Williams, Ward, and the Unity of Theological Language

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In the February issue of *New Blackfriars*, Rowan Williams explored the unity of theological discourse. He asked what criteria might be used in setting limits to pluralism—how we can go about deciding what should be allowed to count as a statement of *Christian* truth. He concluded that we must go beyond the domain of formal theological language and look to the way in which a theology becomes enfleshed: 'the unity of Christian truth is perceivable to the extent that we can perceive a unity in Christian holiness'[1].

> The limits of Christian truth are perceivable as we engage in the hard work of spelling out the human meanings, the hopes and possibilities, carried in this or that theological utterance ... Does it ... continue to offer intelligible roles for the living out of new creation? Does it conserve a hope for shared, unrestricted human renewal/liberation/salvation?[2]

I believe that, in an important though rather complex way, Williams is right, and in this article I would like to explore that complexity and to offer some observations on the understanding of Church which implies and is implied by that insight.

One obvious criticism which could be made of Williams' position is that it shifts the problem of unity rather than solving it. If 'the unity of Christian truth' is to be discerned through 'a unity of Christian holiness', this latter unity must be in some way recognizable. And that raises a question.

On this view it is not particularly helpful to say, for example, that what unites Mother Theresa and Simeon Stylites is their shared Christian faith. Rather, it is the other way round. What holds the articulated faith of the fifth and twentieth centuries together is the fact that spending forty years on the top of a column and tending the sick in Calcutta somehow display 'continuities of Christian patterns of holiness'[3]. I would want to say that in the end it must be so. But how can we know?

There would seem to be two answers readily available, or at least two polar limits to the range of possible answers. On the one hand, it could be claimed that the unity of patterns of holiness is simply self-evident: what should and what should not count as a model of Christian living is just obvious when you look at it. Or it could on the other hand be claimed that the unity of patterns of holiness is something which must

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be worked out, that it only becomes discernible when the foundations, moral and theological, of those ways of living are explored and compared. We would then be driven back to the domain of formal theological discourse, so that there would always and of necessity be a circular movement. In order to understand how theological utterances fit together, we must look to the lives which they facilitate, and in order to understand the coherence of different patterns of living, we must look to the theological structures which they presuppose and by means of which they find articulation.

Now, it seems clear that in this categorization Williams' answer would be the second, for he speaks of 'the process by which the memory of Jesus and the humanity of the Church give shape and definition to each other'[4]. And he observes that

> to explore the continuities of Christian patterns of holiness is to explore the *effect* of Jesus, living, dying and rising; and it is inevitable that the tradition about Jesus is re-read and re-worked so that it will make sense of these lived patterns as they evolve.[5]

But the fact that these two answers are available is instructive, for there is a nineteenth-century analogue which may help to clarify the underlying ecclesiological problem. Our two answers have correlates in the thinking of W.G. Ward on the one hand and of John Henry Newman on the other.

It is difficult to introduce Ward into what is, I hope, a serious discussion without a nagging sense of the need for apologia, for his theology is as extravagant and exuberant as was the man himself. Ward always stands out. In the fastidiously exact society of Oxford Tractarianism, he remained rather proud of being fat and untidy. In the company of aesthetes, his opinions, like his figure, remained untrammelled by proportion. The son of a distinguished cricketer, he acquired no taste for outdoor activity.[6]

But for all his excesses Ward is an important theologian. And that is true if for no other reason than the fact that he is so often the mirror image of Newman: his thought is so like, and so unlike, that of his greater contemporary that it often illumines with a clear if garish light what is going on in Newman's mind. And so it is here.

Ward, like the Tractarian Newman, became increasingly sceptical about the possibility of attaining any sort of theological certainty through the normal, quasi-historical, quasi-textual methods of a tradition claiming to be based on Scripture and the Fathers. And his escape (like Rowan Williams') was through the trap-door of sanctity.

> Let others, if they will, lay their whole stress on the petty and interminable warfare of details, the hostile array of fact against fact, text against text, father against father: be it our task to throw ourselves boldly on men's higher and spiritual nature ...[7]

Sanctity is simply self-evident; through conscience we respond to it immediately and directly when we see it. And that, as he explains in *The*

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Ideal of a Christian Church, gives access to right belief, for 'holy men are the great fountains, from which moral and religious truth flows to the world'.[8]

And so, in order to find the truth, we have to find a saint like Mother Theresa and adhere to the principles to which she adheres. That will mean, among other things, adhering to a Church which recognizes and fosters her kind of sanctity. No other test is possible.

> From the circumstanced that some doctrine, wholly foreign to our own moral experience, appears to us to have literally no foundation whatever either in reason or in Scripture, not even the faintest probability arises that it may not be true. And if holy men, who have cherished and acted on it, profess to prize it most dearly, and to view it as the necessary result of acknowledged Scriptural principles, while no holy men can be found who have realised it by spiritual action and yet thought otherwise; if this be so, it is the wildest and most extravagant presumption, to hesitate for a moment in accepting it.[9]

And so Ward escapes from ambiguity and uncertainty by an appeal to sanctity. In effect Newman does the same, though in a characteristically subtler and more nuanced fashion.

The Newman of the Oxford Movement lived as we do in a theologically fragmented world. He and his friends accepted as axiomatic the notion that the four credal adjectives 'one, holy, catholic, and apostolic' were notes diagnostic of the presence of the true Church.[10] And yet, as he looked at the competing ecclesial systems around him, those notes, which should in theory have cohered, appeared themselves to be fragmented. In a rather self-mocking passage of the *Apologia,* he recalls this fragmentation as he had perceived it some twenty-five years before, around 1839:

> ... the Anglican disputant took his stand upon Antiquity or Apostolicity, the Roman upon Catholicity. The Anglican said to the Roman: 'There is but One Faith, the Ancient, and you have not kept to it'; the Roman retorted: 'There but One Church, the Catholic, and you are out of it.' ... The true Church, as defined in the Creeds, was both Catholic and Apostolic; now, as I viewed the controversy in which I was engaged, England and Rome had divided these notes or prerogatives between them: the cause lay thus, Apostolicity *versus* Catholicity.[11]

In the end the problem was in effect to be resolved through an appeal to the note of sanctity.

In 1877 Newman reissued his *Lectures on the Prophetical Office of the Church Viewed Relatively to Romanism and Popular Protestantism* with a long, new preface devoted to the refutation of one of his favourite opponents in controversy—himself. His topic was, above all, the apparent contradiction between the Church's formal teaching and those visible manifestations of her devotional life and hierarchical functioning which he had previously lumped together under the abusive label

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'Romanism'. That contradiction was not dissolved; it was, rather, subsumed within his new understanding of the Church as a system whose very life was tension and conflict.

He began with the three 'offices' of Christ, as prophet, priest, and king, offices which were 'in human measure' shared by His Church. But what is distinctive in Newman's understanding is that there is among the members of the Church a specialization of function.[12] The regal office is exercised above all by the hierarchy, the prophetic by the body of theologians, and the priestly, neither exclusively nor primarily by an ordained priesthood, but rather by priest and people who together constitute a worshipping community making holy their bit of the world.

> Christianity, then, is at once a philosophy, a political power, and a religious rite ... As a religion, its special centre of action is pastor and flock; as a philosophy, the Schools; as a rule, the Papacy and its Curia.[13]

Each of these three offices has its own task, its own way of proceeding, and its own characteristic fault.

> Truth is the guiding principle of theology and theological inquiries; devotion and edification, of worship; and of government, expedience. The instrument of theology is reasoning; of worship, our emotional nature; of rule, command and coercion. Further, in man as he is, reasoning tends to rationalism; devotion to superstition and enthusiasm; and power to ambition and tyranny.[14]

The Preface attracted favourable comment, but little real attention. It even received an impishly laudatory notice from W.G. Ward in *The Dublin Review*: Ward praised the work in most generous terms for saying precisely what it was meant *not* to say.

But even if reviewers did not quite realize what the old man was up to, that Preface remains one of Newman's most important ecclesiological statements. It had, of course, deep roots in his thought. From the time of his first book, *The Arians of the Fourth Century*, published in 1833, Newman had, after all, been interested in the complex relationship that pertains between popular theological culture on the one hand and the articulations of theologians and the promulgations of bishops on the other, and those historical reflections were in due course to feed the notorious *Rambler* article 'On Consulting the Faithful in Matters of Doctrine'. And the traumas of 1870 had forced Newman to brood on the respective tasks of the magisterium and of the theological *schola*. And his thinking on these three functions had been brought together in, for example, his 1875 letter to Isy Froude:

> Some power ... is needed to determine the general sense of authoritative words—to determine their direction, drift, limits, and comprehension, to hinder gross perversions. This power is virtually the *passive infallibility* of the whole body of the Catholic people. The active infallibility lies in the Pope and the Bishops—the passive in the 'universitas' of the faithful ... The

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schola theologorum is one chief portion of that universitas—and it acts with great force both in correcting popular misapprehensions and narrow views of the teaching of the active infallibilitas, and, by the intellectual disputes and investigations which are its very life, it keeps the distinction clear between theological truth and theological opinion, and is the antagonist of dogmatism.[15]

But what is new and for our purposes significant in the 1877 Preface is the way in which this reflection on the diverse *offices* of the Church, each vested in or focused around a different body, is allowed to take over and transform the more traditional and static concept of *notes*:

Christianity, then, is at once a philosophy, a political power, and a religious rite: as a religion, it is Holy; as a philosophy, it is Apostolic; as a political power, it is imperial, that is, One and Catholic.[16]

And the notes, so understood, far from fitting harmoniously together as in the traditional apologetic, are now in tension and conflict. Indeed, each of the three offices to which the notes are on this scheme attached *must* fight the other two, for only so will each be able to fulfil its own proper function and to check the aberrations to which the others, if left to their own devices, are prone.

It was this awareness of tension that Ward could not stomach. Newman had seen the opposition between the 'prophetic' articulation of the Church's faith and 'priestly' piety already sketched out in the New Testament itself. He saw it exemplified in the contrast between the Pastoral Epistles of I John on the one hand and the popular religiosity of some of the miracle stories in the Gospels on the other. And he asked, 'Need men wait for the Medieval Church in order to make their complaint that the theology of Christianity does not accord with its religious manifestations?'[17] Ward quoted the passage in *The Dublin Review*, but changed it so that instead of reading 'does not accord with' the text now said 'is by no means coextensive with'. And he added in a rather coy footnote that Newman's actual words

might be understood to mean, that there is some *inconsistency* between its theology and its religious manifestations: which of course F. Newman does not for a moment admit. In one or two other passages we have observed a similar ambiguity of expression, which might possibly perhaps engender grave misconception.[18]

Newman did, of course, *mean* inconsistency, and much more than that. Each office, he said, 'will find its own line of action influenced and modified by the others'.[19] There will be 'collisions', 'contrasts', 'compromises', and 'adjustment'.[20]

Now, Newman sometimes speaks as if the visual image in the back of his mind were the Newtonian world of billiard balls: the 'course' which the Church takes, 'acting at once in all three capacities, ... must ... be deflected from the line which would be traced out by any one of them,

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if viewed by itself'.[21] But what he is really invoking is not the laws of some Newtonian theological physics, but the vision so near the heart of the *Essay on Development*, of the complex, organic functioning of the living idea which is Christianity: the offices are exercised 'in this ever-dying, ever-nascent world, in which to be stationary is to lose ground and to repose is to fail'.[22]

It will be observed that there is a small asymmetry in Newman's distribution of the notes. While holiness belongs to the priestly office and apostolicity to the prophetic, the royal office is described as both one and catholic. The asymmetry may not be necessary. It would surely be as true to Newman's central insight to say that the oneness of the Church resides precisely in the systemic relationship of the three offices.

In any event, the apparent conflict between the notes of catholicity and apostolicity which so preoccupied the Newman of 1839 has been transcended. And it has been transcended because Newman has come to see catholicity and apostolicity, not as static properties, but as functions within the complex, interlocking, three-cornered system which is the life of the teaching and believing Church. The conflict of 1839 has, in other words, been transcended by taking the note of sanctity into account, by seeing catholicity and apostolicity as parts of a larger, organic whole.

We can now return to Rowan Williams' question of the unity of theological discourse. For Ward, what makes a statement *Christian* discourse is simply the fact that the saints talk that way, or at least that it is the speech of the communion in which they are nurtured. For Newman, what makes a statement Christian discourse is primarily the fact that it is part of a conversation, an ecclesial conversation to which there are three parties. Both Ward and Newman, then, like Williams, look beyond the domain of academic theology, beyond the sphere of formal theological discussion, for the guarantee that a given statement fits. And both, like Williams, appeal to a notion of sanctity—Ward to sanctity as the arbiter of truth, Newman to sanctity as an integral part of the structure of a Church whose life is dialogue, that dialogue within which and as a part of which all true theology finds its validation.

Ward offers the first answer to our question concerning the unity of patterns of holiness: holiness is simply self-evident; you just recognize it when you come across it. Newman, in effect, offers the second. Patterns of holiness are held together by the interlocking structure of which sanctity is a part. So there is of necessity a circular movement from the prophetic office to the priestly office and back again, from the work of the theologian to the life of a priestly community and then back again, from the sanctity by which that community lives to the theology which both underlies that form of sanctity and which gives expression to it.

But for Newman that circular movement is not the only circular movement in the Church. If the theologian is in conversation with priest and people on one side, he must also be in conversation with the hierarchy on the other.

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The notion of being in conversation with the hierarchy does not, however, get us very far. It gives little purchase on the unity of Christian discourse save in the limiting case of the one-sided conversation which takes place when someone is told to be silent.

A linguistic analogy may help. The problem of deciding whether various theological statements are pieces of *Christian* discourse is in some ways like the problem of deciding whether various speech forms are dialects of the same language.

The problem of dialect and language is not an easy one. The seemingly straight-forward move of appealing to a criterion of mutual intelligibility is not in fact very helpful. In part that is because mutual intelligibility is actually quite difficult to measure. But in part it is also because that criterion simply does not do justice to the complex patterning of the linguistic data and to the claims about dialect and language which we feel compelled to make on other grounds.

An alternative solution is to appeal to a standard language. It may happen that there is a dialect chain, a continuum of speech forms within which each is quite close to those adjacent to it but the extremes of which are so far apart as to be mutually incomprehensible, or nearly so. Such is the situation with the dialects of Dutch and German or with those of Hindi and Urdu. A farmer on the German side of the border may speak a dialect very close to that of his neighbour on the Dutch side and very far removed from the speech of his Swiss or Austrian cousins. And yet we, and they, still want to say that German is one language and Dutch another.

And we also want to say that German is *one* language. It is not just that there is a whole series of dialects linking our mythical farmer with his unintelligible cousins, so that the transition from his speech to theirs is made in easy stages. More important is the fact that the speakers of all these dialects are united by the common recognition of another variety of the language, a standard German, used for formal purposes, used in books, used by people who speak 'correctly'. Our farmer may not be able to handle this standard language very well himself, but he at least recognizes the propriety of using it in certain settings and for certain purposes. The farmer on the Dutch side, on the other hand, looks to a different standard language: his newspapers, his radio, his television are in standard Dutch, and he realizes that in certain contexts—political, social, religious, or intellectual—his own vernacular would be out of place.

Now, in neither case should our hypothetical farmers feel linguistically inferior to those whose native variety is the standard language. Linguistically, no variety is intrinsically better or worse than any other. Standard German evolved from a particular local variety, marked out from other local varieties only by non-linguistic factors such as the social and political power of its speakers. These non-linguistic factors led to its recognition as a prestige form, as 'correct' speech, far

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beyond its original geographical extension. It became codified in grammars and dictionaries; it acquired technical vocabularies and was adapted to a wide range of special functions. It became 'good German', by which all other varieties were to be judged. A language, they say, is a dialect with an army and a navy.

If this analogy works at all in the case of theological language, it would suggest that it may be possible for a whole range of widely differing styles of doing theology to be held together by the common recognition that there is another style which is particularly appropriate in certain formal contexts. This standard language, within the Catholic communion, may be represented by the theological idiom and the theological method of conciliar and papal pronouncements.

The common acknowledgement of a standard language does not mean that it is appropriate to use it at all times and in all contexts. It may be as totally inappropriate for a Guatemalan parish priest to address his flock in the language of a Vatican congregation as it would be for our farmer to chat about the weather in stilted, literary speech.

And our analogy would further suggest that the unity of various theological idioms—the validity of different modes of speaking—cannot be assessed in any very straight-forward way by a simple test of whether the 'same' thing is being said. To try to relate the language of our Guatemalan priest to the language of the Vatican in that way is to make the same mistake as to apply the test of mutual comprehensibility to dialect.

This model of dialect and standard language, then, seeks to relate the speech of the theologian to the speech of the hierarchy. It connects, in Newman's terms, the prophetic and royal offices. And it is, like Newman's model, a strongly ecclesial one: it assumes that the normal context for the doing of theology—the normal context in which the unity of theological discourse must be assessed—is within the visible and organic structures of the Church.

But we, like Ward and Newman, live in a theologically fragmented world. There will be all sorts of situations in which we want to insist that men and women who do not acknowledge our standard language, outside Catholic communion and perhaps some within, are yet speaking a *Christian* language.

Because we live in a theologically fragmented world we are thrown back on cruder, more rough and ready tests. If you work your way through a *Teach Yourself* grammar and want to see whether you can actually speak the language, an obvious move is simply to try it out: walk into a shop and order what you hope will turn out to be a loaf of bread and see what you get.

In a world which is ecclesially imperfect, in which there is no one ecclesial system which contains the discourse of all those with whom we hope to speak, we may have to try to gauge the unity of Christian discourse by the same sort of rough and ready test. We can at least look

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to see whether speech claiming to be Christian speech does actually speak of bread for the hungry, and of dignity and of love.

Theology is talk about God, and Jesus, after all, spoke to His disciples about God by asking, 'What father is there among you whom his son will ask for a fish, and instead of a fish he will give him a serpent? Or he will ask for an egg, but he will give him a scorpion?' (Lk. 11:11—12). In that sense Rowan Williams is emphatically right to claim that 'the unity of Christian truth is perceivable to the extent that we can perceive a unity in Christian holiness ...'

1 Rowan Williams, 'The Unity of Christian Truth', *New Blackfriars* 70 (February 1989), p. 93.
2 *Ibid.*
3 *Ibid.*, p. 92.
4 *Ibid.*, p. 93.
5 *Ibid.*, p. 92.
6 In July 1820, when W.G. was eight, his father, William Ward, made 278 for M.C.C. at Lord's against Norfolk. It was the first double century recorded in the history of the game and is still the fourth highest score ever amassed at Lord's. Five years later he bought the lease on the ground from Thomas Lord in order to save it from property developers. If the son occasionally anticipated the problems of modern theology, the father anticipated those of the modern cricketer: he coped with the poor pitches of his day by the use of a massive four-pound bat and relied heavily on the drive.
7 W.G. Ward, 'The Synagogue and the Church', *British Critic,* XXXIV (July 1843), p. 4, quoted in Owen Chadwick, *From Bossuet to Newman, The Idea of Doctrinal Development* (Cambridge, 1957), p. 136.
8 W.G. Ward, *The Ideal of a Christian Church, Considered in Comparison with Existing Practice* (2nd ed., London, 1844), p. 517: the book was first published in June 1844.
9 *Ibid.*, pp. 521—22.
10 Though the four adjectives of course go back to the creed of 381, this notion of 'note' is a modern one. It was only in the seventeenth century that the idea, and this set of four notes, became widespread. Its popularity in the Anglican communion owed much to such works as William Palmer's *Treatise on the Church of Christ* of 1838. The classic study of the history of the notes is Gustave Thils, *Les Notes de l'Eglise dans l'apologetique catholique depuis la reforme* (Gembloux, 1937).
11 John Henry Newman, *Apologia Pro Vita Sua, Being a History of His Religious Opinions*, ed. Martin J. Svaglic (Oxford, 1967), pp. 101—102.
12 In this, Newman's view differs from the much weaker form of the theory of the three offices to be found in, for example, *Lumen gentium*. Though the notion is central to the development of that document its teeth have been drawn through the importation of an underlying hierarchical structure, as if bishops exercised all three offices to the full, priests to a lesser extent, and the simple faithful in some smaller way.
13 John Henry Newman, *The Via Media of the Anglican Church. Illustrated in Lectures, Letters, and Tracts Written between 1830 and 1841,* Vol. 1 (London, 1891), 'Preface to the Third Edition', p. xl.
14 *Ibid.*, 1, xli.
15 Letter to Isy Froude of 28 July, 1875, in Charles Stephen Dessain and Thomas Gornall, eds., *The Letters and Diaries of John Henry Newman,* Vol. XXVII, *The Controversy with Gladstone, January 1874 to December 1875* (Oxford, 1975), pp. 337—38.
16 Newman, *Via Media,* 1, xl.
17 *Ibid.*, 1, p. lxvii.
18 [W.G. Ward], 'Notices of Books, *The Via Media of the Anglican Church*. By John Henry Newman', *The Dublin Review,* New Series — No. LVIII (October, 1877), n. to pp. 514—515.
19 Newman, *Via Media,* 1, xli.
20 *Ibid.*, 1, xliii, lxxxii, xciii.
21 *Ibid.*, 1, xlii.
22 *Ibid.*, 1, lxxxi.

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