

"Of the making of many books...": theology, academy and Church in a media age

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I cannot think of too many things more worthy of cause for great celebration than the re-dedication of a theology library. Admittedly, that is the kind of statement which would make my teenage children wince and confirm along with the many other pieces of evidence they have gathered over the years, that I really have lost the plot and become an ecclesiastical anorak. But even if I say it slightly tongue in cheek, I also mean it. A good theology library is a great thing. But I want us to celebrate the library's re-dedication this evening in the light of two challenges to us all, challenges I want to present in the form of stark questions.

First if theology is so exciting, then why are our churches often so dull? Second, if theology is ultimately so practical, then why is so much of it so inaccessible when it finds its way on to the page or the screen, or into the words of a lecturer?

I suggest we consider those two questions with respect to the title offered for this evening: "Of making many books...": *Theology, Academy and Church in a Media Age.* What I'm signalling by my title, of course, is that church, academy and wider society are all involved in the task of doing theology. There is, though, some tension between making of books and the so-called media age in which we now live. Yes, more books are now published than ever before. But more and more books are also pulped than ever before. And theological books make up a small percentage of book-production. All theological publishers struggle to make ends meet. Very few theology books become bestsellers. You have to become Archbishop of Canterbury, and already be known as a good academic, to make it into Waterstone's. Otherwise, you are left - like a number of us here - dragging your wares round with you in a suitcase whenever you are invited to speak anywhere. So if theology is exciting and practical, how are church and academy to do any kind

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of theological task in a media-saturated society and age? And what place does a theology library play in all of that?

What does a theology library represent?

A theology library represents the church's collective wisdom. Having access to a library of the quality of the one on this campus is like having a whole load of people from the Christian past and the present crowded into the room as you do your thinking, prepare your sermon or write your essay. They are all having their say about who and what God is, pressing us all the time to clarify our own position - where we stand and why - asking us to think very carefully about what can be said about God in the present, whatever our context. Sometimes this is a bewildering experience.

We may enter a place like Queen's thinking our grasp of Christian belief is fairly good - quite with-ranging even. Its comprehensiveness quickly gets challenged however, when we actually meet people who are very different: different theologically, different culturally, of different social and ethnic backgrounds, of different personality type.

When we explore the theological differences, in all their interwovenness with those other differences, we find that they all have deep roots. We need a library to enable us to explore those roots. And as we explore, interesting things start to happen. We are reminded, or made aware for the first time, that Augustine was an African, that orthodoxy may not quite have been what it seemed in the early centuries, that there are some blips in the apostolic succession, or that Methodists have not always been the gentle materially comfortable, mild-mannered, middle-class people they sometimes are now (!). That's what libraries are all about.

What will any self-respecting theology library contain?

But what should we expect to find in a theology library these days? It will always contain the classics. A 'classic', of course, is a work which has proved itself over time and always merits being returned to, because it will go on offering new and fresh meanings which prove helpful to those who encounter it. The notion of 'proving its worth over time' is crucial. It takes time, in other words, to find out even what the classics are. 'Classic' is such an overused word now that it has been devalued. I find myself talking about a CD that may have come out last week with a few 'classic tracks' on it. But that is a misuse of the word I am simply meaning 'it sounds like a great track to me' and 'I really like it'. A classic track would merit returning to again and again. And not only that, lots of other people would have to agree with me that the track was worth repeated listening and over a long time. That is exactly how it is with theological resources. The reason that Augustine, Aquinas, Julian of Norwich, Luther, Calvin, Teresa of Avila, Hooker, Wesley, Schleiermacher and the like are regarded to have produced classics is that their works merit re-visiting.

But to ensure that it has the classics, any self-re theology library has to take the risk of gathering together lots of stuff which may prove ephemeral too. Today's classics are, after all, yesterday's journalism. The great systematic theological texts of today were the apologetic, contextual texts of the past. So theology libraries have to buy the journalism and the contextual theology of today, only some of which will last. But without libraries doing that, we do not remain present. We would be too dependant only on the past. And we would not already be working with texts now which will become classics over time. The fact is, in the present, we simply don't know which texts will be classics. It is not

possible to predict.

And there's another twist, of course, in our media-dominated age. The 'texts' with which we work are changing in form. Yes, print copy is not likely to disappear. There are palm-tops but they need batteries, or charging up, and their screens are so small. Until we have technology which is as satisfying and as easy as throwing a paperback into you bag when you go on a train journey, this is not likely to change. (We have the right-sized technology. But is the reading experience as gratifying?)

Be that as it may, theologians and ministers' work with a wide range of material; art; film, and music are part of what need to be interpreted. We work in the present not only with classics, but with popular culture (and with classics of popular culture) too. And we have to work increasingly with material the theological content of which may be quite oblique, yet present nevertheless. Perhaps, in fact, it has always been so. It is just that the combination of the cultural dominance of Christianity for much of the recent history of the West and the way that histories of theology have been written (and by whom and for what purpose) mean that the interplay between theology and popular culture has been clear only to certain types of historian. And some have perhaps not wanted to, or been able, to highlight the theological aspects of their work. Or perhaps it has been the case that theologians have not really wanted to listen.

The evidence which is now being brought together through media and cultural studies, though, is showing us that Christians in the present are certainly not different in kind from others in the way they do their meaning making. Yes, we may use resources which the explicitly non-religious do not. But we also consume films and music and TV and Internet broadcasts. And we read the Bible on our Blackberries and watch films on our

laptops. This will have an impact, in time, on what libraries will field and how we access the material to be found in them.

Theology can be reduced in its focus mid purpose, of course, if it's too easily subsumed under the concept of 'meaning-making'. And some of the work which is done from the theological end in the field of popular culture is facile to say the least. But the fact of the ways in which meaning is discovered and made - whatever resources are used - cannot but be of interest to theology as a discipline.

In what way does a library help Christians to be critical?

But what, in more precise terms can a library actually do, other than provide people with information? In a recent collection of essays on the current state of the disciplines of theology and religious studies in the academy, Julius Lipner, Professor of Hinduism and the Comparative Study of Religion at the University of Cambridge, comments: 'It is the academic study of religion that helps rescue religion from its own worst excesses?' (Lipner 2005, p. 101)

I think that is absolutely right. It does not overstate the case. It recognises that it is not academic study alone that may prevent religion getting out of hand, and it does not claim a guaranteed success. But it acknowledges the dangerous tendencies which lurk within 'religion itself' and shows how the academy can actually serve its own and public good. So long as that kind of insight does not come to mean that universities are always the ones correcting what is delivered in church-run institutions, or that religious studies is inevitably in a better position to evaluate critically what the theologians get up to, then I suggest we pass Lipner's message on.

Religions can - indeed must - be internally

self-critical. They will always receive criticism from outside anyway. And no-one is value-free. So if you stand outside of one tradition, religious or not, you are always standing in another. But such critical enquiry - wherever it happens has to be *resourced*. And that's what libraries do. And because beliefs are held by people, not books, we are reminded that in resourcing the contemporary critical enquiry that religious traditions need - that contemporary *Christianity* needs - through places such as this, libraries resource people. Libraries enable informed conversations to happen between living people, who embody the traditions which *humanity as a whole* needs; in all its complex variety, for it to flourish.

To put it another way: at their best libraries create, and are related to, communities of learning. Communities of learning are rarely bunches of people who always think the same way. But they are bodies of people committed to the kind of informed critical conversation I have just described. The problem with the phrase 'communities of learning', of course, is that it can too easily conjure up an outdated image of a rather fusty Oxbridge common room with leather sofas, a ticking clock and copies of *The Economist*, *Punch* and *The Times* on the coffee table. Communities of learning need to be heard to exist equally in such forms as a church study group, a regular gathering, of at students around a kitchen table, a Diocesan evening course, or a Local Preachers' Continuing Development group. All such groups can only be communities of learning - as opposed to being groups which simply provide opportunities for the pooling of impressions or opinions, important though those are - when they are fed. Libraries can offer the food. Information is not of itself education. But uninformed conversation is not necessarily education either.

But if a theological library like the one in

this institution represents the collective wisdom of Christianity; and if it contains a mixture of classical and contemporary material, as a living tradition, the leading edge of which is so fresh that we do not yet know what will last and if it resources contemporary, critical enquiry, and serves both church mid society by means of that resourcing then what roles do church and academy play in making the best use of such a resource, and in guiding people - us- who use it? And how is the sheer excitement of accessing the collective wisdom of the tradition, of seeing just how broad and deep theological enquiry can be, and sharing that excitement in whatever communal settings we find ourselves in...how is that to be grasped hold of?

I offer two comments. First, church and academy are not polar opposites. Yes, the academy is not a place of worship (unless, of course, there is hidden worship of the human intellect going on). But as I have reminded us already, it is not value-free. It is a place of clashing political, ethical and ideological commitments. One thing that makes a university very different from a religious tradition is that a university does not usually have a single, dominant view which binds all its members together (save, perhaps, for a desire for free-spirited enquiry). But a university has a purpose - the expansion of knowledge for human good. Prosperity, and thus an economic drive, might have become more prominent in university aspirations in recent years: But there remains something in a university's reason for being about helping its students and staff develop and about benefiting society.

Churches exist, it has been said, for their non-members. But they benefit their members too. If they in practice exist *only* for their members, then they have denied what they should be existing for. Do they need an academic arm? Certainly - and this campus is one such academy within the church which itself links both church

and academy. In order to be the kind of academic institution which the church needs, there has also, though, to be a distinct form of institution like a university, to which a church institution like this can relate: But each has a different ethos. It is often being said at the moment how much universities are losing their sense of being communities of learning because they are too big, because study is becoming so individualistic, and because the practice of studying is becoming so utilitarian. Academic institutions in the church like Queen's have a chance to resist such tendencies. But let us not pretend that they can exist on their own. Arguably, the excitement of theology can be fostered more easily, and even more radically, in universities because of the spirit of free enquiry at work. But church academic institutions are the ones that remain closest to 'real religion'. For every conservative tendency which may be apparent in church life, there is a social radicalism - being in touch with the roots of where, and by whom, beliefs are actually held and practised - which universities sometimes cannot get anywhere near. Universities and church institutions have something to teach, and need, each other.

And the excitement of theology in the church must not, of course, be reflected only in academic institutions like this one. Most people here already do have, or will have, a pr responsibility to be. leaders of worship, local theologians, or managers of small group processes in the lives of churches (even call them committees if you must). It is in all such settings where informed theology lives. Theology of this kind is vital for both church and society.

Second, we have to ask how both churches and universities can help people make sense of life in a media age. We shall not help people in their task, of meaning-making just by stocking libraries up with DVDs as well as books. Some expansion and diversification of stock will

be necessary - it already is necessary - but that will not of itself be enough. Nor will it be enough simply to remind academics to be more inter-disciplinary in their work (and despite much talk of interdisciplinarity, too little actually goes on). Cultural studies people will need to talk more to theologians, educationalists will need to talk more with religion scholars; and so on. Inter-disciplinary work is demanding, and time-consuming work. And grant-awarding bodies often don't know how to handle it. But even that will not be enough, because with all the best will in the world, inter-disciplinary work remains largely amongst the academics, even if its effects may be felt beyond academic circles.

No, what I talking about here is how we can respect the importance of churches through where they are socially focussed i.e. as, at their best, real life, local communities of people already engaged in the business of meaning-making: theological meaning-making. And if that's what they are, then the purpose of a theology library is to resource churches, and those who lead them, in that task, with as much critical awareness as is possible, and in as informed and as contemporary a way as we can. That will not just mean finding Christian meanings embedded in *The Simpsons* or *Harry Potter* - though it may mean that too. It means knowing what to do with *Big Brother*, and *I a Celebrity, Get Me Out of Here*, or the contemporary significance of pre-match anthems at football matches, illuminated by reference to Luther and Luther King. Christian theology is, after all, about gaining a glimpse into who God is, through Christ, and about discovering who we are, given all that we do and experience, before God, as creatures made in God's image. Respecting that task in the midst of real-life communities called churches, with a clear view of the complex, cultural world in which we are all located, cannot but mean working in as accessible a way as we can. We discover and explore

our identities through all sorts circuitous routes, and by all manner of intriguing means. What we need, then, in communal terms, are places, safe places, where we can process, before God, all that stuff, and be resourced in the process. That means there is an urgent task for churches to be engaged in. Academic institutions run by the church will have an important future in this light. The theologians and ministers of the future have to be astute, resourced interpreters of wider culture, as well as

Christian culture. And for them to be able to undertake both tasks, they will need well and appropriately, stocked libraries. But as an enthusiastic ecclesiastical anorak I would say that.

Lipner, J. 2005 'Love in Ford, D F, Quash, B and Soskice, J M (eds.) *Fields of Faith: Theology and Religious Studies for the Twenty-First Century*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

