

## Featured Review

### *Tales of 'Accidental Theologians'*\*

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Eamonn Conway

Theology (is) an exercise in exploration in the faith that is always provisional and in constant need of revision as we strive for more adequate answers to the pressing questions that confront all of us – questions that are personal and cosmic.  
—Seán Freyne, p. 74

The title 'theologian' ... is properly conferred on those who have shown evidence, not just of philosophical learning, but of an ability to evoke and clothe in language the things of God. Like poetry, theology grows out of life, and demands a certain diction, easily recognized but difficult to achieve, which makes statements about ultimate meaning convincing.  
—John D'Arcy May, p. 112

Drs Gesa Thiessen and Declan Marmion of the Milltown Institute, Dublin, invited a number of theologians who have reached what they call the 'wise side of fifty', and who have worked for many years in Ireland, to reflect essentially on their theological vocation and passion. The contributors to *Theology in the Making* are almost all well-known names in Irish theological circles: Una Agnew, Mary Condren, Jim Corkery, Donal Dorr, Seán Fagan, Seán Freyne, Michael Paul Gallagher, Werner Jeanrond, Mary T. Malone, John D'Arcy May, Enda McDonagh, Vincent MacNamara, Geraldine Smyth and Elochukwu E. Uzukwu.

Very often, collections of essays are only loosely threaded together, somewhat disparate and therefore difficult to read. That is not the case with this collection, for the contributors have been carefully directed to reflect upon the same reality: essentially, how their original questioning about ultimate meaning became a spiri-

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tual and hopefully graced quest that has consumed several decades of their lives, a quest that clearly continues for each of them.

#### NOT SETTLING FOR THE MAP

Understandably, there is some discussion in this volume about what it is to be a theologian. When Anthony de Mello's stories were all the rage, I used to use his story of 'The Explorer' from *The Song of the Bird* to try to explain to students the difference between being a mere student or even professor of theology on the one hand, and a genuine theologian on the other.<sup>1</sup> In de Mello's story, an explorer returned from the Amazon is pressed by his people to describe to them his adventure. But he struggled to find words that could depict the 'flowers of breath-taking beauty' he alone had seen, or the danger he sensed in his heart as he heard wild beasts or paddled in treacherous stretches of river. He told them to go and explore for themselves, but to help them he drew a map. You probably know the rest of the story: instead of undergoing the journey many of them settled for the map, and those with personal copies considered themselves Amazon experts because they knew by heart every twist and turn of the river.

In my embellishment of the story, some of those with personal maps even wrote doctoral dissertations and published scholarly peer-reviewed articles. But did this substitute for undergoing the journey?

What characterizes the contributors is that at some point they each decided not to settle for the map. The map in this case is described by the contributors as pre-Vatican II neo-scholastic or seminary theology, which, in Seán Freyne's phrase, substituted 'rote memory' for 'theological imagination' (p. 75), and which, according to Donal Dorr, was clearly boring, irrelevant and inadequate (p. 56). Leaving behind the map took courage, and it is significant that almost all the contributors mention close personal friendships as well as encounters with key theological figures as having underpinned their courage to explore their own 'Amazons'. Leaving behind the map also often led to personal sacrifices, as disclosed by a number of the contributors to this volume, sometimes at the hands of the institutional Church they still sought to serve.

The fruit of genuine theological exploration is that it leads to personal liberation, and certainly a number of the contributors, admittedly perhaps not all, convey a sense of joyful personal liberation as the fruit of their theological endeavours.

1. 'The Explorer', *The Song of the Bird* (India: Anand Press, 1982), p. 37.

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Michael Paul Gallagher's life-task has been to overcome 'a gap between the official study of theology and religious realities' as he perceives them (p. 88). Similarly, 'The theology in which I am interested', Donal Dorr, says (p. 64), 'is a reflection on spiritual experience, my own and that of others whose journey I have shared to some degree.' Joseph Campbell once remarked that we cannot expect to talk people into belief; we have to share with them the radiance of our own discoveries. This would also seem to be the conviction of most of the contributors. It is, as Wittgenstein observed, experience, fundamentally the experience of love, which renders the resurrection credible.

At the same time, as Eliot noted, one can have the experience and miss the meaning. By including experience, we run the risk on the one hand of vulnerable self-disclosure, and on the other of arrogant self-indulgence that claims as authoritative for all what can sometimes be individual delusions best kept private. But bracketing experience is not an option either, even in a post-modern context that makes us wary even of speaking about it. We can be grateful to the fourteen contributors to this volume for taking the risk of sharing with us their own personal theological journeys, giving us not maps, but landmarks and a few pointers, as we continue on our own explorations.

### THEOLOGY AS SPIRITUAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY

The subtitle of the book is *Biography, Context and Methods*. If we reflect upon the people in our life and work who have influenced us most, whether people we have come to know personally or through their writings, we would admit that their personal biography, context and theological method were clearly interwoven, clearly one of a piece, as they are in each of our own lives, even if we do not always recognize this.

*Theology in the Making* testifies admirably to a point made a number of years ago by Sebastian Moore, namely, that theology simply has to be autobiographical if it is to enflame the heart with love of God. According to Moore each of our personal stories has only one goal: to mediate 'the Great Story'. In that case, Moore says,

... my story had better be the true story of me: and what is that but the story known to God alone of my dialogue with ultimate reality? My story is known to God alone, but the story of Jesus can awaken in me, in flashes, my story ...<sup>2</sup>

Balthasar claimed that God is his own exegete. Yes, and no. Surely an incarnate God needs exegetes? To exegete God is the

2. Sebastian Moore, 'Four steps towards making sense of theology', *The Downside Review*, vol. iii, no. 383, April 1993, pp. 81, 82.

theologian's burden as well as joyful task. But, as Moore notes, the only way I can be sure that my story is the true story of me, and, simultaneously, the story of God, is by remaining in a state of discipleship. Theology is essentially an act of discipleship, and is fruitful only to the extent that one's theological explorations have clear spiritual landmarks. The converse is also true: spiritual explorations also need to take their bearings from a theological compass. The proper relationship between theology and spirituality is the subject of Una Agnew's essay, in which she argues for a distinction without separation.

All but one of the contributors to *Theology in the Making* was at some point, or still is, a priest or a religious (and even he mentions having been an altar boy!). Understandably, therefore, the editors express in the introduction some concern regarding the inclusive and representative nature of the contributors. However, to the extent that contributors convey a deep sense of being in discipleship, and therefore of surrendering their personal stories to be, however fragile, nonetheless genuine mediations of the Great Story, the editors' fears can be allayed, as issues of gender and denomination become somewhat secondary.

#### IMPRESSIONS

What can we learn from the book? It is interesting how providence played no small part in most people's lives. Jim Corkery's delightful contribution is entitled 'An Accidental Theologian', and that would also have made a very good title for the book as a whole.

What else can we learn?

- That theology in Ireland has been anything but insular: the international experience of the contributors is striking.
- That the capacity to reflect on one's experience is clearly not enough.
- That to be an effective and influential theologian requires a keen historical sense, a scholarly knowledge of philosophy, perhaps also of sociology and the sciences as well, depending on one's specialism, as well as a grasp of languages.
- That being a theologian is more about *Berufung* than *Beruf*, vocation than profession.
- That being a theologian is no easy task.

There is one perhaps hard lesson to be learned. That, as Yeats said, 'Too long a sacrifice/ Can make a stone of the heart.' A number of contributors have had to tread lonely paths with little sense of community, thus lacking both the support and encouragement as well as the necessary challenge and critical correction that a community of scholarly learners can provide. In particular, women

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theologians in Ireland have been outsiders until recently. And yet, theology would seem to thrive on struggle, and it remains to be seen if theology in Ireland will be vastly improved when and if it establishes itself in the perceived Promised Land of the University.

This book captures an important moment in the history of theology in Ireland, providing a valuable record of the joys and struggles of doing theology in the immediate aftermath of the Second Vatican Council.

A **'telescopic philanthropy'**! But what about our sexuality and our desires? In *Bleak House* Charles Dickens tells us about Mrs Jellyby who had a 'telescopic philanthropy, because she could see nothing nearer than Africa'. She loved Africans in general, but did not even notice the existence of her own children. We, as priests or religious, cannot take refuge in that telescopic philanthropy. St Aelred, the twelfth-century Abbot of Rievaulx, warned religious against 'a love that in addressing itself to all, reaches no one'. Drawing near to the mystery of love will also mean that we shall love particular people, some with friendship, some with deep affection, and maybe some more passionately. We must learn how honestly to integrate these loves into our identity. I am told that in the past religious were often warned against 'particular friendships'. Gervase Matthew, OP, always said that he was more afraid of 'particular enmities'!

—TIMOTHY RADCLIFFE, OP, *What is the Point of Being a Christian?* (Burns and Oates, Continuum) p. 189