Theological Education: a Resource for Public Moral Discourse?

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SOME YEARS AGO, there were plans for PACE (a voluntary organisation working with prisoners and ex-prisoners) to provide accommodation in a Dublin suburb for women who had just left prison. People who rejected this idea, placed in their windows a large red poster reading 'NO to PACE.' Going to Mass on Christmas morning, I noticed in one window, alongside that poster, electric Christmas candles. Here were two clearly opposed images – 'No to the stranger' and, 'Welcome to the stranger.'

Theological education can explore such life situations. It can bring some social analysis into conversation with the faith tradition, represented by the candles. This tradition, located in the Judeo-Christian story, might point towards stories, experiences and insight concerning the value of hospitality and the need to act toward another with justice and compassion, especially if the person is poor.

When the participants bring their life experience and the faith tradition into a mutually critical conversation, the dynamics of the conversation can 'pull us up short' and help reveal our presuppositions and enlarge our understanding of the issues at hand. New understanding will happen at the intersection of what is familiar and what is strange. This back and forth between one's life experience and a faith tradition allows for real education to take place.

Such real education is not just learning 'about' information; it is also about learning 'from' what is being explored for one's life, both

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personal and public. Here, I use the word 'public' in the sense set out by Parker Palmer:

> The word 'public' as I understand it contains a vision of our oneness, our unity, our interdependence upon one another. Despite the fact that we are strangers to one another – and will stay stranger for the most part – we occupy a common space, share common resources, have common opportunities, and must somehow learn to live together. To acknowledge that one is a member of the public is to recognize that we are members of one another.[1]

When there is a movement from life to faith and faith to life in theological education, it is generally concerned with the personal aspect of our lives. This article will draw attention to the importance of theological education turning people towards the public significance of faith.

THEOLOGY IN PUBLIC – CONVERSATIONAL, PROPHETIC, JURIDICAL

The style of the Church's engagement in public life can be crucial to the outcome. It is possible to see three different styles of bringing the Christian faith tradition into public moral discourse. One places great emphasis on persuasion and dialogue, another believes in taking a more prophetic stance, and the third places much of its effort in shaping the law of the land. They have porous boundaries, overlap with one another and, at their best, complement each other very well. Depending on the context, one 'style' might be more appropriate than another.

The first approach, drawn from Vatican II, emphasizes the church in dialogue with the world. This is a two-way relationship in which the church has something to learn from the world and something to offer it. It involves a 'clear recognition of the intrinsic value and validity of secular institutions and secular disciplines.'[2] The organizations, communities, and people who find a home in this category value persuasion as a means of communicating Gospel values – appealing to the intellect,

1. Parker J. Palmer, *The Company of Strangers: Christians and the Renewal of America's Public Life* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), p.19.

2. J. Bryan Hehir, "The Church in the World : Responding to the Call of the Council," in *Faith and the Intellectual Life: Marianist Award Lectures*, ed. James L. Heft (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1996), p. 112.

desires, and innate sense of goodness and justice in people. In this way, they aim to help shape public opinion and values, and to influence the culture, incrementally, over a long period of time. Such an approach requires patience, courage, wisdom and humility.

There is the danger that this style of involvement with the public will lead to accommodation with the values of the world, thereby diluting the imperatives of the Christian message. Persuasion can take time, something that many people who suffer injustice and exclusion do not have; they need help immediately. And so, there is need for something more immediate, and at times, confrontational.

The second approach can be broadly categorized as prophetic. It seeks to persuade by witness and is uncompromising in its demands for social justice. It has deep roots in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures and traditions. Steeped in the justice of Yahweh, the prophets were acutely aware of the presence of injustice and oppression within society. They felt the pain of those excluded, the anger and compassion of Yahweh, and they lived in the fissure between the prevailing culture of oppression and Yahweh's desire for justice. Thus, the task of the prophet is to 'nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the dominant community around us.'[3]

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This involves both using criticism to dismantle the dominant consciousness and energizing people through a vision of what is possible here and now. Those who are excluded and marginalized are at the heart of such an approach. And often it can act in jarring and confrontational ways.

With this approach there is a danger of politicizing the Gospel by getting too involved in politics and the work of social justice. At times, it can lose connection with its own religious tradition. It can be polarizing and can lead to single issue politics, fragmenting further the political

3. Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, second ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), p. 3.

process, and distorting the religious tradition one belongs to – making it equivalent to the issue at hand.

The third approach is characterized by an oppositional stance, with a desire and a drive for clear and radical Gospel teaching. The certainty that emerges for some out of this approach requires a sharp break by the church with society. Those who take this approach aim to influence culture by changing the law. They believe it is reasonable to use the coercive power of the state to help shape the values, behaviour and habits of citizens in society. They appreciate the educative quality of the law.

There is a danger if the Church places too much emphasis on using the coercive arm of the state to realise its mission, especially in a pluralistic context, that people – both within and outside the church – will not be open to hearing it or being in conversation with it about what it means to live well and in a sustainable way today.

I believe the style best suited to public moral discourse is the conversational one. Being 'public' is about being visible in an intelligible and understandable way to the public, with an emphasis on persuasion, dialogue, reasoned discussion, and debate and an openness to learning from one's interlocutors. It ought to ensure that *fora* in which these conversations take place, are inclusive, participative and open.

THE QUESTION

So, is theological education, in its current form, whether in parishes or universities, schools or in the home, a resource for such public engagement? I think not, for, as Thomas Groome points out, 'the reigning paradigm of theological education pays intense attention to the content of theology but little to the how or why we educate therein.'[4] This arises from the legacy of the Enlightenment which, though it facilitated democracy and human rights, and the development of technology and science, also had a down-side. It privileged abstract knowledge over knowledge derived from reflection on one's own experience. In this way, it could claim to be scholarly and scientific. According to Groome, there are four consequences for theology from such a paradigm: theology

4. Thomas H. Groome, "Wisdom for Life: The Horizon of Theological Literacy," in *Theological Literacy for the Twenty-First Century* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), p. 352.

sought rational and universal knowledge about God through becoming a theoretical science; everyday experience was disparaged and not seen as the source of theological knowledge; theology was exclusively in the hands of the experts; within theology, systematic, moral, scripture, history were truly scholarly endeavours; pastoral or practical theology was simply the vehicle or tool used to implement scholarly theology.[5]

Groome believes that, together, these four consequences have impacted greatly on how theology is taught. It became a matter of delivering lectures, to summarise ideas for students to absorb, to contextualise these ideas, all to lead to good understanding. But the appropriation is done elsewhere, in the students' own time. Such an approach has resulted in people learning 'about' theology and not from it for their lives and certainly not being educated to engage in public moral discourse.

WHAT ABOUT OURSELVES?

I suspect some of the difficulty is with ourselves, as teachers. While we might like the idea of the conversation between faith and public moral issues, we seldom educate for it. Perhaps we don't know how to do it in our own lives. It is difficult to know how to teach for both our personal and public lives. For instance, to explore what the Trinity means for me and my own relationships is much easier than wondering what it means for the economy, our society, the state, the banks, and the environment.

Part of the difficulty of moving into the public forum, is that we move into a sphere that is contested, where there is a plurality of views. To engage moral issues in public discourse requires an understanding of the issues themselves and their interrelated nature; a vision of how things ought to be and a capacity to act strategically on credible alternatives. No wonder the personal seems easier. But this emphasis on the personal – and at times, private dimension of our lives – is also an expression of the cult of the individual, where we just appropriate material for ourselves and not for its public significance.

There is another reason why we don't foster the interest or capacity of those doing theological education to participate in the public forum – we just don't have the time. It is difficult enough to cover

5. See Ibid.

essential themes and ensure some basic understanding of the ideas in the subject. But to find time for appropriation and the exploration of the public significance of faith might be asking too much.

A WAY FORWARD

I believe that where theological education is based on a 'Shared Praxis' approach, there is some chance that it will foster the desire and capacity to engage in public moral discourse. Within this approach, there is a two way dynamic between life and faith. It begins with expression and reflection on some aspect of the participant's praxis. The process then moves to giving ready access to Christian Story/Vision. Participants are then invited to interpret their present praxis in the light of Christian Story/Vision. Since this is a dialectical process, Christian Story/Vision is itself interpreted in the light of present praxis. Finally, participants are invited to make their own judgments and decisions about their life in light of this process. This 'shared praxis' approach is characterized by a number of movements. They are:

1. *Engagement*: creating personal interest and activity engaging all participants
2. *Expression*: inviting people to be attentive to and express – somehow – present praxis;
3. *Reflection*: encouraging people to reflect critically for themselves on their praxis – personally and socially – to question and probe, to reason, remember and imagine alternatives;
4. *Access*: enabling or lending people 'ready access' to Story and Vision of the Christian faith;
5 *Appropriation*: encouraging participants to integrate Life and Faith, to 'see for themselves' to 'make the faith their own';
6. *Decision*: inviting decision making – cognitive, affective or behavioural, personal or communal, etc., - choosing a life response.

The shared praxis approach 'typically unfolds as a process of bringing life to faith and bringing faith to life.'[6] Faith refers to Christian Story/Vision. Praxis refers to one's own life and reflection on it. The

6. Groome, Thomas, 'Total Catechesis/Religious Education', in *Horizons and Hopes: The Future of Religious Education*, ed. Thomas H. Groome and Harold Daly Horell (New York: Paulist Press, 2003), p. 28.

dialectic between these two sources of wisdom calls for an ethic that is integrated in the head, hands and heart. Groom's hope is that a shared Christian praxis approach helps participants to develop the disposition to integrate their lives with their faith and their faith into their lives on an ongoing basis. For him, theological education ought to unite 'knowing' with 'being' in a way that engages and forms the whole person-in-community.

For this approach to foster the desire and capacity to engage in public moral discourse, particular attention needs to be given to movements 3, 4 and 5. Movement 3 reflects on praxis through the use of reason, memory, and imagination. It is essential that good social analysis be employed in this movement so that a thick description of the praxis can emerge, especially concerning the public dimension of whatever is being reflected upon. When this is not the case, there is every danger that values from the prevailing culture that privilege the private individual and autonomous self will go unnoticed, and anecdote, personal experience and narrow psychological analysis will dominant the reflection and seep into the rest of the process.

Theological education ought to unite 'knowing' with 'being' in a way that engages and forms the whole person-in-community.

Movement 4 offers ready access to Christian Story/Vision. But once again, if this is shaped too much by the values and interests of the dominant culture, it too might lift up aspects of Christian tradition that reinforce a solitary and independent view of human existence. When the reflection on present action and Christian Story/Vision – as described above – are brought into a dialectical conversation with one another in movement 5, they might reinforce privatised views of the person and society. The dialectic between them will have been constrained by the limited nature of the reflection in movement 3 and the narrow access to Christian Story/Vision in movement 4. Hence the decisions that emerge in movement 6 are unlikely to enlarge the experience of oneness, awareness of social responsibility, or promote action in the public forum for the reign of God.

In this process, much will depend on the willingness and ability of

the educator to help the participants:

- to gather thick descriptions of reality,
- become aware of their own assumptions and predispositions in how they approach and interpret their lives,
- offer access to Christian Story and Vision that fosters care for the common good and a desire to participate in the public forum,
- promote a critical conversation between these two sources of wisdom that will lead to personal appropriation of the Christian faith in ways that encourage responsibility and action for justice in the public forum.

This approach ought to be fostered right across the curriculum of theological education regardless of what is being taught, with a 'public proofing' for each course offered. This means that when an outline of the course is prepared, it ought to be examined to find an element or dimension in it that might foster public moral discourse. This way, it becomes part of the culture of the organisation or institution doing the theological education.

AN INTERESTING MODEL

Don Browning offers an interesting model of bringing Faith to life.[7] At the end of a course he taught on practical theology, he assigned the students a paper. In it, students identified an issue they cared about and offered a thick description of this issue, through interviewing someone outside the college who was involved with this issue. They next outlined their own connection with it, why they cared about it, their pre-understandings and assumptions. Then they selected two theological texts that served as guides to the witness of the Christian classics to this issue and summarized their arguments. This allowed the student to bring the issue into a critical conversation with the texts and come to some judgments for themselves as a result of this encounter. Then the students wrote their conclusions for the people they interviewed at the beginning of the process and they communicated with that person. This ensured that the students had to become bilingual. They needed the language of their own community but they also needed to be able

7. Don S. Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology: Descriptive and Strategic Proposals* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), pp. 72-74.

to speak to people outside their tradition.

Imagine if Browning's model or something like it was to become the practice in all aspects of theological education? How would such an approach change the way we teach Christology, ethics, systematics, scripture, liturgy, history – if students had to bring life to Faith and Faith to life in practical and very real situations? It would change the imaginations, the consciousness and the practice of the students along with the educators and it would build the desire and capacity to engage in public moral discourse.

CONCLUSION

The number of people who are theologically literate and engage in public moral discourse in Ireland is small. Part of the reason for this is how theology is taught. There is too much emphasis on content, and where there is some appropriation of theology with the life of the learner, more often than not, it takes place in the private or personal realm. If theological education is to be a resource for public moral discourse it needs to help the student become aware of the public dimension of their lives and bring this into sustained, critical conversation with themes within the Christian faith tradition that can speak to this dimension. At its best, the conversation ought to lead to some appropriation and action in the life of the learner. This is a difficult task and it will happen only if theological educators want it to happen.