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ON BEING A THEOLOGIAN IN THE WORLD TODAY

THE PRIESTLY TASK

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Fifty years ago last Advent Sunday I was confirmed in the Church of England in the chapel of Trinity Hall in the University of Cambridge. I had been prepared for confirmation during the previous term by Robert Runcie who was just beginning his last year as the Dean of Trinity Hall. It is therefore not merely an honour for me to give this annual Archbishop Robert Runcie Lecture, but – if I might put it in these words – a small act of filial piety. I am simply one of a large number of people who found in Robert Runcie a type of faith and leadership that was informed, questioning, good humoured, tolerant, life-affirming, inclusive. Liberality is, I suppose, the word that best captures what Robert Runcie represented: a liberality that derived not from an easy-going permissiveness, but from an openness of mind, a generosity of spirit, and those rather old fashioned virtues – courtesy and patience. It was – in the best sense of the word – a worldly holiness that he presented and portrayed.

Of course, it's one thing to say, Thank you for asking me to give this lecture. It's an entirely different thing to know what to say to those who have just completed their graduate theological studies and whose graduation ceremony we shall all be glad to attend tomorrow morning. When I was asked in the mid 1990s to become the Dean of St Paul's Cathedral in London, there was the inevitable press conference. My wife and I made our way to London by train, and as we walked along the north side of the Cathedral to the Chapter House we stopped by the north transept and looked up at that vast building. I remember saying to my wife, "It looks alright, doesn't it?" She looked at me and replied, "I hope you know what you're doing".

It's the sort of remark we might all make to our closest friends – perhaps even to ourselves – in the course of our life and work; but it is a sentence – or should it be a question – that might properly be asked of those of us who like to think that we are theologians. “I hope you know what you are doing.”

To those of you who will graduate tomorrow, I would want to join with families and colleagues and friends in offering my congratulations and in wishing you well as you continue on your journey as theologians. And I say *continue*, because it is a journey – once commenced – which cannot be lightly abandoned. Theology is a study which brings so many disciplines into play; it asks that we address the large questions about mystery and meaning, direction and destiny; it requires a dialogue – principled but open-ended – with the world and with those around us which is bound to lead to new insights, new possibilities. And that is even more true when graduate students of different traditions of faith – or of no faith - come together.

Many of you have pursued your studies at GTF in recent years as a necessary part of your vocation, your ministry; and I hope you will have chosen to study theology because of what I have called the large questions that intrigue, perplex, excite. If *God* is a word that you dare to use, you will know – surprisingly even from such a source as Thomas Aquinas – that God is not the answer, He is the question. But it is the questions that matter. Elie Wiesel, who has done so much to make the post Second World War generation of theologians face the questions posed by the death camps, tells how as a young boy living in Transylvania before its occupation by the Nazis in 1944, he turned to the beadle, the man-of-all-work in the synagogue, to learn to pray. Wiesel relates that, “He explained to me that every question possessed a power that did not lie in the answer” (1). That is something that every theologian must understand.

All of you will discover that the research in which you have been engaged will have sharpened your critical faculties. You will know – or ought to know – whether work with which you are presented has been properly thought through, arguments correctly assembled, conclusions reached which can be justified by evidence. Many of you will take what you have learned back into your work – in church or mosque or synagogue, in dioceses and parishes, in schools, in universities, in hospitals. But what concerns me most is whether you might discover that there is *for you as theologians* a new awareness, a new empathy, which enable you – quietly and unselfconsciously – to pursue what I want to call the priestly task of the theologian. Yes, I take my vocabulary from my tradition of Christian faith, but what I am wanting to say will commend itself, I believe, to those of other faith traditions and none who recognise nonetheless that the questions are too important just to be left to the sociologists, the psychologists, the environmentalists, the students of government.

You will appreciate that I can only speak as a Christian, as a priest of the Church of England; and my formation, my perceptions, my perspectives, have been shaped by that tradition. But I dare to believe that what I have to say

about *what it means to be a theologian in the world today* might be recognised by men and women of all traditions of faith – indeed, by all men and women who are questioning, searching, because we are all engaged in the theological enterprise.

But why should I speak of *the priestly task of the theologian*? I do so because the priest – like the rabbi, the imam, the lama – embodies and represents and gives voice to his or her own particular tradition of faith. And the theologian – male or female, ordained or lay – is required to bring out into the open, to bring to consciousness, to articulate, something of the drama of our story, the contradictions of our experience, the promptings of the human spirit; and to do so in such a way that those with whom we share the journey can find the confidence, the courage, to take responsibility for who and what they are.

It was Teilhard de Chardin who wrote, “Because I am a priest, I wish from now on to be the first to become conscious of all that the world loves, pursues and suffers; I want to be the first to seek, to sympathise and to suffer; the first to open myself out and sacrifice myself – to become more widely human and more nobly of the earth than of the world’s servants” (2). There is an understanding of priesthood that goes far beyond the work of the theologian; but in so far as de Chardin speaks of being conscious of all that the world loves, pursues and suffers; in so far as de Chardin speaks of being more widely human and more nobly of the earth; I find I want to say – Yes: this is a part of what it means to be a theologian in the world today; this is the priestly task.

Theology has a fairly dry and dusty reputation. It’s easy to lose ourselves in the pedantic details – and somebody has to do that – but wherever we slot in, the theological enterprise is quite simply concerned with life in its totality. Many of you will take whatever you have learned in recent years at GTF back into the communities – secular or religious – to which you belong. You will be required to work within the constraints of community, of institutional, life. That is not always easy. And yet what excites me is the task of the theologian – within and beyond his or her community – to speak to those who do not stand where we stand, but who live with the questions which we presume to address, and who more often than we might realise are grateful for the light that can be thrown upon the questions, the perplexities, the aspirations with which they live. And these things do not come together to form some convenient and coherent pattern. Life is not so simple. On the contrary, it is no small part of our work as theologians to own the brokenness of our condition, the disconnectedness, the fragmentation of our world, and to enable others to do so too. Yes: this is also part of what it means – or ought to mean – to be a theologian in the world today; this is also the priestly task.

But we deceive ourselves if we believe that this is something that can be easily accomplished. Faith communities stand on uncertain ground. This is most obviously true for the Christian churches in the western world, but I am far from being convinced that the problem is confined to the Christian churches or, indeed, to the western world. What has to be conceded is that the culture of our so-called first world is profoundly secular. Churches – or, to

be more precise, some church groups, some church traditions – might appear to be very self-confident, very strident, in what they have to say; but certainly in the United Kingdom and throughout much of western and central Europe there has been over the generations an erosion of any sense that the religious tradition, and especially the Christian tradition, is able to offer a unique, a comprehensive, a compelling interpretation of life.

I realise that the situation – at least with regard to church attendance – is significantly different in your country from what I know in mine; but I wonder if you will dissent from the stricture of one of our Roman Catholic historians in the United Kingdom who, observing the prevailing scene some fifteen years ago, wrote that, “Large areas of our common life have become de-Christianised; growing numbers of people are cut off from real contact with Christian values; society is increasingly anchorless and bereft of shared ideals; the Christian contours of society and the humane values they perpetuated are being daily eroded” (3). Many who are deeply involved in the life of their local communities will see signs of hope. Of course they will. They are always there for those who have eyes to see; but it is nonetheless a curious and confusing combination of civilisation and a new barbarism that we see around us. There is a sense of fragility, of dislocation, of impotence, of weariness. There is no wider frame of reference to which people in large numbers feel able to relate their beliefs, their behaviour, or their work.

Of course, there is always the temptation for faith communities to take refuge in some mythical past, some golden age; or to fabricate a vision of what life might be in a world that does not exist. But theologians – almost by definition – are not allowed to collude with such denials of the truth. It may be that what is required is nothing less than a prolonged period of painful and continuing theological reconstruction. So be it. What is certain is that theology cannot do its work in isolation. The context is international and multi-disciplinary and ecumenical in the widest sense of the word. Our time is the present; our place is the world as it is; our stance is one of faith seeking understanding.

Is it therefore possible to speak of the theologian in the world today as one who is entrusted with a priestly task? I believe it is. It is bound to be the case that many graduate students of theology will concern themselves with matters that relate directly to the life of their faith communities – their stories, their doctrines, their liturgies, their pastoral practices, their governance. I want to go some way beyond those things and point towards four areas where theologians still have a distinctive contribution to make; remembering, of course, that the theological enterprise is concerned with nothing less than the discernment of truth, and that the priestly task subsists in bringing out into the open, bringing to consciousness, articulating something of what I called just now the drama of our story, the contradictions of our experience, the promptings of the human spirit.

First, our theologians must be willing to engage wholeheartedly in dialogue with all other disciplines. I can still recall the excitement with which I discovered nearly forty years ago the conclusion of the unofficial report that had been commissioned by the Secretary-General of the United Nations

Conference on the Human Environment. Its authors bemoaned the lack in earlier generations of a wider rationale of unity, and then continued: "Our prophets have sought it, our poets have dreamed of it. But it is only in our own day that astronomers, physicists, geologists, chemists, biologists, anthropologists, ethnologists and archaeologists have all combined in a single witness of advanced science to tell us that in every alphabet of our being, we do indeed belong to a single system, powered by a single energy, manifesting a fundamental unity under all its variations, depending for its survival on the balance and health of the total system" (4).

These words might appear at first sight to be far removed from orthodox definitions of faith; but if we believe that the task of theology is to speak about God; if we go on to say that every speaking about God is a speaking about the world and how we understand the world; and if we can go one step further and say that the task of the theologian – whatever his or her tradition of faith might be – must include a theory of the present time; then you may feel as I do that the dialogue with other disciplines has about it something of the divine imperative.

The whole of life is a dialogue with God – even if we cannot name Him. It is a dialogue that requires the insights of complementary disciplines, and it is in the cut and thrust of that dialogue that we begin to see who God is, and how God works, and what God requires of His people. Every faith tradition will have its points of reference, its boundary markers, beyond which we cannot easily go; and yet we know something of the necessary tension between retrenchment and renewal, between continuity and change. "Every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like a householder who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old" (5).

You might expect me as a good Anglican to look to Richard Hooker. Certainly there are sentences in his writings which seem to me to be particularly pertinent. Let me give you two. First: "God hath created no thing simply for itself; but each thing in all things that in the *whole world* nothing is found whereunto anything created can say, 'I need thee not'"(6). And secondly: "All things cannot be of ancient continuance, which are expedient and needful but the Church hath always power no less to ordain that which never was, than to ratify what hath been before and in both may do well" (7). Our faith communities require that we keep faith with our sacred scriptures, with our traditions; but it may be supremely the work of the theologian, building upon these things, to take the common perceptions of knowledge and experience and to use them as building blocks for that wider rationale of unity which for men and women of faith finds its beginning and its end in God.

Secondly, it is for me a corollary of all these things that theologians – in pursuing their priestly task – should engage wholeheartedly in that age-old dialogue between what we call the secular and the sacred. If it is true that our starting point is the world, that it is in the world that we find God, that it is in the centre of life that we find the meaning of faith; then there can be no room for the ghetto mentality, which can only recognise faith on its own terms and according to its own light. As one who until he retired was able to count John

Donne as his most famous predecessor, I cannot be in any doubt about the tension between the flesh and the spirit, the secular and the sacred, with which most of us are all too familiar.

Many of us are glad to acknowledge the truth of St Augustine's observation on the life of the church that, "Many seem to be within who are in reality without, and others seem to be without who are in reality within". Let us be clear that the divine favour does not only rest on those who are within; and for favour let us also read insight, knowledge, wisdom, revelation. A faith community which sets its face against the world might be able for a time to live within the securities of its own internal life as a religious sect; but moral questions, ethical questions, have a way of intruding. Traditional institutions and traditional "certainties" might well be struggling, but across a whole range of issues – from the environment to bio-ethics, to human sexuality, to information technology, to finance, to the disciplines of professional life – there is a growing list of ethical questions many of which are thought to include a religious dimension.

And this goes further than a mere recognition of context, of culture. It has something to do with the incompleteness of knowledge, with the paradoxes of life, which demand at the very least an intelligent and glad-hearted rediscovery of what I have called the dialogue between the secular and the sacred. Faith communities which do not understand these things cannot speak to those who live with the ambiguities, the contradictions, of human experience, or to those who wrestle – from outside the camp – with questions of meaning, of value, of direction.

This emphasis upon the need for the theologian to look outside the camp leads me to raise as a third question the possibility of a far more extensive, a far more open-ended, dialogue between the faith communities. Please do not misunderstand. I am not looking for some synthesis of faith. Nothing will be achieved, nothing should be attempted, unless those who take part in such discussions are clear about the integrity of their own faith traditions. But the world in which we live – with its high degree of mobility, its global consciousness, and its deep antipathies – requires an acknowledgement of the common ground on which men and women of faith all stand.

I've had reason over the last two years to read many of the writings of Thomas Merton, the Trappist monk and spiritual writer, who became in his later years not merely an outspoken social critic but also one of the early protagonists of a wider ecumenism. He was entirely clear about his position: "I will be a better Catholic, not if I can refute every shade of Protestantism, but if I can confirm the truth in it and still go further. So, too, with the Muslims, the Hindus, the Buddhists, etc. This does not mean syncretism, indifferentism, the vapid and careless friendliness that accepts everything by thinking of nothing. There is much that one cannot 'affirm' and 'accept', but first one must say 'yes' where one really can. If I affirm myself as a Catholic merely by denying all that is Muslim, Jewish, Protestant, Hindu, Buddhist, etc., in the end I will find there is not much left for me to affirm as a Catholic: and certainly no breath of the Spirit with which to affirm it" (8).

Merton was looking for a free exchange of ideas, of experience. He was drawn by the mystical traditions of the east, and he was willing to go beyond doctrinal definitions and ethical codes, in order to find what he called "a living contact with the Source of all being" (9). He saw the need for Christians to find a global dimension to their thinking, and similarities in the realm of religious experience seemed to him to be so important in the formation of a world view. He was entirely persuaded that "God speaks, and God is to be heard, not only on Sinai, not only in my own heart, but in the *voice of the stranger*" (10). It was therefore for him an ecumenism which, while it went far beyond the bounds of Christianity, was nonetheless concerned – and only concerned – with what he called the ultimate meaning of life. Is it inappropriate to suggest that the wider ecumenical dialogue might also be part of the priestly task of the theologian in our world today?

I have placed great emphasis upon this priestly task, but let us go a little further. I think there will be a general agreement that the priest – and for priest read all the other titles and designations by which such a person is known – embodies and represents and gives voice to his or her own particular tradition of faith. But if there is one activity which gives definition to all that the word priest conveys, it is prayer: personal prayer, liturgical prayer, public prayer. It does therefore follow for me that the priestly task of the theologian must – in the fourth place – include an exploration of all that we mean by prayer. And – bear with me – I am not talking about the varieties of religious experience. We must go deeper than that.

Let me illustrate what I mean by referring to the remarks of an English novelist, Catherine Fox, who was interviewed by one of our church papers in the United Kingdom when her second book was published. Her books had been set either in a seminary or in a parish, and they had an earthy – some would say an erotic – dimension. She was being questioned about her treatment of the subject and why she had written in a particular way. In the course of her remarks, she made these observations:

"I still see the Scriptures as in some sense primary for belief and practice."

"The drawing force of your faith is a personal relationship with God."

"I can't impose theological thought on the novel. Unless it arises from the characters and their situation, it's not going to work as fiction."

"I didn't want to tie it up too neatly at the end Instead it's more tentative."

"The main characters are on their way to a greater and deeper knowledge of God."

What Catherine Fox had sketched out, of course, was a marvellously helpful introduction to the way in which theology is – or should be – done. Her

remarks speak of the authority of scripture; of the impossibility of separating faith from prayer and discipleship; of the engagement with life in the light of which our theological interpretation arises; and of the end of all faith which is the knowledge of God. And that's what I'm after: what she called the knowledge of God, which comes not from books but from living, and which informs everything we understand by our integrity as human beings.

Prayer is a word that cries out to be unpacked. It will mean different things to different people; and different things at different times for all people. For some, it will speak of silence, of solitude; for some, of an awareness of the mystery of things; for some, of the abandonment of contemplative prayer; for some, of the empathy of intercessory prayer; for some, of the outpouring of love. What matters – and this is the question to be addressed - is the way in which everything we understand by our freedom, our sense of wholeness and well-being as individuals, turns upon the degree to which we penetrate in prayer the depths within and around. It was the Roman Catholic theologian, Cardinal Jean Danielou, who reminded us that, "The true science of God, is that which leads us to love God" (11). Alongside the question that might be asked of any piece of theological writing – Does it help me look at life in a new light? – there is another question that might be judged to be no less pertinent - Does it make me want to pray?

So what do we have: the dialogue with other disciplines; the dialogue between the secular and the sacred; the dialogue between the faith communities; the dialogue with regard to prayer and the discovery of a true humanity? These are dialogues that are already in train in many places; and if I emphasise them it is because of the higher profile, the higher priority, that I believe they require. And if it is the case that they constitute at least a part of what it means for theologians to pursue their priestly task in the world today, then let it be acknowledged that there is an apologetic dimension and *for me* that relates to the inarticulate religion that we find on every side.

I talked earlier on of speaking to those who do not stand where we stand, but who live nonetheless with the questions we presume to address. There are large numbers of people for whom faith is tentative, hidden, fragmented, elusive. And yet they have some sense of the mystery of things; an awareness of the paradoxes, the ambiguities, of human experience; a tacit acceptance of the law of love as the primary law of life; and a wrestling – often fitful and uncertain – with questions of meaning, of value, of direction, of destiny.

It's what we have to call an inarticulate religion. And for those who might say – Yes, I can recognise the things you're talking about, religion remains nonetheless inarticulate; for some, because they do not have the vocabulary to put these things into words; for some, because they cannot see the connections that might be made with the tenets of religious orthodoxy; for some, because the whole culture in which they stand inhibits them from embracing institutions with all the packaging that they expect to find in terms of faith, piety and practice; and for some, because they are simply not

persuaded that these are actually the things with which our faith communities are seriously engaged day by day.

But it will be a long haul. We are not talking about the work of a decade or of a generation. One of the most respected religious journalists of the last thirty years or so in the United Kingdom reminded his readers that by contrast with the newspapers for which he wrote, "Religion is a waiting game: the only view that makes sense is the long view. Newspapers", he went on, "are bound to be concerned with the ripples on the surface of life; religion is about the deep ocean currents which are often completely hidden and which move enormous masses of water over long distances very slowly. Deep ocean currents make little difference to today's weather, but they are crucial to the overall climate". It is a necessary reminder. There are "enormous masses of water" to be moved if theologians are to speak to the inarticulate religion that is there wherever we might turn. The question is whether we have the imagination, the empathy, the courtesy, and the resolve to pursue quietly, patiently, the priestly task which – if I may – Archbishop Robert Runcie would have understood and commended.

NOTES

1. Elie Wiesel, *Night*, MacGibbon & Mee 1960, pp. 14-15.
2. Teilhard de Chardin, *Le Pretre*. Cited by Eric James, *Odd Man Out?* Hodder & Stoughton 1962, p. 45.
3. Eamon Duffy, Article in the *Tablet*. 22nd January 1994.
4. Barbara Ward and Rene Dubos, *Only One Earth*, Andre Deutsch 1972, p. 297.
5. St Matthew xiii 52
6. Richard Hooker, *Sermon III.2*.
7. Richard Hooker, *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity V . viii . 1 – 2*.
8. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, Sheldon Press London 1977, p. 141.
9. Thomas Merton, *Redeeming the Time*. Edited by Robert E. Daggy. Collins Fount Paperbacks 1981, p. 102.
10. Thomas Merton, *Collected Poems*, Sheldon Press London 1978, pp. 384-385.
11. Jean Danielou, *God and Us*. Trans. by Walter Roberts, Mowbray & Co 1975, p. 171.