology which is their own, that of the church, and which works.

The Institutional Magisterium

The issue of the nature of the magisterium and its relation to the *sensus fidelium*, will become more sharply focused than ever. To put it simply, if the Vatican has trouble with the indigenous liberation theologies of Latin America and Africa it is unlikely that it will have more patience with the grass-roots theologies of North America and the English-speaking world.

Theology in its natural environment is people's theology. Its fruits are as unpredictable as the winds of Christ's Spirit. It is likely to have little concern for programs mandated by pastors, bishops or popes unless they are experienced as having both connection to and meaning in the context of the perceived needs of the local pastoral situation. Local theologies are by their very nature local. They are rarely universal in concern. They can easily become reductionistic precisely because those who make up the local group frequently cannot see beyond the exigencies of the local situation. Yet, heavy-handedness by the magisterium will only contribute to the hardening of position. How the present Vatican and diocesan bishops might productively engage these local theologies cannot be easily imagined.

The tendency of institutions toward self-preservation means that this movement will make church authorities of bureaucratic

temperament all the more nervous. Yet the quality and quantity of the theology being done in local congregations today may be the most faithful, truthful and promising heritage of the Second Vatican Council.

1 Robert J. Schreiter, C.P.P.S., *Constructing Local Theologies* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1985), 1–21; Don S. Browning, ed., *Practical Theology; The Emerging Field in Theology, Church and World* (NY: Harper and Row, 1983); James E. Hug, S.J., ed., *Tracing the Spirit; Communities, Social Action and Theological Reflection* (NY: Paulist Press, 1983).

2 Bairnick Center is the theological education by extension division of The School of Theology at The University of the South in Sewanee, Tennessee, U.S.A.

On the assumption that effective proclamation and service can only be achieved through the instrumentality of the Christian *laos*, the Center's stated purpose is to provide the kind of theological education that enhances knowledge and understanding of the Christian tradition while simultaneously offering the skills needed to link Christian faith to life in everyday experience. All this is done in the student's local environment.

The content of the *Education for Ministry* program comprises twenty volumes based on the traditional curriculum of a school of theology's *M. Div.* program: two years of Biblical study, a year of Church history and a year of thematic theology. Its second component is the local seminar group, which meets weekly, thirty-six weeks per academic year for two to three hours a session. Here students worship together, discuss issues arising out of their assigned readings, and under the facilitation of their trained mentor analyze incidents of ministry previously experienced by group members. This mentor is neither teacher nor lecturer. Rather, she or he enables the learning process, guiding discussion and most importantly the unique theological reflection process developed by the Center.

For an introduction to this model, and insights into this theological reflection process see: Patricia O'Connell Killen and John de Beer, "Everyday Theology: A Model for Religious and Theological Education", *Chicago Studies*, 22 (1983); 191–206.

3 The best treatment of publics for theology is David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination; Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (NY: Crossroad, 1981), 1–28.

4 John A. Coleman in "A Church with a Worldly Vocation", pp. 38–56 of his *An American Strategic Theology* (NY: Paulist Press, 1982) states bluntly the cost to the Church of not having enabled the doing of theology by laity in the world and about their world. His claim that there currently exists:

"no viable European or North American model for Church society relation, no sustained pastoral mobilization of lay energies toward world transformation, no compelling sense of the world of work as, genuinely, a *religious* vocation, no appropriate vision with powerful leverage to criticize the imperfections and rank injustices of the social order. The absence of these creates a situation of pastoral tragedy and represents a serious dereliction of duty on the part of the Church. For their absence means the effective abdication of the Church's vocation to transform the world." (p. 46)

5 Schreiter, pp. 6–16 on translation, adaptation and contextual models for local theologies.

6 Thomas E. Clarke, S.J., "A New Way: Reflecting on Experience", *Tracing the Spirit*, pp. 13–37; Robert L. Kinast, "Orthopraxis, Starting Point for Theology" *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America*, 1983, pp. 29–44.

7 Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (NY: Herder and Herder, 1972); David

Tracy, *Blessed Rage For Order; The New Pluralism in Theology* (NY: Seabury, 1978); *Analogical Imagination*; John S. Dunne, *A Search for God in Time and Memory* (NY: Macmillan, 1969); *The Reasons of the Heart* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1978); *The Church of the Poor Devil* (NY: Macmillan, 1982); James D. Whitehead and Evelyn Eaton Whitehead, *Method in Ministry*; Juan Luis Segundo, *The Community Called Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1973); Joe Holland and Peter Henroit, S.J., *Social Analysis; Linking Faith and Justice* (NY: Orbis Books, 1984); Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (NY: Continuum, 1983); Edward Farley, *Ecclesial Man* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975); John Shea, *Stories of Faith* (Chicago: Thomas More Press, 1980); H. Richard Niebuhr, see note 2 above; James Fowler, *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian* (NY: Harper and Row, 1984).

- 8 Robert L. Kinast, "Theological Reflection in Ministry Preparation", *Tracing the Spirit*, pp 83—102; Browning, *Practical Theology*.
- 9 Edward Farley, *Theologia* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 29—48, passim; Schreiter, 75—94.
- 10 H. Richard Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*.
- 11 Fowler, *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian*; David P. Killen, "Indigenous Theological Education and Christian Formation", *Insight*, 11, No. 7, (1984) 3—13.
- 12 Michael J. McGinnis, "The Appropriation of New Theology By The Laity:..." (Ph. D. dissertation, Notre Dame University, 1981); Derek A. Kotze, "An Evaluation of the Education For Ministry Program in the School of Theology, University of the South". Bloomington, Indiana: September, 1984. (Typewritten.)

RESPONSE

Schillebeeckx's second book on ministry—two views

In 1984, when the Vatican condemned the argument in Edward Schillebeeckx's book Ministry that a faith-community has the right to the Eucharist, and therefore has the right to ministers (if necessary, commissioned by itself) to preside at the Eucharist, Fr Schillebeeckx said that he was writing a clarifying book.

The English translation of this, entitled The Church with a Human Face: a new and expanded theology of ministry, was published last year by SCM Press (price £8.95). Speaking of it in January 1985, the author himself said: 'I can ... say absolutely that I retract nothing from the