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Theology for the Sake of Mission

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Introduction

'Throughout human history,' says the late Bishop Stephen Neill, 'religion and culture have been inextricably connected. There has never yet been a great religion which did not find its expression in a great culture. There has never yet been a great culture which did not have deep roots in a religion'.¹ He wonders, however, whether Marxism (and, we might add, western secularism) might not prove to be an exception.

What is true in general for religion is true also for Christian theology. In its long pilgrimage it has both shaped and been shaped by many elements of culture. The most obvious example, perhaps, comes in the Chalcedonian definition of the two natures in Christ. Such clauses as 'consubstantial (*homoousion*) with the Father' and 'the property of each nature being preserved and concurring in one person (*prosopon*) and one substance (*hypostasis*)', reflect language and categories taken from the Greek metaphysical systems.

In the last two centuries theology in the West has been variously influenced by positivism, Hegelian dialectic, existentialism and structuralism. Moltmann's epic, *A Theology of Hope*, was written largely as a response to the neo-Marxism of Ernst Bloch; Cone's, *Black Theology and Black Power*, to the growing black consciousness which was both the cause and the result of the civil rights' movement in the USA; Gutierrez's, *A Theology of Liberation*, to the failure of developmental policies in Latin America during the 1960s, and Mary Daly's *Beyond God the Father* to the Feminist movement.

The interaction between theology and culture has become a more conscious process now that the disciplines of cultural anthropology and the sociology of knowledge have demonstrated the way in which thought is conditioned by the social context in which it takes place. Many theologians

1 J. Stott and R. Coote, 'Down to Earth', *Studies in Christianity and Culture*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids 1980, p 1.

today, especially in the Third World, are making a virtue out of this necessity, consciously doing theological reflection from an acknowledged historical or intellectual perspective.

All theology worthy of the name is an attempt to communicate, in a language and categories that ordinary people can recognise, the given facts of God's revelation in a way which truly illuminates the meaning of the Gospel. The process, borrowing from the science of linguistics, has sometimes been described as using 'dynamic equivalents'. The intention is to convey to contemporary listeners, using appropriate cultural forms, meanings equivalent to those found in the original transmission of revelation.

Linking a message given in one cultural context to another culture is an enterprise involving risk. The interpreter needs to bear in mind at least three questions:

1. Is the meaning the same?
2. Are the dynamic equivalent forms appropriate to the contemporary culture?
3. Do the forms facilitate or obscure communication?

Before investigating the nature of the theological task in more detail, we will look briefly at the main features of culture and how it operates.

Taking Account of Culture

Culture is human life expressed in a variety of outward forms, values and religious and ideological beliefs. It can be described as a series of layers. At the centre is the cosmology of the culture (a world view or ideology which seeks to address and answer ultimate questions). There is an inner layer which takes the form of a set of values, derived from the cosmology, whose purpose is to regulate human relationships. A good example of this would be the values which determine the place of women in society. Thirdly, there is an outer layer, derived from the set of values which is constituted by human institutions such as the family, laws, education and the economic system.

In Western secular society, because of the intellectual impact made by the scientific method and philosophical naturalism, there is no longer much conscious adherence to a centre layer. This has made theology's task particularly difficult, for its subject-matter is an all-embracing cosmology, whereas the culture in general seems to have abandoned the belief that there is a source of truth which gives final answers to ultimate questions. As a result, some theologians (in Britain, perhaps most notably Don Cupitt) have also abandoned any attempt to articulate Christian faith in terms of a world-view. Instead they concentrate their attention on what remains of culture, namely its values and institutions.

The task, however, is not made any easier by the fact that when the central layer is missing, the inner layer of values is in a constant flux (one example would be the changes in attitude towards freedom and discipline in bringing up children).

The loss of an integrated intellectual framework to help society find new meaning for itself and cohere as a mature human community has led to a kind of do-it-yourself mentality. The choice between what Lesslie Newbigin calls 'faith commitments'¹ is now very wide.

Culture, then, is a complex, interlocking, mutually-influencing set of fundamental beliefs, codes of behaviour, customs, art forms and institutions. It determines, to a large extent, what we believe to be true and false, good and bad, important and insignificant, and how we relate to people of other cultures. Clearly the gospel can only be heard by people from within their culture. If they believe it they then have to work out its implications and significance in terms of their culture.² The Willowbank Report sums up the process in the following way:

Today's readers cannot come to the text (of Scripture) in a personal vacuum, and should not try to. Instead they should come with an awareness of concerns stemming from their cultural background, personal situation, and responsibility to others. These concerns will influence the questions which are put to the Scriptures. What is received back, however, will not be answers only, but more questions. As we address Scripture, Scripture addresses us. We find that our culturally conditioned presuppositions are being challenged and our questions corrected. In fact we are compelled to reformulate our previous questions and to ask fresh ones. So the living interaction proceeds.³

The Western Captivity of Theology

This living interaction, of which the Willowbank Report speaks is of the essence of the theological task. However, the Church around the world has inherited a tradition of doing theology from Western academic institutions which may hinder rather than aid the task.

The theological enterprise, as conducted in the West, has come to be seen as the norm for all serious theological reflection. Yet, today more than ever before, serious questions are being asked about this tradition of theology and in particular the cultural assumptions on which it is based. Before stating the main criticisms we need to outline briefly the chief characteristics of Western theology.

1 *The Other side of 1984*, World Council of Churches, Geneva 1984.

2 Cf. Vincent J. Donovan, *Christianity Rediscovered*, SCM, London 1978.

3 The Willowbank Report was part of the fruit of an international consultation on the Gospel and culture held in Bermuda in 1978. Under the auspices of the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelisation it brought together probably the most culturally representative group of evangelical Christians from across the world ever gathered to consider this topic in depth. The full collection of conference papers as well as the report itself are published in J. Stott and R. Coote, *op. cit.*

1. *Domination by the method of rational, historical investigation*

The object of theological work is mainly either ancient texts or the conceptual thinking of other scholars. The widely accepted critical approach to the Bible assumes that objective research can only be guaranteed if the text is treated as if it were no different from other ancient literature. 'Critical' interpretation occurs almost exclusively within the narrow range of a small circle of professionals, whose main objective apparently is to survey critically the opinions of other scholars in order to extend or modify certain hypotheses. Little direct application of the text to the modern world goes on, for this is not considered an integral part of scholarship as such. Consequently much Biblical scholarship is surrounded by an air of almost total unreality.¹

A highly theological approach to the texts often leads to stalemate, for conflicting interpretations are left at the level of hypothesis and conjecture. Behind the method lies the assumption that real scholarship proceeds through the interaction of ideas about the text. If the discovery of Scripture's correct meaning has to be controlled by this method, then clearly the university with its considerable library resources and the time that it can make available to its teaching staff is the privileged place to do theology.

2. *A tendency to separate theology from praxis*

Western theology tends to think in linear terms.² Applied theology (such as ethics, homiletics and personal counselling) is only possible after a long process of theoretical work has already been undertaken, beginning with biblical studies and moving on to historical and systematic theology. The assumption seems to be that applied theology can only follow a process of pure theology in which thought is initially abstracted from the real world in order that it might not be contaminated by alien elements.

3. *A marked emphasis on specialisation*

Theology is compartmentalised. Theologians have to choose limited fields to operate in. Under the influence of the natural sciences, the study in depth of any reality is deemed to be dependent upon breaking it down into its component parts. In this respect it is significant that a doctoral degree, requiring original research in a narrow field, is considered the highest academic award.

1 G. R. Beasley Murray's book, *Jesus and the Kingdom of God*, Paternoster Press, Exeter 1986, is an excellent example of the limited field of pursuit. He does not engage at all with the contemporary debate about the Kingdom of God as a key concept for the church's mission, dealing only with exegetical and critical questions raised within the scholarly community.

2 The process is aptly and amusingly captured in the title (and content) of an article by the Chinese theologian, Peter Chang, 'Steak, Potatoes and Chop-suey: Linear and Non-Linear Thinking in Theological Education', *Evangelical Review of Theology*, Vol. 5.2, Oct. 1981.

As a result of this emphasis, scholars not only do not know what is going on in fields other than their own, but more importantly they are not able to relate their findings to other disciplines. To assume that knowledge is best acquired through attention to a narrow range of study unrelated to knowledge gained from other sources, is a hazardous half-truth.

4. *Theology has become 'professionalised'*

Theology in the West is seen principally as an academic study on a par with other subjects designed to train professionals – law, education, psychology, etc. The guild of theologians are jealous of their position and their privileges. Professional training, therefore, takes place according to the criteria of expertise laid down by the professional accrediting body – either the university faculty (which in a secular climate, and with decreasing funds available from the Universities' Grants' Committee, may be under pressure from its academic peers in other disciplines to justify theology as a suitable subject for a university) or the Church's relevant professional association, made up of academics and clergy. Both of these bodies, in their respective spheres, run a monopoly. It was George Bernard Shaw who, with not a little touch of irony, called all professional organisations 'conspiracies designed to take advantage of ordinary people.'

The emphasis in Western theology is on what the expert is able to teach in lectures, seminars, books or articles from his reservoir of knowledge. There has not yet been a major shift of emphasis from teaching to equipping and learning. Perhaps, the time has come to challenge from below the hegemony of the expert.

The Theological Task in a different World

In recent years a number of important considerations have begun to shake the self-evident nature of Western theology's method and purpose. The following four theses challenge those engaged in the theological enterprise to reconsider from the beginning the whole task of theology.

1. *No value-free knowledge is possible*

In the early nineteenth century, under the spell of the Enlightenment, theology quickly accepted a positivist and rationalist basis for its epistemology. This led to 'objectivism', the belief that certain methods were free of all philosophical and dogmatic biases and that certain critical stances flowed from a strict application of the scientific method.

The esteem in which science is held, because of its supposed objectivity and freedom from presuppositional bias, is still part of the inherited cultural climate of the West.¹ However, Thomas Kuhn in his famous

1 L. Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel, and Western Culture*, SPCK, London 1986, calls it the plausibility structure which is taken as granted as self-evidently true by all educated in a Western cultural context.

book, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, has questioned the supposed neutrality of scientific endeavour in all its forms. He has argued that the acceptance or rejection of particular scientific paradigms responds in part to social control: 'normal science relies on consensus, not logical compulsion.'¹

How much truer this is of theological studies. The theological fraternity looks askance at any who challenge the 'assured results of modern scholarship', even when strong evidence points to quite different conclusions. In this sense Western theology displays its cultural captivity. It is shackled by the idea that it is applying an unconditioned method. But, as Robin Gill argues in *Theology and Social Structure*, theologians have generally remained unaware of the way in which society determines their discipline:

theology is demonstrably a human product and as such properly subject to the sociology of knowledge – the discipline which attempts to analyse the relation between human ideas and social structures.²

The claim often made that the Western discipline of theology is based on a scientific method can easily be refuted. In many instances it has uncritically adapted the assumptions of whatever the *Weltgeist* of the moment happens to be.

2. *Theory and practice should not be separated*

Carefully worked out academic standards of accreditation have defined the status of theological scholars in the academic community. Scholarship has cultivated for itself a certain mystique based on the expertise presumed to be demonstrated by advanced degrees and learned books.

However, the search for knowledge cannot be divorced from the theologian's own *Sitz im Leben* and in particular the purpose for which he does his study. What range of commitments does he have outside the academic institution? Is he wholly absorbed by lecturing, supervising and writing or does he take an active part in the Church's missionary task? Is theological reflection seen as an end in itself or primarily as a pastoral and missionary imperative? There can be no escape from a commitment of some kind, for the person who has isolated his intellectual work from the life of the Church has already made a fundamental choice.

As a human being, the interpreter of the Bible will need to understand and justify himself in his role. If he belongs to an academic community, how does he cope with the tensions produced by belonging simultaneously to a community which tends to be sceptical and uncommitted and to God's people who are committed to a way of looking at the world which our culture finds uncongenial, if not absurd? Does the theologian measure the truth of theological statements by their plausibility to the human mind or by their missiological effectiveness in evangelism and in the pursuit of

1 *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, University of Chicago Press, 1970.

2 *Theology and Social Structure*, Mowbray, London 1977, p 9.

justice? Current scepticism in some theological quarters is no less an act of faith than a strong orthodox conviction. Anyone confronted by the text of Scripture has to decide whether it has a unique message with missionary implications, or not. Neither opinion is more neutral than the other. Both will determine a further approach to and understanding of the text.

It has now become a commonplace of much Third World theological endeavour that the verification of theology's true meaning is not determined by abstract criteria formulated from within the academic community, but by its abiding ability to liberate Christian people for effective involvement in society. If it does not have this effect it is an alienated and alienating force.¹

3. *There needs to be an integration with disciplines studying human society*

There is a growing realisation, at least in some theological circles, that over-specialisation leads either to knowledge for its own sake (a goal based on particular cultural values), or to considerable insecurity in its application. No-one should demand that all research have an immediate cash-value in terms of instantaneous action; nevertheless the ultimate purpose of theological reflection must be to elucidate the task of Christians in given situations. Theologians cannot afford to leave this work to others, on the grounds that they are not concerned about applied knowledge, for the value they put on communicating the knowledge they have acquired will influence their research. A narrow scholastic focus may end up distorting reality and even the narrow focus itself.

Moreover, if we start from the premise that the message of Jesus Christ is good news of salvation then it has to have a contemporary reference-point: in what sense and circumstances is it good news? No adequate answer can be given without understanding the contemporary reality which forms the context in which the message is to be communicated as good news. In other words, valid theological questions are hermeneutical questions in which the ancient text and modern society are constantly brought together.²

1 Cf. G. Gutierrez, 'Theology from the Underside of History' in *The Power of the Poor in History*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll 1983, pp 169ff.

2 If the purpose of theology is to demonstrate the significance of God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ to the manifold dimensions of human life, then theological reflection must interact critically with investigation designed to understand the world around us. In this sense neither Biblical studies nor systematic theology on their own can be called theology. Only when they engage with every level of culture do they become part of genuine theological reflection. Cf. J. A. Kirk, *God's Word for a Complete World: Discovering how the Bible speaks today*, Marshall Pickering, Basingstoke 1987, especially chapters I, VI and IX.

4. *There are new demands on the theologian as an educator*

Academic theological reflection presupposes a particular style of education, financial resources and freedom from other activities. It is possible only in a situation which allows theological teaching to be a full-time career.

Likewise, to study theology implies reaching a particular level of academic achievement. In order for the theologian to communicate his knowledge and his methods, it is necessary for the student to have accepted his cultural and intellectual premises. It is virtually impossible at present for anyone to study theology as an academic discipline without having become middle-class in their cultural assumptions, and probably in their lifestyle too.

However, theological educators have given too little thought so far to how it is possible to train people to be 'animators' of semi-literate people who inhabit a non-book culture.

To develop Christian leadership skills in groups made up of those on the edge of society what knowledge is required? How is it to be acquired?

Present patterns of theological teaching will unfortunately continue to reinforce the Church's alienation in deprived urban areas. Existing western theology, because of its alienation from non-middle-class culture is incapable of equipping a genuinely indigenous leadership.

Towards a culturally adaptable model of doing and teaching theology

Some theological institutions in recent years have begun to take seriously these criticisms and are encouraging more engagement between theological studies and social reality. However, what has tended to happen is that new courses have been added to the existing programme: sociology, development studies, urban studies, pastoral psychology and counselling techniques, inter-faith dialogue, mission, etc. The syllabus cannot take the strain, for nothing already taught is allowed to drop out.

This is not the way forward. Rather, the theological curriculum, as a whole, needs restructuring, taking seriously the inherent deficiencies of the present system. The following pointers to the future suggest a possible new model for a theological curriculum which could be applied in different cultural situations.¹

1 My intention in offering a possible framework of a new curriculum is not to prescribe a detailed blueprint of how a given student would fulfil the requirements of each course but to stimulate discussion of what, for me, is a wholly different method of approaching theological education. The self-evident value of the new approach needs to be accepted first, before the details are added. However, it is in the nature of my scheme that the curriculum becomes to a certain extent an open-ended experiment: stages 3 and 4, for example, may well vary from year to year and group to group. There is little point in designing the detailed art work, until (to borrow a phrase) the old mould has been irretrievably broken and a new mould created. The whole point of this article is to argue for the new mould.

1. The separation of theological disciplines should be broken down

This process could happen in a number of ways: by changing the order in which subjects are studied; by relating disciplines together through a multi-disciplinary approach to themes and issues. In the case of biblical studies, for example, this would mean spending a minimum amount of time on purely introductory questions in order to concentrate on teaching interpretative skills by addressing particular hermeneutical issues. One which I have been involved in myself is the study of violence. This lends itself to an approach from many perspectives – biblical, historical, social, psychological, the media, international, juridicial, etc.

2. Reflection on the whole of life

Theological studies will, at every stage of training, include field-observation and real-life case studies. This will avoid the temptation to treat theology as a purely academic subject designed to provide answers to theoretical questions. At every step, from the very beginning, theological learning will need to be applied to the Church's mission in the world. Training will begin by building critically on each person's experience of the culture in which they live.

3. Integration of training for both ordained and lay ministries

The present system whereby theological students are separated from the rest of the Church and taught in semi-isolation for a number of years ought to be changed. As the distinction in kind between lay and ordained ministries is theologically unjustifiable and pastorally damaging, a graduated system involving the integration of training for a variety of ministries should be devised.

4. New criteria for assessment

The main process of evaluation would be continuous and partly self-imposed. The ability to write essays and pass exams would be largely replaced by submissions from teaching staff, external assessors and the supervisors of placements.

A new design for the curriculum

In the light of our discussion so far on the need for theology to break out of its captivity to the western intellectual tradition let me suggest a tentative approach to a new type of curriculum for theological training. The main implications for theology itself is that for this kind of scheme to work the educators will have to be prepared to be 're-educated', shifting gear into a different model of doing theology. I see the curriculum divided into four basic stages. Each one will follow the other, build upon it and stimulate repetitions of each stage in different patterns and combinations.

Stage 1: Social awareness and analysis

The course will start with the accumulated experience and knowledge of the student. This stage is designed to probe the student's awareness of both

trends in society and the activities and social role of the Church. They will be expected to reflect, first impressionally and then systematically and critically, on their own experience of the Christian faith, the Christian community and social reality. With regard to the Church they will be asked to consider the way it operates in different situations, what are the range of its activities, the degree of participation, the structures of leadership, its reaction to local and national events, its image as seen from outside and the congruence of its activities to its declared goals. With regard to society, they would reflect on such things as their experience of education, family life, friendship, work, patterns of consumption and the way the mass media cover events. They would be introduced to an awareness of culture, so as to begin to understand how it has helped to shape their own attitudes, the society they live in and the beliefs and role of the church.

Stage 2: A study of the Church's Mission

The purpose of this stage will be to produce the first draft of a comprehensive theological rationale for the Church's task in God's world. It will be achieved by integrating biblical, historical and missiological studies.

Biblical studies will begin by being synthetic rather than analytic in character. They will focus on the overall message and on themes, rather than on issues of introduction and on isolated textual analysis. Critical theories will be studied only in so far as they throw genuine light on the living message of Scripture.

Historical studies will look at implicit and explicit views of the Church's place in the world at different points in its history. It will seek to elucidate the relation between the Church's ideas and actions and the conditioning factors of given historical realities. In the process the student will be helped to see how belief and practice have interacted in the past.

Missiological studies will explore the experience, thinking and action of the contemporary Church, both at home and in other parts of the world.

Stage 3: A Process of Interaction

In a series of interdisciplinary seminars and small tutorial groups a first attempt will be made at integrating the student's own observations of Church and society with the conclusions drawn from the biblical, historical and missiological studies.

This stage has two main functions: to begin to learn how to apply theological reflection and to raise further questions which will become the subject matter of the next stage.

Stage 4: Dealing with questions that emerge

At this point the student will be introduced more systematically to methodological questions: principles of interpretation, hermeneutics, the use of historical and cultural analogies and the critical evaluation of historical developments.

The student will also begin to tackle issues which have emerged in personal and social ethics, pastoral counselling, cultural conditioning and renewal in the Church.

The main point of a curriculum designed in this way is that it is flexible and adaptable. None of the stages have been set within a particular time-scale. This will depend on the time available for each kind of training course. One important principle is that students should be allowed extensive periods of exclusive involvement with particular subjects. This will involve a radical departure from the normal kind of time-tabling.

Each stage might be split into a number of different learning units which happen either simultaneously or chronologically. They presuppose both intellectual work and practical exposure.

The four stages can be repeated in a series of cycles in which consolidation and expansion of horizons follow one another. The idea is not to complete a set, artificial syllabus, but to respond imaginatively to a continuing learning process. Frequent assessment of the process would be crucial. Thus, out of the first cycle of four stages some key problems may have emerged, e.g. conflict and its resolution, the exercise of power, attitudes to change, the nature and consequences of forgiveness. These can then be taken as a basis for a more extended study in depth in the next cycle, and so on.

The courses would be both structured and adaptable. The unique and authoritative voice of Scripture and the witness of tradition would be heard, not as abstract entities, but as related to the concrete demands of a God who sends his people into the world to do his will.

The curriculum can be adapted to a number of different training contexts, ie, residential, non-residential, day-release, sandwich and extension. The important issue is that of the learning process itself (not theology as a self-contained discipline) which is directed towards the constant application of knowledge and understanding through reflection and involvement.

Reflections on the Church, Theology and Culture

Throughout this paper I have argued strongly that the theological task must be undertaken in close relation to the life and witness of the Church. This latter in turn must be based on a view of the place of the Church in the purpose of God which is the result of both a thorough-going cultural critique of the empirical Church and a fresh assessment of the biblical mandate for God's people. Neither theology (nor theological training) is to be manipulated by the Church for its own ends, particularly when these are based on a backward-looking captivity to culture; it is a critical discipline. To criticise theology because it may be so preoccupied with its own internal affairs that it is not concerned to direct its forces to aiding the Church's mission is one thing. To criticise it because it asks questions that disturb an institution bent on maintaining its traditions and structures, irrespective of their relevance to its God-given mission, is quite another.

The Church is a community of people who belong to the new world which has been brought into being by the resurrection of God's Messiah from the dead. Its fundamental calling is to demonstrate the reality of the new world in the midst of the age which is passing away. The Church belongs to a new order of reality made possible by Jesus' death, in which God expresses his supreme judgment on the religious and political life and ideological defence-mechanisms of the present world order, and by the resurrection, which is new life from the dead.

The eschatological nature of the Church means that in every culture, it will be a community within a community, a group of people called out to witness in word and deed to the reality of the end-time.

This eschatological community is in essence also a universal fellowship in which diversions based on ethnic exclusiveness and national identity are broken down. The Church's primary identity is being the new humanity in Christ, the foretaste of a fully restored human race, not belonging to any particular people or nation. Nevertheless, rejoicing over ethnic diversity and finding part of one's identity as a created being in one's roots in a particular culture is right and proper, for it acknowledges as a gift the diversity of God's creation. At the same time, it is even more important to put down new roots into the order of redemption – 'as therefore you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so live in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith' (Col. 2:6-7).

The eschatological nature of the Church brings with it two complex problems to do with culture.

1. Its minority status in a culture shaped by an alien religion, philosophy or ideology

The gospel of Jesus Christ is bound to seem strange and unwelcome in any nation where the religion is coterminous with an entire people. It enters as something new and challenging and inevitably demands a lessening of ties with the dominant socio-religious order. This is certain to prove deeply disturbing to any cultural system which has remained unchanged for centuries.

The challenge of the gospel, however, must be presented as the challenge of God's future, not the breaking-in of a replacement culture from elsewhere. Unfortunately in the missionary thrust from East to West and North to South, God's kingdom was often confused with European cultural achievements and led at times to a demonic sense of racial superiority.

The alien nature of Christian faith in places like India has given rise to an intense debate about the possibility of believing in and following Jesus Christ without belonging to the empirical Church. In popular understanding a Christian is one who is baptised and thereby changes religion. Effectively, a newly baptised Christian joins another 'caste'. In one sense this means having to leave society.

The main response to this dilemma must be to live out to the full the scandal of the particularity of Jesus, which, as Orlando Costas argues persuasively, lies in the fact that he is the crucified Lord.¹ In this sense, in being true to Jesus Christ, the Church will see itself as the community of the poor and the anticipation of the new world which is the result of the liberating work of Christ and the power of the Spirit.

2. *Its status as a religious support for culture*

History is littered with examples of the Church identifying itself too exclusively with any one culture. Two obvious examples from this century are the German Church under the Third Reich and the Afrikaans Reformed Church in South Africa and the apartheid system. The first has been condemned as idolatry and the second as heresy. These are harsh, but justified, judgments on Christian bodies which have failed to maintain the Gospel's proper critical distance from culture and social systems.

In Europe today, it seems to me, the Church hovers uncertainly between these two problems we have outlined above. On the one hand, European social life and belief systems have been intricately bound up with the presence of the Church for some 1,500 years. There are aspects of European political life, its laws, education, and health care which continue to be profoundly influenced by Christian values. The Church, therefore, may have a calling to bear witness to these and lobby for their maintenance, whenever they appear to be under threat.

At the same time, State Churches in particular are in danger of compromising the critical elements of the Gospel when they continue to operate according to the myth that they are the Church of the people, occupying a privileged place in the life of the nation and taking the right to attend the people's formal cultural needs in the spiritual sphere.

On the other hand, Christian faith has spawned a culture which has made sectarianism possible. It is no longer the dominant religion of the European peoples, for they have either consciously or unconsciously exchanged a humanist framework of belief for a theocentric one. The Church, therefore, represents in reality a minority faith in a pluralist society, one whose whole cultural ethos seems to be drifting further away each year from any contact with Christian belief. Though the Church, being faithful to the one unique revelation of God in the person of Jesus Christ, cannot accept that pluralism is right in theory, nevertheless it cannot and must not try to impose a uniform belief on society by coercive means. Therefore, facing the reality of the situation, it both declares the universal truth of Jesus Christ and also concentrates its resources on being a counter-culture in a recently re-paganised continent.

1 In Anderson and Stransky (eds), *Christ's Lordship and Religious Pluralism*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll 1981, pp 148ff.

The Church is neither a nation nor a people (in the sense of a race). Its identity comes exclusively from its confession of Jesus Christ (it is always a confessing Church) who refused to interpret the advent of God's kingdom in narrow nationalistic terms (cf. Lk. 4:18f.; Acts 1.6-8). In this community of the age to come (or coming), loyalty to other Christians is paramount over loyalty to cultural or national ties. The unity of those who confess Jesus as Lord and Messiah is fundamental, and is a major part of its witness to the truth of its message (Jn. 17:15-21).

The distinction between Church and culture, though it poses problems for Christians called to live as a minority in an alien environment (including now Western society), also gives Christians the ability to distinguish between good and bad elements in culture; to separate evangelism and church planting from cultural imperialism and nationalism and to identify idolatrous elements in the relation between religious groups and the State.

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