



Newness in theology

How to Tell a Fashion from a Paradigm Shift

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What is really new in theology? What is the difference between a theological fashion and a genuine paradigm shift?

Perhaps every generation of theologians has to find the most fundamental things about life, about faith and about God as if anew, while interpreting the heritage on which it builds. But there is also that quality of newness which profoundly differentiates one age from another, which brings along a deep transformation of the whole order of beliefs, values and practices by which communities of people hold together. This profound newness is described by Thomas Kuhn as a paradigm change.¹ It is different from a change in fashions which does not cut to the roots of thought and belief systems, which does not irreversibly shift how people act, but comes and goes and may return back, like miniskirts, flared trousers or Edith Piaf

¹ See Kuhn (1996).

haircuts. A good theology does not live only here and now, it has always had to negotiate between openness towards the future and memory of the past. On its pilgrimage through ages and cultures, good theology has managed to guard its memory, without letting memory be the final judge of new directions, and within the new directions it has to discern not only between good and bad but also between the temporary winds of fashion and the profound paradigmatic shifts, while the good and bad cuts through and mixes in both of them. As we engage in a conversation about newness in theology, we need to enter into this process.

IN: How does newness manifest itself in theology, Anne Marie?

AMR: The desire to find new information, novel ways of framing questions, of expanding our horizons, of connecting more and more, comes from a universal given in the make-up of »homo sapiens sapiens«. Today's novelty is transformed into tomorrow's habits of thought and tradition, leaving the mind hungry for the next novelty or revolution.² But novelty can also be illusory, as the fascination of the worldwide web of connectiveness and the lure of Big Data, the meta-encyclopaedia, illustrates. For ethical and theological reasons we should resist this novelty and insist on singular theologians rather than generic theology.³ We can learn about how newness manifests itself in theology when we observe thinkers who have renewed the ways in which we looked at the world. For me this would be the pioneering works of Delores Williams, Sarah Coakley, Rebecca Chopp, Catherine Keller or Sally McFague.

IN: Not every newness or novelty would be comparable then. How would you differentiate between helpfully new and unhelpfully new theology?

AMR: Theology is like and unlike other »Geisteswissenschaften«. Unlike, because in philology or history you do not hear, as we do, the command and the promise »Why do you seek the living among the dead?«

KB: For me, theology simply as a pure academic discourse without any spirituality behind sounds ridiculous; it is closed, descriptive and repetitive. A good theology when it speaks about God speaks also about people. Ridiculous theology speaks about God as if not only the resurrection but also the incarnation did not happen. Here Vladimir Solovyov inspired me with his term Godmanhood that expresses the connection between God and God's

² See for the neurological aspects Goldberg (2002).

³ See Schaffer, Tresch und Gagliardi (2017).

creation. If the new in theology breaks at least a desire for wholeness, if it divides and isolates the divine and the human spheres, it has far-reaching negative consequences for the lives of believers.

AMR: I am reminded of Luther: paradoxically, since he was viewed by people hostile to his ideas to be unduly novel, revolutionary, he himself had great disdain for novelty seekers. If we consider the history of theology over the last two centuries it is fair to say that that history is replete with successive »turns«: the turn to history; the linguistic turn; a certain turn to liturgy (Protestants), a turn to Biblical study (Roman Catholics); a turn to the body, the politics of the body and politics in feminism; a turn to economical analysis in Black and liberation theology. What is next? I would venture that the horizon for theology must come from a turn to the cosmos, to the cosmic dimension of our life on this planet. But is such a turn (to the cosmos) not a betrayal of the unfinished struggles: feminism, the struggle against racism; the protest against homophobia etc.? That is a serious question to myself. I would be grateful for your views on it. Another way to look at newness is to consider theology as the remedy to the wounds it has itself inflicted. Then the turn to the cosmos is the theological answer to the injury of a-cosmism, which has dominated the Western tradition. Here, a discussion with the world of Orthodox theology would be most helpful.

IN: I like your idea of expanding the horizons, and yes, we are never finished with one task when another one emerges as urgent, but taking on board new needs and new interests does not mean abandoning the old ones. Perhaps the new will shed a new light on the old. This is what we can see e.g. in Leonardo Boff's turn from Liberation Theology to Eco-Theology, and then integrating both. The new in theology as a remedy to what has gone wrong in the past, is one very important feature according to which a good theology can be recognised retrospectively. Yes, as you say, Kateřina, a good theology should not break the desire for wholeness initiated by the divine-human communion. What would be other discernible features?

KB: For me the attractive newness is connected both to the past, to the roots where it grows from and to the present time, as it grows from the contemporary historical and cultural context together with a personal ability to create. In my view newness is deeply connected with people's possibility to create something new. Since people were made in God's im-

age they display a similar creative spirit and desire to cultivate and transform the surrounding world, which is manifested also in the theological work. This is what excites me in modern Orthodox theology, for example in books by Olivier Clément.⁴

IN: Why would that be?

KB: In my view there are at least three reasons: (i) His books connect the past, the present and the future. Clément draws from the older Church tradition with its depth but he works with it creatively in his context using views of other sciences and of arts, as for example psychoanalysis or fiction. At the same time his books provide a positive theological anthropology that gives his readers hope and meaning to their lives in the bodily existence here and also to their lives after death. His books bring a profound eschatological perspective. (ii) He elaborates current existing themes, such as the relationship of Christianity to new age spirituality or Buddhism, the human possibility to commit suicide or perform an abortion, etc. However, Clément does not provide the strict moralistic answers as he always works also with the mystical Orthodox tradition of apophatic theology. (iii) He writes with passion, which is also manifested in his style of writing. He moves in between the academic scientific discourse and poetic texts, which is very attractive.

AMR: I have been very stimulated by a session at AAR (2016, San Antonio) about the project called Theology Without Walls. It's fundamentally about leaving behind comparative theology in order to work with the question of what religions hold in common. I thought about this when the other day I started working on Raimon Panikkar's magnum opus, *The Rhythm of Being*.⁵ It is a fantastically rich book drawing on several major universal religious traditions (Christianity and Hinduism). I had read only shorter work by Panikkar before. I think that Panikkar's book has a comparable importance for me as Olivier Clément's book for Katerina.

IN: It is interesting that speaking about examples of newness and seeking to express criteria for helpful newness in theology you both turn to a kind of classic – well, new classics, works which were first published more than 20 years ago. It makes me think that newness does not have to do with the time when the ideas are expressed, and perhaps not even with the time

⁴ See e.g. my favourite book, Clément (1995).

⁵ These were the Gifford lectures of 1989, published only months before Panikkar's death in 2010. See Panikkar (2010).

when we read them, but with the freshness. For me, there are two very current examples of that. One is a book by Jonathan Sacks, *Not in God's Name: Confronting Religious Violence*.⁶ Reading the book, I really liked the way he emphasized that sometimes the religious texts which on the first plane speak about killing the enemies, purging the elect, in a deeper level aim at making the communities which would read them again and again, sick of such practices, and by doing so, they subvert the violence they speak about. Last winter I was struck by Christian Wiman's poems,⁷ to which I was introduced by my friend. Of my age, ill with cancer, he writes with beautiful simplicity which shakes you inside: »Madden me back to an afternoon I carry in me, not like a wound, but like a will against a wound. Give me again enough man to be a child...« Perhaps, it is also the child-like quality of theology, not the naivety, but the need to be always young, exploring new possibilities, creating new possibilities, that makes theology not be imprisoned in the past, living now, open for the future.

KB: In this sense theology is comparable to art. But the new discovery, the new creativity and also the new responsibility to what emerges as a new life is also comparable to motherhood. Anne-Marie, how did the experience of motherhood influence your sensitivity towards the new in theology?

AMR: While there are wrong tracks in playing the card of mother against men or against other women who are not biological mothers, in my own experience there are insights connected with theological themes. There is the experience of »quickening«, or of »being quickened«. In terms of grammar, a third mode would be required somewhere between the active and the passive. It is active in the sense that quickening is felt in one's own body. However, it is not the usual personal agency. I certainly recall the moment with utmost precision (when so much in my recollection is fuzzy and unreliable); I remember the ceiling, the bed in which I was lying, because there and then I had this incomparable, novel experience of something stirring in me which was coming from my innards but which was not an immanent process like my heart beat or the workings of my digestive system. It felt like a butterfly struggling to get out, or a tadpole knocking very softly. It is I think a way to talk about an »embodied creation«. Maybe it is a proper way (or a not altogether improper way) of understanding the world »present« in God. Like a quickening, a flutter of life independent and yet utterly dependent on God. Also this helps to

⁶ Sacks (2015).

⁷ Wiman (2010).

understand that there is only one way forward: the creature has to go out, to leave the mother's womb. But the womb, the motherly feelings, will never forget the first-born. That is the meaning of God's mercy, literally the »*rahamim*«.

IN: Motherhood is, in this sense a very good example of a kind of a paradigm change at a personal level. The gift of the new life which you are given and give touches all the other aspects of your life and opens up new ones. Kateřina, how would you link mercy or grace and embodiment? And how would you see the active-passive mode working there?

KB: Yes, motherhood on the physical or metaphorical level means both to be active and passive at the same time. This is something very similar to Merleau-Ponty's attempt to overcome the dichotomy between subject and object, knowledge and one who comes to know. In his view we always experience and come to knowledge as embodied beings. In the theological context it reminds me of the Orthodox nun Mother Maria Skobstova (1891–1945) and her interpretation of Godmotherhood. She herself, after the birth of her first child, realized that on one hand she had taken part in the mystery of creation, that a gift had been given, and at the same time this mystery took part in the human, bodily, and earthly condition. Without corporality, which involves for her not just the mother's embodied presence but also the body of Mother Earth, the mystery would not be mediated; without human cooperation it would not happen. Carrying her own child, she became part of the grace given but as a child of creation herself, she was also called to co-create. Mother Maria goes even further in her understanding of her active role. Through the experience of God's gift and mystery that she received through bearing a child, she tried to apply this transfiguring love not just to her own children but to others who were in need. As a result of such a broad understanding of motherhood she saved the lives of many Russian refugees in exile after the 1917 revolution and later of many Jews during the war.

IN: Theology, I think, can mirror and support such processes, as you describe with Mother Maria. It can give them a voice, include them into the symbolic language of tradition. But, when they happen, when the very new arrives, and opens under the feet of the one who walks it a journey that has not been trodden before, such processes are not yet capable of being reflected on. That can be done only in retrospect, I think. But the active-passive mode, the paradox of trying to be fully receptive (both to

God and to the traditional mediations of God that have worked, that have made sense) and fully active (and in this sense also innovative) is something that precedes the inclusion into a reflective language. But when we reflect, there is already a difference between now and then. We reflect on the »then«, even regarding the futures that we used to envisage. They include the shapes of the things we expected, regarding society, theology, the world. In this sense we can talk about retro-futurology, the type of introspection examining the imagined futures in the past and their relationship to the actual coming life. This I think, is also a necessary part of the theological memory and of the wisdom which makes discernment between paradigm changes and fashion changes viable.

AMR: Two things come to mind, for me personally: one is the convergence of this topic with the discovery of the »retroverse«: the insight that when we gaze into deep space we really »see« the past of the observable universe. The retroverse is not static but dynamic. Observations yield different pictures of the retroverse at a distance of a decade or a century. In a similar fashion, on the subjective level my perceptions of the past are shifting as I move into the future. In the 1980s, expectations were high for the generation of young theologians committed to fight apartheid, to participate in black theology and other political theologies, to become more holistic in our practice and theory, along the lines of the Age of Aquarius. In that sense the present looks bleak because of the backlash against feminism, the regression of the public sphere into a tolerance of homophobia and racism. It is sobering to realize that there is no end to the need to demonstrate and to work in soup-kitchens. On a more hopeful note I would like to mention that I received »inklings« of ecumenism during my formative years which have come into fruition through later felicitous circumstances: collaborating with Orthodox colleagues, and the privilege of being a Protestant in a Catholic theological school.

IN: Looking back, 20 years ago and thinking about how I imagined the future of the church or the future of theology, the biggest difference between then and now, I think, would be precisely the emphasis on embodiment, on what you call the active-passive mode. With getting a bit older, the active-passive mode teaches me to see new life even when it is less easily visible, not obviously delivering answers and solutions to complicated problems, yet still bringing healing, beauty and joy to our uncertain and often limited conditions.

KB: What role in that change was played by art? How does your own artistic work influence your theological works and vice versa?

IN: My first theological insights came through art, when I was teaching deaf children, and later started to study art with a desire to develop its therapeutic potential. I remember an eight-year-old girl, who had severe problems, mental and physical. She was ill almost every month at least for a week. And then she discovered that she could paint beautiful abstract motifs, with very gentle colours. It was the first and probably also the only thing her classmates saw in her as worthwhile, and perhaps she saw even it in herself. She was not ill that year any more. This is what art can do, to the one who is inside it, but also to those who see it. The artistic experience and spiritual experience coincide here, even if each may use slightly different language for expressing itself. The active-passive mode is vital for both. You can learn a craft and do it well, in art as well as in theology, but you cannot really learn art. You can learn to be open to inspiration, to follow its path, but you cannot know where it will lead you. Sitting in front of a sheet of a paper, preparing for drawing or for writing a poem, most often I do not know what will emerge on the paper when I make the first step and the next. It is both exciting and frustrating, sometimes it can be very painful. There is nothing more I can do, and sometimes the result is marked only by that nothing. I can train my hands, my eyes, my language, but such exercise is something different than art, even if the two meet and sometimes dance together. The new life is born out of that dance. Theology has taught me to value both the memory of tradition and the mystery that transcends tradition, sometimes with the help of tradition, other times despite its being in the way. But there are times I am tired of academic theology, perhaps the same way I would be of an academic study of art if my life had taken a different direction. It is not the need for precision, for adequacy of method, which tires me there, but the emptiness or worse, what covers the emptiness and wants to sound clever or too quickly useful. The parable about the mustard seed keeps me company in these moments of desire for both theology and art to have the courage for embracing the smallness and uncertainty of germinating faith.

KB: That may be the reason why we still keep doing theology, and what, despite the growing administrative burdens and competition imposed on academic life, helps us not to give up. It is precisely that life that comes and is shared, continues in new themes, shared with students, in creative writing, and in the church, outside the church, and in our own spiritual

ascent. Therefore, I still believe in the future of theology. As I see it, theology flourishes when it concerns not just God, but humanity and whole creation. This leads me back to the Chalcedonian dogma and its interpretation by Vladimir Lossky in his *Dogmatic Theology*,⁸ where he emphasizes the fact that the truth about God is at the same time the truth about the human being. As in Jesus Christ, the mystery of unity between God and humans is neither in their separation nor in the absorption of one into the other. When I finished my PhD, I saw this holistic approach in the work of the French Jesuit Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and today I still find very similar holistic approach, for example in the work of the contemporary French theologian Louis-Marie Chauvet or in the work of the Protestant theologian Jürgen Moltmann. I have also tracked similar non-dualist features in the Western and Eastern mystics and I think it is one of the reasons why there is still unflagging interest in mystical theology, in which I see the future of theology as well, as it opens the possibilities for holiness and wholeness on all levels of reality.

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⁸ Lossky (2012).

