

What Is Lived Theology?

Please note: this is a modest contribution to an ongoing conversation, at best sketches toward a theology of lived experience (though sketches may be all we ever get).

If it is the case that Karl Barth gives us a theological realism in which the particular aspects of Christian belief are foregrounded in theological writing, then perhaps what might be of use to us now is something like a theological hyperrealism wherein the details of lived experience are foregrounded in narrative; a kind of writing which enables life with God to appear full of "the secret heaviness of experience" (as the writer Patricia Hampl has written), where stories live their complete lives.¹ Perhaps this might be one of the contributions of lived theology, as we use the term in our work together; seeking to foreground the particularities of experience, and thus seeing and measuring everyday life with God in its brilliance, depth, detail and intensity. Lived theology would not then be a matter of reducing theological reflection to practice but rather about expanding theological reflection to include the wisdom, depth and detail of lived experience; for theological convictions and commitments in their inner logic aspire toward lived ends. In other words, the matter of a Christian social philosophy and sociology is a genuinely theological one insofar as the patterns and practices of everyday life community are an essential part of faithful theology (and indeed not just practices and patterns as a conceptual category but narrated accounts of Christian social experience). In short, attention to lived experience is a theological matter—and a messy one at that!

Occasionally someone refers to the project as practical theology. The work of lived theology should not be identified with that of practical theology. The work of lived

theology rather requires two distinct but interrelated tasks that disregard the conventional boundaries between philosophical and practical theology, between the academic and pastoral: first, it requires a disciplined attention to the theological depth and detail of lived experience and, second, a reconsideration of theology as writing.* The latter, which I might have once imagined to be primarily a question about theory, I now think of primarily as a question about style.

I am not suggesting that we evade theory, or that lived theology is beyond theoretical needs or consequences. Theory is everywhere. Wayne Meeks is correct to remind us in his book, *The First Urban Christians*, that without interpretations there are no facts. "Every observation entails a point of view, a set of connections," Meeks writes. "If we translate without that awareness, we are only moving bones from one coffin to another."² Clifford Geertz's description of the social anthropologist's task as an ethnographer in search of the famous "thick description" seems especially useful to our collaborative work. Theory is indispensable in this regard, both to shape the interpretation of experience and to criticize constructions, but theory must "stay rather closer to the ground than tends to be the case in sciences more able to give themselves over to imaginative abstraction."

In this manner, we might talk about "an eclectic" application of theory to our theological endeavors; taking and applying our theory piecemeal, as needed, where it fits. "Although we take theories into the field with us, these become relevant only if and when they illuminate social reality," wrote Victor Turner. Turner's genius was showing us how

* Schleiermacher writes, "[If] theology as a whole is so defined that dogmatics becomes theology proper and practical theology merely an application of dogmatics, and if we consider how little of dogmatics—indeed nothing, insofar as it is truly dogmatics—is ever applied in the field of practical theology, then it seems to me that this view is very skewed and inadequate to the actual state of affairs". [*Christian Caring*,. 84.

very frequently it is not the theorist's system that illuminates, but "his scattered ideas, his flashes of insight taken out of systematic context and applied to scattered data."³

Our collaborative work together has reminded me in important ways that the theological life begins and ends with a certain disciplined attunement to the plenitude, complexity and detail of being in the world, to a deeper mundane. This attunement is not primarily a conceptual task--as in Heidegger's systematic analysis of the diverse modes of human being in the world—but theological. As Mark Gornik has said, it looks for the ways in which God's presence is felt, tasted, and touched in experience. It even asks about transcendence, the sacred, the holy and the sublime.

One of the questions that motivated the work of the Project in the beginning was this: how can we get from dogmatics to life; from systematic theology to places such as the Oak Park Housing Project in Oakland, where Russell Jeung and his family live with Cambodian and Bosnian refugees in witness to the Kingdom of God. I see now that the question was mistaken in its basic formulation. For indeed Christian faith begins and ends at the Oak Park Housing Project in Oakland, it begins and ends in places of exclusion and struggle. Our sojourn into different social spaces is shaped fundamentally by the memory of the Christ who was "born in a stable because there was no room for him in the inn" (Bonhoeffer).

It seems that the question is then not so much the familiar one of which comes first, theory or practice, but the question of place. This is the quality that makes Gornik's recent book, *To Live in Peace*, one of the most exciting theological exercises to appear in recent years. Like Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *The Cost of Discipleship* and Martin Luther King, Jr.'s *Strength to Love*, Gornik's book is theological writing born of human struggle

and conviction, an imaginative and powerful work that reveals its wisdom in complex textures. It is no exaggeration to say that *To Dwell in Peace* also invokes the early writings of Karl Barth, those astonishing meditations on the “new world of God” and “the movement that proceeds all other movements”, penned by the young theologian, pastor and supporter of labor unions in the working-class Swiss village of Safenwil. But Gornik’s *To Dwell in Peace* foregrounds the particularities of lived experience, while remaining conceptually demanding theological analysis. *To Live in Peace* is not a book plagued by any sense of deracination, and yet, as I said, it is not non-fiction narrative but constructive theology.

Let’s make the point in a different way. Theologians need a Yoknapatawpha County, a concrete social world alive in time, its historical memory wedded to locality. Without a place, we live our lives in a deracinated gaze. We regard ourselves as free to roam wherever we wish, and we will end up writing about a no man's land of concepts without foot prints. Theologians need a place. Maybe we get our Yoknapatawpha County, and we get it early and get it good, but we don't have the good sense (or the courage) to stay put. Or perhaps the problem is slightly different, a matter of forgetting our origins, forgetting those places where our passions and convictions were born, and so what we need are constant and concrete reminders of the Savior born homeless in a stable.

I think this point speaks to the project’s mission. We seek to create spaces where the voices of ordinary women and men are welcomed and treated with the respect they deserve. Similarly, we need to take trips to distressed and excluded communities, to places far away from the familiar zones of our discussion and debate. And while we

must always be careful to avoid condescension and the objectifying gaze, our site visits are not exercises in “theological tourism” (as one of our participants’ rightly worried) but attempts to remember, and to reconnect with, the theological origins of our convictions and to make the theological writing more real and alive. As Gornik writes, "God's reign draws the church into a new story, a drama that moves forward in light of its ending with the new creation, demonstrated by the presence of the gospel among the poor."⁴

I said earlier that one of the contributions of lived theology to the academy and church is the way it compels us to rethink how theology is written. Lived theology calls us to a language more direct and communicative of the effects of the divine-human encounter in the world; once again to reconsider language as event. If the dialectic of life is the Spirit of God moving through and in the human world without the need of conceptual road maps, then lived theology emerges from these transactions and exchanges.

Does this mean that lived theology is simply a matter of telling stories, a retrieval of "narrative theology"? The narrative theology movement of the late seventies came to be identified more with a meta-theological or homlietical engagement of narrative than with a distinct kind of writing; it was more about theology as story (or stories for theologians and pastors) than about “the wild and crooked branch” (Barth) that characterizes the best and most expressive theological writing.

Appeal to 'narrative' often proved to be a "fashionable theological ploy of dubious utility", as John Webster wrote, especially when it sought too simple a resolution of complex historical problems or evaded ontological description or questions about the

truthfulness and rationality of faith. Yet to pay attention to stories and their details may surely "bear fruit in ensuring that those features of human history which are contra-indicative to highly generalized theories of human nature...not be forgotten."

Attentiveness to narrative may remind us of "that sheer phenomenality of human history which can only be engaged with in the particular instance." Schopenhauer said that in story-telling, as in history, "we see...the mind engaged with the particular as such."⁵

Again, is lived theology about including the incommensurable details of lived experience in theological writing, a kind of refined testimonial, our hyperrealism mentioned above?

I don't think so. For one thing, the problem with the appeal to story alone, as the poet Jorie Graham has written—and poets can help us here—is that story does not rest until it covers over everything. The mission of the poem, on the other hand, is to reclaim "the unsaid" in language, to create a space with words where the unsaid can be represented but only in a kind of "vertical burn" (in the image of the film student Graham turned poet), as when the moving picture freezes, then before disintegrating in a dramatic flash of blue and brown. That's what poetry does, moving to its own wild rhythms, licking for contact, resisting our grasp, as in her "Tennessee June," "the heat that seeks the flaw in everything and loves the flaw".

But does this have to do with our work together? If prose writers tame language, the theologian, like the poet, should set it free again.

I would be willing to bet that many of us decided to study theology after reading books like, *The Word of God and the Word of Man* or *The Epistle to the Romans*. It may

have been other books: *Fear and Trembling*, *Black Theology Black Power*, *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers*, *The Idea of the Holy*, or *The Cost of Discipleship*.

(Certainly anyone who has read Barth's early essays--I'm thinking again of *The Word of God and Word of Man*--has experienced the way theological writing sets language free.)

Theology's task remains an impossible one, "to draw the bird flying."

But these theologians--these writers--despite their differences, understand that theology should not simply make reports about doctrine. Theology should not be a kind of "algebra", as Rowan Williams has said, but it should make you feel things; it should make you see the world in a new light; it should inspire you with fresh energies and perspectives. The best theology should slow down speech and thought, ease the mind's desire to control and to comprehend, while also quickening the mind and approximating movement.

Lived theology is passionate and attentive standing in the place where we are, a prayerful openness and patient listening to the story of God told in creation and history. But lived theology is also about creating a space in writing where the polyphony of God's presence in creation and history can be imagined, beheld, and experienced even, and where the voices of ordinary men and women are not only welcome in the writing and conversation but shown respect as theological voices conveying insight and wisdom.

Some of us are called to move to Oak Park and live in community with the poor. But not all of us are. Still, we all must work with the conviction that our thinking and praying and reading and writing begin and ends in these places, in the streets and playgrounds of Sandtown, Blue Ridge Common, Boyle Heights, or Reynoldstown.

"Are we still of any use?", Dietrich Bonhoeffer once asked. "What we shall need is not geniuses, or cynics, or misanthropes, or clever tacticians, but plain, honest, straightforward [persons]. Will our inward power of resistance be strong enough, and our honesty with ourselves remorseless enough, for us to find our way back to simplicity and straightforwardness?"

If we are going to welcome the voices of ordinary women and men, of everyday saints and sinners, into theological writing--not just as categories of "alterity" "otherness", "the marginalized", or the "oppressed"--but as real persons and participants in our theological conversation and spiritual journey, then it would also be a good thing if the names of Fannie Lou Hamer, Howard Kester, Will Campbell, Victoria Gray Adams, and Sherwood Eddy (and many others) were as familiar to young theological students--and to us--as the names of Giles Deluze, Michel Foucault, and Michel de Certeau.

Let us say in conclusion: The bedrock role of lived theology—though I also mean Christian theology as such--is "to restore, for each generation anew", the power of the individual encounter with God in the concrete situation and in its community *in words, that is, into language*. Each theological generation has that task and responsibility, which cannot be abdicated by the fashions of the guild; it must be done anew, "essentially from scratch." To *do theology*, means, as Barth put it, "to take the whole situation upon us in the fear of God, and in the fear of God to enter into the movement of the era. To understand means to be given in order to give."⁶

Or as Martin Luther King Jr. said, "One must not only preach a sermon with his voice. He must preach it with his life."⁷

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¹ Patricia Hampl, *If I Could Tell You Stories*, p. 20.

² Wayne Meeks, *The First Urban Christians*, p. 5. "To collect facts without any theory too often means to substitute for theory our putative common sense. Making that substitution modernizes no less than does the scientist who follows his theory, for our common sense, too, is a cultural artifact. The advantage of an explicitly stated theory is that it can be falsified."

³ Cited in Meeks, *The Origins of Christian Morality*, p. 5. The reason practice is able to nurture Christian moral dispositions is "that practice is communicative". (Hence the "grammar of Christian practice".) "The practices we have looked at are not just 'doing things', they are also ways of saying things. Like a nature language, these practices 'make sense' within a particular social setting. They all have a high degree of regularity, they imply some measure of organization, they press in the direction of institutionalization. They are essentially communal....The Christians' practices were not confined to sacred occasions and scared locations--shrines, sacrifices, procession--but were integral to the formation of communities with a distinctive self-awareness." (p. 110).

⁴ Mark Gornik, *To Live in Peace*, p. 73.

⁵ John Webster, *Eberhard Jüngel: An Introduction to His Theology* (Cambridge), p. 116. Webster criticizes Jüngel for his "suspicion of the discordant" and a "certain underrating of the consequence of discrete historical particulars, and the elevation of a general pattern" (117).

⁶ Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, p. 294.

⁷ King cited in Taylor Branch, *Pillar of Fire*, p. 30.