

Binding and Loosing for Theologians
A short paper for the colloquium
Theology for Church and World: The Priestly Vocation of the Theologian

The title of this colloquium makes a presupposition that is not universally shared by theologians today: that theology is for the world as well as for the church. Or at least that theology is for the Church only insofar as the Church itself exists for the world.

The idea that Christian thought can be of use only to isolated groups of Christians within a highly restricted sphere of activity (often merely church life and personal morality) has been pushed on us for many centuries by external forces. And indeed, the recurring desire to eradicate religion from the public sphere is undergoing a popular revival championed by Dawkins, Hitchens and the like. But it may also be something that theologians themselves are tempted to collude in, as many have adopted a more confrontational stance towards the world. Late modernity has seen many theologians calling for strong ecclesiologies which stress the coherence of the Church's own language and resist so-called "liberal" desires to map that language onto the world as others experience it. On the one hand this is positive recovery of theological nerve. But on the other, it is in danger of turning theology into "an esoteric, abstract and sectarian activity".¹ If we do believe that theology is truth for the world as well as for the Church, then the language of theology needs to be capacious and more widely significant than simply positivist assertion.

And if I believed that while I was in academia, I certainly believe it now that I am in parish ministry, not just because most people in the world (in fact most people in church pews too) can't relate to a lot of what theologians talk about, but also because being a representative of the Church in the world – being a priest – also requires a language and a symbolics that connects more universally.

Reality and fantasy

Dan Hardy once said to me that my writing had the character of a kind of Natural Theology. I hadn't intended that to be so and I wasn't sure if it was a compliment because I associated Natural Theology with discredited ideas of the likes of William Paley's divine watchmaker, taken up today by proponents of "Intelligent Design". But Dan, seeing my reaction, said "No Jim, you see God as located within the Real. And frankly, I don't see where else God can be".

Theology is for the world as well as for the Church because the Real is an overarching category within which human life is worked out and ordered. And it is within this arena of ordering, interaction and relating – dynamic social life – that we discern God's presence and activity. The temptation to idealise or excessively supernaturalise is constantly militating against theology that properly connects and engages with this Real – theology that truly serves Church and world.

Distorting our encounter with the Real, and therefore with God, is *fantasy*, with which the lives of both Church and world are riven. Fantasies can take all kinds of forms. Within the Church we have a great number, mostly fantasies of a quick achievement of the coherence that evades us as Christian community. That may be the fantasy of a kind of Levitical purging of impurity, or the fantasy of an ahistorical biblically-revealed order, or the fantasy that all will be put right by idealist systems of authority.

¹ D. W. Hardy, *God's Ways with the World*, p.38

Much more could be said about these evasions from reality. But reaching across both Church and world there are what I consider the two most serious and pervasive fantasies that afflict us today:

The first fantasy is **living without depth**. The fantasy *that human beings can flourish without reference to the core and transcendent meaning of creation*. And without being sentimental about any particular past age, our own culture is undergoing a lamentable thinning of its sense of purpose and depth. Put simply, the daily round of working to increase consumer power and shopping to satisfy desire is not enough, and sooner or later is always exposed as such.

The second fantasy is **extreme individualism**. The fantasy *that human beings can live fruitfully without an intimate and generous sense of living with others*. That fantasy has been building up in North Atlantic culture for some time and it has now become deeply embedded. We are seeing manifold 'cracking' in what Dan liked to call the "social 'skin' of the world".² I was leading a Bible study on 1 Corinthians last month where a parishioner was adamant that she disagreed with St Paul, no liberties of the individual, in her view, should be sacrificed for the building up of the community.

Priestly ministry

So what do priests do in a world like this (and I ask that with the most inclusive definition of priesthood)? What, therefore, are the priestly charisms in which the theologian might share? Perhaps Jesus' promise to Peter is one text we could consider:

"I will give you the keys of the Kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."³

Far too many readings of this text have focused on authority, justifying the power of priest and theologian alike to assume control. But it seems to me this passage is about profound **responsibility**. And that was a theme to which Dan Hardy returned continually in relation to the study of theology. "Who will take responsibility for theology? Who will do theology responsibly?" For the theologian, the privilege of theological enquiry is truly a powerful thing; it is the keys to heaven, the privilege of reflecting on the human interface between time and eternity. To do so in a way that is accountable to the Real is perhaps in some sense to enter into the priestly commission of responsibility that Jesus gives Peter.

Enabling people's liberation from their fantasies (about themselves and about the world) is what the priestly ministry of reconciliation is all about. The priest looses people from their fantasies, looses people from the distorted views of both Church and world that we find so seductive. I think theologians share in that, and we should not underestimate the urgency in our age of the need for people to speak prophetically about authentic ways of living, which deconstruct the popular ideologies. Monica Furlong wrote of her expectation that priests should be people who, by their own example "challenge my ideas about status, about success, about money, and so teach me to live more independently of such drugs".⁴ Theologians can do that too.

But the priest does more than this. The vocation is a constructive one, because the priest presides over the Church's enactment of *the binding of people into the Real*. In Baptism the first fantasy of self-referential humanity is exposed and the believer is bound into the deep reality of the source of

² D. W. Hardy, *Finding the Church*, pp.84ff.

³ Matthew 16.19

⁴ Monica Furlong, *With Love to the Church*, 1965

life. The priest therefore takes responsibility for binding people into God, and so connecting them with their human purpose of praise. And at the Eucharist over which the priest presides as the representative of the people, the second fantasy of human autonomy is exposed and the community is bound together – rich and poor, young and old – into, what Dan liked to call, a “redeemed sociality”.⁵

And so the sacramental life is one of what the collect for All Saints Day calls the “knitting together of God’s elect into one communion and fellowship in the mystical body of Jesus Christ”. Here, I think, is also the purpose at the heart of the theologian’s task: to illuminate the process by which we enter more deeply into the Real, by entering more deeply into the lives of one another, and so become bound into the reality of God.

To conclude, it is clear that the priest is called to be a theologian⁶ and I hope that the Church of England will honour Dan’s memory in continuing to make that practically possible at a meaningful level. But I also think the theologian is called to be priestly, in taking responsibility for more than just the immediate pressures of academic life. Theology that is truly for Church and World will *bind people into the Real* – the shared, purposeful, loving reality that is life in God.

⁵ D. W. Hardy, *God’s Ways with the World*, Chapter 11

⁶ see Michael Ramsey, *The Christian Priest Today*, London: SPCK, 1972