

The Value of Theology [with Replies]

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The Value of Theology

The Irish Church has been criticized for its lack of theological substance. Of recent years, on the other hand, there has been quite a growth in the study of theology both at the formal student level and at the more informal adult level. It seems timely to ask how far theology is of value at the various levels of personal development, Church life and public good.

The Furrow has asked a number of people from various backgrounds what value, in their opinion, theology has for the individual, for the Church, for society. Their replies are given below.

—Editor

1. What value does theology have for the individual in intellectual development, in career prospects, in moral maturity, in personal holiness?

EAMONN CONWAY, a priest of the archdiocese of Tuam and Head of Department, Theology and Religious Studies, Mary Immaculate College, University of Limerick, replies:

From comments in class I knew that one of my more critical enquiring students was struggling with the credibility of religious truth claims. Recently, I asked him if he intends to continue with theology. To my surprise, he said he did. He intends to take both philosophy and theology to degree level. I found myself wanting to justify this by saying how theology graduates have many valuable transferable skills; how they are recognized as being able to provide unique ‘thought leadership’ in society; how they are able to ‘think outside the box’. This did not impress him at all. He said that university was too precious to waste on studying something that did not interest him. Only philosophy and theology provided the landscape and horizon that he needed against which he could orientate himself and explore his deeper questions.

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The truth is,
my wrinkled medieval Queen,
your ageless glory
is that you sleep with the King. (John Shea)

Theology helps us to discover who we are by helping us discover who God is and vice versa. As the study of an incarnate God, its value lies in its capacity to humanize us. Specifically, in contemporary culture, good theology offers an antidote to relativism and fundamentalism, both of which short-circuit the risky adventure of becoming human. The dangers of relativism include a 'cheerful ahistoricity' (Lakeland) prevalent among many young students, as well as the reduction of the interpretation of human experience to 'mere emotivist expressions of personal preference' of which M. P. Gallagher speaks. Equally important today is theology as a critique of fundamentalism both in Church and in society. While beliefs might be firmly held, faith is all about letting go. Good theology teaches us to surrender to a meaning that can never be defined, categorized, exhausted. It teaches people to live with uncertainty, ambiguity and failure.

Theology can also lead people to truth and freedom. However, theological knowledge is not enough. Knowledge in itself is rarely transformative. Only love is. This is why theology must always be engaged in as an activity and in a community setting.

Most undergraduates proceed to postgraduate studies of one kind or another. The study of theology inevitably involves an introduction to various methodologies (biblical studies, fundamental theology etc). This leaves graduates well placed for further studies in an increasingly interdisciplinary postgraduate context. Recent theology graduates from the University of Limerick have taken masters courses at the Irish Centre for Human Rights in NUI Galway, as well as courses at our own Centre for Culture, Technology & Values at the Theology & Religious Studies Department in Limerick.

BAIRBRE DE BÚRCA, *active in community life in her neighbourhood and living at 9 Balally Close, Dublin 16, replies:*

Is theology like collecting butterflies, an enjoyable hobby but a rare aberration for the few or does it have a role like the drop of salt or the teaspoon of yeast, to add zest and change flavour way beyond its ratio to a greater mass? While acknowledging the particular developmental quality it has been for me, I just don't know the answer to that in general terms. Its study holds huge potential to effect change, as thinking about issues in the light of the gospel

message certainly challenges accepted ways of being. The energy that comes from the model of Jesus, as a way of living our humanity and the taking on of meaningful stewardship of the earth in the light of the story of creation seems badly needed. But with the emphasis still resting on Canon Law and institutional conformity, theologians, whether lay or clerical, male or female, seem rather like lone voices crying in the wilderness.

I stumbled on theology for lay people accidentally through listening to the radio one morning about twenty years ago. Fr Enda McDonagh, who was being interviewed by Marian Finucane, mentioned a course, which would interest those who might be searching for God. I applied for it, without any real clue as to what might be in store for me.

It turned out to be *The Furrow* Theology Week, an intense introduction for a rookie, to the mysteries and wonders of theological debate. I was at a distinct disadvantage on many levels. I had no vocabulary with which to understand any of the theological terms. For the first time I realized that early learning is of such vital importance, and that exposure to language/literature/concepts at an early age gives one a hook on which to hang developing knowledge. I was missing a vital key; the language of God and Church.

Life had not equipped me then to mix with theologians, ambassadors, bishops, political leaders and academics, intellectuals all, it seemed, who appeared to make up the majority of the one hundred or so participants. My primary occupation at that time was the nurturing and rearing of seven young children at home. While edified that so many eminent leaders were also interested in the God search, I found it alienating and difficult to stay there, as I felt intimidated and painfully shy. It was an experience of acute isolation among the élite.

While I couldn't speak, I did listen intently. About day five, the endurance paid off. I came to a stunning moment of connection with the material being presented. The lecture was about the 'washing of the feet' gospel story. As the lecturer unpacked it, making links between this simple loving gesture and the Godhead, I began to realize that this indeed was very familiar territory, from my lived experience, not just in my own home but also from within the community in which I lived. We too served each other in little and big ways as we were growing in relationship. I heard the theologian say that the washing of the feet came before the breaking of the bread, as an essential ingredient for Eucharist. I instantly knew the truth of that. We, neighbours and family members, lived the washing part. Yet our ways of living seemed of little relevance when it came to sharing Sunday

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Eucharist, as there was no authentic connection between our lives as lived on weekdays, and our Sunday eucharistic gathering.

The awakening of my inner eye to the connection of the stories of scripture with the ordinary events of life showed me a way to begin to enter into the mystery of who God is. The sacred was present in the ordinary events of family life: washing feet, eating, talking, visiting cousins, walking the road with friends. If this is what theology was about, I was hooked. It drew me into further study and reflection ... faith seeking understanding.

When I became freer from home obligations, I attended the Milltown Institute full time for a year's course. I found it marvelous. It yielded the essential tool of 'Godspeak'. *Gaudium et Spes* and *Lumen Gentium* caught my imagination and spurred me into becoming pro-active in parish development and renewal locally. Ecumenism, feminist and liberation theology, social justice, equality, the care of the earth, a theology of sexuality, of marriage, these have become familiar terms as I slowly grow in consciousness.

Despite the initial obstacles of language, a sense of élitism and the lack of a building base from second-level schooling, the study of theology for adults can become a fresh and exhilarating experience as one opens to receive new ideas, to feel stirrings of excitement, passion, flashes of illumination. It engages one on a journey of discovery. Like Plato's story of the cave, one begins to engage with the real rather than stay in shadowy safety. One dares to dabble with thinking more deeply.

As inner liberation occurs one is faced with the dilemma of solving moral issues for oneself, slowly and painfully. Wrestling to discover the essence of truth in difficult situations, which hitherto were dictated by some else's perceived and often male wisdom, is more difficult than I ever imagined. It is humbling and rewarding. It also quietens the strident voice of certainty.

Sadly at present, serious career prospects for suitably qualified lay theologians are non-viable. There does not yet exist in the Church family a way of fairness and equality of opportunity as between the lay and the clerical in employment. With diocesan job contracts lasting only three or at the most five years at the whim of a bishop, there is little encouragement for full-time commitment, as this would not keep a family in much security.

DENIS O'CALLAGHAN, *Emeritus Professor of Moral Theology at Maynooth and parish priest of Mallow, Co. Cork, replies:*

Intellectual Development. In other countries the person with an enquiring mind would turn to philosophy. In the context of our Irish culture such a person would turn to theology. An analysis of

the basis of Christian or, more precisely, Catholic faith is a mind-enhancing experience. The interchange in a group of people so engaged is stimulating – and we Irish enjoy argument. In the adult education groups in my experience this mind-enhancing factor is the principal motive.

Career Prospects. This would be the motive paramount for those who aim to teach religion. The various university Outreach programmes meet this academic concern. Such programmes have multiplied in recent years.

Moral Maturity. This holds for those who are in mode of debating the pros and cons of solutions to current ethical problems. It is less intellectually demanding than the intellectual development described above and has a focus for the less enquiring mind.

Personal Holiness. This motive would drive Bible study groups and foster the prayer group movement, which is now well established.

OLIVER MALONEY, *former Director General of RTE, living at 60 Highfield Road, Rathgar, Dublin 6, replies:*

Theology has been described as a fragile discipline, more like a raft bobbing on the waves of the sea than a pyramid based on solid ground.¹ I like this image. It captures well the restlessness of the theological quest, the searching and questioning for meaning and purpose in our lives, and the provisional nature of many of our conclusions. And, yet, the image is incomplete. It fails to communicate how theology enables the person of faith to respect the profound mystery of life while at the same time providing a secure foundation for *the hope that is in us* (1 Peter 3:15).

Theology shares all the scholarly aims of the science – historical precision, conceptual rigour, interpretative consistency etc., while being also particularly sensitive to the insights of the creative arts. Seen in this way, the value of theology for intellectual development can be considerable. It would be a mistake, however, to see theology as simply an intellectual exercise. Bernard Lonergan has shown that doing theology involves the religious conversion of the whole person. I have seen this conversion in many people. It begins with a growing passion for and commitment to the theological enterprise itself. The human flourishing to which this gives rise, is, in my experience, remarkable. It produces people who are intellectually confident, morally mature, who think for themselves, and are not the prisoners of received ideas. For many it may not be an easy journey; but the

1. Francis Fiorenza, *Systematic Theology: Roman Catholic Perspectives* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1992), p. 5.

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dialogue and exchange which is characteristic of that journey leads for the most part to reflection and shared prayer and ultimately to an experience that is life-transforming.

The dialogical element is important to this process because theology is about more than providing answers to questions. It is about locating oneself within a particular tradition of questioning and exchange. And it is precisely because students of theology can locate themselves within the Christian tradition and narrative that they are normally able to appropriate the gospel faith and make it their own. This is growth in holiness. What may have started as a search for knowledge becomes a way of life, a lens through which to view the world. The Emeritus Professor of Theology at Cambridge University, Nicholas Lash, wrote recently that ordinary Christians cannot afford not to learn theology.² I would go further. I believe that the Church risks losing many more adherents if it fails to present faith and the concept of God in ways that speak to the freedom-conscious and scientifically-minded people of our time.

JOHN LITTLETON, *President of the National Conference of Priests of Ireland, and a priest of the archdiocese of Cashel and Emlý, where he is Director of Adult Religious Education, replies:*

Personal faith is a prerequisite for doing theology. This contrasts with subjects such as religious studies, comparative religion, and philosophy of religion, which can be studied without faith. When, believing in God, we explore the mystery of God, we are doing theology. In terms of intellectual development, theology offers an alternative – and necessary – approach to understanding reality. Theological language is a metaphorical language. It is a faith language dealing with belief in God. Belief in God is not like other types of belief because God's existence cannot be proven scientifically. A scientific approach to reality is only one of several possible approaches. The scientific and theological world views are complementary rather than incompatible.

Thus theology challenges the intellect to appreciate other realms of reality that transcend the merely physical world and ordinary experiences. It brings balance to intellectual activity because it encourages people to think in ways that are not based on the physical world. Theology invites the mind to focus on the ultimate meaning of human life and existence. Students of theology are challenged to examine religious ideas in a positive way. It has often been argued that for those people who believe in God, no proof is necessary, and that for those people who do not believe in God, no proof is ever convincing.

2. See *Priests and People*, October 2001.

THE VALUE OF THEOLOGY

There are many career options available to those who have studied theology. Traditionally (at least in Roman Catholicism), the study of theology was an activity for priests, seminarians and religious. Nowadays, however, there is an increasing interest in theology among the laity – as evidenced by the ever-expanding number of theology programmes and courses available in colleges and other educational centres. Many people wish to enrich their faith by learning and understanding more about God who is the basis of their value system.

People who study theology to degree level may consider the possibility of working in education, especially with the recent inclusion of religious education as an examination subject in the secondary school curriculum. A theology qualification also provides people with an opportunity to work professionally in many pastoral settings. These may include chaplaincy (where a prior study of theology is required for admission to clinical pastoral education programmes), adult faith formation, youth ministry, and working with various parish groups (for example, liturgy groups and pre-sacramental preparation groups).

Significantly, those working in the business world and in communications/journalism would benefit considerably from some theological competence because most business practices and communications issues need the application of ethical principles. Christian morality demands that people should not be badly treated for the sake of profit. In addition, the intellectual rigour provided by a study of theology is useful in many careers.

Theology is beneficial to people in their moral development and personal holiness because theological insight enables people to question the moral basis of aspects of their daily lives, often resulting in changes of attitude and behaviour. Genuine Christian faith exerts a profound influence in forming conscience and establishing moral norms. Theological reflection offers people both a sense of the sacred and a sense of sin. At a time when these senses are diminishing, there is more than ever a need for theological thinking in everyday life. Theological reflection is a prayerful activity, facilitating people in their personal relationships with God. It develops the spiritual resources that are essential to a life of holiness.

2. What value does theology have for the Church, in faith understanding and development, in liturgical practice and renewal, in structure development or reform?

EAMONN CONWAY

The Church is currently facing institutional meltdown. In due course a new form of Church will emerge, hopefully a better

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embodiment of Christ and of Christian values. In turn, this new structure will also need reform.¹ Theology's task is continually to liberate the Church from structures of thought that have become 'petrified, old and empty' (Rahner).² It is also theology's role to enquire whether or not ecclesial change and development is faithful (a) to the originating experience of Jesus and the Christian community; (b) to the dynamic presence of Christ in the living faith of people today. Finally, it is theology's task to provide the Christian community with the means to give an account of its hope (1 Peter 3:15).

In the present crisis, ordinary Church members as well as victims of abuse of one kind or another have experienced much pain, hurt and disappointment. In addition, generations of young, and not so young, hungering for spiritual nourishment, are searching elsewhere. This could have been prevented if change had been freely chosen rather than forced upon the Church. For over half a century now, theologians have been writing about everything from a more authentic theology of human sexuality to more participative structures of leadership. Why have theologians been so ineffectual? Partly because as scholars we think that we have done our job when we have written nice articles and books, just as those in charge of institutions believe their job is done when they issue policy statements. Partly too, because of the sinful human heart's resistance to change, desire for power and fear of the unfamiliar, often underpinned by an ideology masquerading as a God-given and therefore unquestionable theology.

Change, whether personal or institutional, is scary. Theology will affect transformation if it not merely produces paper but engages people in a process. This is why the process of theological reflection, common in many third-level theology departments today, is of central importance. But the process needs to leave its academic nursery and find a home among parish communities as well as among those engaged in leadership within the Church.

BAIRBRE DE BÚRCA

The fruits of theology are many. It can widen faith understanding to include the insights of other faiths, especially Judaism, the genetic base for Christianity. Knowing the faith story in a multi-

1. The Church, to which we are all called in Christ Jesus, and in which we acquire sanctity through the grace of God, will attain its full perfection only in the glory of heaven ... until there shall be new heavens and a new earth in which justice dwells, the pilgrim Church in her sacraments and institutions, which pertain to this present time, has the appearance of this world which is passing and she herself dwells among creatures who groan and travail in pain until now and await the revelation of the sons of God (*Lumen Gentium* 48).

2. On the theology of hope, *Theological investigations* 10, pp. 258-9.

layered way facilitates greater acceptance of one's own and other traditions. It has led some people into engagement with the process of renewal in the Church at local and diocesan level, equipped with the code of language and greater enthusiasm for the possibilities of Christianity. It has led others from the excitement of possibility to a state of despondency of ever effecting change or growth and a greater realization that so often the Church on earth has failed the call of its theological mission. The Church in its present structure is too dependent on the whim of the incumbent clergy to experience the full effect of the present wave of recruits to theology. I am fortunate to live in a parish where all are welcome to participate in shaping the life of the parish. It is not so in many places.

My bookshelves now hold a broad range of theological material. While many are by Catholic authors, other Christian denominations, Jewish and Buddhists authors are well represented. I have nothing as yet from Islamic sources. Several are written by women. Some of the authors are 'respectable'. Some have been strangely silenced by Rome. Very few priest theologians have reached the rank of bishop despite being at the forefront of mediating scripture for the times we live in. This does pose a question about the fate of theologians, who seem at greater risk of disapproval, censure and silencing by the Church authority, the more radical the connections that they make with the gospel.

DENIS O'CALLAGHAN

Faith understanding/development. This is a major felt need for those Irish people who appreciate that their knowledge of the Christian faith is seriously lacking. The problem today is that they have little foundation on which to build. There has been so little instruction in the school programmes – and homilies are often so thin in content. Lay people in Ireland compare badly with those in Britain when it comes to intervening in public debate on matters of faith.

Liturgical practice and renewal. Anyone engaged in liturgical re-ordering of a cathedral (as I am!) realizes what a mountain we have to climb to get any appreciation from the worshipping/celebrating community. The congregation is quite happy to leave liturgy to the priest and to the various ministries which operate around the altar. The congregation remain silent observers. The change to the vernacular did not alter that.

Structural development/reform. I am not quite sure what is in mind here. Certainly people are becoming more involved in what happens in their parishes even though we still remain a very

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clerical Church. The lot of salaried lay professional personnel is not a happy one in Ireland. Because they are not priests they have a difficult time to be taken seriously by lay people and the priests do not treat them with the respect due to colleagues in ministry. Priests see them as a threat – particularly when they are better qualified in theology and liturgy and challenge us with new ideas which require action from us. Deacons? If these are seen as an add-on cohort of semipriests the lay professionals will be further moved out from the centre. The only solution is that the diocese work through a challenging but essential process, the process of producing a really effective Pastoral Plan. In this the various ministries will see how they relate to one another in a common strategy. This applies above all to those engaged professionally in lay ministry – and to deacons, who otherwise would be glorified altar servers. John Paul II on the occasion of the Irish Quinquennial Visit stressed for all dioceses the need of a Pastoral Plan. Have there been any takers? Assemblies yes. Pastoral Plans no.

OLIVER MALONEY

Theology is a faith activity and takes a faith stance. Importantly, it does so within a community of faith. Unless there is this communal dimension, theology can quickly lapse into the idle speculations of individuals and lose its essential ecclesial dimension. The community out of which our faith grows and develops has a history and tradition beginning with the community of the disciples of Jesus Christ. In a sense all theologies consist of a reflection in different times and cultures on the lives and beliefs of that first faith community as recorded in the pages of the New Testament.

There is a dynamic element of faith which we in the Roman Church have been slow to acknowledge. The faith of the first community was conditioned by time, place and culture, and new insights and fresh understandings of that faith were bound to emerge as Christians through the ages sought to interpret their own varying life experiences in the light of the Gospel. Yet while theologians have long accepted that every belief has its own history of development and change, the so-called simple faithful are still presented with a picture of a Church whose teachings have remained in the same forms from the very beginning. That is not just patronizing and ahistorical; it runs dangerously close to an ideological perversion of the Christian tradition. The business of Church leaders should be to help laypeople towards an adult and mature faith; to help them to think cogently and honestly about their faith, and to listen intently to the reflections which such cogent and honest thinking produces. How else can the Church attempt to read the signs of the times?

THE VALUE OF THEOLOGY

Theology has a value also in the area of liturgical practice and renewal. The liturgy is an expression of thanks and praise for the community's experience of God's grace and mercy in their everyday lives. For the liturgy to be authentic, the community must have some sense of ownership of that liturgy. Its members must find in it some resonances of their own experiences, culture and language. A liturgy which sacrifices these considerations in the interests of form and uniformity is empty and does not give life. One might reasonably ask what purpose is served by a group of Roman prelates prescribing in minute detail how, say, a rural community in the west of Ireland should reflect their experience of God in their liturgical celebrations? Is this about facilitating the giving of heartfelt glory to God, or is it about order, control, power and institutional dominance? The value of theology in this area is in reminding us constantly that all in the Church have but one task – the proclamation of the crucified Jesus as the Risen Christ; and that the truth at the core of this belief is not necessarily compromised by proclaiming it in diverse ways.

In present circumstances I would have to say that the value of theology in structural development/reform of the Church is problematical. In my experience, Church leaders have lost the capacity to listen. Instead, institutional interests are valued above the free and fearless search for truth. While no sensible person would deny the need for maintaining a balance between order and freedom in the Church, that relationship is now hopelessly unbalanced. In *Gaudium et Spes* (par 17) the Council fathers made it clear where their sympathies lay – *authentic freedom is an exceptional sign of the divine image within men* (my emphasis). That teaching has been quietly shelved in favour of the pursuit of agendas that owe more to issues of power than theology. How easily we forget that a bureaucratic mindset is precisely what Jesus condemned!

JOHN LITTLETON

Theology is essentially an ecclesial activity. In addition to faith being an absolute prerequisite, Christian theology may only be studied in its truest sense by people who belong to an ecclesial tradition. The faith community is always relevant to the theological enterprise because it provides the appropriate context and preserves the inherited tradition. Theology is the critical reflection of the Christian community on the action of making God's future Kingdom visibly present in the world. It is faith seeking understanding of its own action

To some degree, the future of the Church depends on a well-educated and articulate laity. For so long, the laity did not have the possibility of studying the faith at a serious level. Consequently,

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they depended very much on the clergy to inform them about the Church's teaching and its application to daily living because, apart from teachers, the clergy were the only people trained to teach the faith. After people had finished their school education, the main opportunity for further faith development was through Sunday sermons.

In the past, members of the laity were not involved in the thinking or administration of the Church. Their role was to receive what was handed down to them. The connection between going to church on Sundays and living a Christian life during the week was not always adequately emphasized, so it became easy to compartmentalize different areas of life. The practice of the faith was confined to church-going where people said their prayers and engaged in various devotional practices.

Over the last forty years, however, attitudes have changed. Many people are no longer even interested in religion. We live in an increasingly secular world. The decline in the numbers of people attending church liturgies has increased dramatically. Many people dismiss the Church and all organized religion as something irrelevant.

However, this is not the complete story. Nowadays, there are many people who appreciate the relevance – indeed the necessity – of linking belief in God with their religious practice, and even with all other areas of their lives. Many people, conscious of their baptismal dignity, are again being motivated to think seriously about God and their religious faith. Moreover, a growing number of people are becoming committed members of their parish communities, and they actively seek involvement with parish activities. For them, participation in the Church's life and ministry is worthwhile. A greater theological awareness offers the laity a better understanding of the Church's mission and their collaborative role in that mission which includes participation in the liturgy and involvement in social, ethical and intellectual enhancement.

3. What value does theology have for society, in developing civic and social conscience, in preserving and expending the best of its traditions, in providing a continuing critique for society?

EAMONN CONWAY

So far, the value of theology to Irish society has been diminished for three reasons. The first is the relative absence of theology from Irish university campuses and the negative effect this has on the development of an informed and critical Irish Catholic intellectual tradition. There could have been chairs of theology at NUI

Colleges within the provisions of the 1908 Act and university authorities in the past were more open to theology and to co-operation with ecclesiastical authorities than they were given credit for. It did not happen because ecclesiastical authorities feared the loss of control. As Dermot Keogh has noted, 'it is frustrating to speculate what would have happened in the 1960s if the best and the brightest had been recruited to teach theology in the NUI system'.¹ Now, as university campuses open to theology their lecture halls, and equally importantly, their financial coffers, we find that the university itself has all but lost its soul. Newman had hoped that the university, would 'refuse to be informed by any end or absorbed into any art'. Today the university is increasingly and short-sightedly at the service of 'homo economicus'. Paradoxically, this provides a new challenge to third-level colleges that claim to have a denominational ethos. They need to ask precisely what this means and ensure that they are making a distinctive and liberating contribution to university education in Ireland.

The second reason as to why theology has not yet attained a distinctive voice in Irish society is self-censorship, a largely self-imposed reluctance to express a view because of internalized critical voices and/or fear of one's peers. As more lay people take up posts in theology departments this should change.

The third reason is that theologians in the past, snugly ensconced in seminaries, concentrated on inner-Church questions, of interest only to a small number of uncritical believers. Only a few theologians in Ireland attempted to engage in public debate and influence public policy.

The Church's loss of dominative power has opened up new avenues for theology in society. One of these is in terms of relating to members of what we might call 'Generation Why?' These young people escaped much of the excesses of the Church's institutional power. Their struggle is not to shake off ecclesial baggage; it is to avoid allowing themselves to be defined purely in economic terms. Many of them experience the Spirit calling them to a deeper self-understanding and they are earnestly searching for a community that will support the emergence of a more fragile but authentic self. The key task for theology today is to support the emergence of new forms of Christian community that are appealing to and supportive of critical, enquiring young people.

At the level of public policy, there is growing concern that Ireland's economic development will not only be successful but

1. Cf Dermot Keogh, 'Catholics and the "Godless" Colleges, 1845-1995' in P. Corkery and Fiachra Long (eds.) *Theology in the University* (Dublin: Dominican Publications, 1997), p. 100.

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sustainable. Sustainable development means attending to what is termed the 'socio-technical environment' and to 'human and social capital'. In other words, to human beings, and to their working and social environment. If Ireland is to continue to develop, it will need 'high-quality, broadly educated, thinking, challenging, mature people who contribute actively to society'.² The paradigm is still largely economic; it nonetheless provides an opportunity for theology. 'Our educational problem is to produce free men, not hordes of uncultivated, trained technicians' (Mortimer Adler). Christian faith is a call to the fullness of personal human freedom and responsible social engagement. It is the task of theology to help create vibrant communities that present it as such.

BAIRBRE DE BÚRCA

Does theology benefit society? I have certainly been prodded into action on behalf of people with a mental handicap, to organize personal development courses for women, and to work actively in the local community. I have become sensitized to the complexity of the some of the issues of today. I can no longer say so glibly, 'well, that doesn't bother me'.

But a theology of other times is still strongly present in the Church's thinking on sexuality. This has been hugely influential in the shaping of society. It is agonizing to ponder the present shattering fallout from that repression. It is hard to honour the sacred in those involved in the abuse of power. There is pain in knowing how little the feminine has entered into the understanding of what it is to be human, through centuries of the 'Fathers' influence. Sexual and gender ethics need a new mindset, a new theology.

Many people around me struggle and often live with issues of poverty, sexuality, gender, justice, exclusion from the mainstream of society. Without the luxury of theological exposure or affiliation to a particular Church, they so often have a quality of loving that I don't possess. Theology does not appear to have much value for them.

DENIS O'CALLAGHAN

Developing civic and social conscience. Of a certainty, study of the faith, and the imperatives of the faith, should be at the very core of Christian conscience. But does it take place in Ireland? Look at the array of pastoral letters – *Work is the Key, Prosperity*

2. Cf. Brendan Tuohy, 'Liberal Education for a Technological World?' Paper given at a seminar 'Values in Education and Public Policy', Centre For Culture, Technology & Values, MICUL, 25 April 2002. Cf <http://cctv.mic.ul.ie/seminars.html>

with a Purpose etc. etc. They may as well not have been published. The CORI team led by Fr Seán Healy has made a big impact but that impact is secular of its nature with little or no faith content. The one area where gospel values have given strong motivation is in regard to Third World poverty – note the effect of the coalition of Christian groups for the lifting of the burden of debt. Christian concern had also driven care for the environment – instance Fr Seán McDonagh.

Preserving and powering the best of a society's traditions. This is a vision, true for those who are convinced of the power of the Christian faith, which centres on Christ as the Way, the Truth and the Life, as the Alpha and the Omega, as the source of meaning for all creation. We saw this vision in the writings of Belloc and Chesterton at a time when optimism reigned. We see it supremely in the words of John Paul II, right from his first encyclical, *Christ the Redeemer*. Coming from the oppressed Church in Poland it is evident that he must have been disappointed in how the West had debased the truth that should make one free. This vision would achieve credibility for the Christian message as nothing else would. Unfortunately the Church is obsessed with its own concerns.

Providing a continuing critique for society. This certainly for the Christian is what the faith should achieve in its social dimension – as per Vatican II, *The Church in the Modern World*. Again the sheaf of social pastorals from the Irish Bishops' Conference is absolutely on target. But they did not impact on public notice to any worthwhile extent. The media reported them in the most perfunctory fashion – in stark contrast to anything about sex!

OLIVER MALONEY

The context for theology is cultural as well as religious. Theological reflection occurs when faith encounters a culture of whatever kind – political, artistic, scientific, economic or social. There are, therefore, many theologies each bringing a faith commitment to bear on aspects of a particular culture.

Theology is of particular value in developing civil and social conscience, but only if used in a careful and nuanced way. Care is needed because Church theologians who impart the fruits of their own learning to society may not arrogate to themselves the role of the conscience of that society. They, too, must be prepared to learn. Many of the core values prized by modern societies such as respect for the dignity of the human person, justice and freedom have their origins in the Christian story. Without the context of that story, these values are simply words devoid of content. Theology can provide context as well as content.

THE FURROW

In a modern world of rapid change and a barely-disguised disdain for what the past has to offer, the Church is to be commended on the care it takes to preserve and develop the best of its own traditions. It has much to teach society in this regard not least in the area of moral discourse. The American Jesuit theologian John Courtney Murray, in his book *We Hold These Truths* (p. 164), makes the point that, from a moral point of view, civil law enforces only what is minimally acceptable to ensure the health of the social order. It does not look to what is morally desirable. Theology can do much to point society towards this higher goal.

Theology can, therefore, provide an ongoing critique of society but, for that to be of value, theology must always start with itself. Good theology is always self-critical. It will look first to how the Church lives the values which theologians proclaim in her name. For example, a Church which preaches justice but fails to practise it within its own sphere of influence will be discredited. Theologians who write about perceived inadequacies in society should be sensitive to the complexities of much human living and also to the tenuous nature of faith itself. A measure of humility would seem to me to be an appropriate stance because while we as Church believe in the truth of what we profess, we have by no means exhausted that truth and we have still much to learn from mutually respectful discourse with the wider society.

JOHN LITTLETON

The main value of theology for society is that it provides a much needed framework for critiquing society. Christian theology argues that true authority is to be found in witness, not power. It challenges the leaders of society to behave responsibly towards all people in their care. Theology has much to teach us about ethics in public life and accountability. Theology's emphasis on the truth has relevance in an era where corruption and dishonesty are prevalent throughout all institutions in society, including the Church.

Social justice and human rights are always on the agenda for theological discourse. Theology offers a valuable critique of the current racism and sectarianism in Irish society. It challenges people to reconsider their attitudes towards refugees and members of the travelling community. Theology has much to contribute to the bioethical and ecological debates where, occasionally, human life and the environment become devalued. It teaches us that we are not in complete control of our destiny.

A central task of theology is to call society 'back to basics' so that, rediscovering the truth, society can continue to make great advances in the future while conserving the best of what the past

has to offer. In short, theology argues convincingly that materialism and individualism must be replaced by altruism. Also, as society renews its appreciation of the transcendent and the sacred with a corresponding respect for the dignity of all persons, then the world may become a safer and a better place to live.

Concluding comments. The challenge of Christian theology today is to bring the message and person of Jesus Christ – alive in his followers – to bear on everyday living. For the Christian, the purpose of life is to know, love and serve God and to be happy with him forever in heaven. Just as we try to be well informed and mature in other areas of our lives, we need constantly to nourish our faith. By engaging in prayerful reflection and debate, we are doing theology. Doing theology is more than simply learning; it is about developing our faith and leading the faith of others towards maturity. As we do theology, we involve ourselves in a living, dynamic faith that fully utilizes God's gifts of reason and intellect.

Theology is about how we think of the world and ourselves within the context of what we know and believe about God. It offers us a 'Why' and it has often been said that 'those who have a 'Why' to live can bear with almost any 'How'. The study of theology is clearly relevant to life, work and faith, and so theology has value for every committed believer, for the Church and for society.

Like you and me. It is my contention that we are all diminished by the presence of child sexual abuse in our world and if we really care about our children we have a collective responsibility to find a solution. There is a school of thought, which holds that we adults, through many of our ways of relating and management of our social affairs, form part of the context or climate in which this problem can thrive. I know we don't like to hear this. It is much easier when this problem has nothing to do with us but is about those out there, 'sick' people doing 'perverse' things to children. Not so, I am afraid. Whether we like it or not what is remarkable about men who perpetrate abuse is just how ordinary they are, just like you and me. If we are serious about protecting children we have got to look more closely at this situation.

—MARIE KEENAN, 'The Web of Human Suffering' (*Child Sexual Abuse: Papers from NCPI Conference, Athlone 1999*) p. 10