Practical theology and Pierre-Andre Liege

Radical Dominican and Vatican II Pioneer

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This is giant of a text from the priest with long experience of ministry, learning, leadership and reflective practice. The coherence and authority of this experience and skill as a reflective practitioner is demonstrated through the ten chapters that explore the life and work of Pierre-Andre Liege. One of the foremost French theologians of the 20th century, Liege influenced John XXIII and Paul VI. He was present during some of the committee work of the Vatican II with both the future John Paul II and Benedict XVI. Bradbury establishes a legacy forged out of struggle, critical engagement with the nature of theology and some innovative pioneering pastoral work. There is an authenticity about this work, which is rooted in decades of engagement, reflection and practice.

Its central thesis is that this French Catholic friar, who died nearly four decades ago has much to teach us about Pastoral theology. The arguments set out in these 10 chapters is all the more compelling as Bradbury applies some of this theological legacy to engage with ministry and theological learning 21st-century Britain. Here is a framework that offers us the opportunity to see the world in the name of the gospel. In order to do this we have to be both inculturated and countercultural.

Timothy Radcliffe in the forward offers us this image,

‘The church is like a tree. She can only flourish if she is herself, with her own character and life… But the church is only alive if it is interacting with all that is around it, like the tree, open to the air and the soil, in constant exchange with its environment’ (p ix)

A challenging and organising presupposition of this volume is transformation and a commitment to theology as a source for rejuvenating the People of God. It follows that in order to deepen the wisdom of our faith as something which is both pastoral and practical then we shall need to fall in love (again) with theology. This is a significant task as we learn the language of theology and connect it with the struggle to live authentically.

Very few research projects do not have a significant element of personal autobiography. In the introduction, Bradbury explains his journey of faith influenced by the Community of the Resurrection at Mirfield and as a choirboy at Christ Church Oxford. Theological study is influenced by Nineham, Tillich and H.A. Williams and was put to work in testing and demanding communities in South London and North London. As these influences are mapped, the reader notes the fundamental importance of how and where we learn our theology. The process of growing and maturing that takes place across the life-cycle opens up an acknowledgement of our ‘knowing’ as a constant and never-ending process. Bradbury sets a tone in these opening pages of being ready to live with questions and seek always to go deeper into our experience.

Chapter One sets Liege in the context of mid-20th-century French Catholicism and an anachronistic theology largely inherited from the Middle Ages that had become defensive and created a church under siege. Perhaps implicit in this picture is the encouragement to 21st-century European Christians that ironically and paradoxically despite all of the marginalisation and decline of the Church the years from 1930 to 1960 became the golden age for French theology. If we in our day are feeling marginalised, misunderstood or dismissed then what might be the potentiality for theological transformation? Bradbury is drawn into the militant and progressive voice. We learn about a movement of lay people demanding to be taught a realistic apologetic. Rejecting authoritarian prohibitions there was a call for a spirituality, which takes human love seriously.

The argument here is that those of us who would wish to develop a systematic and coherent Pastoral theology must be fully immersed in new contexts and practices. What might it mean for us to re-constitute theological soil for new and different practice for human flourishing? What does theological renewal look like? There are some implications here as Bradbury describes the significant and ongoing conflict with Rome (pages 19ff) for the necessary resistance of any centralised authority (in this case the Pope) to control belief or practice for mission and ministry. We need, perhaps to reassess the nature of authority and how it is exercised in order to become more radical, more theological, and more transformational. The context within which Liege wrote was not in any way anti-intellectual or obsessive about social activism. It committed itself to a deeper understanding of theology which liberated its ideas from second-hand constructs locked into doctrinal armour. The adventure of learning theology was to engage with the sources of the faith so as to be able to know and love them personally.

Chapter 2 paints a portrait of Liege the man. His family background, education, Dominican studies, ministry and theology are described giving the reader a sense of the man and his motivations, his church and his drivenness. Here is innovation, a deep desire to make a difference and a theology that manages to be both concrete and experimental. We learn of his work with the Second Vatican Council (p42ff) and something of Liege’s personality, his passionate confidence in God and rootedness in faith. ‘Where was the eloquent witness of joy in life and freedom as children of God who were able to radiate simply because of the knowledge of being immensely loved? ( Liege asks) It follows that it is up to each of us to show the Church as an assembly of free people, concerned with the liberation of the whole being’ (p49).

In Chapter 3 Bradbury looks set how theology, and what kind of theology shapes Pastoral theology. He is realistic about both the possibilities and problems associated with getting inside Liege’s thought world and modes of expression. Here perhaps we see some of the foundations of why Bradbury finds the tradition of French Catholic theology so attractive. There is a quality of the training in depth in philosophy (and possibly history too) before theology. This rigorous and lengthy process seems hardly imaginable in today’s academy or church. Bradbury describes a distinctive quadrilateral – the Word of God; faith; theology and the life of the church as set out by Liege. The Section on the description of faith is especially compelling – we learn about a grasp of the nature of faith, which is always and successively seen as conversion, justification, illumination and penetration of the Christian mystery. (Page 66). Faith is also described as knowledge of interiority (page 68). We should also note the originality of Liege, especially as a theologian who used the phrase –People of God – long before its popularisation. We are drawn into an admiration for the argument for a modern, reformed approach to the world. The world belongs to the divine intention and should not be regarded as alien or godless.

Bradbury sets out Liege’s pioneering pastoral theology from 1955 to 1977 in Chapter 4. There is something contemporary in this discussion. How do we make theology more practical? (page 81). Our sense of the man is enlarged as we read, ‘for Liege faith was a living, breathing affair; a personal adventure and commitment costing not less than everything. It combined head and heart. It was not an emotional enthusiasm disconnected from thought. On the contrary, it was the fruit of hard philosophical and theological labour enriched with sharp observation of people and nature, a passion for literature and an interest in the human sciences.’ (p77). There is here also some anticipation of some of the realities of 21st Century church life. During this period in the mid-20th century we learn of the conviction that the era of Christianity was over and that it was important to move forward and articulate the gospel to the modern world in different and more credible ways. Traditional Christianity as currently expressed by the church is described as moribund and theology had an inability to communicate, inspiring more fear than love; more negativity and constriction than life and creativity. (p79). Liege expresses a deep desire for human, spiritual and congregational growth.

As Bradbury describes this pioneering pastoral theology it is clear that there is a heavy emphasis on content and its relationship to dogmatics. It is always related to action (‘Pastoral theology’s task is to work out how faithfully to adapt appropriately rather than to get stuck in unmoving, fixed positions. It must unite freedom and truth as the spirit is united to history’ (p88)). The inevitable implication for this is the integration of Pastoral and practical theology in every aspect of Christian living in community. We note the radical place of this discipline in building a transformed picture of the church and its very purposes (page 127). This is a Pastoral theology, which has many functions: contemplative and doxological, apologetic, critical, hermeneutic and poetic (p100).

Chapter 5 discusses Liege and practical theology in France and Canada since his death in 1979. It is interesting to note that Protestant theologians did not keep abreast of Roman Catholic Pastoral theology. Bradbury argues (page 114) the Church of England’s failure to read the signs of the time and engage critically with its culture is part of its defensive resistance to new and different thinking. There are important and ongoing questions about who does theology and the relationship of power and agency within those institutions that make competing claims about the authority and ownership of the tasks of theological education. Bradbury reminds us that there has been an institutional loss of authority and a general loss of faith as the gap increases between what is official and what people actually practice. (Page 117).

Chapter 6 is an impressive contextualisation of Liege in the place of British Pastoral theology as an emerging and developing discipline. The reader is faced with intriguing questions about how we train clergy and what the curriculum might look like. We are asked to reflect on why British practical theology has no equivalent to writing like Liege’s. Bradbury asserts that corporate Christian life and the Church of England seems more a matter of taste or local tradition. There is no corporate catechetics, mission or formation (page 127).

Here we see articulated by Bradbury what we might learn from the distinctive vision of Liege - ‘Deep in the Church of England’s mind-set there is a reluctance to act on the corporate nature of belonging to the church. It seems acceptable to belong as a consumer on your own terms to suit your own tastes.….. Learning and mission are not its core activities. Learning is optional.’ (p127).

It is worth noting that Bradbury offers a very realistic but often unarticulated view of the role of the writing of Wesley Carr. He critiques Carr’s work and its language as too abstract, too difficult, too theoretical and insufficiently illustrated with concrete examples to be of any practical use (page 141). We listen to a plea for a popular and accessible discourse that can change practice. How can we interpret people’s experience of life in relation to God and thus put them into a divine perspective? The challenge continues when we explore an ecclesiology of Anglicanism which is described as an organisation more based on religion than on faith (page 147). If religious attitudes in Britain are an amalgam of beliefs constructed from upbringing, education and the culture of eclectic secular pluralism then we need a theological revolution with pastoral and practical theology at the heart of the task of learning and making connections.

Chapter 7 translates some significant and at times over stated assertions into a fictional narrative about a parish and its life between the years 1948 and 1984. Bradbury demonstrates what putting Liege’s theology into practice might look like. He maps out a programme of teaching, a model of ministry, an approach to witness and discipleship. Bradbury emphasises the importance of the training of the leader. This is a playful, aspirational narrative but one which could be profitably used for theological formation and reflection. Bradbury demonstrates his own ability as a practical theologian in offering a plan of action for praxis.

Finally chapter 8 and chapter 9 articulate learning about catechetics and practical theology. How is the lived experience of the church to be one in which Christians are nurtured in faith? How is the call to lifelong conversion into Christ to be realised in practice? How are Christians to relate to the culture around them? What does it mean to be a holy congregation? How is the sacramental life of the church to find practical expression in a congregation and issue inappropriate missionary, Pastoral and political response to the world? (Page 182). Part of the solution, Bradbury is convinced by, is that the Church of England will continue to slowly die if it continues to neglect the shape and content of catechesis. We need leaders, especially bishops who can continue to ask fundamental practical theological questions.

Bradbury argues that it is diffuse and needs to recover a heart and a centre.

‘British practical theologians seem willing to let this discipline be a meeting room in which diverse conversations are encouraged. The role of practical theologians is to hold the ring, provide methods, ask questions and contribute some, always fragmentary, ideas from their own, nearly always highly specialised, particular area of interest and research’ (page 190). Bradbury challenges the practical theologian to develop a much more systematic approach, with a controlling centre and clear paths to the periphery. Is it possible to have a systematic British Pastoral theology? This is perhaps the heart of Bradbury’s learning from the work of Liege.

In the final section of chapter 9 Bradbury offers what he describes as a plan of action – a proposal for a response to the challenges of the church in the British context. He organises his schema around the following areas of reflection and question: a wholescale review of church praxis; a map of where we are; establishing why the gospel is still good news for today; the organisation of parish life on the basis of theological criteria; the forging of accessible discourse; the rediscovery of French practical theology and finally establishing a vision of what the church is for and why – and how this should be expressed in practice.

The final chapter offers a short reflection on Liege’s legacy. Bradbury sums up the radical prophetic approach in this way – ‘to do the wrong thing is a serious as to believe the wrong thing’ (page 203.). This establishes radical criteria for action by attacking the non-theological pragmatism of current catechetics that offer no clear principles or content to practical theology. Bradbury offers this attractive summary,

‘He (Liege) was committed to incarnating the love of God in action. Despite the depth of his loyalty to the church, faithfulness to God as his theology understood God, required him to stay true to his thought and convictions even when they brought him into conflict with the church in terms of theology, church practice or moral teaching. He did not compromise his beliefs for any institution. He was a man of friendship for whom shared eating and drinking were milestones of life and a primary model of celebration.…

British prophets like Trevor Huddleston or Ken Leech are perhaps parallels. But in general the British model of Christian life is more compromised and more domestic. ‘Liege would press practical theologians to face up to a radical question, his abiding challenge to 21st-century church: what form of Eucharistic community living is suitable for Christians in an era of post Christianity?’ (Page 208)

There is a comprehensive bibliography of over 30 pages, which indicates the nature, and scope of the author’s readership and scholarship together with a comprehensive index. The questions and challenges that Bradbury faces us with some of the work core to the aspiration of this journal and demands how we integrate our theology into practice.

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