Trends and Directions in Contemporary Theology: An Introduction

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The Expository Times 2010 122: 1
DOI: 10.1177/0014524610377042

THE EXPOSITORY TIMES

Article

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The Expository Times
122(1) 1–3

DOI: 10.1177/0014524610377042
http://ext.sagepub.com
SAGE

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Abstract
An introduction to the forthcoming series on trends and directions in theology today.

Keywords
Contemporary Theology, Denominational Theology, Enlightenment, Liberal Theology

From October 2010 we will be running a year-long series of 11 articles discussing a variety of contemporary theologies. We have invited our contributors to consider their subjects from a number of points of view: what are the key sources of insight and understanding for such theologians; what is their understanding and use of the Bible; are there key events, experiences, contexts which have influenced the direction of any given group; which theologians and which non-theologians (philosophers, anthropologists, literary theorists, sociologists) have been most influential for them? At the end of the series, David Fergusson has agreed to offer a concluding reflection on all the contributions.

In one sense, to run such a series does not require a great deal of justification. For busy practitioners, whether in seminaries, in parish or other forms of ministry, for busy academics, simply trying to keep up with the multiplicity of developments in theology, for general readers with a lively interest in matters of the mind and spirit, in short, for our readers, such a series has its obvious usefulness. What is happening in the field of theological reflection and debate? In a world which in some ways seems increasingly secular, in others seems to be becoming increasingly (and, sometimes, worryingly) more religious, can such work serve to provide some clarity and direction?

Of course, the details of such a review raise more questions: which topics and directions are to be included, which, however reluctantly, left out? Our selection makes no claims to be comprehensive but may still need to be explained and justified. We start with a number of articles which review some of the key theological responses to the Enlightenment: liberalism, post-liberal theologies, radical orthodoxy; this is followed by a further four articles on different areas of theological reflection defined more specifically by their particular areas of study: political theology, pluralist theology, feminist theology and analytic theology. Finally, we look at the attempts of a number of theologians from different denominations to reflect on their own traditions, to produce a normative self-description of their faith positions.

This kind of selection can be criticised from a number of points of view. Is it right to see contemporary European and North American theology principally in terms of its relationship to the European Enlightenment? Do the theologies which emerged in the nineteenth century, of which the Liberalism

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advocated by Peter Hodgson is a direct descendant, not have deep roots in a classical Christian style of theologising, however much they may have learned from and reacted against the philosophies of Kant and Hegel (among others)? The very terms, post-liberalism and radical orthodoxy, suggest quite strongly that what such theologies are offering is a correction of liberalism's too easy alliance with the Enlightenment or indeed its dilution of (true) orthodoxy. The reader is invited to look behind the ideological loadings of the self-ascriptions of different tendencies within contemporary theology and to consider whether alterative accounts could be/are being offered.

It would, interestingly, be just as possible to view the three theological directions which we have been noticing, as all in their different ways, reactions to the enormous impact which Karl Barth had on 20th century theology. While liberalism has, it is true, clear roots in the nineteenth century, present-day liberalism has had to come through the fierce criticisms directed against it by Barth and his many followers; post-liberalism and radical orthodoxy are in their different ways both reacting to and seeking to carry forward Barth's programme of doctrinal reconstruction and recovery, whether by seeking to identify an overarching narrative which defines Christian thought and practice or by locating an ideal period of Christian development and formation.

All of this is unmistakeably European in focus and substance. A further story would need to be told to do justice to the extraordinary development of theologies outside of Europe and North America. Some of this will find expression in the subsequent articles in this series but a full treatment of the fundamental theological principles on which such theologies have been based has to remain work for a further series.

Again, one can only regret the restricted choice offered when we turn to theologies focussed on particular subject areas: politics, the existence of alternative forms of religion and thought, gender issues, the challenge of philosophy. Much more could have been included here but our selection must necessarily be limited and there is no denying the importance of these topics. They are also ones which allow scope for considering developments outside Europe and North America, from continents where Christianity has often had deeply ambiguous political relations; where it is a minority faith and cannot avoid addressing issues of religious plurality.

Finally, in terms of the choice of topics, it might be asked why we have given so much space to forms of denominational theology. This is an interesting question. In a fairly obvious sense denominational theology is anything but a child of the Enlightenment. Enlightenment figures like Reimarus and Lessing grappled with the Reformed and Lutheran orthodoxies of the eighteenth century. Nineteenth century Anglican theology was profoundly suspicious of the academic theologies which came out of German universities like Tübingen, as indeed were many conservative German Evangelicals. In Germany Church colleges (*kirchliche Hochschulen*) were set up to provide orthodox training institutions for those who found the theology of university faculties too 'liberal'. 19th century neo-Thomism was conceived of as an antidote to liberalism and all its works. Yet it would be a complete mistake to suppose that all denominational theology is anti-Enlightenment and anti-liberal. The boundaries between academic and church theology are as blurred as those between academic and church departments of theology. New College, where this journal is edited, was after all set up as the College of the Free Church after the Disruption and then went on to become the home of the University's Faculty of Divinity.

In practice, even theologies which set out to give normative self-descriptions of the beliefs of particular faith communities will find it hard not to engage in dialogue with contemporary culture and thought. And the risk of dialogue is that it will lead one to enlarge, to develop, even to modify and abandon inherited patterns of thought and belief. The reality is that much good denominational theology has been the source of controversy and debate within its own community; that, indeed, in the more tightly controlled faith communities, such theologians have often felt the full force of disciplinary action. One has only to think of the recent attempts to silence the Roman Catholic theologian, Roger Haight.

Again, one might question whether the choice of denominational theologies is balanced or representative. It is regrettable that there is space only for some of the main-line churches and even here there are many important omissions. Equally, it would have been good to have reflection on theology in some of the 'new' churches like the Pentacostals, and also on the churches of the radical Reformation.

All of that will, alas, have to wait. But what are we to expect from what we have prepared? It would be more than a little foolish to speculate too much about a series which is still in the writing. Nevertheless, one can offer a brief discussion of current

views of the state of theology as a preliminary to what will appear. Rupert Shortt in his excellent *God's Advocates: Christian Thinkers in Conversation,* (London: DLT, 2005) presents the kind of view of recent developments to which the discussions above were alluding. In his case, it derives from conversations with Rowan Williams. Liberal theology, he suggests, was an overaction to the Enlightenment, 'embracing modernity with too tight a grip'. It was against this that Karl Barth (over-)reacted. 'His achievement lay in insisting that theology has its own coherence, and must therefore identify its criteria independently of secular authorisation. His weakness sprang from his strength. Underscoring the centrality of revelation was achieved at the high price of downgrading reason and withdrawing into a fideistic cocoon' (Shortt, x). Recent theology is to be seen as arising out of the engagement with this inner problematic in Barth's theology.

This brief formulation of the strengths and weaknesses of Barth's theology is instructive, despite certain inner tensions. It is not difficult to recall the attraction which Barth's theology (and, for some of us, Balthasar's reception and critique of Barth) exercised during the sixties and seventies as British theologians reacted to the almost complete absence of systematic theology in university courses and the limitations of the liberal and neo-Thomist theologies which dominated any publications in the field. Certainly one of the things which attracted many to Barth was his willingness to embrace the whole field of Christian theological discourse and to offer an account of Christian belief which was uncompromising about drawing on its own resources and setting them out as coherently and comprehensively as possible. This contrasted markedly with the treatment of Christian belief which was offered in the philosophy of religion taught in English universities, where brief formulations, e.g. of the doctrine of grace, were subject to criticism and defence but not to further exposition and examination in terms of the history of doctrine. It was not surprising, then, that Barth had a profound influence on the theologies which emerged both in Britain and the United States in the latter part of the twentieth century. But is it quite right to say that Barth's 'achievement lay in insisting that theology has its *own* coherence, and must therefore identify its criteria *independently of secular authorisation*'?

My problem with that formulation is two-fold: firstly, that it suggests that theology must set its own rules of coherence without regard to more generally held standards of rational discourse and enquiry; second, that it suggests that there is one ideal/normative form of theology which it is the task of theologians to identify and to expound. If this is so, then it can hardly be a matter for surprise that such a form of theology should end up 'underscoring the centrality of revelation ... at the high price of downgrading reason and withdrawing into a fideistic cocoon'. Clearly such a form of theology must end up radically opposed not only to the Enlightenment, with its deep questioning of 18th century confessional orthodoxy's understanding of revelation, but indeed to *any* attempt to allow general philosophical considerations to inform the work of theological enquiry. This indeed was the subject of fierce debate between Barth and von Balthasar over the analogia entis, as indeed it was between neo-Thomists and the *nouvelle théologie* of de Lubac and others.

Shortt's formulation, one might say, defines the theological enterprise too defensively, as if the central task is to hold against all comers a centrally agreed body of Christian belief – whether described in terms of doctrine, narrative, or a normative set of (biblical) linguistic codes. Such a description both overlooks the sheer variety of formulations of Christian belief and the contribution which such variety can make to the pursuit of understanding; and it overlooks the sense in which the finest forms of theology have been worked out in dialogue and indeed fierce debate with other contemporary forms of thought. The articulation of coherent and persuasive accounts of Christian faith is a task to be undertaken in dialogue with the best of contemporary thought (at least so far as such dialogue is offered) and there are no guarantees that success will attend all our efforts. Our current review will, it is to be hoped, show something of the richness of contemporary attempts and offer pointers to the future course of the discipline.