British theology after a trauma: Divisions and conversations: After positivism

by David F. Ford in the April 12, 2000 issue

If there was one intellectual development in living memory that separates the “grandparent” from the “parent” generation of British theology, it was the rise of logical positivism and analytical philosophy. A fairly homogeneous educated class, largely shaped through a few major universities, received a massive assault from within those universities not just on its philosophy but on its beliefs, ethics and worldview. “But how can you prove . . .?” “But what do you really mean by . . .” were the reigning questions, and the conclusion of the inquiry was usually that your meaning had no empirical basis and did not make sense. The assault was made by a confident army of elite intellectuals, who appropriated the prestige of modern science and offered a rational rigor that might provide a place (however confined) to stand amidst world wars and huge changes in every area of life.

The story is far more complicated than that, yet it is vital to understand how, in the middle two quarters of the 20th century, a drastically reductionist way of thinking became the bottom line against which everything was measured. In the present grandparent generation of theologians, those who ignored the challenge were easily written off, while those who tried to meet it risked being intimidated into reductive or at least very apologetic and defensive forms of Christian theology. In the face of aggressive, confident and often brilliant critiques (key figures included Bertrand Russell, the early Wittgenstein, G. E. Moore and A. J. Ayer), it was easy to lose theological nerve, become wary of exposure, and be tempted to withdraw into safe havens of academic respectability. The grandparents had an extraordinarily difficult task, and their achievement in sustaining and developing a university environment where theology could still flourish has been remarkable. Yet the effects of the trauma persist, directly and indirectly.

One of the effects has been on the classic forms of mediation in British (and especially English) theology. I remember having a great many discussions with colleagues around the country in the course of preparing *The Modern Theologians*: *An Introduction to Christian Theology in the Twentieth Century*. The eventual consensus was that the headings for the sections on British theology should be: "Theology through History" and "Theology through Philosophy" (with "Theology and Society" added in the second edition). In other words, this tradition of theology is best described through its conversations and the ways it has been mediated through various disciplines, not primarily through its systematic expositions, doctrinal tendencies or star figures. But the mid-century trauma just described has had its effects.

This approach is most obvious in relation to history, especially to the patristic period. British theology has a distinguished tradition of doing theology "through the fathers," meaning the theology and history of the first six centuries or so of Christianity. But increasingly the classicists, historians and text scholars have become suspicious of theological interpretations of "their" material, and the tendency has been for those with academic posts in this field to stay within the dominant academic respectability of the scholarly guild and not stray into contemporary theological debate. This has been intensified by the fact that until recently many British theologians had a thorough grounding in classics (Greek and Latin), but this has now become rare.

A pivotal figure has been the doyen of English patristic scholars, Henry Chadwick, who has largely directed the field toward guild concerns. Maurice Wiles, Kallistos Ware and Frances Young have been exceptions to this, but of the following generation Rowan Williams has been almost alone in doing rigorous scholarly and historical work in the period and integrating that with a critical and constructive theological position. The reigning prejudice of the guild that theological interpretation can only mean "contamination by faith" has strongly inhibited those with posts in the area (a diminishing number).

Yet the vacuum has been filled by a surge of theological engagement by others with patristic theology, above all with Augustine and the Cappadocians, extending into a fresh appropriation of medieval theologies and philosophies, especially Thomas Aquinas. A mark of very different thinkers in the current parent generation and of many of their students is a sense of reveling in the riches of premodern resources. One aspect of the "founding trauma" due to positivist and analytical intimidation

and critique was its “parochialism of the modern”—its deep suspicion of the premodern and a general lack of historical depth. It has therefore come as a liberation to be able to feed on Augustine, Aquinas and others. Theologians as varied as Colin Gunton, Michael Banner, Oliver O’Donovan, John Milbank, Denys Turner, Janet Soskice, Catherine Pickstock and Fergus Kerr have drawn deeply on the patristic and medieval periods and have generated some lively debates. And the tradition of patristics teaching being fed into current theological discussion is also showing signs of renewal. For some years Durham has had the Orthodox Andrew Louth, and now Cambridge has appointed the Yale scholar and theologian Anna Williams, whose work spans the Greek East, Augustine and Aquinas.

The history of other periods has not been well served by theological interpretation, and where it has been done it has usually not been by those considered bona fide historians. There have been historical overviews proposed (as by some of the Radical Orthodoxy group) at a level of generalization that draws the rejection of most historians, but theological understanding immersed in the particularities of a context, period, person or tradition has been rare. The nearest approaches have been in the controversy aroused by Eamon Duffy’s work on the English Reformation, and in the continuing efforts of the Church of England to develop its Anglican identity in dialogue with the forms, doctrines and biographies of previous periods.

As regards philosophy, the later Wittgenstein was much discussed for many years, and though he has not lasted as a leading dialogue partner, one of the classics of British philosophical theology has been Fergus Kerr’s *Theology After Wittgenstein*. Another classic, more constructively theological, has been Nicholas Lash’s *Easter in Ordinary*, offering an interpretation of religious experience in dialogue with William James. Richard Swinburne has engaged with the rigors of logic and analytical philosophy to offer a philosophical clarification and defense of classic Christian beliefs (especially as formulated in the medieval West).

But among the younger generation there has been a reaction against the positivist and analytical traditions. Even those who have been well educated in them (David Brown, Michael Banner, Grace Jantzen, Denys Turner, Janet Soskice) have not found them very fruitful theologically and have tended recently to carry on their main conversations elsewhere. Curiously, for many years the main interaction with philosophers working in an Anglo-American mode has been through the active participation of Dutch philosophers of religion, led by Vincent Brummer, in the Society for the Study of Theology. Otherwise, British theologians have become

involved in a range of new philosophical conversations, with French philosophy the most popular—Paul Ricoeur, Emmanuel Levinas, Jacques Derrida, Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray. There has also been a range of influential voices from elsewhere, such as Martin Heidegger, Jürgen Habermas, Alasdair MacIntyre, Gillian Rose and Charles Taylor.

The tendency of philosophy to migrate from the philosophy faculties into social science, cultural studies, gender studies and elsewhere has also been evident in Britain, and in several universities narrowly focused philosophy departments are supplemented by a more diverse philosophical diet in theology and religious studies. The sadness is that as a result of the 20th-century alienation of much philosophy from theology there is often little conversation between those with posts in the two. Yet in Britain there are signs on the theological side (especially in Fergus Kerr's *Immortal Longings*) of realizing that Anglo-American philosophy has moved on since Ayer, and that the more recent debates, especially in America, hold considerable promise for theology.

Besides history and philosophy a third, and perhaps most essential, classic dialogue partner for theology has been the interpretation of scripture. The founding trauma of positivist and analytic philosophy (which, of course, had its milder predecessors with similar tendencies and effects) had its impact here too, and a great many biblical scholars are averse to linking their guild activities in any way with theology. Yet theological interpretation of scripture by those with guild credentials has been sustained much more fully through the last quarter of the 20th century.

This enterprise is especially strong in Scotland, with Francis Watson in Aberdeen, Richard Bauckham (who spans New Testament, Reformation and modern theology) and Christopher Seitz in St. Andrews, John Riches in Glasgow and Larry Hurtado in Edinburgh. In Durham are Stephen Barton in New Testament, who has helped to bring together various fields to engage with topics such as wisdom and holiness, and Walter Moberly, an Old Testament scholar who writes on biblical theology. Influential senior figures include Anthony Thiselton in Nottingham, covering New Testament, hermeneutics, philosophy, systematics and biomedical ethics, and Frances Young in Birmingham.

Oxford and Cambridge have both continued their traditions of thorough textual and historical scholarship, accompanied by philosophical and doctrinal thought. Oxford has been especially strong in the interpretation of scripture with theological

interests—for example, Christopher Rowland, John Barton, Ernest Nicholson and Robert Morgan; and in Cambridge similar concerns are shared by biblical scholars such as Graham Stanton, Graham Davies, Markus Bockmuehl and James Carleton Paget. Besides such biblical scholars with theological concerns there is of course a very large number of other theologians for whom the interpretation of scripture is central.

What of other conversations? What has been said so far does not at all do justice to the variety of discussions going on and the ways in which current theology is being mediated through new dialogues. Perhaps pride of place should go to literature and the arts. British (and especially English) theology has often been deeply literary in its interests and even in its form. The combined influence of the Authorized Version of the Bible and the Book of Common Prayer is incalculable, and a great deal of the most influential theology has been distilled from literature—George Herbert or John Milton or Samuel Taylor Coleridge (best known as a poet and literary figure, but also one of the most influential theological voices of the 19th century) or Gerard Manley Hopkins. This continues to thrive. In Wales, Rowan Williams is a poet as well as a theologian who often engages with literature, Donald Allchin is in deep dialogue with poets in many traditions, and Oliver Davies, having ranged through German, Russian and Welsh literature as well as Meister Eckhart, is now engaged on a major work of fundamental and systematic theology with a strong literary dimension.

In Scotland, David Jasper in Glasgow concentrates on literature and theology and runs the journal of that name; in Edinburgh there is a center focusing on theological engagement with the media (with a strong interest in the arts) led by Jolyon Mitchell; and St. Andrews is developing a collaborative theological project on imagination and the arts under Trevor Hart.

In England, the leading center has been in Cambridge, where Jeremy Begbie’s project on theology through the arts in the Centre for Advanced Religious and Theological Studies has sponsored a range of publications, performances and educational initiatives, and is due to culminate in September 2000 with an arts festival embracing new film, drama, sculpture, music, painting and poetry.

Such centers only hint at the pervasiveness of literature and the arts in theology, and there are other dimensions, such as the use of literary criticism and theory in biblical studies (Sheffield has been a center for this, though it has had something of an allergy to contemporary theological engagement), and widespread interest in

theological aesthetics (Patrick Sherry in Lancaster; Brian Horne in Kings College London; George Pattison, Janet Soskice, Catherine Pickstock and Ben Quash in Cambridge; Graham Ward in Manchester, Francesca Murphy in Aberdeen). This way of mediating theology, often linked to worship and sacraments (which have regularly attracted the attention of British theologians) promises to be one of the distinctive contributions of Britain to wider theology this century.

Another notable set of conversations for theologians is in relation to social life, ethics, politics and the social sciences. Here is another area of intensive engagement which is, I suspect, largely unrecognized outside the country. The embedding of theology in practices of various sorts, and the accompanying integration of theory with practice, together with a concern for the particularities of situations and histories, do not make for the sorts of portable generalizations which travel easily. Even though many of the theologians with these concerns have public political commitments (the most forthright tend to be on the political left or center-left, such as Elaine Graham, Timothy Gorringe, Kenneth Leech, Michael Northcott and Denys Turner), the main debates have not usually been about current political issues. I will discuss the influence of liberation theology in the next article.

If I were choosing recent books in this area which most deserve to be read outside the country, I would start with Oliver O'Donovan's political theology in *The Desire of the Nations*; John Milbank's critique of the social sciences in *Theology and Social Theory*; Timothy Gorringe's provocative political reading of Karl Barth in *Karl Barth*: *Against Hegemony*; Peter Sedgwick's *The Market Economy and Christian Ethics*; Michael Banner's *Christian Ethics and Contemporary Moral Problems*; Duncan Forrester's *Christian Justice and Public Policy*; and Timothy Jenkins's *Religion in Everyday Life*: *An Ethnographic Approach*, which argues with a dense interweaving of theory and empirical study for a social anthropological approach to English religion which has learned much from theology.

One center of consistent theological engagement with practical issues has been the University of Leeds, inspired by Haddon Willmer. The leading figure of the present generation has been Al McFadyen (his major book is *The Call to Personhood*, and another is due soon on sin, with special reference to child abuse and to the Holocaust), and he has been joined by the ethicist Nigel Biggar. Nearby in Sheffield is the Lincoln Theological Insititute for the Study of Religion and Society headed by Martin Percy.

Finally there is Richard Roberts in Lancaster, who has made it his life's work to engage with theology and the social sciences together and is likely to provoke considerable discussion in his next phase of publications beginning with his forthcoming *Religion*, *Theology and the Human Sciences*.

The natural sciences have been an issue in British theology for centuries. The grandfather of the current phase of the discussion is Thomas F. Torrance of Edinburgh. Others have taken up these concerns in different ways. John Polkinghorne was professor of mathematical physics in Cambridge and became an Anglican priest and theologian. He was joined in a new post by Fraser Watts, an experimental psychologist by training. Oxford has a new post held by the historian of religion and science John Hedley Brooke. The biologist and theologian Arthur Peacocke also works there; and the philosopher of religion Keith Ward has courageously confronted the atheist popularizer of science, Richard Dawkins. The issues in religion and science have been very lively in the British media and education system, though still largely fixated on a paradigm of opposition and competition betweeen Christianity and modern science.

Finally, there is the widespread conversation between Christian theologians and those of other religious traditions, a conversation encouraged by the presence of theology and religious studies together in most university departments. The grandfather of this effort was John Hick during his time in Birmingham, and he set the terms for much of the early debate. His approach is now generally criticized as assuming too much of a philosophical overview and failing to allow for the full particularity of traditions (points made by his students Gavin D'Costa and Gerard Loughlin).

The dominant emphasis now is on less programmatic engagements which, in their emphasis on the particularities, are inevitably more piecemeal and open-ended. Perhaps the most far-reaching development in this area is the increasing presence in British departments of members of different faiths who are interested in making critical and constructive contributions to their own and to other traditions. There are very few places outside universities where such conversations can be sustained long-term. Among the most influential Christian participants in such conversations at present are David Kerr (Edinburgh), Gavin D'Costa (Bristol), Keith Ward (Oxford), Julius Lipner (Cambridge) and Michael Barnes, S.J. (Heythrop College, London University).

While a description of largely peaceful conversations gives a fairer overall impression than any division into schools or parties, there are of course divisions along various fault lines. The main fault line can best be identified according to differing responses to “modernity.”

There are those who largely welcome modernity in classic liberal fashion and work out a realistic Christian theology by taking the modern or late modern context to be as good a setting for Christian thought and life as any other. These might include Robin Gill and Ian Markham in ethics, Paul Badham and Keith Ward in philosophy of religion, and Gareth Jones in systematic theology.

Then there are what one might call British theology’s two basic “default settings,” in the sense of positions which are taken by a good number of theologians as a sort of norm or at least a recurring point of reference for discussions.

The first of these takes something like Barth’s approach to modernity: mainstream Chalcedonian Christianity as renewed through the Reformation is the most reliable form of Christian truth, and it inspires a critique of modernity, though usually not what Rowan Williams describes as “experimenting with the rhetoric of its uncommitted environment.” The center most associated with this approach has been Kings College London (Colin Gunton, Michael Banner and, until their recent moves to Scotland, Alan Torrance and Francis Watson). John Webster in Oxford might also fit.

The second approach takes Thomas Aquinas (sometimes read in a very Augustinian way or even with Augustine as the dominant voice) as the default setting, and the choice of a premodern position gives a very different vantage point on modernity—often saying or implying that something went radically wrong in early modernity and seeing the Reformation as part of the problem. Many of the “Radical Orthodoxy” group would take this line, and they have provoked some sharp confrontations.

The role of such pivotal thinkers as Aquinas and Barth is far more complex than simply being repeated or even directly interpreted and discussed. I see them as often playing a symbolic role in theology’s emergence from the “founding trauma” of positivism. They are massive, richly theological, and not to be intellectually dismissed or intimidated, able to act as sponsors of a generation that wants to do theology in intelligent faith and with confidence. Hans Urs von Balthasar has also

filled this role for some. It is interesting that there is no British name in this category.

Finally, there are those in varying degrees like Rowan Williams who inhabit mainstream orthodoxy, though without appealing to one dominant theological voice; they engage in intensive conversation and critical discourse and appreciate the “celebratory” mode; their main concern is not so much cognitive coherence or invulnerability as fulfillment of a range of complex responsibilities within academy, church and society. This “wisdom” style is well suited to a theology mediated through the conversations described above.

It also tends to hold a distinctive attitude to modernity. It is reserved about metanarratives of massive discontinuity, whether in the first millennium, the late Middle Ages, early modernity, the Enlightenment or the 19th or 20th centuries (a reserve that should extend to the founding trauma suggested above!). It is skeptical about nostalgic claims for any previous period’s Christianity or theology. Above all, it is convinced that there is need for radical mending and healing all round—healing of the church and its traditions and thinking, healing of society and its centers of vitality and of suffering, and healing of the university and its pursuit of education, knowledge and understanding.

It may be obvious that this is my own preferred response to modernity, but it is striking that it is more a style or quality of practice than a type of theology. The single most significant feature of the British scene to me is the way in which this ethos tends to influence the whole field, including many of those who appeal to Augustine, Aquinas or Barth.

Even if there is reserve about my suggestion that a founding trauma for recent British theology was the aggressive assault of positivist and analytical philosophies and their allies in the middle 50 years of the century—a full account would at least require interweaving with several other historical strands—it is still clear that the mood of the parents is rather different from that of the grandparents. The present parent generation (those established in university posts and still some way from retirement) has had to cope with considerable pressures, especially because of the restructuring and increased government supervision of teaching, research and administration in the British university system. Despite this, most exhibit a quiet (or occasionally noisy) confidence in the worthwhileness of doing theology, and a concern to try to hold together a mainstream Christian faith with a range of lively conversations across the boundaries of disciplines and religions.

It is fair to ask whether the achievements have matched the confidence, especially in complex interdisciplinary areas and in the face of the overwhelming impact of late modern capitalism and its cultural industry. But the confidence has helped to generate fresh theological life in many centers and professional societies, and even (untypically for Britain) a movement or two.

In the next issue I will consider the British variant of systematic theology, some of the centers and networks of theological vitality, recent movements (including feminism and Radical Orthodoxy), theology in relation to the churches, and future prospects. n