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Are centres that teach theology a resource for Christian discipleship?

Thomas O'Loughlin

Words have a sparkle as well as a meaning. For many Christians today the word 'discipleship' – a notion that has a very wide range of meanings – has a very positive sparkle. It captures a sense of personal commitment, of life as a movement of growth and learning, and seems to fit very well with a sense of belonging within a church that imagines itself as the pilgrim people of God. 'Theology,' by contrast, has little sparkle; indeed, it seems a dull word relating to a rather boring and obscure academic pursuit. Indeed, it is not only dull and boring, but seems to be disappearing! A few years ago there were many places in the British Isles where one could study theology. But as money gets tighter (I, however, cannot remember when it was not!) and church structures contract (often linked to a shortage of clergy / members of religious orders), the number of places facilitating theological reflection is declining sharply. But are we losing anything of real importance? I believe the whole People of God as affected by this contraction, so the purpose of this paper is to look at a series of situations – scenes that confront us as Catholic Christians every day – and argue that looking at them with the resources of theological speculation can help us to do three things.

First, theology can help to reposition these problems so that they might be seen as opportunities rather than roadblocks.

Second, theology can help us to relate to them differently as individual disciples and as a community of disciples, the church, and thus find ways 'through' the problems.

And third, theology can provide us with alternative ways of talking about what we hold precious as disciples and so help us in the task of evangelization.

But what do we mean by theology? Most Christians think of theology primarily as an academic subject: a body of information that exists 'out there'; is difficult to get one's head around, but which has to be absorbed by religious experts – and so it is really the business of the clergy. It is like the religious equivalent of

physics. Physics is complex, seems to be awfully important, and we are glad that there are boffins off in some university somewhere who work on it – but we can get on with life quite well without it! Just so, theologians are no doubt useful, but just as the egg still boils whether or not you understand the physics, so faith keeps going and God is still ‘above us all’ whether or not you have read a theology book! But theology is not really like physics, it is far more like cookery: the more you know about cookery, the easier everyday cooking – and cooking is not only unique to human but affects us everyday – becomes.

This might seem a little bit arrogant, but think of the number of times either religious questions or questions with a religious dimension come up in everyday conversation. A person is knocked down on the road and someone says: ‘if your number’s up, your number’s up!’ Do you accept that life is so determined? Even if you do – and there have been many deterministic religions – do you still look both ways before crossing the road? One athlete on winning a race bows to the ground and thanks Allah; another blesses herself; a third does nothing because he thinks that is superstition – are there different gods or if just one God why so many arguments or is it all hocus pocus? As I write this I have just heard on the news that a bomb has been thrown into a church in Pakistan, another bomb has gone off in Iraq in a dispute between Sunni and Shia, and there are tensions in America arising from some of the apocalyptic ideas of the fundamentalist ‘Christian’ right who deny climate change: and all three stories set me thinking. Perhaps religion is bad for human beings – maybe it needs to be consigned to the dustbin of failed stupidities? That is a theological question. Religion produces discord but could it also be the sponsor of discourse between groups since societies always develop religions even if today they are usually god-less religions. That is a theological question. All religions argue about what their ‘original’ texts/stories/ founders mean/ said/wanted – are there better ways of looking at these questions that might generate more light than heat, and are there ways of pursuing these questions that are creative rather than destructive? Once again, we have theological questions.

We all ask theological questions and we cannot avoid them! Sometimes we realize this and we carry on the questioning with skill and a cupboard full of resources, sometimes we do it badly, with a limited range of ideas, and make a mess of it. The poor cook has only a handful of recipes, relies on tins of sardines, and cannot cook a piece of meat without burning it; the good one has enough training and built-in resourcefulness that with the same ingredients we get an interesting meal! So it is with the study of theology: the same questions that lead the untrained person to throw it all up and say that the world is mad and a mess, can, with some theological training, be seen to refer to basic human issues and it can be seen that there are ways out of our problems and the discourse can replace discord, and enlightenment can take the place of bigotry and ignorance. I want to develop this by looking at five situations where there is 'a common sense answer' and another, more theologically informed, answer and then leave it to you to choose.

Situation 1: Living as an individual disciple: What is 'God'?

Everyone I meet appears to know what the word G-O-D means. For a great many people I meet the answer is simple: there is no god – it is an illusion and the universe does not need a god and there is no evidence in human life for god: just look at suffering! For others, there is a god and there are ways of describing god. There are Acts of God' which are always nasty like fires or floods or earthquakes. There is 'The Man Upstairs' and it's a good idea to 'keep in with him.' This Man Upstairs is very much like a lord of the manor whom you do not really like, indeed resent, but you know that you have to be 'nice' to him, as you do not want the consequences of making him angry. I know other people who cannot utter a sentence without mentioning god and god seems to be the actual motive force of everything – except for some reason he keeps hiding. So it is 'Thank God for a lovely day' – but what about the storms that kill people? Or "God is above us all" – so no need to worry! – So why bother doing anything? Or "do not be sad, God loves us" – but I am sad and I want to shout out in anger as the agony of death, decay and destruction I see around me.

By contrast, most other words need very careful definition. I have to learn how to use language precisely and if I were a car mechanic and referred to a 'rocker arm' as a 'yoke' you would probably (wisely) not trust me to service your vehicle. Much of education is trying to explain how to use language so that it illuminates rather than obscures. But 'god' is so simple a word we all seem to know all about it. The atheist knows there is no god, while some religious people know more about god than they do about the physics of their refrigerator. So why have theologians asserted over and over again: we do not know what we mean by the word G-O-D and that the whole task of theology is to ask the *real* question (it is not a learning game): *what* is God?

Could it be that we confuse the question 'what is god?' with the question 'how many gods are there?' To the latter question the answer must be 0 [zero] – the reply of the atheist; 1 – the official answer of Jews, Christians, Moslems, and many other religions; or 1+ - the answer of many religions but also many individuals such as the person who referred to 'the Man Upstairs' who thinks of God as the super-boss and one of a class of bosses. By contrast, '*what* is God?' is an attempt to put words on mystery. It is a mystery that is glimpsed here and there for a moment, felt intensely and then felt as absent, a vision which is more akin to poetry than to prose, a sense rather than a cold-blooded deduction from evidence. '*What* is God?' is a question that is the pursuit of a lifetime and while we may pray and worship and work, we must always resist the falsehood of thinking we have an answer. If you think you have captured God in a sentence or a single idea or 'have it worked out' then that is your projection, your idol, rather than the Reality which is beyond the universe but which beckons us. It takes a lot of training in theology to appreciate this fundamental maxim: *Deus semper maior* – 'whatever G-O-D is, is always greater than what we think God is.'

So let us use the word G-O-D with reverence and be sensitive to how we can be spreading confusion by overuse.

Situation 2: Living in a community of Catholic disciples: Are we short of priests?

Anyone even vaguely familiar with the Catholic Church today knows that there are not enough priests to staff the parishes, that communities are losing their churches due to this shortage because the remaining priests are usually greying and often exhausted through trying to cover too much territory, and while priests from Africa and India may bring welcome help, this is far from ideal: they are needed in their own cultures and often have difficulty adjusting to a western European religious environment. To many people the answer is so obvious as to need no reflection: ordain married men, abolish compulsory celibacy, or even consider ordaining women – as other churches have done. But as soon as these possibilities are suggested a series of counter-arguments, usually designated as ‘from tradition,’ are advanced so as to make any change appear impossible or so far in the future as to be beyond any visible horizon. Faced with this impasse, most arguments seem to revert to the history of practices: could what happened in the past, tell us about the future? But once we turn to the past we find that cases are put forward from each side as to what happened or did not happen in the past, the significance of Jesus doing or not doing something, whether or not ‘apostles’ equal ‘bishops’ and whether or not those around Jesus were ‘ordained’ or simply picked – or maybe there is no difference? Then, even when answers to these questions emerge, another problem pops up: can the church do something that appears never to have been done, or if something has always been done in one way whether it can now be done in another? So faced with a crisis in the present and the future, we seem to pore over the details of the sixteenth century (Trent’s rejection of those who challenged the notion of celibacy as a more perfect form of discipleship) or the twelfth century (first imposition by the western church of celibacy as a pre-requisite of ordination), or even (to the dismay of biblical scholars) the exact details of Jesus’s meal on the night before his crucifixion (asking, for example, were women present). Can theology throw light on this question?

The first point to note is the style of the argument: it looks backwards to the past while imagining the past as a (1) complete, (2) clear and (3) adequate statement of all that we need to know about the structure of the church. The past, it seems,

sets the parameters of discussion and contains the precedents for what can and cannot happen now. So we might start by noting that the notion that ever closer scrutiny of the past (as containing the answers to any possible question now or in the future) is very similar to the way as some Protestant Christians relate to 'the bible' as having within it a clear answer to every possible question. So asking 'does the tradition' allows women to be priests?' is like asking 'does the bible allow slavery or capital punishment?' The assumption is that there is an answer in the book so that if it countenances the practice, then it is allowed, while if it criticizes it, then it is forbidden. But the bible has no criticism of slavery or capital punishment and does not condemn those who would stone a woman who committed adultery. Likewise, until the later nineteenth century the tradition had little problem with slavery and I knew a priest who had been a prison chaplain and was with many men before they were hanged – and could not understand why people now thought it immoral. Likewise, I have met Christians from cultures where stoning women still occurs – and they say they can 'understand' the practice!

But asking these questions of the past misses a more basic fact of life: cultures change and sometimes their insights amount to an enrichment of human life and sometimes to its diminution – but a culture's past is as different from its present as that culture is from a foreign culture, and the future will be different again. So maybe we need to refine our questions. Perhaps we should ask: what can we do now that would help us pursue the goal of building the kingdom of God, affirming the dignity of each person, recognizing the presence of the Spirit in every one of the baptized. We shift the focus from where we have come from (because we are no longer there) to where we are going (because that is where we soon will be). This question allows us to assess what we value, value what we possess, and asks what it means to say 'thy will be done' today. We are only asking these questions – about celibacy, the form of ministry, and about who can be ordained – because we are no longer in the older situation: so we look forward and know that we may make mistakes – we have made many in the past – but if we focus on purpose, what are we called to become, we will at least be honest. And, moreover, we will break out of the circle of endless details about what some

verse in some first-century text means or what happened in the fourth or fifth century. These questions may be great historical questions (and, as such, respond to our needs as history-producing beings), but they are not questions about what is demanded of us on the path of discipleship moving into the future.

One thing that the study of theology should do is to help us clarify our questioning. The past – and all its texts such as those that are in the bible – is our memory, an important key to our identity, and one of the deep common bonds between us – it is not ‘the universal religious encyclopedia’ in which are all the answers just waiting for one of us to go and ‘look them up.’

Situation 3: Living with other Christians: Can we share a table?

Meet any group of Christians and the likelihood is that there will be individuals from more than one tradition: a few Catholics, a few Anglicans, maybe a Methodist or Baptist, and one or two others. All claim to be followers of Jesus, all pray to the Father, all acknowledge the Spirit within them. All have been baptized and have set out on the Way of Life which makes them fellow disciples. So far, so good – and we rejoice that we no longer call each other nasty names (or worse) and appreciate that God, and the divine love and mercy, is unlimited. But then, someone notes that the community of disciples never becomes more visible than when we gather in the Christ to share the meal of the Christians blessing and thanking the Father when we break and eat the common loaf and drink from the common cup. This sharing of the loaf and cup, the Eucharist, is the centre and summit of the whole Christian life – and we echo Paul when we say ‘Because there is one loaf, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf’ (1 Cor 10:17).

But we are also divided: we worship apart, we have different structures and customs, and we have different ways of expressing belief and different ways of explaining what we do believe (and a history of saying that anyone who is ‘not with us’ is both wrong and needs corrective punishment). So many churches have rules which say that ‘if you are not completely united with us, you cannot

share the Christian meal with us.' This causes bitterness, hurt, rejection, and has caused untold suffering when, for example, two Christians from different churches marry and cannot share that which both may proclaim as most precious to them. Faced with this problem it seems the only answer is to argue that the Eucharist is a manifestation of the union the church in Christ (which it is), so if you are not in visible union with the church it would be wrong to participate in that visible manifestation. This logic is tight, and has been proclaimed by bishop after bishop, canonist after canonist, and so it would seem that it is as much a fact as 'caution: hot surface' written on many machines. The rejection of 'intercommunion' is hard, even sad, but there is nothing that can be done!

But one amazing difference between theology and engineering is that while the latter uses language factually – the bridge can either bear the weight or not, theology uses language analogically – it is aware that language is an approximation and that what appears a clear answer from one string of reasoning, emerges as a faulty answer from a different starting point, *and both strings of argument can be true.*

On 15 November 2015 Pope Francis visited a Lutheran church in Rome. Then the wife of a Roman Catholic, expressed sorrow at 'not being able to partake together in the Lord's Supper' and asked: 'What more can we do to reach communion on this point?' The pope's reply is very interesting. This is what he said:

Thank you, Ma'am. Regarding the question on sharing the Lord's Supper, it is not easy for me to answer you, especially in front of a theologian like Cardinal Kasper! I'm afraid! I think the Lord gave us [the answer] when he gave us this command: "Do this in memory of me". And when we share in, remember and emulate the Lord's Supper, we do the same thing that the Lord Jesus did. And the Lord's Supper will be, the final banquet will there be in the New Jerusalem, but this will be the last. Instead on the journey, I wonder - and I don't know how to answer, but I am making your question my own - I ask myself: "Is sharing the Lord's Supper the end of a journey

or is it the viaticum for walking together? I leave the question to the theologians, to those who understand. It is true that in a certain sense sharing is saying that there are no differences between us, that we have the same doctrine - I underline the word, a difficult word to understand - but I ask myself: don't we have the same Baptism? And if we have the same Baptism, we have to walk together. You are a witness to an even more profound journey because it is a conjugal journey, truly a family journey, of human love and of shared faith. We have the same Baptism. When you feel you are a sinner - I too feel I am quite a sinner - when your husband feels he is a sinner, you go before the Lord and ask forgiveness; your husband does the same and goes to the priest and requests absolution. They are ways of keeping Baptism alive. When you pray together, that Baptism grows, it becomes strong; when you teach your children who Jesus is, why Jesus came, what Jesus did, you do the same, whether in Lutheran or Catholic terms, but it is the same. The question: and the Supper? There are questions to which only if one is honest with oneself and with the few theological "lights" that I have, one must respond the same, you see. "This is my Body, this is my Blood", said the Lord, "do this in memory of me", and this is a viaticum which helps us to journey. I respond to your question only with a question: how can I participate with my husband, so that the Lord's Supper may accompany me on my path? It is a problem to which each person must respond. A pastor friend of mine said to me: "We believe that the Lord is present there. He is present. You believe that the Lord is present. So what is the difference?" — "Well, there are explanations, interpretations...". Life is greater than explanations and interpretations. Always refer to Baptism: "One faith, one baptism, one Lord", as Paul tells us, and take the outcome from there. I would never dare give permission to do this because I do not have the authority. One Baptism, one Lord, one faith. Speak with the Lord and go forward. I do not dare say more. (papa-francesco_20151115_chiesa-evangelica-luterana.pdf)

Pope Francis notes that theology is not a matter of fixed answers: there are always a variety of explanations and interpretations – and it is the task of theology to find those answers which are most conducive to discipleship.

So what would such an argument be like? It might take this form. We have one Lord, and this is the faith we share, and at baptism each of us was joined not only to the Christ but to one another as forming the children of the Father. This is what is the kernel, the basis, the cornerstone of *our* identity – and this is not limited to any one church but is the basis of ‘the Church.’ All who are in this great host of witnesses to God’s love are on the journey of faith and are sustained on this, often difficult, path by each other and ‘the food for the journey’ – viaticum – and this is an expression of God’s love, mercy and care. If it is God’s mercy, are we not overstepping the mark to limit it?

Theology is not only more than ‘an encyclopedia,’ it is a creative process by which we seek out what is the way of faith amid an often-dark forest of clashing ideas. It helps us to recall that because ‘God is always greater’ we have to watch out for a bad habit of making God appear to be as narrow as we have a tendency to become with our ‘possessions.’

Situation 4: Living alongside other religions: Does the Spirit speak in every heart?

Just a generation ago many Christians lived in societies where everyone they met was either a Christian or someone who rejected Christianity. Today most Christians live side by side with people from a variety of religions; indeed I can keep track of the variety of religions where I live by watching the way that the local supermarkets try to cash-in on festivals. There is Christmas and Easter for Christians; Passover and Hanukkah for Jews; Eid for Moslems, Divali for Hindus; and – in the last few years – Halloween (originally an Irish Christian festival) for anyone else! We live in a multi-faith world and there is little chance that anyone can think that there is only one way of thinking about the Big Questions of live, death, love, meaning, and purpose. But there lies the heart of it; we all are concerned with these questions – and humans have been concerned about them,

and consequently engaged in ritual and religion, since our very earliest evidence for humans on this earth. What does this fact – that all human societies and cultures ask the great religious questions – mean for us as Christians?

It is very easy to take the logic of the marketplace and transfer it to questions of religions (the proof of this is how endemic is the notion among Christians that we can buy our way into heaven) and it can confuse us at a very deep level. If I need to change a punctured wheel, I need either to have a jack or buy one. If I get a jack and use it, then the wheel gets changed. The opposite is also true: no jack, wheel cannot be changed! This is a good piece of clear, logical thinking. Alas, I might try to use this same thinking in matters of religion. The starting point seems clear enough: if I follow the Christ, the way, truth and life, I can look forward to new life with him in the presence of God the Father. This is a true and simple statement of Christian hope. But what if I tried to expand on it? I might try to reverse it and then I would say 'if I do not follow the Christ, then I cannot look forward to new life.' This too can be true, because following the Christ as a disciple is a costly business and I could reject God's love. But what if I tried to make it more abstract: 'Disciples of Jesus can look forward to new life' – again this is a very blunt, but still true statement. But can it be reversed? Then it would become 'no new life unless you follow Jesus' or 'only followers of Jesus can get to new life.' Both these statements have often been made – and many have tried to present Christianity in terms of 'faith' on one side, and hell and annihilation on the other. But these statements are false: we cannot try to limit God's love and mercy; we cannot be true to a God who is love and preach such an either/or vision of rewards/punishments. The fundamental problem is that we have transferred what is efficient thinking within the finite world into the realm of mystery and the Infinite. That is not only sloppy, but leads to falsehoods.

All those various celebrations advertised in the supermarket are all a response to the mystery of God who created the whole universe and each of us and who loves each of us. We may have insights into the nature of the divine that we want to share with all, we may want to build the great family of the People of God in peace, but we do not 'bring God' to people: God is already present in every

human heart, every word of prayer in every religion is a praise of God, and we must respect each searching after the divine as part of the precious treasure of humanity and as a something sacred. Religion is viewed by many today as the great distraction and the great sower of discord; part of the Christian message is that God is present to each and so, respecting God's presence in every religion we can build discourse.

We all think about the questions of religion – but usually do so in a very confused manner. Theology can help us do it better – and the more ably we think about religion, the more we can replace discord with discourse. Religions can learn how to respect one another, speak to one another, and learn from one another – all to the glory of God.

Situation 5: Living in a post-religious world: Are people really not 'religious'?

One of the most significant cultural developments of recent decades across the developed world is the number of people who reject any recognized form of religion, who say they do not believe in God or a god, or who ignore organized religion in their lives with the simple statement: 'I'm not religious!' Christians respond to this situation in a variety of ways. One obvious reply is to try to 'convert' them to accepting the traditional language, vision and practices of Christianity. After all, this is the basis of all missionary plans when missions were sent out in areas that had never heard of the Christ and there they won many new people for the faith. So why should they not view the society around them as 'a new pagan land' and preach to such people? While it is true that Christians must always proclaim Jesus as the Lord's Christ, addressing fellow citizens does not seem to have the same impact as missionaries had in parts of Africa in the twentieth century. Part of the reason for this is that the languages and practices of Christianity appear to many post-Christian societies as simply an appeal to go backwards. Christianity - at least in its traditional language and practice - is explicitly that from which many are running away (and often for very good reasons); and they cannot abide the notion of returning. Inviting people to 'come

home' to Christianity is equivalent to saying they should love the technology of the early twentieth-century, the social views such as the restrictions on women of the nineteenth-century, or the religious clashes and bitterness of even earlier. The situation is that they have tried Christianity and found it wanting. It is so easy to imagine that this post-Christian situation is the equivalent to being a-religious – as so many claim: but this, for those who believe in God the creator, would be a great mistake. Post-Christian does not equate to being without religious longings.

But does that mean that they are godless, that the great questions do not trouble them, or that for this generation Augustine's claim that every heart is unquiet until it rests in God (*Confessiones* 1,1,1,) is no longer true?

If it is true that they are truly godless, then it must be a case that now, for the first time in history, there are hearts and minds in which the Holy Spirit is no longer speaking. To say they are godless is tantamount to saying that God has gone away. But part of the good news of the creation is that God never goes away and in every heart his Spirit is somehow active. It means that the quest for God is taking new forms, finding different expressions, and the challenge facing Christians is twofold. First, for themselves to recognize these new expressions of God's presence in human life and work – and not assume that God only speaks in the older language with which they are familiar. Second, to help their fellow citizens recognize for themselves these divine stirrings, the deep human need for the Infinite, and to forge with them a new language – a language and religious culture and practice – that belongs to today and tomorrow (rather than being that of yesterday spruced up for today). This view of the situation of modern women and men was elegantly summed up at the Second Vatican Council over fifty years ago:

For since Christ died for all, and since the ultimate destiny of all humanity is the same, namely divine, we must hold that the Holy Spirit offers all of us the possibility, in a way known to God, of being made partners in the Paschal Mystery. (*Gaudium et Spes* 22.5)

But finding this new 'language' is very difficult – it is even more difficult than learning a foreign language because we do not know its grammar – and then we have to translate our older 'language' into it. In this task of translating the Christian past into the human situation of today and tomorrow, theology plays a crucial role. So every study of theology is intrinsically an act of mission – and no explicit missionary act can take place without theological reflection. Put bluntly, the more people say 'I'm not religious,' the more those who profess faith need to have the skills of theology.

Theology and theologies

'Theology' is not some body of information that one downloads. In the past it was often confused with 'the information needed by a priest' or some set of codes that could be used to explain everything as if 'theology' were the religious equivalent of basic geometry. Theology does involve knowledge about how Christians live, how they worship, how they have presented their faith in doctrine, about how they read the texts they cherish, and what it is that makes them the community of followers of Jesus. But most of this is already known to some degree to most Christians who take their discipleship seriously. So what is special about theology? It is having a developed, trained skill in thinking about the Christian life, reflecting on what we are doing, why we are doing it this way, and asking if the great purposes of God could be better served by acting differently. Theology is not just about knowing 'what your are about,' but having the skills to think about what you know and do, clarify what is obscure and confused, and then help others in their quest. God infinity, *Deus semper maior*, is most truly recognized in God's mercy; but appreciating the range of that mercy and seeing what response it calls forth from human beings is a most complex challenge – and skill in theology is one great facilitator in this task.

This essay has worked outward in a series of circles:

- religious questions that concern me as an individual;
- religious questions that concern me as a member of the Catholic Church;
- religious questions that concern the Catholic Church in relation to other Christians;

- religious questions that concern Christians in relation to other religions;
- religious questions that concern 'religious people' – those who believe in the Transcendent with other human beings.

We all inhabit each of these circles simultaneously because each of us is the centre of a world whose outer reaches (and they might be just next door or even among our closest friends) interact with the whole of humanity. Being a believer in this world – exploring my own doubts and questions, working with other Catholics and other Christians, encountering others every day of every religion and none – calls on us to think through our choices, what it means to follow Jesus's Way of Life and to reject the Way of Death, and to bear witness to hope and love. This vocation is neither easy nor straightforward. We *both* follow a well mapped route which our sisters and brothers have travelled before us *and* we have to explore new routes and carve out new paths – and on this journey being well-skilled in theology is like having a compass as well as a map.