Theology Overcoming the Abuse of Power

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Background

Returning from the 2011 meeting of INSeCT in Chicago, Professor Anne Hunt, the then-President of ACTA, promptly elicited its members’ commitment to the project on: The nature, function, and location of theology, with particular attention to the power of theology to overcome power abuse in church and society. ACTA resolved to devote an afternoon of its 2012 conference to papers on and discussion about that project. Four papers were offered: Tony Kelly on the nature of theology, Neil Ormerod on the nature of power and authority, Robert Gascoigne on moral theology, and Anne Hunt on theological education. A rich and impassioned discussion ensued.

Following Cathy Clifford’s request this February to extend the focus of this project, the ACTA executive consulted a diverse group of members – lay, religious, and clergy; women and men, young and a little older – for a response to the question: how can theology be at the service of the reform for which Pope Francis is calling?

This report gives an account of the main lines of thought of the papers presented at the 2012 conference, and summarizes the discussion. It then gives a summary of members’ reflections on theology at the service of Pope Francis’s reform.

Theology’s Power & Overcoming its Abuse | Professor Anthony J. Kelly, CSSR

Tony Kelly’s paper focussed on theological activity itself, stressing that theology’s sole power rests in it being authentically theological. His paper was a plea to theologians to
“remove the plank from their own eyes before pretending to remove the mote from the eyes of others.” The authenticity of theology, he says, consists in it “participating in the corporate faith of the church in its receptivity to the grace of God, in its continuing search for collaborative understanding of what has been revealed, and in seeking to express the ways the Word of God can be heard, appropriated, and applied in all the variety of its historical and cultural contexts.”

Kelly portrays the primary tension in the theological community as that between, on the one hand what he calls a “papalisation” of theology, through which papal theological reflection since the 1980s has tended to dominate the life of the church, and on the other a theological community that, in his judgement, has turned inward and feels more justified criticizing church leadership than struggling with broader social issues. Kelly proposes that we revive the theological disputatio as a valuable means of theology “managing its own house.” Such engagement over difficult questions would enable theologians to critically examine different opinions prior to those opinions becoming the source of a broader public crisis.

The Legitimate Power & Authority of Theologians | Professor Neil Ormerod

Neil Ormerod’s paper examined the relationship between power and authority, since he sees the question of social power and its relationship to social authority as underlying any adequate theological reflection about overcoming the abuse of power. He begins from Max Weber’s classic definition “authority is legitimate power,” but argues that Weber lacks any appeal to a normative element, so that for Weber “legitimate in the end simply means legitimated, acceptance by those who follow.” Ormerod turns to the works of Bernard Lonergan and Joseph Komonchak to locate a normative element—principles that would enable us to distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate uses of power and authority.
Lonergan sees the shared meanings and values that are the basis of communal life constituting the source of power; and, in his view, it is “authenticity” that confers legitimacy on the use of power. We should note here that for Lonergan, authenticity is, simply, fidelity to the transcendental precepts: Be attentive, Be intelligent, Be reasonable, Be responsible. Thus, Lonergan shifts the grounds for legitimation from the political realm to the moral realm of authenticity. For Komonchak, what grounds legitimacy is the trustworthiness of the authority. He sees authority as trustworthy power. An office has authority when, as Komonchak puts it, “persons who can be trusted to provide the direction society needs” occupy that office.

So, for Ormerod, the trustworthy use of power by office-holders is foundational for an office’s legitimacy, and failure in this regard may well erode the authority of the office. He comments: “the situation can become such that the very notion of authority itself is undermined, leaving brute power as the sole means of attaining social ends.”

Ormerod applies these perspectives to theologians’ own exercise of power: they, too, must exercise their office in a legitimate fashion. He comments: “Theologians may exercise mere power, rather than authority when they speak without the requisite skills, knowledge, and values commensurate with their role.” He insists here that values are crucial, and sees the following questions as important: “How does the theologian stand in relation to the tradition? To church authorities? Do they possess a genuine catholicity? … Do they see theology as an ‘ecclesial vocation’?”

**Moral Theology on the Abuse of Power** | Professor Robert Gascoigne

Robert Gascoigne drew attention to the rich resources that Catholic moral theology brings to bear, firstly, on the challenge of overcoming the abuse of power in society. These sources include the Bible and church tradition, as well as human experience and cultural and
philosophical perspectives. The primary aim here is: “to follow Jesus of Nazareth in his
naming and denunciation of the abuse of power.” Gascoigne regards Augustine’s *City of God*
as a key source, particularly Augustine’s notion of the *libido dominandi*, the lust for
domination, to which Gascoigne adds the *libido consumendi*, the lust to consume. Catholic
moral theology challenges the dominance of a materialistic and consumeristic mentality. It
draws upon Catholic Social Teaching’s nuanced analysis of the market economy, and of the
whole tradition’s keen awareness of humanity as a global family.

At the same time, Gascoigne sees Catholic moral theology making a contribution to
overcoming the abuse of power in the church, since the church is a human and morally
fallible community. He focusses on the church’s teaching on sexual ethics. While Catholic
Social Teaching employs a nuanced model of natural law, recognizing that fundamental
principles are expressed in different ways depending on cultural and historical
circumstances, Gascoigne argues that that same nuance does not seem to be employed in the
area of Catholic teaching on sexual ethics. He says: “The church’s teaching on sexual
ethics…continues to employ a model of natural law which is focussed on physical acts and
the absolute moral norms that apply to such acts.” While insisting on the unitive and
procreative meanings of sexual acts, Gascoigne argues that some moral theologians “see no
compelling reason why both these meanings – in their physical sense – must be in every
act,” with the implication that artificial contraception is wrong in all circumstances, and that
loving unitive sexual acts between committed, faithful homosexuals cannot be an expression
of Christian life, even though it would not be equated with marriage. In conclusion,
Gascoigne affirms: “In advocating this, moral theology must always manifest its respect for
the teaching office of the church, and the ways in which this teaching can often be a
prophetic voice against widely-held conceptions; at the same time, moral theologians must
bear witness to the experience of Christ’s faithful and do what they can to ensure that the fruits of this experience, and the insights that spring from it, are made available to the development of the church’s moral teaching.”

Theology, Church, Power, & Society | Professor Anne Hunt
Anne Hunt’s paper considered power and authority and their abuse within the field of theological education in Australia. Anne firstly sketched the shifting institutional environment that I described yesterday in my presentation to SOTER. She noted: the predominance of lay mature-age students, particularly women; the increasing number of lay faculty over priest-theologians; the shift from theological colleges to universities; and the development of flexible education, especially online education.

Anne’s judgement is that in Australia to this point, these changes have been negotiated without falling into an adversarial relationship between theology and the church hierarchy. She says: “the tone of the relationship here is, as far as I can see, quite different than in the USA.” No doubt a number of factors contribute to the difference in tone, including: the “laid back” Australian approach to life along with the pragmatic bent of the culture, the broad and deep formation of theologians following Vatican II, as well as the Australian church being enormously blessed with humble, pastoral bishops immediately following the Council. Of course, we have suffered from the occasional culture-warrior church leader and theologian but, thankfully, neither has dominated the relationship. Hunt recognises that the delicate balance between theology and hierarchy is exactly that: delicate, and needing to be nurtured with care.

One critical, emerging issue identified by Hunt is the increasing role of the lay theologian, particularly in the public university setting. Such theologians stand outside the structures of direct control of accountability to dioceses and religious orders. Hunt
comments: “I wonder if, and to what degree, this is the source of nervousness …for members of the church hierarchy. This issue is, at least to some degree, to do with power and control; but it is also related to the danger or fear of theology becoming a merely academic exercise outside of or not emanating from a strongly faith-filled, prayerful and church-grounded life.”

**Discussion**
The ensuing discussion took a number of directions, and is summarized by these points:

- The lack of consultative processes in the church more generally, and the lack of transparency and accountability in processes;
- The lack of methods for redress of abuse of power;
- The difficult position of the bishops, often caught in the middle between central authority and the grassroots;
- The lack of authority, power, and autonomy of episcopal conferences;
- That many voices are not heard or able to speak in the church;
- The particular vulnerability of the lay theologian
- A concern for the lack of imagination in the church; freedom and creativity at a low point;
- The concept of orthodoxy needs to be rethought;
- The gospel and the cross as a basis for critiquing power and its abuse

**Theology at the Service of Pope Francis’s Reform**
Francis’s call for reform has fired theological imaginations in Australia. Many of the issues covered in his Apostolic Exhortation have their roots in the Second Vatican Council and the theological reflection that ensued, including: the theology of the Kingdom, its relationship to the poor, and also a range of contextual theologies which seek to communicate the gospel to human beings in their concrete circumstances. *Evangelii Gaudium* places the proclamation of the gospel at the heart of ecclesial life, and seeks to revision and reform church life from that perspective. How can theology serve this reform? In a twofold fashion, I suggest: by grasping the nature of the reform, and with Francis, reconceiving evangelization afresh in our time. Theology can assist in at least the following four dimensions of the challenge:
First, theology can serve Francis’s focus on the central message of evangelization. Although *Evangelii Gaudium* names secularization, relativism, superficiality, widespread indifference to religion, and the like (cf. nos. 61-66) as cultural challenges for those seeking to evangelize, it does not judge them to be the primary challenges we face. Francis has put these conflicts with groups and ideas in Western societies (i.e. “culture wars”) in a better context, emphasising that the church should avoid defining itself in opposition to these groups, which necessarily limits its own vision as well as entrenching it in the preoccupations of Western individualist societies. He emphasises that “pastoral ministry in a missionary style is not obsessed with the disjointed transmission of a multitude of doctrines to be insistently imposed...the message has to concentrate on the essentials” (*EG* no. 35). Theology can assist with this by developing an understanding of evangelization which does not neglect the range of the church’s teachings but keeps its focus on the central message of divine mercy and salvation.

Second, Francis’s emphasis on the image of the Kingdom of God gives new vigour to this biblical vision of salvation, re-situating evangelization in relation to the poor. He sees the gospel challenging: an economy of exclusion, the new idolatry of money, a financial system that rules rather than serves, and an inequality which spawn violence. Francis contends what when the church stands with the poor, it learns from them, comes to know the suffering Christ, and is evangelized: “The new evangelization is an invitation to acknowledge the saving power at work in [the lives of the poor] and to put them at the centre of the church’s pilgrim way. We are called to find Christ in them, to lend our voices to their causes, but also to be their friends, to speak for them and to embrace the mysterious wisdom which God wishes to share with us through them” (*EG* no. 198). Catholic theology can assist in this process by enquiring into the justice of global economic patterns, and
attending both to the conditions of the human family, and to our common home, planet Earth (EG no. 183).

Third, and in my view what fundamentally characterizes this approach to evangelization, and differentiates it from the approaches of the last two papacies, is Francis’s emphasis on “the importance of understanding evangelization as inculturation” (EG no. 122). By this he means that: “Each portion of the people of God, by translating the gift of God into its own life and in accordance with its own genius, bears witness to the faith it has received and enriches it with new and eloquent expressions” (EG no. 122). Such a view incorporates a recognition of the diversity of cultures, and a recognition that the inculturation of the gospel presents new challenges in each culture (cf. EG nos. 68-69). This understanding of evangelization also includes what Francis, in typically Ignatian fashion, calls “an evangelical discernment” (EG no. 50). That is, in his words, “We need to distinguish clearly what might be a fruit of the kingdom from what runs counter to God’s plan. This involves not only recognizing and discerning spirits, but also—and this is decisive—choosing movements of the spirit of good and rejecting those of the spirit of evil” (EG no. 51). Theology has an important yet demanding role here. What is required is close, faithful attention to the scriptural word and the whole theological tradition, while at the same time, and equally, attending to the cultures in which we find ourselves—discerning between the moral goods that motivate them, which may well be authentic developments of the gospel, and those dimensions of the culture that are closed to God and negating the gospel. This dual discernment is at the heart of the process of inculturating the gospel. Both elements are integral to an adequate inculturation. At present in the West, an adequate cultural analysis is especially important, given the shallow analyses that (“subtraction theses”) have prevailed to this point.
Fourth, Francis sees this reform changing ecclesial structures, making them more mission-oriented, and more inclusive, and open (cf. *EG* no. 27); he sees parishes being transformed into “environments of living communion and participation” (*EG* no. 28). He writes of bishops, as leaders of particular churches, at times going before their people, at other times in their midst, and at other times following their people as those people strike out on new paths (*EG* no. 31). This is a church of dialogue and participation. He envisages reform at the universal level, again developing more participative and dialogical structures. This is especially so with regard to episcopal conferences, which, in his view, have not yet attained a juridical status consistent with Vatican II’s vision. Theologians can aid this process by continuing to elaborate the participative vision of ecclesial life developed in *Lumen Gentium*, and highlighted again in Francis’s *Evangelii Gaudium*.

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