Faith becoming culture: theological perspectives

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On 20 May 1982 Pope John Paul II signed a letter founding the Pontifical Council for Culture. In it he spoke of human destiny itself being at stake in the field of culture, and he stressed that "living culture" constitutes the "ethos of a people". Then he went on to express a key challenge for faith horizons today: "A faith which does not become culture is a faith which has not been fully received, not thoroughly thought through, not fully lived out."[1]

Kieran Flanagan's *The Enchantment of Sociology* could be regarded as a long footnote to that claim (which he does not quote). Even though he is suspicious of much of the discourse of inculturation, he is passionately concerned about how faith embodies itself within culture by constructing its own "habitus"—a favourite term he borrows from Pierre Bourdieu. In this respect he engages in some running battles with theologians who have misread the power of the "living culture" and whose "liberal" options for "relevance" have undermined the power of religious belonging and of the sacred. Even the Second Vatican Council's important document (issued in 1965) *Gaudium et spes*, on the Church in the modern world, is accused of naivety over the question of culture, or, more particularly, of ignoring sociological insights concerning the complexity and power of culture as a product. As a result it fell into excessive optimism about the hoped-for dialogue with contemporary culture and is criticised for playing down the necessity of religious distance from the deceptions of culture.

If this book had wanted an epigraph, an appropriate one could have been taken from Newman, from the note he added to the 1880 edition of the *Grammar of Assent*: "Religion has, as such, certain definite belongings and surroundings".[2] Flanagan, who has previously written, as a sociologist, about liturgy's need for its sacred space, here extends his focus to the "scandal of particularity" inherent in the gospel. He is worried that superficial desires for adapting faith to the culture end up destroying what is crucial to the Christian vision itself. Hence he has written this extensive plea for alertness to the real issues, awareness of the many dangers, and he presents a strong case for re-sacralisation of the "surroundings" of faith and of the processes of its reproduction" in newer generations.

My responses to this challenging and energetic book can be summed up with three simple words: "yes" (areas of agreement); "but" (areas of

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qualification or differing emphasis); and "also" (additional approaches or insights, especially from the field of theology). In fact my copy of the book is littered with pencil marks in the margins—ticks to signal agreement, question marks to indicate at least queries and sometimes disagreement, and plus signs to suggest that there is more to be said on some particular issues. At first I thought of structuring this article along those three lines, but for readers who will have not read *The Enchantment of Sociology*, it seems better to give pride of place to some "also" topics, and to let the "yes" and "but" responses express themselves in passing.

The battle zone of imagination

For Flanagan "enchantment" is the opposite of secularisation, and indeed sums up his proposed " solution to the link between theology and culture" (12). It means a whole range of options to safeguard the language of the sacred and the differentness of faith from ordinary cultural expressions. As against the "de-ritualization" that in the author's judgement has been damaging, "enchantment" calls for a renewal of solemnity, tradition, and a sense of mystery, especially in liturgy, but also in the wavelength of theology itself.

> Secularisation signifies the cultural conditions of the cancellation of God and theologians who read these too innocently become His shroud manufacturers. It points to the erosion of belief from the cultural field, but also an internal ecclesial disbelief in the autonomy of sacred values. (116)

Since theology can thus become "a victim of secularisation in its academic settings", it needs to "rebuild a culture of belief" (62–63). Indeed quasi-synonyms with that "re" prefix occur frequently in these pages—for example "re-sacralisation" or "re-spiritualise" or "re-enchantment".

In Flanagan's view theologians, when they stress their starting point in faith, can see themselves as not needing to "attend to the way belief is constructed in a culture" (220). Sociology, on the other hand, examines the social construction of belief and therefore provides a corrective for the possibly ingenuous theologian. If theology has something crucial to learn from sociology, it is not in the direction of social trends: in fact Flanagan is quite dismissive of theologians who, like a character in a David Lodge novel, opt for the latest items in the religious supermarket. Instead sociology, according to this interpretation, has something to teach theology about the dark confusions of postmodern culture and, more positively and challengingly, about the crucial need for community formation, for the cultivation of a "habitus" of resistance to the culture and of reverence for the sacred.

There are points of emphasis here that are stimulating, convincing and often needed within theology today. Faith is formed in a context or culture. That culture is never neutral; it is always ambiguous, offering a mixture of potential entry-points for evangelisation and a whole cluster of

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influences that can make impossible that hearing from which faith comes, according to St Paul in Romans. At least two American Catholic theologians have developed an aggressive form of cultural discernment along these lines. John Kavanaugh sees culture as involving a clash between "competing life-forms . . . the 'gospels' of Personhood and Commodity".[3] Michael Warren (who often draws on Bourdieu, like Flanagan) argues that faith-based communities must move towards "cultural agency" because "a religious culture of resistance is impossible unless it is grounded in patterned ways of living that embody an alternative vision of life".[4]

A key battle zone in this struggle for faith—or even for the cultural preambles of faith—lies in what Flanagan calls "sensibilities of belonging" (54). This is *the* area where culture can either foster or fight faith, and in fact many distinguished witnesses could be called to testify to the importance of this basic intuition. One thinks of Newman's insistence, in different moments, on the negative and positive potentials of imagination. Thus in one of his university sermons he claimed that the influence of the damaging "world" consisted "in its hold upon our imagination". Later he spoke of this dimension of our humanity as one of the gateways to faith: "The heart is commonly reached, not through the reason, but through the imagination". And (an emphasis Flanagan would relish) he saw this exemplified particularly in the world of "ritual". Concerning the liturgical services of the great feasts he asks: "are they addressed to the pure intellect, or to the imagination?".[5]

Culture shapes, often secretly, the images we live by and hence our capacity for revelation and for knowing God. Over a half century ago T. S. Eliot touched on this issue in one of his lectures, indicating the zone of sensibility as the key to both faith and unbelief today. "The trouble of the modern age is not merely the inability to believe certain things about God which our forefathers believed, but the inability to feel towards God and man as they did".[6] However, a further question arises about whether all versions of imagination can be equally and genuinely Christian. Even Eliot himself can be criticized for promoting an excessively "timeless" image of faith, in spite of all his eloquence about the intersections with time. I notice in some other writings of Flanagan a fondness for the word "timelessness" as a term of praise to describe the "transcendent qualities" of the Latin Mass.[7]

In fact this theological tension within imagination between timeless and incarnate tendencies has been explored in a recent book by Francesca Murphy. Especially in a chapter where she studies the writings of William Lynch, a much underestimated American theologian, her argument may qualify a possible undercurrent in Flanagan's work. Let me be clear: I am not accusing him of being unhistoric, disincarnate or "angelic" in his implicit theology. If there are passages that run that risk, what Francesca Murphy highlights can serve to protect us all from those subtle temptations. She insists that the genuinely Christological imagination is intensely realistic and rooted in a reverence for the flow and drama of

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concrete human life. It is analogical rather than univocal, in the sense of not dominating reality with one imposed focus, but rather embracing the complexities of existence in imitation of Christ himself. As against what Alan Tate called the "angelic intellect", which wants to float into a timeless realm beyond the struggles of ordinary existence, the realistic imagination prefers definite forms and the limits of the temporal, even if "the borders of time contain a boundless expanse".[8] For the analogical sensibility, the image of faith will be anthropological and will stay rooted in the flux and pain of history. Transcendence therefore will remain incarnational, linking the gift of God with "a dramatic way of engaging with reality".[9]

The context of *Gaudium et spes* and after

All of this challenges us towards a specifically Christian interaction of theology and culture, a field that *Gaudium et spes* sought to explore. Flanagan claims frequently that theologians then and since have been too gullible before the complexities of culture and that if Vatican II could have learned more from sociologists, it would have arrived at a less optimistic reading of the surrounding culture. There is no doubt some truth in both those assertions, but the second one seems historically insensitive in various ways. Moreover, his claim that this pastoral constitution of the Council "offered an uncritical, philosophically based endorsement of a culture that concealed its more nefarious aspects" (71) seems to me ungrounded and excessively dismissive of a nuanced text, which he never quotes in any detail.

From the debates of the Council, it is clear that a symbolically important decision was made to avoid anathemas or condemnations, and indeed any condemnatory tone. This was a way of embodying the historic novelty that this was a pastoral Council. Besides, this preference for dialogue as against public condemnations was explicitly endorsed in *Ecclesiam suam*, the first encyclical of Pope Paul VI. As regards *Gaudium et spes* in particular, the methodology was equally new in conciliar history: it was described as "Christian anthropology" in the official "relatio" or commentary on the draft text. This was in contrast to the tone of the various texts proposed at the outset in 1962, all of which remained in the mould of objectivist judgement and hence far from any inductive account of the signs of the times as found in the final version. Archbishop Wojtyla (the future Pope) made more than one contribution to the debate on this text, proposing that the Council should avoid an "ecclesiastical mentality" and any mere "lamentations over the dire state of the world"—in order to enter into genuine dialogue with the various "worlds" of today; if it did not find a fresh wavelength, it could end up as monologue rather than dialogue ("Caveamus autem ne schema nostrum soliloquium fiat!").[10]

In short, the context of *Gaudium et spes* must be taken into account before judging its possible limitations. Nobody could have foreseen the upheavals in the world during the years immediately after the Council, when new cultural complexities and ambiguities came more clearly into

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focus. Without the Council's sense of historical consciousness and its resultant imaginative attempt to recognize rapidly changing factors in the culture, the Church would surely have been in a much poorer position to discern the social contexts and cultural shifts of more recent decades.

There is no doubt that official Church reflection on culture became more confrontative and more complex in its analysis in the seventies. The key moment here is the publication of *Evangelii nuntiandi* in 1975. Coming exactly ten years after the end of the Council, this "apostolic exhortation" expresses an urgency about how the Gospel can transform people today. This is the context within which Pope Paul arrives at the first ecclesial statement concerning "evangelisation of culture", insisting that it involves "affecting and as it were upsetting, through the power of the Gospel, mankind's criteria of judgement, determining values, points of interest, lines of thought, sources of inspiration and models of life, which are in contrast with the Word of God" (No. 19). Thus the evangelisation in question will seek to change the cultural assumptions of people: the implication is that the dominant criteria of common sense are often in silent conflict with the gospel. If so, then evangelisation has to include a new and ambitious goal—the Christian transformation of culture in its many senses, which will mean going to the roots and not being content with surface appearances.

This landmark document represents a development in Catholic approaches to culture and one that will continue to have echoes in later years—without however rejecting the vision of *Gaudium et Spes*. Culture is taken as a convergence of many layers of significance—as acknowledged in Vatican II—but this complex phenomenon is now viewed as a potential blockage to the liberating truth of the gospel. Thus a certain discernment of culture has come to recognize an inevitable conflict in the process of confronting cultures and of transforming them with the vision of the Gospel.

The American theologian, Avery Dulles, has written an article entitled "The Prophetic Humanism of John Paul II", which explores some converging concerns in the Pope's many statements on culture (a vast field that Kieran Flanagan hardly touches): a longing to remind human beings of their potentials for self-transcending living—in the face of various forms of dehumanisation; a spiritual sense of God's truth because only in harmony with revelation do we find authentic fulfilment; an awareness that each person discovers his or her genuine humanity only through love within community and social solidarity. Dulles goes on to claim:

> Culture has been a major concern of John Paul II from his early days, when he developed his talents for music, poetry and drama. . . Everyone lives according to some culture, which determines the mode of one's existence. Culture, as a human achievement, involves our capacity for self-creation, which in turn radiates into the world of products. Culture is a materialisation of the human spirit and at the same time a spiritualisation of matter. It thus serves to render our world more human. [11]

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A second and rather different dimension of culture has been increasingly the focus of the Pope's reflections. It is as if he started out in the early years of his papacy with a concentration on the self-conscious culture of artists and thinkers but gradually found himself giving more attention to the lived culture that is such a hidden power in today's world. The spur to deal with this second side of culture was primarily pastoral, as already seen in the letter founding the Pontifical Council for Culture in 1982. As Dulles highlights, the Pope was by temperament and training more inclined to the "higher" culture. However, his pastoral concern led him to pay attention to the vast field of sociological culture and especially to its trivialising impact. On a visit to the United States he expressed the positive and negative approach together: "Sometimes witnessing to Christ will mean drawing out of a culture the full meaning of its noblest intentions. At other times witnessing to Christ means challenging that culture, especially when the truth about the human person is under assault" (8.10.95).[12]

Thus with *Evangelii nuntiandi* and the extensive attention to culture by the present Pope, the Catholic Church has certainly moved beyond *Gaudium et spes*, but not in the sense of abandoning its trust or thrust. As a strong statement of this continuity there is a 1994 statement of Pope John Paul II which offers a notably positive evaluation of modernity: "if by modernity we mean a convergence of conditions that permit a human being to express better his or her own maturity, spiritual, moral and cultural, in dialogue with the Creator and with creation, then the Church of the Council saw itself as the 'soul' of modernity".[13] What is implied here is an embracing of history as an adventure of freedom and a reading of modern culture as potential ground for Christian growth, not simply as a negative challenge or danger to be warned against and avoided.

Incidentally this way of viewing the culture seems in harmony with a study by the sociologist José Casanova of varying responses of Catholicism to modernity in countries as different as Poland, Brazil, Spain and the United States. Also writing in 1994, he came to the conclusion that where religion tries to resist the whole "process of modern differentiation" and in particular the new sense of human autonomy born from the Enlightenment, it will simply fail and suffer "religious decline". But when religion discerns and accepts what is genuine within modernity, then not only can it find new authority for itself within the open societies of today, but it can save modernity from some of the "inhuman logic" of its own unbalanced ideology.[14]

In defence of theologians

The subtitle of Kieran Flanagan's book is *A Study of Theology and Culture*. I mentioned that I pencilled in various question marks in the margin of this book; most of them stem from what seems to be its inadequate treatment of "theologians". This word, without qualification, is used on many occasions to introduce a blanket complaint about their irresponsibility or their shallowness. Flanagan argues that when they are

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not sociologically alert, "theologians fail to recognize the dangers that lurk within a culture" and hence they may advocate secularising developments that in fact damage the social roots of faith (144). To that sentence I can respond with "yes, perhaps"; however, when the claims get more vehement, I move from "yes" to "but". "Because of an "incapacity to read culture", we are told, "theologians have no enduring belief in the cultural forms that are supposed to signify the holy and timeless" (161). Again, because they were "paralysed by a benign attitude to the world" in the period after Vatican II, "theologians capitulated to the supposedly superior faith of the cultural market-place" (182–183). But who are these theologians? As a leader of the opposition to such reductive theology, prominence is given, and rightly, to von Balthasar. But in the index one will find no mention of other major Catholic thinkers of this century who have often reflected on cultural issues, and against whom such accusations of secularising innocence would be unfounded: Chenu, Congar, de Lubac, Geffré, Gutiérrez, Jossua, Lonergan, Metz, Moore, Rahner, Schillebeeckx, Tracy. (To list more Dominicans than Jesuits seems fitting in these pages!).

It seems, however, that the real target of Flanagan's critique is the "liberal" theology found more often outside Catholic institutes and in particular within secular universities. "Prayer, worship and theological reflection are interconnected in a way that has recently become obscured" whenever a "disembodied academic version of theology" prevails (55–56). Yes, indeed, there is an urgent need to rebuild bridges between spirituality and theology, to save the former from excessive interiority and the latter from excessive rationalism. It is noteworthy that one of the most distinguished of Catholic theologians who works within a secular context, the University of Chicago, has recently advocated just such a retrieval of "a serious spiritual, theological life". Against various spiritual tendencies "too oriented toward a sort of psychological culture", David Tracy speaks of a commitment to "spiritual practices" to aid theology regain its depth and power.[15] This is in no way a contradiction of the earlier Tracy argument that theology "must speak from and to three publics: society, academy and church" and that to "refuse to face the complexity of the social reality of the theologian may well prove as damaging as an earlier theological generation's refusal to face historical consciousness".[16]

Lonergan on theology and culture

Historical consciousness was a central emphasis in the work of the Canadian theologian Bernard Lonergan and the insight that cultural change necessarily influences the agenda of theology is symbolized in the opening sentence of his *Method in Theology*: "A theology mediates between a cultural matrix and the significance and role of religion in that matrix". He goes on to note that once the meaning of culture widens from the "classicist notion" to the "empirical notion of culture" as involving ways of life, then theology is no longer a matter of ageless or "permanent

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achievement" but is recognized as "an ongoing process".[17] In this light he sees the contemporary world as undergoing a crisis not of faith but of culture.

> A culture is a set of meanings and values informing a common way of life, and there are as many cultures as there are distinct sets of such meanings and values. However, this manner of conceiving culture is relatively recent. It is the product of empirical human studies. Within less than one hundred years it has replaced an older, classicist view that had flourished for over two millennia. On the older view culture was conceived not empirically but normatively. It was the opposite of barbarism . . . It stressed not facts but values. It could not but claim to be universalist.[18]

With the term "informing", used in the sense of giving form to (rather than modern "information"), Lonergan bridges the inner world of philosophies and the outer world of shared patterns of life. Hence culture is in perpetual dialogue between two dimensions, one more invisible and one more visible. We can describe the complex patterns of a "way of life"—that is the first level of anthropology or sociology; but we need also to inquire further into the underlying worldviews "informing" that more external realm of shared life. In this way culture involves the interaction of two dimensions: more hidden sets of assumptions (meanings and values) and the more manifest field of observable social patterns (common ways of life). In other words, "culture is the meaning of a way of life" and thus he proposes a distinction between the "social" and the "cultural", akin to the old relationship of body and soul.[19] If one accepts Lonergan's philosophical emphasis, the social realm is more visible and more vast, whereas the more restricted field of culture is immanent behind the appearances of society. In this sense culture is sometimes spoken of as a "superstructure", above the merely sociological, and at other times as "underlying" the externals of society. Although the metaphors may seem to conflict, in fact they point in the same direction, to a view of culture as a more internal and intentional horizon of human consciousness than social organisation and behaviour.

In many ways Lonergan is a cultural theologian who highlights the danger to theology and to church of not understanding the radical changes of horizon stemming from the sciences of today. In particular Lonergan returns frequently to the break between "classicist thought" and "historical consciousness"—an issue on which I would welcome Flanagan's reflections, especially since his argument could, I fear, be misinterpreted as a defence of a classicist mentality. For Lonergan a "blind spot" in classicist assumptions led it to "exaggerate the stability and universality" of culture; when this mentality dominates in theology, it is in danger of lacking a "proper sense of history".[20] Where "the old dogmatic theology has misconceived history on a classicist model", in today's situation theology has two new challenges: "to mediate God's meaning . . in a culture in which God is ignored" and even "to influence

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the cultural context, to translate the word of God and so project it into new mentalities''.[21]

Nor was Lonergan too starry-eyed about the spiritual or intellectual state of contemporary culture. The opening paragraph of *Method in Theology*, already mentioned, ends with a striking little sentence on how culture, having remained unchanged for ages, can enter a "process of slow development or rapid dissolution". The implication seems to be that growth towards authenticity and wisdom is uphill and gradual, whereas collapse may come with frightening speed. Some years later he returned to this theme and offered a more explicitly Christian response:

> Can a people, a civilization, recover from such decline? To my mind the only solution is religious. What will sweep away the rationalisations? . . . when reasoning is ineffective, what is left but faith? What will smash the determinisms—economic, social, cultural, psychological—that egotism has constructed and exploited? What can be offered but the hoping beyond hope that religion inspires? . . . what is needed is not retributive justice but self-sacrificing love.[22]

Conclusion

According to another Canadian theologian, Gilles Langevin, three major principles have guided theological reflection on culture within Catholicism during recent decades. Firstly, culture is seen as a place of human transcendence and hence of creative encounter with God. Secondly, since all culture is a human construct, it remains a source of ambiguity always in need of discernment and purification. Thirdly, the culture of any particular place or time must play an essential role in the mediation of faith for people in diverse contexts of receptivity for the Gospel.[23]

These relatively new horizons within theology give rise to healthy tensions simply because the issues are complex and the challenge is deep. Some fear that unless faith finds fresh languages, it may fail in its evangelising urgency to reach people within the sensibilities of today. Others fear that if one approaches faith from the point of view of culture, one may fail to do justice to the uniqueness of revelation. Clearly these are genuine fears, but fear is not a good basis on its own. What we need is a richer and converging spirituality for living in our culture and building structures of faith. Such a spirituality would echo some of the great mysteries: Incarnation (embracing cultural realities with hope), Redemption (discerning them and transforming them with love) and Pentecost (having faith in the guidance of the Spirit towards unity-in-diversity).

1 Translated from *L'Osservatore Romano*, 21–22 May 1982.

2 John Henry Newman, *An Essay in aid of a Grammar of Assent* (Longmans, Green and Co., London, 1909), p. 498.

3 John F. Kavanaugh, *Following Christ in a Consumer Society: The Spirituality of*

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Cultural Resistance, Revised edition (Orbis Books, New York, 1991), p. 21.

4 Michael Warren, *Communications and Cultural Analysis* (Bergin & Garvey, Westport, Conn., 1992), pp. 6, 16.

5 John Henry Newman, *A Reason for the Hope Within: sermons on the theory of religious belief* (Dimension Books, Denville, 1985), p. 139; *Grammar of Assent*, pp. 92, 139.

6 T. S. Eliot, *On Poetry and Poets* (Faber, London, 1957), p. 25.

7 Kieran Flanagan, "Theological pluralism: a sociological critique", in *Religious Pluralism and Unbelief*, ed. Ian Hamnett (Routledge, London, 1990), pp. 99, 105.

8 Francesca Aran Murphy, *Christ the Form of Beauty: a study in theology and literature* (T & T Clark, Edinburgh, 1995), pp. 118–120.

9 *ibid.*, p. 128.

10 *Acta synodalia... Vaticani II*, Vol. III, Part 5, Vatican Press, 1977, p. 299.

11 Avery Dulles, "The Prophetic Humanism of John Paul II", *America* (23 October 1993), p. 9.

12 Some of the material in this article, including these comments on the evolution of the Pope's approach to culture,will be found in greater detail in my forthcoming book, *Clashing Symbols: an introduction to faith-and-culture* (to be published by Darton, Longman & Todd about April 1997).

13 *L'Osservatore Romano*, 25th September 1994, p. 5.

14 José Casanova, *Public Religions in the modern world* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1994), pp. 214, 234.

15 Todd Breyfogle and Thomas Levergood, "Conversation with David Tracy", *Cross Currents* (Vol. 44, No. 3), Fall 1994, pp. 314, 295.

16 David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (SCM Press, London, 1981), pp. xi, 6.

17 Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (Darton, Longman and Todd, London, 1972, p. xi.

18 *ibid.*, p. 301.

19 Bernard Lonergan, *A Second Collection*, ed, W. Ryan and B. Tyrrell (Darton, Longman & Todd, London, 1974), p. 101.

20 *A Second Collection*, p. 96.

21 *ibid.*, pp. 59, 62.

22 Lonergan, *A Third Collection*, ed. F. E. Crowe (Geoffrey Chapman, London, 1985), p. 146.

23 See Gilles Langevin, "L'inculturation selon le magistère de l'Eglise catholique romaine", *Nouveau Dialogue* (Montreal, No. 97, 1993), p. 23. I have not dealt in these pages with the theme of inculturation, which Flanagan treats briefly in his book, partly for lack of space and also because I have recently published an article on this issue: "Inculturation: some theological perspectives", *International Review of Mission* (Vol. 85, 1996), 173-180. The issue of inculturation remains a crucial area of reflection in Catholic thought, as evidenced by the post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Ecclesia in Africa* of September 1995.

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