

Topic 1: An Ancient Tradition Facing a Post-Modern World

I. Rationale for this Program: An Introduction to Catholic Theology: The problematic that this series addresses is captured in the title of this first lecture: "An Ancient Tradition Facing a Post-Modern World." This could be stated as a question: what is the relevance of this ancient Christian tradition today? How is it possible to make sense of the religious claims made by our tradition?

I intend this title to be simply descriptive of where we are today; it is not staking out some kind of ideological position. Christianity is an ancient tradition with roots in an ancient world that is quite different from our own. This is part of its glory, its beauty, its truth. But it is also problematic when Christians find themselves living in a world with basic assumptions that differ dramatically from the assumptions of those who first passed on this tradition.

The phrase "post-modern world" is also descriptive. We are living in a completely new era in human history, one characterized by globalization, plurality, historical consciousness, urbanization, new forms of life, new information and communication systems, and a world of terrible human suffering. These factors have implications for our ancient tradition and for those of us who engage and live in this world with faith in God shaped by that tradition.

Our ancient religious tradition and our post-modern world - is not automatic nor is it easy. One way of describing the task of theology: theology mediates between this ancient tradition and the contemporary world in which it finds itself.

This problematic shows up in my teaching graduate theology to men and women preparing for ministry - ordained ministry as priests or various forms of lay ministry – in our church. Our pluralistic and ambiguous world can be unsettling for them; it engenders feelings of insecurity and a temptation to flee into various forms of traditionalism or fundamentalism that refuse to engage the modern or post-modern world. There are those in our church and our theological schools who turn their back on the modern world and that is understandable, but it might not be the best nor the only way to deal with the tensions involved in living at this time.

The problematic also shows up in the lives of ordinary Catholics. Yesterday I spoke to a woman in a parish attending church with her 19 year old grandson, the only one of her ten grandchildren who goes to church. Her pain as she spoke was palpable. She expressed a need to offload her feelings of guilt and anxiety onto someone else - her children and their spouses, church leaders, even me! Even the one grandson who still goes to church. She doesn't know how to help them make

sense of the faith she loves and longs to share with them...

So this is the problem in broad strokes... But it might be useful to say more about some of the particular questions that arise as a result of the confrontation between the Christian tradition and the modern/ post-modern world. There are many particular issues one could identify.

Among these are the failures of the Church's own witness - the sex abuse scandal, the decline in religious and priestly vocations, etc. But these, important as they are, do not represent the real crisis. Rather, it lies in the dynamics of our historical age and its roots are deep... far deeper than my poor parishioner could know. For the sake of simplicity, I'd like to focus on three main questions. I will return to these toward the end of this course to see if the theological method we propose here successfully engages them.

II. Three Crucial Questions:

1. The question of cogency: Theology facing historical and scientific consciousness. The recognition of historical consciousness and the social interests that underlie every attempt to do theology have put an end to theology's cognitive innocence. Theology must reckon with the relationship between knowledge and interest. "If all empirical knowledge is determined by some interest, then not only the contents but also the subject and addressee of knowledge are significant for cognitive processes" (J.B. Metz). A theology which does not wish to practice some form of intellectual hibernation must encounter the world as history, for the religious and metaphysical views of the world which formerly supplied the context for doing theology no longer prove convincing.

2. The question of religious pluralism and the issues being addressed by comparative theology regarding the relationship of Christianity to the other religions. What is the status of our claims about Jesus as savior and what do our claims mean for the savior figures claimed by other traditions? A theology poised to offer support to believers at the dawn of the twenty-first century must account for a church that is truly worldwide and incarnated in very different cultures. Moreover, it must recognize that both the world and the church are socially divided and culturally polycentric. Above all, Christianity has to face the pluralism of religious traditions.

3. The problem of faith in God in the face of massive historical injustice represents third crucial challenge for theology to take up today. The third challenge appears forcefully at Auschwitz. This massive historical interruption, along with other

similarly incomprehensible historical catastrophes, brought theology to the end of its historical innocence. Johann Baptist Metz writes "There is no meaning which one could salvage by turning one's back on Auschwitz, and no truth which one could thereby defend. Theology therefore has to make an about-turn, a turn which will bring us face-to-face with the suffering and the victims." Because a true theology in and of history must address the suffering of history, theology must likewise attend to the historical irruption of the poor. In short, theology must once again take up the question of theodicy, and must do so in terms of the victims of history. This is not only a particular content for theology to address; it has to be built into theology itself.

III. Distinguishing Fundamental and Systematic Theology: This last statement introduces a distinction it might be helpful to flesh out at this point, even before we begin to wrestle with the meaning of the word theology itself. The distinction is between what has been called "fundamental theology" and "systematic theology." (One could use other terms, but these will suffice...) Allow me to use a computer metaphor to suggest introduce this distinction. If systematic theology - which addresses questions of "particular content" about God, Jesus, salvation, creation, church, sacraments, etc. - is like the various software programs that your computer runs, then fundamental theology is like the operating system.

IV. Plan of the Entire Course and of Part I of the Course: I have divided the 24 lectures into four parts of equal length

Part I: What Is Theology? An introductory section with five more lectures following this one. Here we will begin to see how theology has been understood and what it looks like in action, first in various periods of the church's history, and also today.

Part II: Faith And Revelation

Part III: Scripture, Tradition, Church

Part IV: Theology for the Twenty-first Century

Part I, addressing the question, what is theology, has six parts

- An Ancient Tradition Facing a Post-Modern World
- How Can We Talk About God if God is Absolute Mystery?
- The Soil Where Theology Grows: Christian Faith, Life and Prayer
- Classic Paradigms and Contemporary Approaches to Theology
- Doing Theology Today
- The Creature Who "Does Theology"

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What problems arise speaking about an ancient religious tradition like Christianity in our intellectual climate today?
2. How would you characterize our intellectual climate today?
3. What are some of the crucial questions that theology has to face today?