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Three Ways of Engaging Theologically with Modernity

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Abstract

The paper discusses three theological ways of responding to modernity, all of which rely in some way upon the analogy of the church as a culture. First, Friedrich Schleiermacher represents the turn to the subject and the turn to the church. Second, Stanley Hauerwas's rejection of the turn to the subject is shown to require a sharper turn to the church. Third, David Kelsey's recent work is used to present a modification of that turn substantial enough to constitute a third way. Kelsey's analysis of various theological logics and how they are often conflated in modern theology, together with his account of church practices, is used to integrate a more traditional theocentric theological approach with a more contemporary focus on the church's practices. Some conclusions are then drawn for critical congregational study of enactments of church practices.

Keywords

Hauerwas, Kelsey, church practices, theological method, church

The three ways I discuss here are three types of response to modernity found in the work of Friedrich Schleiermacher, Stanley Hauerwas and David Kelsey respectively. None of them is a Roman Catholic theologian; my reason for discussing them with a Catholic readership, aside from their intrinsic interest, is to tell a kind of story and then draw something like a moral from it which applies to all theological inquiry, including Roman Catholic. First, though, a few general remarks.

Not a few theologians go about their business these days with the idea that the church is rather like a culture, in the sense of a community that has, as one of its more significant functions, the formation of its members' identities as Christian, in distinction from other possible identities currently available. One reason for the popularity of this idea is that, in a postmodern society, it may help to make Christianity seem a little more reasonable (if not more credible) to non-Christians,

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including those who assume that religious beliefs and the communities that engender them are irrational. The idea may also provide some relief for those Christians who feel they are being irrational in persisting in the faith. Thus, with both pastoral and apologetic concern, we can portray Christians in the diaspora as formally similar to other cultures or communal traditions, including those that develop, or can develop, identities antagonistic to religious belief, such as some versions of the modern tradition of scientific rationality. We can say to our cultured despisers: so what if the church's cultural-linguistic forms lack a secure foundation in universal reason? Yours do too, as do everyone else's. And from there we can argue more positively. We might go on to suggest that we have unique resources to offer the larger society, or at least those individuals within it who elect to join us. Among the better known who say something like this are Stanley Hauerwas, John Milbank and Alasdair MacIntyre. Perhaps you will agree there are some substantial problems with such a pastoral-apologetic strategy.

Another reason for using the culture analogy is to bring out the concreteness of Christianity as a communal way of life, often in contrast to religious spiritualization and individualism. It helps to emphasise how on-going enactments of the church's socially-sanctioned practices or forms of life turn us into Christians. These practices establish the bounds of our collective and individual identity as Christians, thereby avoiding the need to rely on abstract belief statements or some distinctively-Christian mental state. The people I just mentioned are also well-known for this move, too, to whom we might add George Lindbeck, among many others. Again, there may be significant problems with this strategy.

Schleiermacher

Somewhat ironically, it was probably the pietist-Romantic theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher – the first of the three ways I shall be talking about – who smoothed the way both for the culture analogy as well as its apologetic use in modern theology. In his great work, *The Christian Faith*,[1] Schleiermacher makes the turn to the subject, on the belief that our self-consciousness is surer than our knowledge of anything else, including knowledge of God in the form of doctrine. So doctrine must be brought within the field of the subject. However, religious self-consciousness – as something universally available – is pre-conceptual. It must be formed by living within a clearly defined religious community, so that it may be evoked, expressed, purified

[1] Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1928).

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and developed to higher levels. Only within the Christian Church – the highest religious community – can humanity realize its full potential, both as individuals and as a society. The Christian Church, then, is vitally necessary if modern society is to progress to its highest forms.

Thus Schleiermacher's apologetic *tour de force* initiated not only the turn to the subject; it did so by also turning to the church as a formative culture. The latter turn can be said to be as sharp a one as the former. For in earlier theology – theology up to say 1600, whether Catholic or Protestant – the church is by no means so central. Traditional theology works on the premise that we know theological things about ourselves and the church only on the basis of who God is and how God acts towards us as Father, Son and Holy Spirit: theology treats everything *sub ratione Dei*, in Aquinas' well-known phrase. In contrast, for Schleiermacher it is the account of the church that provides the basis for his account of doctrine. Theology can enquire into the nature of God and what our triune God does for us, only *after* it talks or *as* it talks, about the church. The result is that doctrines are, as it were, re-located and, as I shall argue in a moment, distorted.

Hauerwas

I include Schleiermacher among the three ways partly because I want to go on to suggest that, even if we abstain from making the turn to the subject, a turn to the church-as-a-culture is, or can be, equally dangerous, in that it turns us away from the focus upon God that is typical of traditional theological inquiry. This danger can be seen in my example of the second way of engagement with modernity, the work of Stanley Hauerwas. I shall assume his work is sufficiently well known to you that I need only remind you of some of its key elements. A proper (and fairer) treatment would, of course, require much more extensive analysis.[2]

Hauerwas's appropriation of the culture analogy is an integral part of his polemical rejection of the turn to the subject exemplified by Schleiermacher's theology. However, he otherwise follows Schleiermacher in a number of significant ways. For example, they both define the identity of the church in a contrastive way. That is, they move from a non-theological account of formative cultures- or traditions-in-general to what specifies and separates the Christian Church from the others. For Schleiermacher, what is common to all religious

[2] I discuss Hauerwas, including his relation to Schleiermacher, at length in my forthcoming book, *Stanley Hauerwas: A (Very) Critical Introduction* (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans), 2013.

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communities is the basic religious self-consciousness; for Hauerwas, the common element is the story: each culture embodies a story in its social practices, thereby forming their members. What is particular for Schleiermacher is Jesus' God-consciousness; in Hauerwas it is the story of Jesus of Nazareth. As a result, for both the distinctive identity of the church is very important, albeit in different ways, since what differentiates the church from other groups is what is most significant about it, and which constitutes its identity.[3]

As part of his rejection of any notion that Christianity is essentially an abstract system of beliefs, Hauerwas, like Schleiermacher, construes doctrine in an untraditional way. For Schleiermacher, doctrines are the community's expressions of its God-consciousness. For Hauerwas they are the product of the church's experience of reading and living Jesus' story, and are embodied in the church's practices.[4] He has difficulty showing the material significance of grace for his work, or what Barth would call the "sovereign freedom" of the Holy Spirit, tending, like Schleiermacher, to undermine the distinction between the spirit of the church and the Holy Spirit.[5] And apart from a couple of recent undeveloped remarks about how the theologian is to support the bishop, he understands authority, like Schleiermacher, to be directly proportionate to Christian *Bildung*. For Hauerwas, too, a prince of the church is a virtuoso of its culture.[6]

There is, of course, much more that needs to be said about the complex relation between Schleiermacher and Hauerwas. Here I can only suggest without proper argumentation that the relation between them is analogous to the relation between Hegel and Marx, as textbooks sometimes portray it. That is, Hauerwas keeps the basic structure Schleiermacher sets up, the ecclesio-centrism, the focus on identity, the cultural analogy and the like, but upends the earlier theologian by dwelling heavily upon our bodiliness rather than upon our inner experience, and by rejecting Schleiermacher's strong ties with the larger society in favour of the church's standing apart from the world as the exemplar of truthful community.

[3] For a brief summary, see Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1981, pp. 4, 9–12; and for more extensive treatment, the same book and also his *Peaceable Kingdom* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1983.

[4] See the first four chapters, written jointly by the editors, of *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics*, edited by Stanley Hauerwas and Samuel Wells (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004).

[5] Hauerwas rarely mentions the Holy Spirit outside his sermons, nor does the action of the Holy Spirit make any material difference to his account of the church.

[6] Among a range of sources for this conclusion is his *Unleashing the Scripture: Freeing the Bible from Captivity to America* (Nashville TN: Abingdon, 1993).

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Conflation

I turn now to propose a description for what has gone on in the first and second ways by using an insight of Hans Frei that is developed much more extensively by David Kelsey in his recent book, *Eccentric Existence*.[7] Kelsey observes that theological inquiries usually focus on displaying the logic – that is, the systematic coherence – of material in one or more of three areas. One area he calls the logic of our Christian beliefs: here theology inquires into what we believe, and necessarily focuses first and foremost on the triune God, who is made known to us in the person of Jesus Christ as portrayed in the Gospels. A second area of inquiry is the logic of how and why we come to believe, together with the benefits of belief: here theology addresses issues of credibility directly. The third area is the logic of living the Christian faith: here theology would be concerned with ethics and church life (*EE* 80–1).

According to Kelsey, to engage in any one of these inquiries is perfectly reasonable. Things go wrong when two or three areas are conflated into a single inquiry, something that often happens in modern theology. According to Kelsey's analysis, Schleiermacher and some other moderns conflate their account of the logic of faith, that is, their answer to who God is and how God relates to us, within their more dominant account of how we come to believe and its benefits. The result, as I remarked earlier, is that Christianity becomes reconceived as the way to realize one's full potential as a human being. But this has the effect of making Jesus' self-consciousness merely the instrumental means to achieve the primary goal. Who Jesus is, his "unsubstitutable personal identity" (as Kelsey terms it, following Frei), is obscured in favour of an abstraction. For what is significant about him is not finally who he is as a person, but what he exemplifies – perfect God-consciousness for Schleiermacher – and thus his role in our self-actualization. The answer to the "Who is Jesus" question, which is a logic of belief question, ends up serving an account of the logic of coming to belief, and the logic of belief is thereby distorted.[8]

Arguably, something not too dissimilar happens in Hauerwas's work. For example, his tendency towards a realized eschatology, together with a lack of interest in the doctrine of justification or the shape of things to come, suggest that, for him, salvation is much the same as being a well-formed member of a well-formed

[7] David H; Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence: A Theological Anthropology* (Westminster John Knox, 2009). Hereafter cited as *EE*. The work of Hans W. Frei to which Kelsey refers is *The Identity of Jesus Christ* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), pp. xi-xii.

[8] I here combine the conclusions of two of Kelsey's analyses in *EE*: chapter 2B, pp. 80–119, and chapter 19B, pp. 649–93.

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Christian congregation. The church is "God's new creation",[9] outside of which there is no hope of living truthfully since our identities will inevitably be distorted there by liberalism and other evils. Even within the church there is danger: he has written that if you are a member of a church that is in thrall to America, by celebrating Mother's Day, for instance, then "your salvation is in doubt".[10] The church is to be the embodiment of the story of Jesus of Nazareth, nothing else; and that seems to constitute salvation. With this emphasis upon the church, the story's primary function in his work is not so much to bring us to know Jesus and thus to know God, i.e., to address the logic of belief. Rather, as Hauerwas's commentary on Matthew suggests, Jesus' story functions as the foundation of our story as the church. His life is the pattern which we are to embody and thereby make present, in order that we may achieve and display truthful community. In so far as Hauerwas does this, he arguably distorts central elements of the logic of belief.[11]

The third way

So it is possible to make a more gentle turn to the church, one that acknowledges, as Hauerwas has helped us so well to see, how the concreteness of the church is so important for living the Christian faith. Can we do this without conflating theological logics?

One difference between the second way and the third way, to which I now turn, has to do with their respective notions of a "practice". Hauerwas appropriates Alasdair MacIntyre's understanding of practices as the embodiment of a tradition and constitutive of its identity. MacIntyre's defines a "practice" as:

> any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended.[12]

[9] See, for example, the sermon in his essay, "The Church as God's New Language", which can be found in *The Hauerwas Reader*, edited by John Berkman and Michael Cartwright (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2001), pp. 142–161; the cited phrase is from p. 143.

[10] Stanley Hauerwas, *Working With Words: On Learning to Speak Christian* (Eugene OR: Cascade, 2011), p. 166.

[11] This is, of course, little more than a bare assertion, which would take considerable analysis to justify. I make the case for this criticism in the book referred to in note 2 above.

[12] Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, second edition (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), p. 187.

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Practices on this view are relatively settled – "socially established" – and therefore are subject to little except external criticism. After all, if it is a tradition's job to out-narrate other traditions, it becomes difficult to question its own identity-constituting practices.[13] For Hauerwas, furthermore, enacting the church's practices enables us to acquire the virtues that transform us so that we see things truly. He agrees that a practice can be inadequately performed, or be corrupted in its enactment by liberalism or social activism. But for a Christian to reflect critically upon a church-sanctioned practice would indicate insufficient formation or a distorted Christian identity.

By contrast, David Kelsey, who represents my third way here, understands practices "at some distance from MacIntyre", he says. His definition is: "any form of socially established human interactivity that is conceptually formed, is complex and internally coherent, is subject to standards of excellence that partly define it, and is done to some end but does not necessarily have a product" (*EE* 14). The "distance" is thus indicated by adding the phrase "conceptually formed", and by deleting the concluding phrase, "the result that human powers to achieve excellence and human conceptions of the ends and good involved, are systematically extended". The latter phrase is excluded presumably because it is expressly oriented toward the benefits of membership in a tradition, which in a theological inquiry would reflect a dominant focus on the logic of coming to believe.

The addition of the phrase "conceptually formed" indicates for Kelsey, as I understand him, that the function of church practices is not primarily to form our identities as Christians, although that is what they also may do; nor is it primarily to bring us to new heights of excellence, though they may also do that, too. Rather, Christian practices are communally-sanctioned ways of concretely responding to God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. As such, they are "conceptually formed" by the logic of belief, by our understanding of who the triune God is and how God acts. Thus a church practice cannot be quite the same as a traditional or a cultural practice; the analogy's *maior dissimilitudo* is revealed here. Traditions and cultures are ways of living in the world. Their members can become well-formed and flourish without ever having to consider the conceptuality of their practices. Nor is there a standard outside the tradition or culture against which to assess its practices, except perhaps other traditions, the limitations of the physical and social worlds, and their instrumental adequacy for flourishing. This is not the case for church practices, since they are primarily a response to

[13] See the discussion of rival traditions in Alasdair MacIntyre, especially chapters 18 and 20 (pp. 349–369 and 389–403).

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the one in whom we have faith, who is the source of our understanding of what it means to live well, and in responding to whom *is* to live well.

A church practice's conformity to the logic of belief is thus the necessary and primary criterion for its assessment. It may not be a sufficient criterion, since the practices should also reflect the logic of Christian living. So, for example, we might argue that the Eucharist is the church's central practice and has a normative bearing upon our understanding of all other practices. We might also argue that the Eucharist has much to say in an *ad hoc* way about what makes our faith credible and worth living, too. But the Eucharist and all the other Christian practices cannot be understood apart from what their enactment is to embody, namely our response to our triune God made known to us in the person of Jesus Christ by the grace of the Holy Spirit. Church practices are necessarily subject to critical analysis and assessment of their adequacy as responses to God. Such critical reflection is the basic task of theology.

Thus to acknowledge the significance of church practices for the life of the church is – on Kelsey's definition – necessarily also to acknowledge the necessity of critical theological inquiry into their adequacy as responses to the triune God. As in traditional theology, our attention is directed to the one to whom we seek to respond. Yet with the focus on practices, doctrine cannot float free of Christian living in such a way that, as Hauerwas rightly worries, faith becomes merely an abstract "system of beliefs".[14] The cultural analogy, with its focus upon our practices as embodying our faith, helps to forestall this danger. Faith is living, enacted; it is reducible neither to a set of propositions nor to special inner states.

So the culture analogy can be maintained here, but in a limited and largely secondary position. *With* Hauerwas, theology in this third way is not interested solely in whether we've got the beliefs just right, or have the right kind of interior states. *Unlike* Hauerwas, here the right question is whether our church's practices are appropriate, where "appropriate" is gauged by critical analysis of how well those practices enable our response to the triune God. Here, then, the theocentricism of theological inquiry is maintained within a more concrete understanding of Christian faith. Here there is no overly sharp turn to the church, though there is a strong rejection of subjectivity and abstraction. Thus the third way.

[14] Hauerwas often exhorts us to be wary of this danger, particularly in his *Sanctify Them in the Truth* (Nashville TN: Abingdon/T&T Clark, 1998).

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A concluding moral

The third way complexifies theological inquiry, for it requires examination and assessment of church practices not only in their ideal or normative form, but also *as they are enacted*: both are called for. Kelsey's focus on the conceptuality of a practice recovers a stronger notion of the intentionality of its enactment: some people will enact it well, others will distort it even though they appear to do exactly the same thing. Thus, to take a simple example, I may participate fully, even enthusiastically, at Mass, but my understanding of what I am doing may not conform to the logic of belief. Perhaps I do not understand the gift-and-response character of our relation to God celebrated at Mass. I may think of going to Mass as a kind of individualistic *quid pro quo*: if I fully participate at the Mass, then God will reward me with a good week, make me into a better person, grant me a promotion, save me from hell, or whatever way I think of the Mass's function for my life. The conceptuality of my enactment is distorted. Similar distortions can occur in any kind of church practice.

Thus the third way – arguably quite unlike the second – pushes theology not only to recover a keener interest in the doctrine of God, but also to engage in the critical study of practice-enactment.[15] Studies of church life, especially those that develop thick descriptions of a congregation's practices, can provide us with a sense of how far practices are enacted concretely with the appropriate conceptuality. Their concern, as Paul Murray argues, is to assess the "quality" of our church life, with a view to improving the faithfulness of our response to God.[16] Theological inquiry in this third way is therefore practical, in the sense of seeking to improve our enacted response to God. However, it is also "theoretical" in the sense that such assessment can be done only in tandem with on-going inquiry into the logic of Christian belief.[17]

The assessment is not necessarily one-way. It may be that critical analysis discovers that a particular practice's conceptuality, as enacted, embodies a revision of the generally accepted account of the

[15] The idea is not at all to inquire into particular individuals' enactments, as in some kind of inquisition, but rather to gain a sense of general trends so as to seek ways to respond accordingly, through preaching, new or revised practices, and the like.

[16] See Paul D. Murray, "Discerning the Dynamics of Doctrinal Development: A Post-foundationalist Perspective" in Simon Oliver, Karen Kilby, Thomas O'Loughlin (eds), *Faithful Reading: New Essays in Theology in Honour of Fergus Kerr OP*, (London & New York, T & T Clark, 2012) p. 215.

[17] The use of "theoretical" here is metaphorical, referring to the careful analysis of the practice's conceptuality in relation to broader theological knowledge. I do not mean to suggest there are two "moments", a theoretical moment and its application in practice. The better word is probably "contemplative".

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logic of faith and that the revision should be judged to be a better account. A possible example of this might be the Christian practice of aiding the poor, which has shifted here and there from merely well-intentioned acts of charity to include more determined efforts to address systematic problems as well. This shift may indicate a revision of our understanding of how God relates to us that involves an increased emphasis upon God's special concern for the poor, as well as having some implications for the doctrine of salvation.[18]

Arguments may well increase if theology is complexified in this way. A significant source of conflict may revolve around which logic is primary with regard to a particular practice: the logic of faith *or* the logic of Christian living *or* its benefits. In some matters of contention within the Roman Catholic Church, some might argue that the logic of Christian living has been conflated with and has trumped the logic of belief. In other words, the customary interrelations among our accepted practices have become so normative that they are rendered practically impervious to critical reflection in terms of a response to who God is. We might point to the reform of the liturgy after Vatican II as an example of this, whether positively or negatively. The thinking behind some of the decisions to avoid scandal in the child-abuse cases may also suggest that a concern for the credibility of the Catholic faith has sometimes trumped both the logic of Christian living and the logic of faith.

So we come back to the initial point, the credibility of the church. These days we are bombarded with arguments about the benefits of choosing this thing rather than that, one politician rather than another, one consumer product rather than its competitors. We are taught to judge most things by whether or how far they are beneficial for us or, more usually, for me. Given the pervasiveness of such consumer-directed "apologetics", perhaps the church should stop talking for a while about how special we are and about the wonderful things we have to offer – community, security, certain truth, happiness in heaven, and such like. If the church – not just the magisterium, but all engaged Christians – paid less attention to itself and more attention to who our God is, as made known in Jesus Christ, and thus to the logic of our faith and its embodiment in our responsive practices, then we would be talking and arguing far more about God and what God does for us; and when talking about ourselves, we would be more self-critical.

If that happened, perhaps we might reasonably hope that those outside the church will look on and see more practices, and new

[18] I am assuming, for the sake of the example and without argument, that liberation theology began as a reflection upon church practices conceptually informed by an understanding of God as especially concerned with the poor, and not that such practices are merely the application of a new theoretical position.

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or newly recovered practices, that embody our efforts to turn self-critically in trust towards God. And perhaps those looking on may think to themselves that Christians are rather more interesting than they used to be, our way of life more interesting, too, and even a bit more credible.

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