Theological wisdom, British style: Integrating theology and religious studies

by David F. Ford in the April 5, 2000 issue

Some years ago when I encountered theologian George Lindbeck of Yale Divinity School, he asked me about the Gifford Lectures which had been written by my doctoral supervisor, Donald MacKinnon. At the time, Lindbeck was planning a course on MacKinnon. Within a year or so theologian David Tracy of Chicago gave a paper in which MacKinnon was one of the featured theologians. When asked what current theology he found most interesting, Tracy replied, “British.”

For Yale and Chicago both to be interested in theology in Britain was something. Other signs of serious American interest involve academic posts: Sarah Coakley moved from Oxford to Harvard, John Milbank has recently left Cambridge for the University of Virginia, and there have been other such moves. More and more U.S. theologians have been coming to meetings of the Society for the Study of Theology, the main British forum for academic theology, and more and more British theologians have been regular participants in the American Academy of Religion. More AAR sessions have been on British theologians than previously, and a recent addition to that gathering, the Society for Scriptural Reasoning (which brings together Jewish, Christian and Muslim thinkers), is a joint American-British initiative.

Journals such as *Modern Theology* are transatlantic, and major monograph series, textbooks and works of reference by British-based publishers such as Cambridge University Press, Blackwell and Oxford University Press have both British and U.S. authors. Postgraduate students cross the Atlantic in both directions in increasing numbers, and e-mail and Web sites have spawned more collaborative projects and networks.

U.S. interest in British theology has peaked at a time when continental European theology seems rather lackluster in comparison with 25 years ago. The shared

English language helps the exchange; but the old adage that Britain and the U.S. are “divided by a common language” is also worth remembering. Theology in Britain is in many respects very different from that in the U.S., and its distinctiveness is one of the reasons for the U.S. interest.

Two events in late 1999 are a good place to start in appreciating the special context of theology in the United Kingdom. The first was a request from the British government asking all departments of theology and religious studies to produce a “benchmarking statement” for their field. The purpose was to define the field, describe the knowledge, methods and skills to be learned, and state the levels of achievement needed to qualify for a degree. Though the exercise itself was understandably controversial, the striking thing was the level of consensus that emerged. Benchmarking became a stimulus to articulate what might be called the “British paradigm” in theology and religious studies.

The British paradigm might be best described in contrast to the German and U.S. models. In Germany, most theology is state-funded, Christian and denominational, sometimes with separate Protestant and Catholic faculties in the same university. Religious studies also exist in Germany, but they are rarely integrated with denominational theology.

In the U.S., the church-state divide discourages state-funded institutions from offering theology, so they usually have religious studies departments, which often take a negative attitude toward theology. On the other hand, hundreds of institutions (usually affiliated with one or more religious communities) offer theology, and sometimes these institutions unite theology with religious studies. But the bias of the system is against the two getting together.

In Britain, by contrast, the trend has been to integrate theology and religious studies, to the extent of questioning the legitimacy of the dichotomy. The wisdom behind this stance might be summed up in the following seven propositions.

1) The historical reasons for developing a “neutral” religious studies program as opposed to dominant “confessional” theology (seen as a threat to academic freedom) have largely disappeared in British universities.

2) There is no disputing the need of religious communities (and not only Christian ones) for institutions, which may be universities, where their theology (or whatever they name their thought and teaching) can be worked out, but such confessional

theology does not exhaust the field. Universities are obvious settings where those who pursue theological questions in various ways (in identification with particular traditions; in dialogues across traditions, cultures and disciplines; in dialogue with academics and students of many faith traditions and none) can flourish together. Perhaps the most striking thing about British theology in American eyes is the prevalence of this sort of theology, which is not confined to church institutions and is carried on in a wide variety of universities.

3) Religious studies arbitrarily (or ideologically) limits itself if it forbids the asking and answering of theological questions about, for example, the truth and reality of God within a particular tradition, and the ethical and other implications of that reality. Unless religious studies rules out in advance the possibility of answering such questions in “orthodox” ways, and excludes making critical and constructive contributions to current debates about them, then it must be open to the presence of theology in universities.

4) Theology need not be in competition with religious studies defined in such an open way, but benefits from its engagement with various disciplines.

5) The field of theology and religious studies does not have only purely academic responsibilities of excellence in relation to academic standards; it also has responsibilities in regard to public education and debate (most major issues have religious dimensions) and for the health of religious communities. These responsibilities are far better performed if theological questions of meaning, truth, goodness and beauty are energetically discussed and related to current issues.

6) The university is an increasingly important element in an information-saturated and knowledge-based economy and culture, and the university is impoverished if it does not include places where there can be thoughtful and rigorous engagement with important questions raised by, between and about the religions.

7) Overall it is healthier for theology, religious studies, religious communities, universities and public debate if universities include places where theology and religious studies are integrated. This has been the main trend in Britain, and perhaps more purely confessional models, such as the German, and more dichotomous models, such as the American, have something to learn from it.

Two examples from the recent history of the field illustrate the tendency toward convergence. The department of religious studies in Lancaster University was

founded by Ninian Smart in the 1960s with a very strong “religious studies” ethos, which it maintains. But it has shown a strong tendency to encourage theology at the same time. Both Sarah Coakley and John Milbank spent many years there, and today its faculty includes a set of lively Christian thinkers, among them Richard Roberts and Linda Woodhead.

By contrast, the faculty of divinity at Cambridge University was purely Anglican for centuries. In the 20th century it opened up first to other Christian traditions and then to other religions, changing its undergraduate degree to “theology and religious studies.” In the past seven years it has simultaneously expanded its teaching of Islam, Judaism and Indian religions, developed much closer links with the Cambridge Theological Federation (an ecumenical set of Anglican, Methodist, United Reformed, Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox colleges, together with a Centre for Jewish-Christian Relations), and founded the Centre for Advanced Religious and Theological Studies, housing a range of collaborative and interdisciplinary projects.

The second event in 1999 was the election of Rowan Williams, the Anglican bishop of Monmouth and formerly the Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity at Oxford, as archbishop of Wales. Around the same time he published a major work, *On Christian Theology* (Blackwell Publishers). L. Gregory Jones of Duke University calls Williams “one of the most creative and profound theologians writing in the latter half of the 20th century”; in Britain he is probably the leading theologian of his generation. Though in some ways he is an untypical academic theologian, his career nevertheless exhibits some key features of British theology.

First there is his theological genealogy. Williams was a student of MacKinnon (1913-1994), a Scottish Anglican who spent 18 years as a professor of philosophical theology in Cambridge and was perhaps the most influential teacher of his generation in British theology. His impact was not so much through particular positions or doctrines as through a quality of intensive interrogative engagement with both Christianity and the realities of contemporary culture, politics and ethics, and a prophetic urgency of concentration on certain themes. Williams has a comparable interrogative edge, a sense of the difficulty of doing justice to the complexity and sheer intractability of reality, and of the unavoidability of tragedy, conflict and fragmentariness. He has MacKinnon’s passionate concern for ethics, including the ethical dimensions of intellectual life and of epistemology, yet also extending into courageous and costly confrontation with issues of war and peace, race, economic justice and sexuality.

Characteristic themes of MacKinnon recur in Williams: a deep interpenetration of philosophy and theology; a cross-centered realism which accompanies close attention to the contingencies of history and the ambiguities of power; theological use of the hermeneutics of suspicion in the context of the judgment of God and a call to conversion and repentance; acute awareness of the necessity and costliness of historical action in line with the gospel; and resistance to premature closure or claims to have a definitive, systematic overview. Both have theologies radically immersed in the gospel and in life at its darkest points, and are orthodoxly Christian in ways which show Christian orthodoxy to be anything but comfortable.

Yet unlike MacKinnon, Williams is not primarily a philosopher. His core scholarly work has been in patristics and the history of spirituality, with major works on Arius and St. Teresa of Ávila. They show his capacity to do theology and history together, each enriching the other. He has also written on other early church figures and topics—on Luther, Richard Hooker, St. John of the Cross, Sergii Bulgakov, Karl Barth, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Karl Rahner, Hans Urs von Balthasar, Raimundo Pannikar and many others. He has written books on pacifism and the resurrection, a set of sermons and addresses, *Open to Judgement* (1994), which is perhaps the best basic introduction to his thought, and a volume of poetry. But the most thorough theological statement is his recent work *On Christian Theology*. It explores the nature of theology and of biblical interpretation, and has chapters on human nature, Christology, Word and Spirit, various aspects of the Trinity, the resurrection, sacraments, the church, ethics and politics.

What sort of theology is this? In his prologue, Williams offers his own helpful categories to describe what he is doing. In a modification of Schleiermacher's typology of poetic, rhetorical and descriptive theology, he divides theology into the celebratory (drawing out the connections of thought and image so as to display "the fullest possible range of significance in the language used" and "evoke a fullness of vision"); the communicative (persuading and commending, showing how the gospel can be at home in various cultural settings, and "experimenting with the rhetoric of its uncommitted environment"); and the critical (embracing the apophatic tradition as well as much philosophical theology and methodology). Each has its own appropriate rigor, and the three need to be in constant interaction with each other if theology is to stay healthy; but Williams never rests in a single system. His basic activity is one of continuing conversation, learning and involvement in the practical demands of history. Williams's theology does exemplify the coinherence of the

three, but the typology is of broader significance for British theology.

The attempt to keep these three dimensions in play together, and also immersed in the practicalities of history, spirituality and ecclesial existence, characterizes the basic goal of much British theology, however far much of it may be from achieving excellence in all three or even one. The aim is not so much that of a coherent system, and it is not even primarily cognitive: it seeks a habitable theology which tries to sustain multiple responsibilities—to a range of disciplines, to Christian living and worshiping, and to the shaping of a humane, ethical society with just institutions. Its basis concern is for wisdom—and Williams has described the classic Anglican theologian Richard Hooker as offering just such a “sapiential theology.”

It is very much a mediated (or indirect) theology. The mediations in Williams’s case include prayer, worship and sacraments, history, philosophy, detailed textual exegesis, spiritual and intellectual biography, commentary on theologians of Anglican, Protestant (especially Lutheran), Roman Catholic and Orthodox traditions, literature, music, ethical and political debate, the social sciences, a range of genres (predominantly papers and essays—a mark of much British theology—but also monographs, sermons, addresses, semipopular books) and, pervading them all, conversations with extremely diverse interlocutors, past and present.

Such an approach to theology is relatively unsuited to international, or even national, prominence. It does not go in for embracing systems, metanarratives or surveys; it is reticent, subtle and respectful rather than hyperbolic, sound-biting or polemical; and it prefers intelligent, nuanced conversation to positing controversial theses or presenting confrontational arguments. It avoids shortcuts, admires patience and is willing if necessary to take long detours (through the details of the Arian controversy or the social history of Teresa of Ávila’s Spain). It takes shape in a wide variety of conversations, collaborative projects, sermons, addresses and articles in often rather obscure publications. It embodies an ethic of communication whose primary locus is prayer. I consider one of the gems of 20th-century theology to be Williams’s short “‘Theological Postscript” at the end of his book on Arius, where he sums up the continuing significance of the Council of Nicea, but also gently raises questions about whether Athanasius and Barth fail to achieve a rhetoric reflecting a nontriumphalist ethic of the cross.

I think what emerges from this way of doing theology is a “wisdom style” immersed in the give-and-take of conversations and suspicious of more militaristic rhetorics. It

takes prayer and worship as the most embracing context for theology. It is a mediated theology, with a deep respect for thorough scholarship and history, and a concern for rigorous argument and clear expression. It tries to sustain a theological "ecology" that can practice and interrelate celebratory, communicative and critical types. It is somewhat allergic to large-scale generalization and systematizing, and it has a pervasive ethical interest. It is committed to the church and to the flourishing of society, and puts a good deal of energy into those responsibilities.

That is of course an ideal type. But, as I have considered the example of Williams and tested it, I have been struck by the number of other leading figures (in a setting that is, in line with this style, suspicious of "stars") who in various ways embody significant aspects of this style. I have mentioned only MacKinnon of the "grandparent" generation. Of those still active, while retired or near retirement, the most influential have made considerable (and often largely hidden) contributions to the health of the ethos I have described. I think of Frances Young in Birmingham (New Testament and patristics), Maurice Wiles in Oxford (patristics and modern theology), Henry Chadwick in Oxford and Cambridge (patristics and ecumenical theology), Basil Mitchell in Oxford (philosophy of religion), Anthony Thiselton in Nottingham (New Testament, hermeneutics and modern theology), Haddon Willmer in Leeds (modern theology, practical theology), Daniel W. Hardy in Birmingham, Durham, Princeton and Cambridge (modern theology), Stephen Sykes in Cambridge and Durham (modern theology, with ten years as a bishop), Nicholas Lash in Cambridge (philosophical theology), Fergus Kerr, O.P., in Edinburgh and Oxford (philosophical theology), Herbert McCabe, O.P., in Oxford (systematic and political theology), Colin Gunton in London (modern theology), Duncan Forrester in Edinburgh (political and practical theology), Joseph Laishley, S.J., in London (modern and political theology), Keith Ward in Oxford (philosophical theology and theology of religions).

Of course, some people less in line with the ethos I have described have made major contributions, and these include some of the names best known outside Britain: Richard Swinburne in Oxford (an analytic philosopher of religion, with little interest in dialogue with postmedieval theologians), John Hick in Birmingham (a philosopher of religion best known for his "Copernican revolution"advocating a pluralist approach to religions), Don Cupitt in Cambridge (a philosopher of religion with a strongly nonrealist position) and Thomas F. Torrance (the most distinguished living Scot, who fits better a continental European model of the systematic theologian).

If those are the still-active grandparents, what about the present generation of “parents”’? In a subsequent article I will attempt to describe them, with special reference to 20th-century intellectual trauma and to the main conversations and divisions in British theology. In the third and final article I will consider systematic theology, key centers of theology, movements such as feminism and Radical Orthodoxy, and theology in relation to the churches.

I conclude this esssay, however, with a reflection on the moods of British theology. In general, the two leading moods in theological discourse generally have been the indicative (this is what is believed, affirmed) and the imperative (this *is* what should be done). Those are essential moods of any Christian theology, as they are of the Bible. They certainly run through Rowan Williams’s theology too.

But what makes Williams’s theology distinctive is an intertwining of three other moods: the pervasive interrogative mood, the questioning in which his “critical” type specializes; the subjunctive mood, exploring what may or might be, which marks the experiments of a “communicative” theology that engages with the rhetorics of its environment; and the optative mood of desire and longing for that “fullness of vision” which is anticipated in the “celebratory” mode.

To rework indicatives and imperatives in the light of such interrogatives, subjunctives and optatives: that is hardly a slogan to hit the headlines, but its practice may have some contribution to make to the integrity, richness and faithfulness of theology.