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Why Practical Theology Must Go Public

Elaine Graham

ABSTRACT

This article makes the case for a strong affinity between pastoral studies and practical theology as conceived in the UK and the emergent field of public theology. Practical theology in the UK has resisted over-specialization in the discipline, creating an eclectic and diverse mix of institutional contexts and intellectual approaches. It has also succeeded in holding together the “public” and “private” in a way that has often put it in the vanguard of the discipline internationally. In particular, its insistence on embracing wider political, cultural and economic dynamics at work in pastoral care and counselling, pastoral studies and practical theology has avoided the pitfalls of privatization and individualism. It has also succeeded in spanning the divisions between church and society, by including strong representation from those who practise pastoral care and theological reflection on practice within secular contexts, such as industry, education, community development and public policy as well as the Church. A further challenge awaits, to consider how the sources and resources of the Christian tradition can speak into the increasingly secular and pluralist spheres of public life; but in the interests of promoting greater “religious literacy” within wider society, practical theologians must continue to do their work “in public.”

Keywords: pastoral care, politics, practical theology, public life.

When I became a graduate student in Social and Pastoral Theology at the University of Manchester in the mid 1980s, and started attending national pastoral studies conferences, what attracted me most to the discipline and to the network which represented it was its diversity and breadth. Whilst the world of pastoral care and counselling with its various therapeutic and psychological traditions formed the core constituency of pastoral studies in the UK—and the readership of *Contact*, to which I first contributed in 1989—there were other worldviews, other disciplines and other contexts represented as well. I liked the way that no one discourse or institution dominated, so that one could be presenting a paper, in a discussion group or even chatting over coffee to any combination of university teachers, chaplains in health care or industry, com-

munity workers or psychotherapists. I learned to mind my language, to be attentive to the many contexts within which pastoral care was practised, and the need to call upon the many and various insights of the social and political sciences, psychotherapies and theology in order to make sense of the activities of Christian ministry and human care (and critical reflection upon them) with which we were all concerned.

Whilst it may be an expansive and rash claim to make, it seems to me that such a natural diversity within the field of pastoral studies and practical theology is one of the primary distinguishing factors of the scene in the United Kingdom and not necessarily one so richly embodied in any other national context. We have not sub-divided into sub-disciplines, as is the case in the United States, where there are separate networks and professional associations for healthcare chaplains, Christian educators, teachers of pastoral care or liturgy, for example. In other international contexts, such as other parts of Europe, there is a much stronger demarcation between Church especially and State—which frequently means a starker separation between pastoral care undertaken in congregational and parish life on the one hand, and practical theology as taught at the organs of higher education on the other. Yet the pastoral studies network, which eventually transformed itself into the British and Irish Association of Practical Theology in 1994, has never drawn a line between the research and teaching in practical theology based in universities, and that conducted in other organizations such as healthcare trusts, the community and voluntary sector, or even the churches. To me, therefore, a strength of the British context has always seemed to be that practical theology is understood to span a variety of institutional contexts, be practised by a wide range of people (lay and ordained) and to address questions of social as well as ecclesiastical concern.

Some of this may reflect the cultural peculiarities of religion and society in the UK, in particular the historic relationship between Church and State, expressed in the established nature of the Churches of England and Scotland; but also the broad-based nature of theological education which is not organized along denominational lines and which can be found in secular or non-confessional universities as well as colleges, courses and seminaries.

As a result, I think it is possible to see two clear motifs which have traditionally characterized practical theology in the UK and which reflect that greater capacity to transcend the boundaries between ecclesial and secular, confessional and non-confessional, and which have always given practical theology a strongly “public” tenor. We might describe these respectively as the politics of pastoral care and the public nature of practical theology.

Firstly, pastoral studies and practical theology in the UK has always been the standard-bearer of the understanding that the one-to-one relationship between counsellor and client cannot be insulated from wider structural or political factors. I began my own academic career by considering the difference gender makes to the practice of pastoral care. An examination of how the pastoral needs of women were represented in the pastoral-care literature of the twentieth century led me to conclude that much of the field was contaminated by sexism and clericalism (E. L. Graham, 1989; 1990). This led to an attempt to develop an understanding of pastoral ministry as something exercised by the whole community of faith, as addressing the structural factors behind pastoral need—such as inequality, oppression, the social construction of mental health, and so on. Such work represents an important critique of the privatization of pastoral care, and a reminder that pastoral ministry must address the causes of human distress as well as the symptoms (Sedgwick, 2000; Selby, 1983; Pattison, 1997). In an international context, such literature began to appear in the early nineties, led by the North American writer James Newton Poling who underlined the importance of understanding the dynamics of gender and power at work in the pastoral care of men, especially those who have abused women and children (Poling, 1991); to be followed by works which argued for pastoral counsellors to acknowledge economic, systemic and political factors in their work (L. K. Graham, 1992; Hunter and Couture, 1995). More recently Emmanuel Lartey has examined the intercultural nature of pastoral care (Lartey, 2006), once more to highlight how cultural difference is an essential part of the expression of, and response to, pastoral needs.

The politics of pastoral care has therefore been an essential part of the evolution of the discipline in the UK over the past twenty years. Yet there is another respect in which pastoral studies and practical theology “goes public” and that reflects the way in which much of pastoral care and ministry takes place in a secular as well as an exclusively ecclesial context, and the way in which practical theology entails more than the propagation of “hints and helps” to the ordained ministry.

As I have already hinted, much of this is to do with the institutional arrangements associated with the establishment of national churches in England and Scotland. The boundaries between communities of faith and the secular world—of government, public policy, welfare and industry—is perhaps more permeable by virtue of establishment, whereby ministers and leaders of those denominations believe they have a responsibility not only to minister to the membership of their congregations but for the “cure of souls” of all those who inhabit the geographical area of their parishes.

Inevitably, that brings a “public” dimension to the self-understanding of these traditions, an understanding which has shaped much Christian social thought to have emerged from Britain—indeed, to have given rise to a kind of “practical theology” that necessarily considers how the relative authorities of Church and State must co-exist, from John Knox to Richard Hooker; or how the particularities of Christian tradition can speak into the worlds of economics, politics and society, such as in the work of figures like William Wilberforce, George McLeod, William Temple or Ted Wickham. That convergence of “practical” and “public” theology is best exemplified in the pioneering work of the Edinburgh Centre for Theology and Public Issues (Forrester, 1997; Storrar and Morton, 2004) in which the work of preparing future ministers and equipping the Church for its work necessarily involves engaging with users of public services, community activists, policy-makers and politicians, whether they profess a Christian faith or not. It is simply an out-working of the conviction that theology must do its work “in public” as a measure of its contribution to shaping public life. But it is important to note, in passing, that this generates (or maybe emerges from) a particular theological method, because it teaches that theological discernment is drawn from the multiple sources of Scripture, tradition *and* reason, since divine providence is at work in human culture and creation itself as well as the life of the Church.

But if that public calling of pastoral studies and practical theology reflects in part a history of the establishment, then one of the future challenges for the discipline and its practitioners will be to engage with the changing character of religion in public life. There are increasing calls to end the historical privilege of certain brands of Christianity in British society, from revisions to the blasphemy laws to full-blown disestablishment. This reflects both the numerical decline of mainstream Christianity and the increasing religious pluralism in the wake of mass migration to this country over the past two or three generations, to which has been added the piquant seasoning of what we might term the “new secularism,” of high-profile and explicitly anti-religious writers such as Richard Dawkins, Polly Toynbee and Christopher Hitchens. But it raises the question of what the public role of Christianity and other faiths should be, and what role faith-based organizations should play in public life: in caring for citizens at times of need, in providing basic services, in shaping the ethos of our public institutions and providing the underpinning of moral codes and national identity.

Arguably, Britain at the beginning of the twenty-first century is witnessing a realignment of religious affiliation: there is no denying the reality of numerical decline within mainstream Christianity (includ-

ing Roman Catholicism) and yet increasing globalization means that diaspora communities are bringing their religion with them, whilst even amongst the disaffiliated indigenous majority, an interest in spirituality persists in unexpected and heterodox ways (Garnett *et al.*, 2006). Yet for the sake of social harmony we urgently need to cultivate ways of bridging the widening gulfs between the non-religious (but not necessarily secularist) majority and an increasingly diverse religious minority.

We can see a further dimension of the call for practical theology to “go public” in the debates surrounding leading political figures. In the UK, following the resignation of Tony Blair as Prime Minister, attention focused on the interplay between his own personal Christian profession and his political policies. Did God tell him to go to war in Iraq? Did he pray with George W. Bush before important summits? How did his theological worldview inform his moral map of the world, as a kind of religious geopolitics (Graham, 2009)?

Do those with some degree of theological understanding have a responsibility to analyse and explain what is behind the religious professions of a new generation of conviction politicians, the pronouncements on current affairs by established faith leaders, or the political mobilization by particular religious bodies in order to influence public opinion?

Similarly, 2008 will see attention turn to the United States and to the role of religious discourse in the campaign strategies and political rhetoric of candidates for the Presidency. Unlike the UK, public life in the United States is religious and therefore the theological stance of each of the Presidential hopefuls is an integral matter of their self-presentations. The figure who is perhaps capturing most attention in this respect is Barack Obama, in his conscious—some would say calculated—echoing of the principles and cadences of the African-American pulpit (Raban, 2008) and his professed predilection for the Christian Realism of Reinhold Niebuhr (Brooks, 2007).

It seems to me that practical theology has an important role to play in this respect, since a significant part of its tradition has always been to examine the relationship between the ultimate values people hold and their actions in the world. This is perhaps best embodied in the work of Stephen Pattison and his interest in the “action-guiding worldviews and belief systems” that inform even the most secular of institutions (Pattison, 2007: 11). Practical theology’s methodological concern to interrogate how the values of revealed tradition in the shape of biblical teaching and church teaching, together with insights gleaned from the human sciences, translate into distinctive practices of Christian nurture, mission, ministry and social action must surely be of use here, in terms

of exploring how religious and other values inform contemporary dilemmas of identity, citizenship, ethical choice and public policy.

The question for Practical Theology is whether any of the resources at its disposal will assist commentators to make informed judgement about such matters—as we might say, to assist the “religious literacy” of the media and public life. I would argue that this practical theology could usefully interact with the emerging discipline of public theology—and in fact, once again, many leading figures in practical theology in the UK have also had an abiding interest in this area: Duncan Forrester, Will Storrar, Stephen Pattison, the Manchester Centre for Public Theology and especially the work done by the William Temple Foundation. This tradition does not attempt to colonize or convert public life so much as establish a common space in which the language of value and ultimate meaning can be mediated across confessional and institutional boundaries into a common search for the stories we live by.

I have no wish to efface the traditional activities of human care and Christian ministry to those in need which have characterized the field of pastoral studies over hundreds of years. However, I do wish to underline the extent to which those undertakings have always been conducted, to some extent, *in public*: aware of the powers and principalities that shape the human dilemmas and tasks of healing, reconciling, nurturing; but aware too that practical theology is also a task at some level of Christian apologetics—of theological reflection on practice being capable of giving an account of itself to those beyond the community of faith, forever mindful of the distinctiveness and convergences between itself and other worldviews, and how it can contribute critically and constructively to the common good. But essentially, as Terry Veling has fluently reminded us, pastoral care and practical theology is where human needs and aspirations meet the divine horizon: at the heart of our discipline, be it politics or pastoral care, action or reflection, is to work for ways in which the affairs of this world can be ordered “on earth as it is in heaven” (Veling, 2006).

Elaine Graham is Samuel Ferguson Professor of Social and Pastoral Theology at the University of Manchester. Oxford Road, Manchester, M13 9PL; email elaine.graham@man.ac.uk

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