

British theology: Movements and churches: A web of conversations

by [David F. Ford](#) in the [April 19, 2000](#) issue

Having surveyed in previous articles the variety of theological conversations in Britain—ranging across patristics, history, philosophy, biblical interpretation, literature and the arts, the natural and social sciences, ethics and politics, and other religions—it probably occurred to some readers to ask: But what about the classic topics of Christian theology? What about the doctrines of God, creation, human being, providence, sin, Jesus Christ, salvation, Christian living, church, Holy Spirit and eschatology?

Traditionally, the tendency was for such doctrines to be dealt with in a systematic way mainly in Scottish centers—one thinks especially of Edinburgh during the long professorship of Thomas F. Torrance—while the English and Welsh shied away from Germanic systematics and concentrated more on approaching theology through biblical, historical and philosophical discussion. But in the last quarter of a century a considerable convergence took place, partly due to members of the Society for the Study of Theology, which covers the whole island and which set out in its annual conference to create a forum for wide-ranging discussion of major doctrines and allied themes. Another factor was the increasing participation of Roman Catholics in university theology departments.

Professors in universities outside Scotland began to study modern systematic theologians, especially from the German-speaking world, and to reach beyond historical theology into critical and constructive engagement with contemporary theological questions. Many new translations from German appeared, and theology from other countries too became available—especially from the U.S. and Latin America, but also some from Asia and Africa. The new confidence in doing theology that I described in the previous article was partly due to this sense of being part of a worldwide community with many vibrant centers. Still, British theology was not usually “systematic” in the sense of seeing a coherent treatment of all the main doctrines as the ideal. Instead, it was often a blend of types—biblical, doctrinal,

apologetic, philosophical, practical, aesthetic—focused through one or more topics.

The nearest thing to a systematic integrator was a remarkable consensus that developed on the importance of the doctrine of the Trinity (which is still widely agreed upon across many other divides). In the same period, the systematic theology tradition in Scotland suffered something of a decline, and when it began to revive in the 1990s it was with the help of several English theologians, so that there has been considerable convergence with England and Wales.

As in other cases, Rowan Williams is characteristic: his theology is deeply informed by Luther, Schleiermacher, Barth, Rahner, von Balthasar, Bonhoeffer and other continental Europeans, besides theologies from other parts of the world, and his recent book *On Christian Theology* covers theological method, biblical hermeneutics, creation, sin, Jesus Christ, incarnation, church, sacraments, ethics and eschatology, with the Trinity as the integrator. But he is a world away from the sort of systematic coverage given by such Germans as Moltmann and Pannenberg. Even those who have come nearest to imitating that German tradition have tended to do so in collaborative modes, such as in the *Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine*, edited by Colin Gunton.

Given the conversational nature of British theology and its tendency not to have “stars” and “schools of thought,” it is not surprising that it is better described through mapping the conversations than through looking for one leading center. My main interest here is not in the quantity or quality of published output but in locating where the liveliest conversations are happening.

The place to start is not with any particular university but with the networks that sustain the conversations. Nearly every department of theology has participants in one or more of those ongoing discussions (increasingly sustained through e-mail). I suspect that the reasonably frequent face-to-face meeting possible in a small country, together with the easy multilateral communication now possible electronically, has already greatly strengthened a field whose participants often feel somewhat isolated in small university departments.

The next places to look for the vitality of the field is in the professional societies. In relation to the sorts of theology I have been discussing these are mainly five. The largest is the Society for the Study of Theology, which meets annually for a three-day conference concentrating on one main theme, discussed in several plenary

sessions as well as small groups, with an additional range of special-interest seminars on topics ranging from ecology, practical theology and the Trinity to feminist theology and biblical interpretation. There are also the Society for Christian Ethics, the Catholic Theological Association a women's theological network, and an annual meeting of Christian philosophers in Oxford. Consultations and conferences on specific themes are increasing.

Movements or schools in theology are often associated with star figures who attract followers and generate debate and often conflict. In the 20th century one thinks of Karl Barth, Rudolf Bultmann or Hans Urs von Balthasar in continental Europe, or Paul Tillich or A. N. Whitehead's process thought in the U.S. British theology as I have described it is not usually hospitable to movements of that sort.

I described Rowan Williams as an antistar. In both style and content it is hard to imagine him leading anything like a movement. It is similar with his teacher Donald MacKinnon and with MacKinnon's successor, Nicholas Lash: each of them had the capacity to found a school or movement but has rather done his theology in a more ruminative, interrogative mode. Even movements from elsewhere have tended to change their dynamics in Britain and become more like conversations—though these can sometimes be sharp.

That is what happened to liberation theology in the hands of practitioners such as Christopher Rowland (New Testament in Oxford), Timothy Gorringer (systematics, Exeter), Joseph Laishley, S.J., and Denys Turner. A critical challenge of liberation theology is its rooting in local praxis and base communities, and here the main British version has been a multifaceted urban theology which has built on a tradition of pastoral, political and community-building activity in cities. Kenneth Leech and Laurie Green in London, John Vincent in Sheffield, Austin Smith in Liverpool, John Atherton in Manchester, Margaret Walsh in Wolverhampton: these and others have combined local praxis with influential speaking and writing. A great deal of the theology here is oral, local, and shared in networks which do not usually produce books. Liberation theology in Latin American and other forms has been a point of common reference, but nothing like an overarching influence.

Something similar is true of feminist theology. It has had widespread effects, but the most influential women have resisted the more ideological versions. Ann Loades, Janet Soskice, Mary Grey, Susan Parsons, Linda Woodhead, Linda Hogan and Sarah Coakley (at Harvard, but living part of the year in England) are all feminist and

actively Anglican or Roman Catholic. The successful drive to have women ordained in the Church of England acted as a catalyst for many women to engage in theology together. Soskice, Hogan and Coakley, together with Grace Jantzen in Manchester and Pamela Sue Anderson in Newcastle, also tend to be more impressed by French feminist philosophy than by American feminist theology.

Perhaps the most obvious feature of British women's theology is its commitment to spirituality. A remarkable flourishing of spiritualities has combined thoughtfulness with passion, often by women who also write in other genres (academic and nonacademic), such as Loades, Soskice, Grey, Coakley, Hampson, Jantzen, Ursula King (a German teaching in Bristol), Sarah Maitland, Monica Furlong and Elizabeth Stuart. It is also striking that many of the women already named, as well as others such as Frances Young in Birmingham, Deborah Sawyer in Lancaster, Esther Reed in St. Andrews, Harriet Harris in Exeter, Jackie Stewart in Leeds, Elaine Graham in Manchester, Marcella Althaus-Reid in Edinburgh, and Catherine Pickstock and Margie Tolstoy in Cambridge, simply do not fit usual categories of feminist or other theology. Their women's voices contribute to the conversations of British theology, but "movement" is hardly the right word. As with liberation theology, feminisms elsewhere are a point of reference for an indigenous development, the nature of which has yet to be adequately described. And on issues of theology and gender it is not only women who contribute: Graham Ward (Manchester), Gerard Loughlin (Newcastle), Adrian Thatcher (Plymouth) and Sean Gill (Bristol) are all significant voices too.

However, two homegrown British theologies might actually be described as movements. One is the "Sea of Faith" movement following the thought of the now retired Cambridge philosopher of religion Don Cupitt. Its main mark has been a radical reinterpretation of Christianity, religion, philosophy and ethics in nonrealist terms, with a strong linguistic and aesthetic emphasis. This movement has conferences and sustains a journal, though in universities it has been received more as a provocative set of questions than as a fruitful way of doing theology. It might be seen as the ultimate theological reaction to the mid-20th-century "founding trauma" of aggressive positivism and analytic philosophy. Theologians of this persuasion reject the challenge to link sense and reference in theology in anything like a realist way, and they revel in a postmodern aesthetic freedom.

The other British movement (with American offshoots) is Radical Orthodoxy, which gathers around John Milbank (in Lancaster for many years, followed by Cambridge,

and now at the University of Virginia). His major book, *Theology and Social Theory* (1990), interprets the implicit and explicit theory of the secular social sciences as concealed, heretical theology. Milbank claims that their basic thrust is nihilistic, as is that of positivism, Hegelianism, liberalism, relativism, subjectivism and pluralism, and that they are founded on the ultimacy of aggression, violence and war. Against all this, Milbank retrieves from Augustine's *City of God* the priority of peace and harmony, with the church embodying a social theory allied to a trinitarian theology that is the true alternative to the heretical and disastrously nihilistic theologies that have dominated the postmedieval Western world. More recently Milbank has published much in philosophical and systematic theology, and has had an especially intensive engagement with Aquinas.

A manifesto in the form of a set of essays, *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*, edited by Milbank, Catherine Pickstock and Graham Ward, was published in 1999. The authors (who include five Cambridge doctoral students) are seven high-church Anglicans and five Roman Catholics. Several of the book's features are shared with other British theology: a basic concern for intelligent orthodoxy informed by worship; the Trinity as the encompassing doctrine, strongly connected to both church and society; a well-articulated response to modernity; a wide range of "mediations," through various discourses and aspects of contemporary life (philosophy, history, friendship, sex, politics, aesthetics, the visual arts and music); a special affinity for the patristic period; and a preference for the essay genre.

Other features are more distinctive of this group. It emphasizes participation in God, employing a Thomist doctrine of analogy as a way of affirming difference as well as participation. Its critique of modernity is drastic. Its members tell a metanarrative of decline from a rich patristic and medieval Christian church and society to an utterly impoverished modernity in the grip of nihilism, to which most of Christianity accommodates or capitulates. Many writers insist on the need for every discipline and discourse to have an explicitly theological framework; many make broad claims, confident generalizations covering long periods of history and whole disciplines, and fairly summary dismissals of periods and categories of thinkers with whom they differ.

Differences have emerged in the group. The clearest division is between Graham Ward and Gerard Loughlin and everyone else. Ward and Loughlin are engaged in sophisticated cultural criticism, parody, irony, and a fluid combination of discourses from postmodern philosophy, Christian tradition and gender studies, and both their

style and content seem ill at ease with confident programmatic statements and a preference for Augustine/Aquinas as the theological “default setting.” The presence of other divergences too (David Moss’s luminous piece on friendship stands very well alone), the dispersal of the group on both sides of the Atlantic, and the fact that some members are already deep into other conversations all suggest that as a movement it will (at least in Britain) either fragment or at best fare like feminist, liberation and nonrealist theologies, and have its main influence as a point of reference and interrogation.

What are the questions to be raised about the Radical Orthodox? There are many concerning their interpretations of other thinkers and the quality of their attention to historical context, development of thought and possible alternative construals. Similarly, there are questions about their relations with other disciplines: Can they move beyond confrontation into thorough dialogue with historians, social scientists, Anglo-American philosophers, art historians and critics, biblical critics, and many others? A preference for confrontation, polemic and outflanking generalizations tends to constitute an anticonversational stance, at least for people outside the group. What will be the quality of ongoing listening, learning and self-criticism?

Questions also are raised about the identity of the church that plays such a major role in the Radical Orthodox account of history, about whether there is a doctrine of providence implicit in it, about the dismissal or ignoring of Protestantism, about the role of Jesus in its Christianity, about the role of Socrates in its Platonism, about its failure to engage with the challenge of modern scientific and technological developments, about how other faith traditions are related to this version of faith, and about whether this is a habitable orthodoxy for ordinary life.

The movement is young, and so are most of its members; the verdict is open on such questions. But with regard to the account I have given of the rest of British theology there is an obvious contrast to be drawn between Radical Orthodoxy and some of the leading features that I have portrayed, especially in the theology of Rowan Williams. He himself has been a sympathetic commentator on Milbank, but his early response to *Theology and Social Theory* in the June 1992 issue of *New Blackfriars* also gently but firmly indicated serious differences, largely in interrogative form. His questions concern the danger of grids, “diagrammatic accounts of ideological options,” and a picture of ideal types in grand conflict that Milbank was imposing on history. The other side of this is whether Milbank can do justice to the particularities of history, such as the practice and teaching of Jesus in

its Jewish context, and the complexity of crises, conflicts and points of tension.

Unease also exists about Radical Orthodoxy's account of the church, about Milbank's Augustinianism, and about his refusal to allow for "the haunting of ethics by the tragic." A fundamental query is whether this theology of "total peace" is in danger of being "totalizing and ahistorical." Williams wants a mode of discourse that is better suited to healing a contingent world in which "contestation is inevitable," in which the church is not in fact so "dramatically apart" from other ways of realizing the good, and in which there is a need for patience in tracing how the Christian contribution to history is "learned, negotiated, betrayed, inched forward, discerned and risked." Such comments reflect the characteristic temper of British theology.

My focus in these three articles has been on Christian theology in British universities, but of course that is by no means the only setting for theology. What has been happening recently in church theology? I would name five trends.

First, the collaboration between universities and church educational centers has been increasing, and some institutions closely involved with churches have become universities or parts of universities, giving rise to a new set of university-level departments (which have generally opted for the "theology and religious studies" model). This development is not without its dangers for churches. They might be wise to consider whether they need to supply better resources to their own institutions, and in particular whether they can nurture a new generation of theologians to lead them.

Second, collaboration between churches has increased in theological education, with federations of colleges, shared colleges and common links to universities. These first two trends predictably generate debates and tensions about identity and distinctiveness.

Third, in church colleges and universities most theology is now taught and learned by laypeople. This shift is most striking in the more clerical churches, the Anglican and Roman Catholic. It has also meant that for the first time in history there is a body of laypeople who are theologically trained and active in many areas of society.

Fourth, recent decades have been especially important for the emergence of Roman Catholics as a significant group in British theology. A remarkable "grandparent" generation of theologians such as Cornelius Ernst, O.P., Herbert McCabe, O.P., Fergus Kerr, O.P., and Nicholas Lash, together with others in history, philosophy and

literature, have led the way into widespread participation in university life. The British Catholic bishops have been quite successful in resisting pressures from Rome in theological education and discipline. And the *Tablet* (a sort of Christian Century with a Catholic complexion) has consistently brought theology into dialogue with contemporary issues in religion and society.

Fifth, the Anglican Church, which has the largest number of theologians and theological students, has seen a shift toward the more evangelical wing. Yet this has not meant a tendency to fundamentalism (as might be assumed by North Americans). A set of vigorous evangelical theological colleges exist, with theological leaders such as Anthony Thiselton, Jeremy Begbie, Elaine Storkey, Colin Buchanan, Christopher Cocksworth and Tina Baxter. But Anglican Catholic theology is showing signs of recovery (Rowan Williams being its leading thinker), and perhaps a majority of practicing Anglican theologians would resist any party label.

Can British theology flourish in this complex ecology of universities and churches in symbiosis? Can Rowan Williams's three modes or styles of theology be sustained and developed in interaction with one another? Each of these styles faces a tough future. Can the "celebratory" mode not only recover and articulate afresh the richness of thought and imagination from the past but also rise to current challenges? These include churches where vitality is often anti-intellectual, and a culture which engulfs us and our children in celebratory and other modes that make the inhabiting of a full Christian vision extremely hard to think, feel or imagine.

Can the "communicative" mode sustain creative conversations and "survive the drastic experience of immersion in other ways of constructing and construing the world" (Williams)? One temptation is to opt for invulnerable positions and secure confrontations rather than risk thorough and respectful dialogues. The contemporary "learning society," overwhelmed with information, knowledge and entertainment, requires discerning and constructive responses of an even greater order than those of the early church in the sophisticated rhetorical culture of the Roman Empire, or the early modern Western church faced with printing and transformations in scholarship, geographical horizons, sciences, nations and industries. Are theologians up to the task? In Britain, too, the shying away from grand metanarratives and generalizations risks discouraging the sort of thinking and conversing that can do justice to the global scale and dynamic complexity of the situation. The normal form of this retreat is seen in those who are content to do work in their own field, fulfilling the norms of the academic guild and ignoring wider responsibilities.

Can the “critical” mode simultaneously allow the cross to test everything, with appropriate practices of repentance and forgiveness, while also taking seriously the multiple contemporary discourses of critique and suspicion? One test for British theology’s critical credentials is whether it can heal its 20th-century “founding trauma” due to aggressive positivist and analytical philosophy. A sign of healing might be a fresh engagement with more recent British and American philosophy such as that begun by Fergus Kerr.

There also are institutional challenges to be met if the delicate ecology of theology and religious studies is not to succumb to the commodification of education, to ideologies with no room for theology (least of all for its celebratory mode), or to absorption in a range of other disciplines.

Overall, the bottom-line question for the sort of “sapiential theology” that I have described is whether it can, amidst often extreme pressures, continue to serve the academy, the churches and society by distilling a diagnostic and therapeutic wisdom informed by the gospel.