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**IN DOING THEOLOGY TODAY, WHAT LESSONS FROM THE PAST CAN WE  
LEARN?**

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TRG400 – Introduction to Theological Studies

**Doing Theology Today in Light of Lessons from the Past**

This paper deals with a central question in doing theology today: What lessons from the past can be learnt? The lessons addressed are numerous and varied, and are approached from two perspectives. The first is recognizing limitations of past theological approaches and the need for reform today. The second is reclaiming valid theological understanding from the past which has been neglected in present theological work. For the purpose of this paper, the past is broadly considered as the time before the Second Vatican Council (1962-65). While the sources used mainly reflect a Catholic perspective, the lessons apply equally to a Protestant position.

**Lessons from Limited Theological Perspectives in the Past**

To begin with, one lesson in doing theology today is to accept the involvement of a *wider constituency* – not just “a clerical monopoly”.<sup>1</sup> Typically in the past, a predominance of male students studied theology in theological colleges and seminaries, taught by male professors.<sup>2</sup> Necessary today is also the participation of religious women, laymen, and laywomen as students and teachers of theology.<sup>3</sup> Through such involvement, the spirituality and pastoral care in local churches would be better informed and served.

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<sup>1</sup> Gerald O’Collins SJ, “Catholic Theology Since 1965”, in *Retrieving Fundamental Theology: The Three Styles of Contemporary Theology* (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1993), 7.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. This statement also holds true, I believe, for Protestant theological study.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. This is occurring in Brazil, Canada, England, Italy, the U.S., and in many other countries.

Second, a *broader range of philosophies* enriches the process of doing theology. A lesson from the past is the need to move beyond the predominance of Platonic, Aristotelian, and Thomism thought traditions.<sup>4</sup> Various forms of modern existentialism, common language philosophy, process thought, phenomenology, and other perspectives enable a deeper and fuller theological approach.<sup>5</sup> Related to this is that theology today can no longer respond to revelation with only the mind – rather, feelings, intuition, imagination, conscience, and action all form part of a holistic theology.<sup>6</sup>

Third, another lesson for theologians today is the willingness to engage in serious *interdisciplinary dialogue*, rather than to maintain a past closedness. A defensive attitude toward the modern intellectual and technological culture cannot persist.<sup>7</sup> Today, openness and dialogue needs to involve colleagues who are cultural anthropologists, biologists, physicists, psychologists, and sociologists,<sup>8</sup> which would enable a moving beyond existing intellectual biases.

Fourth, theologians today need an *ecumenical spirit* – in order to progress beyond the exclusivity of the past. Commitment to the ecumenical movement will widely benefit the way theologians study, think, and teach their theology.<sup>9</sup> Such an ecumenical approach not only involves studying and teaching theology alongside colleagues of other Christian communities, but also entails a willingness to enter into dialogue with Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, other major religions, as well as modern secularism.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid. This comment would apply to Catholic theology.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. Applies to Catholic and Protestant theology. Also, Brennan Hill, “Religion, Faith and Theology”, in *Exploring Catholic Theology Today* (CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 1999), 3.

<sup>6</sup> Hill, “Religion, Faith and Theology”, 10.

<sup>7</sup> Roger Haight, “The Origins and Relevance of Liberation Theology: From Vatican Council II to Liberation Theology”, *PACE* 17 (1987-1988): 12.

<sup>8</sup> Hill, “Religion, Faith and Theology”, 10.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

Fifth, equally a lesson from the past is for theologians to begin to skilfully utilize various forms of *biblical criticism* in their scriptural studies and exegesis – rather than shying away from the historical-critical approach.<sup>11</sup> Hill notes that “the critical study of scripture in terms of its literary forms, cultural context, sources, editing, and multiple possibilities of interpretation is somewhat new in Catholic theology”.<sup>12</sup>

Sixth, a further lesson from the past is for theology today to engage in the *science of interpretation* or hermeneutics, rather than to limit critical thinking to explaining the meaning of Church definitions.<sup>13</sup> Studies in linguistics, symbolism, metaphor, myth, and context provide theologians with superior and more accurate ways of interpreting the Christian traditions and beliefs.<sup>14</sup> Additionally, contemporary interpretation recognizes both the objective (the text itself) and subjective (the person interpreting the text) dimensions.<sup>15</sup> “The focus on the interpreter,” concludes Hill, “[opens] the way to seeing human experience as being connected with revelation and its interpretation. Revelation [can] come not only through texts and formulations, but also through life experiences”.<sup>16</sup>

Seventh, and related to the interpretation of the Christian message, is the understanding of the significant interaction between culture and religion. Likewise a lesson from the past is that theologians can no longer ignore the challenging issues of *inculturation*.<sup>17</sup> Today, the need is to discover ways to express the message of Christianity through symbols, traditions, languages, and value systems that shape particular cultures –

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> O’Collins, “Catholic Theology Since 1965”, 8.

in other words, how to contextualize and indigenize the Christian message and way of life for all cultures and peoples.<sup>18</sup>

Eighth, in the past, theologians relegated spirituality to the cloister and let individualism supply a rationale for avoiding concern for social involvement and change.<sup>19</sup> Theology must move beyond traditional “piety” to a deeper spirituality that is both contemplative and active.<sup>20</sup> Contemporary theology must be connected and *relevant to the modern world*.<sup>21</sup> Various kinds of urgent moral issues have emerged that need to be addressed theologically.<sup>22</sup> These include the issues of bioethics, social and economic justice, human rights, and international peace.<sup>23</sup> Related is the need for theology today to move beyond “the discussion of essences”<sup>24</sup> (the abstract) to dealing with existential situations (the practical). The context for present day theology, then, is global, political, technological, as well as religious (including the subjective and the experiential).<sup>25</sup>

Ninth, one area of special concern in doing theology today is the *feminist perspective*. Clearly, a lesson from the past is to deal with the suppression of the feminine in religion. Brennan Hill in his work *Exploring Catholic Theology Today* discusses theological themes that need addressing in this connection: reclaiming feminine imagery with regard to God, Jesus’ unique treatment of women in his time, Jesus’ selection of women disciples and their central role in his movement, the rights of women to equality in

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 8-9.

<sup>19</sup> Anne Patrick, “Ethics and Spirituality: The Social Justice Connection”, *The Way Supplement* 63 (1988): 111-112.

<sup>20</sup> Hill, “Religion, Faith and Theology”, 10.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>22</sup> O’Collins, “Catholic Theology Since 1965”, 9.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Hill, “Religion, Faith and Theology”, 8.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. Note: In other words, theology cannot be world-denying as in the past – today it must be world-embracing (p. 10).

the church's ministry, and women's rights to equality and partnership in the loving covenant of marriage.<sup>26</sup>

Tenth, *historical research* in theology is another realm to learn from the past since traditional Catholic theology has often been ahistorical.<sup>27</sup> Needed, for example, in doing theology today are studies in political, social, and religious history to provide background for the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures.<sup>28</sup> Historical and cultural studies, as well as contemporary cultural and social analysis, are necessary to understand the history of the Church and its role today.<sup>29</sup>

Eleventh, another area in which doing theology today can learn from the past is the *theology of creation*. Theologians have seen the need to move beyond the affirmation of creation as simply an event in the past, whereby God initiated and completed creating long ago.<sup>30</sup> Linked to such a theological approach can be the misunderstanding of the account of origins in Genesis as a source for scientific knowledge ("creation science" approach).<sup>31</sup> In place of such a limited creation theology, theologians today need to recognize Genesis as a literary and religious text – a text in which stories can be true without being accurate; a text that speaks truth through literary and religious myth.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 9. An example of theology today moving toward greater understanding of the role of women in the Church is evident in the book *Healing Priesthood*. Catholic women from across the world involved in media, theology, ministry, education, and social justice give their reflections on the theme of "healing priesthood" in a critically engaged collection of essays which offer insight to current debates within the Church. This summary comment is taken from the back cover of the book: Angela Perkins and Verena Wright, eds., *Healing Priesthood: Women's Voices Worldwide* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2003).

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 4-5.

<sup>30</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson, "We Believe in One God", in *The Creed: What Christians Believe and Why It Matters* (London: Darton Longman & Todd, 2003), 95.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 97.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. Additionally, Johnson comments on God's creative power: "Scripture sees God as the breath that breathes through the world, giving it life at every moment. God causes the world to be at every moment. God is the world's "beginning", not once long ago, but at every moment."<sup>32</sup> This understanding of creation as a

Twelfth, in doing theology today, persuasive elements of *Christian fundamentalism* must be discerned as a liability. In describing fundamentalism, Marlene Winell writes: “Historically, fundamentalism was a reaction to modernist trends in theology and society . . . in general, the attitude is anti-humanistic . . . Always central is an absolute reliance on the Bible as the inerrant word of God, making Scripture itself appear to be the deity worshipped . . . One chief characteristic is a mood of militant opposition to secular culture, liberal theology, higher criticism, and scientific views that challenge the Bible. Consequently, fundamentalists tend to form tightly knit groups with a distinct separatist subculture and a strict moral code”.<sup>33</sup> Overall, then, fundamentalism is anti-intellectual, anti-professional, and dualistic (physical and spiritual being at odds).<sup>34</sup>

Finally, in doing theology today and the lessons to be learnt from the past, Gerald O’Collins’ work, *Retrieving Fundamental Theology: The Three Styles of Contemporary Theology*, offers rich insights. In his book, three types characterize Christian theology today.<sup>35</sup> The first is an academic approach to truth; the second, a practical approach; and the third, a contemplative approach. Moreover, the first is faith seeking understanding; the second is love seeking a more just society; and the third is hope seeking to anticipate liturgically the final vision of God.

O’Collins’ paradigm of the three styles of theology, then, is rife with lessons from the past for doing contemporary theology. The first style, favouring reasoned judgment,

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constant and present activity of God is heavily supported by Scripture and is compatible with the evolutionary sense of the world as constantly becoming, constantly in process.

<sup>33</sup> Marlene Winell, *Leaving the Fold: A Guide for Former Fundamentalists and Others Leaving Their Religion* (Oakland, California: New Harbinger Publications, 1993), 6.

<sup>34</sup> Charles Hill, “Theology’s Sources Under Criticism”, in *Making Sense of Faith* (Sydney: E.J. Dwyer, 1995), 91. Also, theologically, fundamentalism is a failure to accept fully the Incarnation and the scriptural incarnation.

<sup>35</sup> O’Collins, “Catholic Theology Since 1965”, 9-15. Note: Three questions show the function of Scriptures: (1) What did it mean? (2) How do the Scriptures challenge us? and (3) How does it turn into prayer and liturgy?

cannot afford to resist change, to be inward-looking, to remain blind to issues crying out for remedy in the church and world, to be socially and politically and ecclesiastically apart, and to lose contact with life and worship.<sup>36</sup> The second style, seeking to find and live truth, must not fail to test its conclusions in the light of the normative voices of Scripture and tradition, as well as not end up in activism in its commitment to suffering people.<sup>37</sup> Finally, the third style, in its praise and worship of God, ought not to neglect sound scholarship or social commitment.<sup>38</sup>

In relation to the three types of theology, arguably the most critical theological lesson from the past is that “Christianity [today] needs an inclusive approach that allows these three styles to complement and mutually enrich each other”.<sup>39</sup> In other words, expressed poetically, we need today “theologies that know how to sit studying in the past, that know how to walk the streets with the poor, and that know how to kneel in adoration of our Savior who is to come”.<sup>40</sup>

### **Lessons Reclaimed from Past Theological Understanding**

To begin with, author and theologian Luke Timothy Johnson argues from a reference to “things . . . invisible” in what is commonly referred to as the Nicene Creed (325 A.D.), and presents a case for theologians to recover some *sense of the spirit* – or, “some awareness of the mystery of being that lies within and beyond the realm of the

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 13-14.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid. A contemporary example comes to mind: the Second Vatican Council’s Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum* (promulgated on November 18, 1965). While the commentaries have found much to praise in *Dei Verbum*, it nevertheless has one dominant style, which is the first style of theology. Taken from Gerald O’Collins, “Dei Verbum”, in *Retrieving Fundamental Theology* (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1993), 48.



merely material”.<sup>41</sup> Today, through the success of technology, the advances of the biological sciences, and the prevalence of the scientific method, the tendency is to consider only the material world as being real.<sup>42</sup> Consequently, spiritual realities have become superstitions, and spiritual awareness – outside and inside humans – has been lost.<sup>43</sup>

Second, also a theological lesson from the past is to remember that *the experience and the content of faith* are intimately linked.<sup>44</sup> The history of Christianity (especially the Reformation and Counter-Reformation) shows that these two aspects of faith can become separated, with one aspect being emphasized at the expense of the other.<sup>45</sup> Accordingly, theologians today need to maintain the unity of these two features of faith since both the experience of faith and the content of faith are involved one’s experience of God.<sup>46</sup>

Third, a noteworthy past theological lesson for doing theology today relates to *divine incomprehensibility*. A danger is that while Christian traditions acknowledge God’s self-revelation through powerful acts and inspired words in history, they then seemingly remove the ultimate unknowability of God.<sup>47</sup> Elizabeth Johnson succinctly concludes that “words [become] too clear and ideas too distinct, almost as if they were direct transcripts of divine reality . . . theologians have forgotten the mystery they were dealing with and have created the impression, that because of revelation, the unknown God is now available for inspection”.<sup>48</sup> Historically, the fact that God is essentially incomprehensible was not

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<sup>41</sup> Johnson, “We Believe in One God”, 101.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 100-101.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

<sup>44</sup> Gerard Kelly, “Grounded in Faith”, in *An Introduction to Catholic Theology*, ed. Richard Lennan (New York: Paulist Press, 1998), 77.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> Elizabeth Johnson, “Classical Theology”, in *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1996), 105.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

always apparent in the apologetics of the early Christian theologians.<sup>49</sup> Moreover, patriarchal assumptions and male symbols became a hindrance to remembering the incomprehensible mystery of God.<sup>50</sup> Even the dogmatic formulations (for example, the Trinity and Christology) of the ecumenical councils of the first centuries, while they intended to protect the mystery of divine greatness, they “also captured and tamed the unknown God”.<sup>51</sup> The lesson that must be returned to, then, is that the mystery of God is fundamentally unlike anything else humans know of, and so is beyond the grasp of all their naming.<sup>52</sup>

Fourth, also a significant lesson from the past for today’s theology is “*the negating power of analogy*”.<sup>53</sup> This form of analogy intends “to prevent affirmations about God from being interpreted as direct transcripts of reality”.<sup>54</sup> As a result, early Christian theologians developed the idea of speaking about God using affirmation, negation, and eminence.<sup>55</sup> The value of this approach is that the mind is directed to God, while not literally representing the divine mystery.<sup>56</sup> Johnson summarizes this method: “The speech must intend yes and no and yes again if language is to avoid the danger of ascribing existence, reality, or personality to God in the same sense in which they are ascribed to

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 107.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 112.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 107. Here Johnson draws on an analogy from Hans Urs von Balthasar from “The Unknown God” (p. 184).

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 117.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 116. The Reformation tradition was suspicious of analogy; for example, Martin Luther, Karl Barth, and Wolfhard Pannenberg. Recently, however, Catholic theologians such as Karl Rahner, Erich Przywara, and David Tracy have returned to an appreciation of analogy, involving movement through negation toward mystery.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 113.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid. In affirmation, a word whose meaning is known from human experience is affirmed of God (for example, “God is *good*.”). In negation, the same word is then negated to remove any association with the creaturely mode of being (for example, “God is *not good* the way creatures are good.”). Finally, in eminence, “the word is predicated of God in a supereminent way that transcends all cognitive capabilities” (for example, “God is *good* in an excellent way *as source of all that is good*.”).

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

creatures. There is always more in the concept that the concept itself can bear".<sup>57</sup>

Poetically expressed, there is an affirming movement of the human spirit that passes from light into darkness, and then into brighter darkness.<sup>58</sup>

Fifth, having reclaimed the theological lessons of God being essentially incomprehensible and that language about God is analogical, another lesson for today emerges from Thomas Aquinas when he concludes in this context: "We see the *necessity of giving to God many names*".<sup>59</sup> The diverse facets of reality – seen in beauty, goodness, and truth – point one to the ineffable source and goal of all.<sup>60</sup> By contrast, Elizabeth Johnson observes: "Indeed, Western language of recent centuries appears thin and paltry . . . [in relation to] the human search for appropriate names for God".<sup>61</sup> She then concludes: "Remembering the Christian and indeed the world tradition of the many names for God opens up space for the renewal of God-language, showing that such pluriform speech is not only legitimate but religiously necessary for a proper discourse about the mystery of God".<sup>62</sup> Indeed, the tradition of the many names of God, resulting from the experience of divine mystery, acts as a safeguard for it.<sup>63</sup> The proliferation of names, images, and concepts – each providing a different perspective of divine excellence – only highlights the unknowability of God.<sup>64</sup> God is still a reality which eludes them all – in other words, even taking all the names together will not deliver a definitive understanding of God or exhaust the reality of divine mystery.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 115.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 117.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 118.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 120.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 118.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 117.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

In concluding, this paper has explored lessons from the past for doing theology today. First, lessons learnt from past *limited* theological perspectives were described. Second, lessons reclaimed from past *rich* theological understanding were discussed. When added together, these lessons provide rich new vistas for doing theology today.

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