Part II

Australian Proposals, Analyses and Papers Related to Conference Workshops: the Australian context-for-theology as discovered in Historical Studies, Literature, the Visual Arts and Sociology

Theology in an Australian Context:

Towards "a Framework of Collaborative Creativity"

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I am presuming at the beginning that the Australian context makes some difference to our theology. In an obvious sense, we can't help being Australian. This fact evokes a particular accent, emphasis and style. It implies an inhertitance of a particular historical experience. It presents us with that particular bundle of concerns and outlooks that somehow can be said to form one national mind. The way we think and feel is earthed here, in this place, this time, within the aspirations and resentments, the capacities and the limitations of this society and this historical process of living.

Being Australian makes a difference to our theology, and it should. It is as Australians that we experience the routines and drama of our Christian commitment. As Australians we relate to one another in freedom or oppression. As Australians we feel the presence or absence of God in the culture that shapes our world and moulds our souls. In our enjoyment, exploitation or dread of this land, we find the basic symbols for our poetry and our prayer. As Australians we have our own ways of celebrating life and death, live affected by a certain mood, absorb a certain moral sensibility. And it is as Australians that we create a way of life which, as Christians, we might appreciate as the foretaste of some eschatological liberation; or sense as the Living God abandoning us to our fabrications of an antipodean hell.

Being Australian makes a difference, and it should, because theology can never speak 'in general'. Should it attempt some timeless system, theologians will soon find that they are haunting the world rather than inhabiting it; and

their theology is regarded as the quaint outer limits of astrology. But once a transcendent faith begins to articulate itself within the dominant meanings and values of a given culture, its claim to be a path of redemption begins to make sense. Being Australian makes a difference to our theology:— that is what I am supposing. What I am hoping for is that our theology, once it begins to achieve its appropriate cultural expression, will make a difference to our being Australian.

Whilst I have been presuming that it is the right course for our theology to become aware of its Australian context, I am by no means presuming that the Australian context is particularly interested in theology. We have the dubious distinction of being probably the first post-Christian society to come into existence, granting the conditions of our origins. The contrast with the deeply theological impetus in the foundation of America is always instructive. For our purposes, suffice it to say that an American President can season his speeches with abundant biblical quotations, whereas an Australian Prime Minister would be on very tricky ground if he followed this course. Further, for all the passion and conflict and rugged fidelity of the Christian community in Australia, the impetus to create a theology to serve such an experience has not been great. Perhaps Australian theologians have been so international (with all our contacts with Louvain or Rome or Oxford or Jerusalem or New York, etc.) that we were made incapable of recognising our indigenous context. This difficulty is, in some measure, aggravated inasmuch as theology out here has traditionally had few links with the universities. That, of course, is a very interesting part of Australian history in itself.

It may sound even more disillusioning when I suggest further that the international discipline of theology that educated most of us overseas will possibly not be very interested in our contextual theology. At least not in the way the Black Theology of Africa or North America is thought to be interesting. Certainly not in the way, too, that the mystical theologies of the Eastern religions or the liberation theology of South America seem to be part of the global context of theology. There might have been a time when we would have been 'theologically interesting', since we knew about 'God being dead' a century and half before *Time Magazine* made its "discovery". Then, with the brutality and isolation of our early history, we were left only with a kind of theology of hope long before European theologians discovered that this was the way to go.

So much for these preliminary remarks. The important thing is that Australian theologians are beginning to advert to their context: the theme of our 1978 ANZTS conference indicates this. Very recently, numerous essays have appeared on this general theme, for example in *Compass, AWD Documentation, St. Mark's Review* and *The Australian Catholic Record.* Fr. John Eddy, S.J. in his History Workshop at the conference drew our attention to a flood of highgrade historical research. Jim Tulip and Dorothy Green have opened our eyes to the deeply theological content of Australian literature. Then there is the all but impossible challenge of keeping up a theological interest in the experience of a wide variety of Christian action groups, whether their concern be for the family, human rights, the Aboriginal Australians, the environment or international questions affecting Australia.

The problem emerges as we try to hold this context together in some way. A context can so easily explode into innumerable particular concerns, each of which has its own 'eschatological' importance! The result is that the possibility of collaboration within the committed Christian community is diminished: what is original in these new kinds of experience does not come to an intellectual expression in the Christian mind. And so theology is cut off from its best data.

This, then, is the question: how do we make our context one of genuine collaboration and mutual enrichment? Another form of this question is: what is good theological method? I would not imply that method should be thought of as a set of rules to be followed. With Bernard Lonergan, I conceive of it as a "framework of collaborative creativity". It's that grasp of the whole process of theology that keeps it coherent and open to its concrete situation. Instead of thinking of method as a set of rules to be followed, we might think of it as a model of a process by which those working in the field of theology can achieve a kind of fruitful interaction.

What follows are some very cryptic suggestions along these lines. My remarks owe a great deal to Lonergan's *Method in Theology* (London: DLT, 1972). More than anyone else I know, he tries to cope with the multi-facetted activity which we call "theology". He sees theology as "mediating between a cultural matrix and the significance and role of religion within that matrix." (*Method* . . , xi) I might paraphrase this by saying that theology is really faith seeking its appropriate cultural form in the terms of those meanings and values that inform a given way of life.

I. VIRTUES OF LONERGAN'S METHOD

I am disposed to commend the value of Lonergan's *Method* for seven reasons which I will briefly indicate.

1. Contextual but not National: The Australian context of theology happens within a framework of many other contexts. For the first time in human history we have the possibility of a global context as cultures intermingle, old national barriers break down and many of our problems occur in world-wide proportions. It would be theologically quite foolish to paint ourselves into a cultural corner and become even more isolated in our antipodean situation. Paradoxically, what we want is a *transcultural* method proportionately applicable to many cultures. Lonergan founds his method on the authenticity of the self-transcending subject. He understands this authenticity to be the creative element in all cultures as men seek for meaning and value. This is as not as ambitious as it sounds, for, however we might express it, we all experience something, we all ask what it might mean, we weigh evidence for and against in reasonable judgment; and then we are faced with the question, what should we do about it? The transcendental, transcultural imperatives are operative for all of us, in all cultures: 'Be attentive. Be intelligent. Be reasonable. Be responsible. Be holy in the faith we possess.'

Our contextual theology would ask what kinds of self-transcedence is our Christian faith demanding of us today in Australia, in the current social, political, international scene. What data are we tending to ignore? What questions are we refusing to ask? What reasonableness are we supressing? What responsibilities are we shirking? What divine call are we hearing?

2. A Comprehensive Model: A good model of theological method should somehow map out the general field of theological activity. It should suggest the scope of the enterprise. A method is defective if it methodically blocks the consideration of some data or forbids some forms of enquiry. The fact that we have taken so long to advert to our context justifies the suspicion that we have been ill-equipped in terms of a good method. We may have opted, more or less implicitly, for a biblical, an existential, a liberationist, a confessional theology. But no one of these covered the field. Here, again, Lonergan's approach is suggestive.

In common with most others who have given the matter a thought, he sees two obvious phases in theology. We might name them the 'Retrospective' and the 'Prospective'. The first phase makes available the normative experience of the past, as recorded in biblical texts, doctrines, theologies and so forth. The Prospective phase seeks to objectivize our present standpoint, to outline key positions and priorities, to work to a comprehensive world-view and apply this in all the variety of cultural forms.

Lonergan interprets each of these phases in terms of his basic understanding of self-transcendence. To achieve this we must be open to experience and new data. We seek to interpret such data in its correct context. Then, in accord with our quest for truth, we try to sort out what is probably the best interpretation, and then make our options accordingly. So the process can be mapped out like this:

(i) Two phases: the Retrospective and the Prospective
(ii) Four stages in the unfolding of authentic human consciousness: experience, understanding, judgement, decision.

Consequently, by applying (ii) to (i) we have eight functional specialties making up the overall process of theology. I will give examples of this later, but it might be helpful to put it down like this:

RETROSPECTIVE PHASE	UNFOLDING CONSCIOUSNESS	PROSPECTIVE PHASE
1. Research.....	EXPERIENCE.....	8. Communications
2. Interpretation.....	UNDERSTANDING	7. Systematics
3. History.....	JUDGEMENT.....	6. Doctrines
4. Dialectic.....	DECISION.....	5. Foundations.

As I will suggest, with a little more explanation, these eight functional specialities will help hold together such seemingly different pieces of work as Jim Tulip's researches into Australian poetry, Clive Harcourt-Norton's interpretations of the Church and Australian Society, Tom Daly's reflections on the meaning of context, and the *Justice and Peace Commission's* "Statement of Concern" for the Aborigines.

3. Praxis Orientation: Especially when a culture is in a state of transition, when there is an obvious conflict of world-views with political consequences, theology must be careful to define itself into the transformation of culture. Political Theology, Liberation Theology, Feminist Theology, Black Theology are all instances of this in a variety of wider contexts. In our Australian context, it is true that theology has not tended to have a very influential role, not even within the Church, apart from a certain moral suasion, say on human life issues, the family, social justice. A few hurried, often confused sentences of response from a "Church spokesman" might grow quickly into a page in a church weekly; but the best resources of theology even on such moral issues remain unused. Our overall conception of the theological process does make a difference.

Here, too, Lonergan's method is, in principle, worth considering. For he outlines it as a critical movement from the data of research to the results of communication. Such a movement passes through the requirements of analysis in interpretation, it is broadened by an appeal to a comprehensive historical context; it is further sharpened by isolating the conflicts that tend to suppress the data, bias the interpretation or distort the history. "Foundations" tries, in the light of all this, to promote a clear personal standpoint. In "doctrines" we state positions and declare priorities; "Systematics" leads to a comprehensive statement of Christian meaning and value: the results of all this are applied according to the different cultural requirements, be they popular religion, educational philosophy, social awareness, political action.

Even such a general statement has its value. We have to have something like this in mind lest we find ourselves thinking that Christian involvement in social issues provides no theological data on the one hand, or exonerates us from a more comprehensive theological reflection on the other. Left to themselves, those working for Aboriginal rights are not likely to think that religious symbols in Australian poetry make any difference. Isolation in theory, or art, or action, in the long run, helps no one. A good method must respect the exigencies of praxis.

4. Division of Labour: A method must inculcate a reasonable division of labour, and assist those engaged in the field of theology to understand the value of particular contributions, and their inter-relationship within the whole. Otherwise, the context becomes very confused, a great muddle of sociological research, fragments of history, prophetic statements, literary studies and philosophical speculation. Lonergan's eight Functional Specialties (no one can do them all!) make some sense out of what is going on. They provide some clue how researchers, historians, ecumenists, philosophers, systematicians, religious educators, and social activists can each make a valued contribution without any totalitarian ambition. To speak in my own Catholic situation, I would not expect that the National Catholic Research Council would do the work of the Justice and Peace Commission. I would not expect that this latter group would find anything immediately relevant in the hundred courses taught at the Yarra Theological Union, just as I would not expect that the YTU would try to duplicate everything that is done in the broader framework of the Melbourne College of Divinity, or in the more limited orientation of the National Pastoral Institute and the Institute of Spirituality.

5. Distinctiveness of the Christian Fact: Further, theological method must respect the distinctiveness of the Christian Fact: methods must be proportionate to the realities they consider. One pursues butterflies not with a shotgun but with a net or a camera. The fundamental concern of theology is "God reconciling the world to himself in Christ". Lonergan obviously admits that theology must respect the exigencies of the ways meaning and values are sought within a given culture. But he makes Foundations the hinge of his own method. This functional specialty invites the theologian to objectivize, as far as possible, his own standpoint, in terms of faith, Church and tradition. By heightening our critical awareness of the horizon in which we are operating, it is less likely that we will content ourselves with a cautious restatement of the generalities of other disciplines. Thus, by objectivizing our standpoint as precisely as possible, we are not only aware of the distinctive reality of Christ, but critically appropriate our context, as a component of where we stand, to form a commitment to make the Word of God meaningful within the fabric of Australian culture.

6. Broader Cultural Collaboration: Under this heading, I am drawing attention to the fact that theology, though it is an important critical element in the Church's identity, is only one tiny part of our cultural search for meaning and value. Political Science, Sociology, Psychology, Anthropology, History, Religious Studies, Philosophy and so on, have each devised methods to research and promote human concerns. For this reason, Lonergan grounded his theological method in 'transcendental method', the method implied in all the methods, in the dynamics of the self-transcending subject. In this way, he cleared the ground for theology to share the same general horizon as that of all enquiry into human meanings and values. In principle, theology is free to collaborate with other disciplines, even though the same cultural data will be treated in different ways according to the demands of particular methods. The collaboration, on the other hand, need not become compromise since, as we said in our fifth point, it has its own specific data to respect, from which it makes its contribution in the realm of absolute transcendence to the cultural enterprise.

7. Critical Demand: I add this extra point since theology in Australia has no traditional link with the universities. This is far from being a neutral fact, but space will not allow me to say more at this point. I do feel, however, justified in stressing the danger that theology be regarded as a fundamentally uncritical enterprise. The method I have been referring to not only assists theology to keep its own house in order, but enables it to resist the uncritical reductivism from university disciplines. By surefootedly occupying the high ground of critical methodology, Lonergan is in a position to suggest the empirical base of theology in a way that cannot be easily dismissed by the human sciences. The theologian is enabled to collaborate with all those engaged in the critical evaluation of human meanings. If the charge of obscurantism is laid, it can be promptly and appropriately redirected.

I know that all this is tantalisingly brief; in no way can it substitute for a study of a fundamental body of writing. It might, nonetheless, suggest a way of approach. To make what I have said a little more concrete, I will now exemplify, as well as I can, Lonergan's eight functional specialties by

appealing to a variety of contemporary work affecting the Australian context. I need hardly add that what I will do here is more in the line of approximation rather than precise classification. I beg pardon in advance of anyone or any group who might judge they have been put in the wrong place!

II. FUNCTIONAL SPECIALTIES AND THE AUSTRALIAN CONTEXT OF THEOLOGY

1. Research: In this activity, theology adverts to its context. The researcher highlights aspects of our cultural experience by presenting relevant data. Such data may be primarily sociological, anthropological, political, artistic, economic, religious . . .

Some examples:

T. Inglis Moore, *Social Patterns in Australian Literature* (Angus and Robertson, 1971): very valuable for such themes as The Land, the Bush, Fatalism, Irony, Social Relationships, Hope . . .

National Catholic Research Council. Under the chairmanship of Michael Mason, this group is already accumulating an enormous documentation of resources in the interests of Church planning and collaboration.

P. Malone, "Australian Moving Images", Compass (June 1978): a survey of the religiously significant dimensions of recent Australian films.

J. Tulip's researches into Australian poetry. A good instance is his ANZSTS paper, "Vincent Buckley, Fay Zwicky and the Religious Issue in Contemporary Australian Culture." (See Tulip's article in this volume).

2. Interpretation: The interpreter places the data in its appropriate context, points to its relevance and evaluates its significance. Interpretation is aware of the many dimensions of human meaning and the many ways in which it is communicated, e.g., in art, institutions, interpersonal relationships, symbols.

Some Examples:

With regard to the Australian landscape, the well known water-colour artist, Father Patrick O'Carrigan, "The Australian Landscape: The Continuing Challenge", *Compass* (June 1978).

Regarding religious ideas in Australian Literature, Dorothy Green's "Sheep or Goats", *St. Mark's Review* (June 1976).

3. History: The historian endeavours to set his data and their interpretation into 'the whole story' of what is happening and has happened in our culture, in terms of our ongoing search for meaning and values, our achievements and failures.

An Example:

John Eddy's Workshop, his own magisterial research and reference to the works of Manning Clarke, O'Farrell, Murtagh, Waldersee, etc.

4. Dialectic: This very interesting activity exposes the conflicts revealed in our history. It examines why they occurred and how they might be resolved. It suggests a more comprehensive viewpoint by promoting ecumenism, dialogue, and a fresh inspection of the data.

Some Examples:

Clive Harcourt-Norton's ANZSTS paper, "The Church and Australian

Society as reflected in the Report of the Royal Commission on Human Relationships." He tries to analyse the 'selective indignation' that greeted the report, and suggests a wider viewpoint. Frank Sheehan, "Intellectuals and the Australian Catholic Church", *Compass* (December, 1976) indicates some of the intellectual blocks in the Australian Catholic experience.

5. Foundations: Here the specific task is to heighten the critical awareness of one's basic theological horizon. It promotes that conversion to truth, value, responsibility, cultural context which will make particular theological positions make sense. It can achieve this only in the light of the historical analysis that has gone before.

Examples:

A. Kelly, "Theology in an Australian Context", *Compass* (June 1978)

T. Daly, "Some Reflections on Context" (reproduced in this volume)

P. Kirkwood, "Australian Religious Experience as seen through Australian Literature", *Compass* (June 1978)

H. Perkins, "Towards an Australian Theology", *AWD Documentation* (Unnumbered: 1976?)

C. Harcourt-Norton, "Justice and Salvation — towards an evangelical, ecumenical and experiential theology", *AWD Documentation* (as above).

6. Doctrines: In a contextual theology, once the standpoint has been objectivized as far as possible, we are now in a position to state priorities, non-negotiables in terms of Christian life and action. Such priorities could be expressed in ecumenical, political, or ethical terms, as well as the obvious doctrinal possibilities. Some Examples:

Chanel Williams, "Migrants: Repercussions for Catholic thinking and practice", *Compass* (June 1978)

"The Aborigines: a State of Concern" from the Catholic Justice and Peace Commission.

G. Dicker, "Liberation Theology in an Australian Context", *AWD Documentation.*

7. Systematics: This activity tries to build all the Christian positions into a coherent, even if provisional whole, within the fundamental meanings of the culture. It aims at something like a Christian 'world-view'. Examples of this type of specialty would be:

R. Campbell, "The Character of Australian Religion", *Meanjin* 36(2) 1977.

A. Loy, "Australian Poetry and Religion: a question of method", *St. Mark's Review* Sept. 1977;

M. Wilson, "Aboriginal Religion", *Compass* (June 1978).

8. Communications: As the name implies, this speciality aims to structure the meanings and values of Christian religion into the creative elements of the culture, be it in the field of human rights, the mass media, education, various action groups. Some examples are:

Annals: in the field of religious education

The Majellan: the values of the Christian family

Action for World Development; Asian Bureau Australia; Nelen Yubu

(see Martin Wilson's article above); the ANZSTS Conference on the theme of the Australian Context.

This framework of collaboration, once it is established and recognised, will promote a sense of what the 'Australian Context' is. More practically, it will keep the theological process alive through our shared effort to communicate to and within Australian culture: this generates new data which call for further research and interpretation. This in turn, calls for a more comprehensive historical understanding; new conflicts will force us to a fresh critical self-possession; this will demand statements of new priorities and positions; our Christian vision will be enriched, and our efforts to communicate will be more creative . . .

I hope, then, that these very brief remarks might emphasize the fact of the Australian Context of theology, refine our perception of it and promote collaboration within it.