

## THEOLOGY IN A SECULAR AGE

– Michael Sweeney, O.P.

What is the future of theology in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? Tasked with this question my first impulse is to admit that I have no idea. However, the theological enterprise must be lived in the world that we inhabit and I propose to offer for discussion: first, a brief reflection upon the secularism that shapes our contemporary imagination; second, the challenges to theology posed by secular imagination; third, present fragmentation in theological studies; finally, directions that theological study might take in responding to our secular age, especially in the light of Vatican Council II.

### 1. Secular imagination

Ours is a secular age, one in which, according to Charles Taylor, it is easier not to believe than to believe. While this has a bearing upon every realm of human thought and activity it is of particular significance to theological study. Whence this difficulty in believing? Taylor has proposed that it pertains on the level of imagination; a secular age has no imaginative categories with which to appropriate the revelation.

What are the factors that play into this imagination? Rather than probing social theories Taylor has attempted to trace what he terms, “social imaginaries.” Just what might a “social imaginary” be? “The way people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations.” Or, “The ensemble of practices they can make sense of.” An imaginary is practical, not theoretical, lived more than thought. Taylor suggests that there are four imaginaries that shape our secular imagination:<sup>1</sup>

- We imagine ourselves to be autonomous individuals who enter into intentional relationship with each other, so that the fundamental unit of society is the individual. This individual is endowed with rights, and the purpose of political order is the prosecution of those rights. (Notice: this is not true in the strict sense that the assertion does not correspond to reality. So, for example, when I was three my family moved from Vancouver to Victoria and I determined to go with them because I was an autonomous individual.) This is, rather, how we imagine ourselves to be.
- Comprised of individuals, we imagine that human society is involved in an exchange of services; an economy is the fundamental model for organized society. The “economy” is “...an interlocking set of activities which form a system with its own laws and its own dynamic.” The economy, thus understood, defines social relationships.
- We imagine time to be homogeneous: the commerce –exchange of services– that makes up society occurs in the here and now: society on the whole consists of the simultaneous happening of all of the events that mark the lives of members at that moment. We possess a new notion of time: secular time, in which “associations are placed wholly in homogeneous, profane time.” Secularism does not merely exclude religion and religious practice but any idea of “exemplary time” that would suggest an ascent into the unchangeable. Moreover, no mediation between the temporal and eternal is imagined; the eternal is merely conceived, if it

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<sup>1</sup> The following is a (hasty) summary of Taylor’s *Modern Social Imaginaries*, Duke University Press, London, 2004).

is conceived at all, as an extension of profane time. Tradition is held in suspicion because it would wed us to a past; we imagine that, for the sake of progress and of autonomy, revolution from what has gone before is requisite.

- Finally, we imagine that there is a "public sphere" –the media, the internet– which is extra-political to which everyone has direct access and from which the political and social orders can be critiqued. A measure of our autonomy lies in the fact that we can opt out by means of our individual criticism of the social order. Moreover, along with a homogeneous notion of time, our imagination is limited to what is entirely a horizontal understanding of social relationships; ours is a "direct access" society in which each member is immediate to the whole. We have a deep suspicion of hierarchy.

It is, at least, a drastic claim that these convictions pertain at the level of the imagination. If this is so, and I fear that it is, then revelation itself –which is the in-breaking of the eternal in history– is unimaginable to many of our contemporaries as are: our common vocation in Christ, liturgical participation in the death and resurrection of the Lord, the transcendent destiny of the human person or any appeal whatever to mystery. Religious practice tends then to be regarded as moral action shored up by a superfluous and esoteric mythology that no educated person would embrace. In the place of theology we can pursue religious studies in order to attempt an account of the anthropological curiosities in which certain of our contemporaries seem to be invested.

## 2. Challenges to theology

There is likely no greater dissonance with the secular imagination than the theological tradition into which I was formed and which, as president of the Dominican School of Philosophy and Theology, I now represent. That theological discipline has, indeed, the character of a tradition. It is called "Thomistic", although that designation can be misleading. While the works of St. Thomas are, indeed, studied, what has been handed on is not so much a content or a measure of theological study as an understanding of the theological project itself and a manner of approach to theological questions.

According to this tradition theology is a contemplative discipline, speculative rather than practical, ordered more to understanding than to action in the world. Its object is God and its unifying principle is a habitual referring of all things to God, whether created things as to their source and end, or revealed truths which are received in a privileged insight that is the gift of faith. The revealed truths that are theology's first principles, while incapable of being grasped by unaided reason or, therefore, rationally defended or proved, nonetheless afford a real knowledge that is more certain than what can be obtained through other disciplines because their source is God, the author of all things. While a contemplative discipline, theology is not indifferent to human acts; the referring of all things to God is a habit of wisdom that not only perceives the order in things but orders human agency in the light of its divine source and end.

Such a study relies upon philosophy –and, indeed, all of the other sciences– not to prove its principles or to render them plausible but as a part of the disciplined enquiry into the revelation that is intimate to the theological habit itself. There is an order to approaching what is revealed: an enquiry into the literal meaning of the revelation; a philosophical analysis that draws upon experience as it is engaged by all of the sciences whereby we attempt by reason to understand what is revealed; a soteriological analysis that depends upon the literal and philosophic engagement according to which we are able to perceive the fittingness of the revelation with respect to our union with God and which determines what we conclude. Seen in this light the theological habit is one in its object, its habit and its method.

Two generations ago the most probing and the most shallow of Catholic theology alike would have proceeded along these or similar lines; my tradition might be regarded as the “whence” of modern Catholic theological study. The whole of this tradition relies upon the fact of revelation. Yet the fact of revelation may well be unimaginable to a majority even of Catholics in a secular age. As a consequence it would seem that there are challenges that such a tradition –or any serious theological work– must address:

- What is the place of revelation in theological enquiry? Can there be compromise in the manner of receiving what is revealed without abandoning the theological project entirely? I hold that there cannot. Yet if theology cannot demonstrate its own first principles then neither can it adequately defend the plausibility of the study in the academy, save in appeal to an historic or academic tradition –or, in other words, as a study in the history of religions or anthropology which, precisely, does not take the claims of revelation seriously.
- What is the relationship of theology to the evangelical and pastoral objectives of the Church? On the one hand, theology is not merely apologetics; in my formation apologetics was not considered to be fully a theological work, but merely an application of insights from theology that is or is not appropriate, depending upon particular circumstances; such a work does not advance our theological understanding. On the other hand, if theology is pursued merely as a pastoral help in support of a small believing community then it will have abandoned its fundamental claim to illumine the truth about God, the human person and the world.
- Christopher Dawson once proposed that by “culture” we designate the unconscious influences upon thought and action –language, social custom– that shape our understanding and conduct. If this is so, then to what degree are theologians themselves influenced by the secular imagination? It is not possible, for example, to retrieve with adequate fidelity the work of Augustine or of St. Thomas –or, indeed, any ancient or medieval scholar– through an Enlightenment filter. St. Thomas, for example, never asked the question “Does God exist?”, which is a question of the Enlightenment. Thomas never uses the verb “existere” in talking about God. The question, “Whether there is God?” –*An Deus sit* – does not attribute “existence” to God, which would make of God the Enlightenment guarantor of order in things. Many students of theology will not notice the difference. Similarly, if a habit of skepticism about revelation is a cultural disposition pertaining at the level of imagination, then how can the theologian escape a suspicion of revelation or entirely avoid regarding the tradition as, in some respects, naïve?

That we can notice a dissonance between popular imagination and the theological tradition suggests, of course, that our understanding is in some manner independent of it. My judgment is that our independence from the culture is, in part, the result of the theological habit itself. However, when we consider the present state of theological studies we find a fragmentation that would seem to contradict the unity of theological enquiry that the theological habit insists upon.

### 3. Present fragmentation of theological studies

Theological study is undertaken both in the academy and in seminaries. An exhaustive investigation of the state of theology in each environment is not something that I have undertaken and every generalization limps. Aware of this, I would nonetheless offer the following remarks.

With respect to the “academic” study of theology, we notice the division of theology into multiple theological disciplines. One reason would appear to be the requirements of the studies themselves. So, for example, in the magisterial pronouncements concerning theological study scripture must have pride of place. Yet in the academy scriptural study has been separated from the other theological disciplines for at least three reasons. First, the preparation for scriptural study necessitates the study of the ancient languages and of the various methods essential for a critical reading of the texts; the requirements of the study itself would seem to render responsibility to the whole theological project to be a secondary concern. Second, there is a founded concern on the part of scripture scholars that fidelity to the texts themselves not be subordinated to some of the theological positions that have been enshrined in the tradition. Third, theologians from others of the theological disciplines can tend to regard a critical reading of the texts as suspect, particularly if that reading appears to challenge the assumptions embedded in their own disciplines.

Because of the sheer scope of theological study a theological education does not imply that the student or professor has a unified notion of theology. Rather, matriculation from a program likely signifies expertise or competence in one area of theology, whether dogmatic or systematic theology, liturgical theology, ecclesiology, historical theology, Christology, moral theology, sacramental theology, theological anthropology, spiritual theology or pastoral theology (one could continue to expand the list). The whole enterprise is not so much one of contemplation as it is of mastering a subject matter as it is reflected in the canon of the academy. Moreover, since specialization along the lines of a “scientific” approach to study now holds sway throughout the curriculum in academic institutions, the reputation of theology, even in Catholic institutions, seems to require a proliferation of theological competences. Influences of the scientific method are reflected as well in the method that is applied to theological study. One wonders, for example, exactly what “original research” might mean as a requirement for a theological degree.

Possibly for this reason there has been a tendency to blur any distinction between theology and religious studies. I am, of course, aware of students who are studying in these disciplines who do not profess the Christian faith or are, in many cases, insecure in it. They are, however, intelligent and capable of mastering the subject matter. Can they be regarded as theologians, even though they lack a living faith?

With respect to the challenge of secularity, each of the theological disciplines appears to be differently impacted. We might, however, notice two things. First, in the light of the secularity of the academy prominence has been given to historical and hermeneutical questions. Conversations around Vatican Council II, for example, have tended to focus upon an interrogation of the issues leading up to the Council, the conciliar debates and the manner in which the Council was received. Subordinated to these considerations, the actual content of the Council documents gets much less attention. Second, new areas for theology have been proposed on the premise that theological study should reflect the collective experiences of individuals, such as queer theology or feminist theology, and should serve as a means for redressing the oppression of individuals in the past. But is such an enterprise truly theological if questions about God are secondary to social agenda, no matter how meritorious?

The seminary system was, of course, an initiative of the Council of Trent. Its focus was, and remains, a professional formation of pastors for the sake of exercising governance and sacramental and pastoral ministry in the Church. While the influences of secularism are taken into account –St. Patrick’s Seminary, for example, has as one of the objectives for the M.Div. “mature and theologically

grounded cultural competence”– it is not the purpose of seminary programs to address questions pertinent to a secular culture as such. The horizon of the seminary is the practicing Catholic community. Moreover, while most seminaries welcome lay students, the focus of their programs is service to and within the Christian community; there is little or no emphasis upon lay formation, particularly when we recall that the secular mission of the Church –the mission *ad extra*– has been explicitly identified as a lay initiative by the Council. Unfortunately, seminary education, with its emphasis upon the pastoral care of communities, has been the principal model for lay formation and this has served, in my judgment, to further clericalize the Catholic community. While lay ecclesial ministry has proliferated we have no imagination for the secular mission of the church. Moreover, there is little commerce between theology as it is undertaken in the academy and theology as it is taught in the seminaries.

All of these factors taken together –the proliferation and fragmentation of the theological disciplines, an emphasis upon “scientific” method that is extrinsic to the theological habit, an emphasis upon hermeneutical questions in the place of an emphasis upon the content of revelation, the subordination of theology to social agenda, awarding degrees in theology to unbelievers and a pastoral theology that is oriented exclusively to life within the community– might seem to suggest that to speak of a theological tradition of the Church is no longer possible. If the Church has not responded effectively to the challenges of a secular age one reason might well be that there is little practical coherence to theology itself.

#### 4. Possible directions for theology

“The greatest concern of the Ecumenical Council is this: that the sacred deposit of Christian doctrine should be guarded and taught more efficaciously. “ With these words Bl. John XXIII opened the Vatican Council II. He went on to say that “the substance of the ancient doctrine of the deposit of faith is one thing, and the way in which it is presented is another.” With this end in mind, the council fathers called for a theological instruction according to which students “...should learn to seek the solution of human problems in the light of revelation, to apply its eternal truths to the changing conditions of human affairs, and to express them in a language which people of the modern world will understand.”<sup>2</sup>

It was clearly the desire of the Council to speak directly to the modern world. In the twenty-first century this means to speak to a secular culture imbued of a secular imagination. How can such a conversation proceed? I would like to propose two things:

There is, I believe, an urgent necessity to restore unity to the theological disciplines without compromise to their integrity. The means to this might be made clear through a consideration of the habit of theology. The theological habit does not consist in an application to a particular subject matter; rather it consists in a contemplation of the things that have been revealed and of created things in so far as they are related to God as their source and end. Accordingly, the theological habit is attentive to the human person and to the world in a manner that is altogether different from other sciences or disciplines. Whereas other disciplines will regard the human person, for example, within the temporal horizon of human agency in the world, theology necessarily considers the human person *sub specie aeternitatis*. Accordingly, the theological disciplines share a common perspective upon, might we even say a common appreciation of, the human mystery. Expressed “in a language

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<sup>2</sup> Vatican II, *Optatum Totius*, 19.

which people of the modern world will understand” the “autonomous individual” is a great deal more individual than she likely imagines herself to be; she is unique and unrepeatable in her individuality. Moreover each of the theological disciplines affords a lens through which her uniqueness and unrepeatability is further brought to light.

To proceed in this manner avoids subordinating theology to the pastoral objectives of the Council. One does not contemplate God and the creation for the sake of some further purpose, no matter how noble. Instead, the invitation of theology is to take delight in God and delight in the creation. In this light a secular imagination can, in a way, be affirmed rather than contradicted: the individual is far more an individual than she imagines; society is, indeed, an exchange of goods – divine goods; temporality is the horizon of human action in the world – until we grasp the particularity and unrepeatability of the acting person; there is, indeed, a “space” in which we can judge the social and political order – without the necessity of opting out.

But more is needed if we are to speak “in a language which people of the modern world will understand.” The Council confided the “secular” mission of the Church in a most specific way to the laity, to whom it entrusted the restoration of the creation itself to its original purpose<sup>3</sup>. Accordingly, we must acknowledge that there is a theological enterprise that is properly lay. It consists in the appreciation for the ordinary things of life that is only possible through participation in them. The papal magisterium subsequent to the Council has insisted that the Church has a real secular dimension. Thus in his apostolic exhortation *Christifideles Laici*, Bl. John Paul II insisted that “...for the lay faithful, to be present and active in the world is not only an anthropological and sociological reality, but in a specific way a theological and ecclesiological reality as well. In fact, in their situation in the world God manifests his plan and communicates to them their particular vocation of ‘seeking the Kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and by ordering them according to the plan of God.’”<sup>4</sup>

In this light what is urgently needed is what M. D. Chenu termed “a theology of the world:”

In the final analysis, it is a theology of the world that faith must elaborate if it is to be a theology of God-come-into-the-world. Before all, we must uphold the unity of the divine design against that dualism which has made its way more or less consciously into the mentality and practice of Christians and which appears theologically in the disjunction of nature from grace. The building of the world is not on one side and the advent of the Kingdom of God on the other; terrestrial involvement on one side and, on the other, Christian life with its hope of heaven; nature taken in hand by humanity is not on one side and, on the other, grace superimposed upon nature from the outside; the city is not on one side and the church on the other, separated like two nations by a border where rights and powers meet in conflict; creation is not on one side and, on the other, the Incarnation.<sup>5</sup>

Faith can never concede that there is any age – or anyone– for whom the Gospel is inaccessible. A secular age will require a secular theology, a theology of the world. Such an undertaking is not inimical to theology but will depend upon a renewed confidence in the Revelation itself and the confident application of the theological habit whereby all things are referred to God and are illumined in their uniqueness and particularity.

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. *Christifideles Laici*, 14.

<sup>4</sup> *Christifideles Laici*, 15.

<sup>5</sup> “The Need for a Theology of the World” *Great Ideas Today*, 1967.