

A TRADITION IN PROCESS

# The Changing Face of Theology

BY T. HOWLAND SANKS

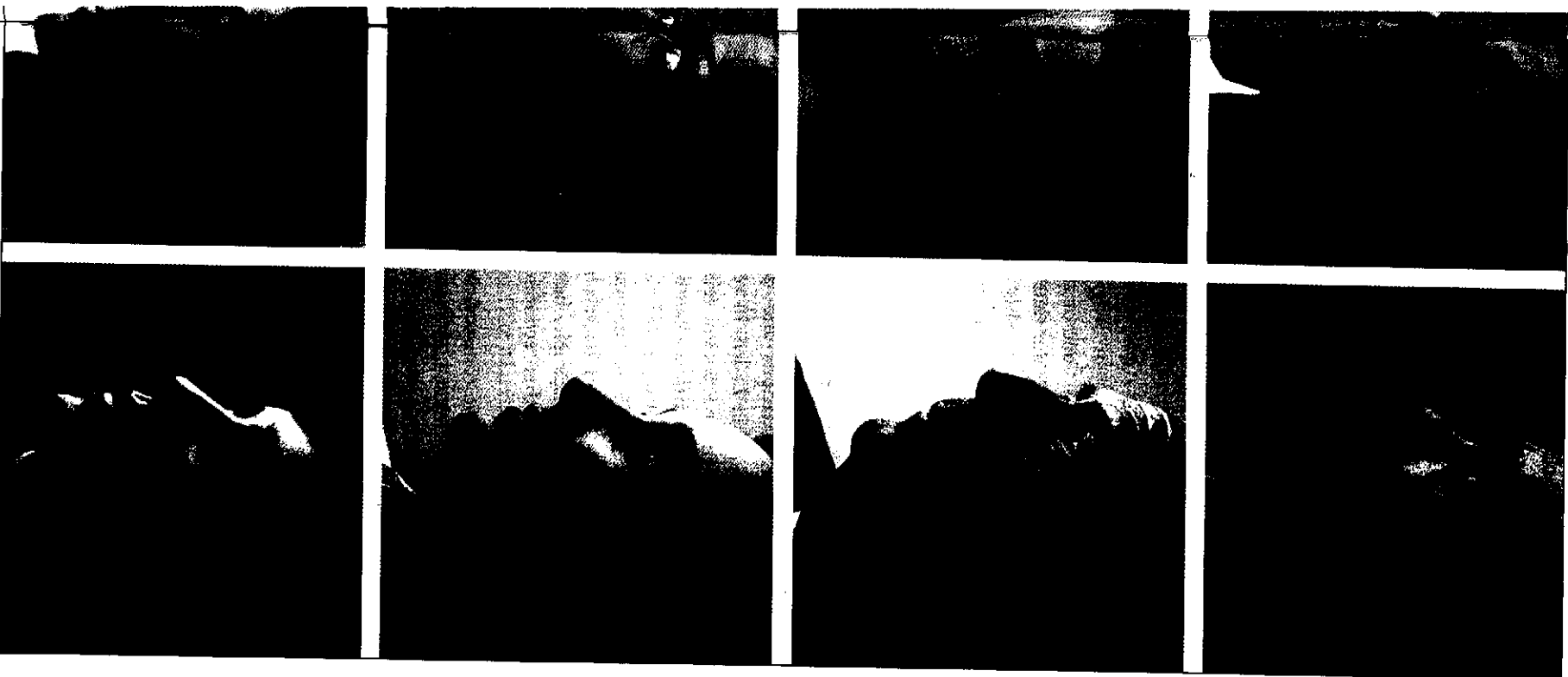
A few years ago Roger Haight, an American Jesuit theologian, published an article (*Am.* 3/17/08) that highlighted the amazing diversity and richness of Roman Catholic theology as it has developed since the Second Vatican Council and pointed out some lessons to be learned from those developments. He concluded, however, that there is “a kind of theological illiteracy among the laity and clergy regarding the work of the academy.” Many who are not professional theologians themselves have the impression that theology merely repeats or refreshes the theological debates of the early church—the Christological or Trinitarian controversies or those that arose with the Reformation. Others think that theology merely passes on a rigid set of dogmas and doctrines: catechism with footnotes. I hope to dispel these misimpressions.

Having taught theology for the last 40 years, I have noted other changes that have taken place, at times gradually and imperceptibly. Theology mediates between faith and culture, as Bernard Lonergan, S.J., once said. Therefore, as the cultural context changes, so does theology. And in the last 40 years the social, cultural and historical context has changed dramatically.

Consider, for example, who does theology and for whom it is done. At Vatican II, all the theological experts were male clerics. By contrast, when the church convenes its next ecumenical council, a majority of the theological experts will likely be lay theologians and a large number will be women.

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Why? These are the people doing theology today. To see them, look at the theological faculties in the graduate and professional schools and at the students currently enrolled in doctoral programs. These are the future theological experts.

Another difference is country of origin. At Vatican II, most theologians came from Europe and North America. Today some of the world's most creative, innovative theologians come from Africa, Latin America and Asia. Note, for example, the presenters and participants at the international meeting of moral theologians in Trent in July 2010. Some 600 theologians came from 75 countries, including Kenya, Ivory Coast, South Africa, Nigeria, Ethiopia and Cameroon; Brazil, Peru, Argentina, Bolivia, El Salvador and Chile; India, Sri Lanka, Australia, Japan and the Philippines. In 40 years the church has experienced the globalization of theology.

The prospective audiences or constituencies for whom theology is being done have also changed. At the time of the council, Roman Catholic theology was done primarily for the benefit of the church community and was heavily focused on training priests to hear confessions and administer the sacraments. Although some U.S. diocesan seminaries were located at universities (like The Catholic University of America in Washington, the American College at Louvain and the North American College in Rome), most were isolated from other intellectual currents and academic disciplines. Today, by contrast, theology takes place mainly in university departments and divinity schools, which typically are part of universities. Theology is directed not only to the church but also to the academy and the wider society. The intended audience is not just prospective members of the clergy but the community of intelligent inquirers, both Christian and others. Theology aims not only to provide an understanding of the Christian tradition but also to contribute to the discussion of contemporary issues and to provide guidance for contemporary society. Theology today addresses three constituencies: church, academy and society.

## Context Matters

A major development in the last 40 years has been the extent to which theology has become contextualized—historically, socially and culturally; John Courtney Murray, S.J., pointed out that “the issue that lay continually below the surface of all the conciliar debates [was] the issue of the development of doctrine.” The council thus accepted the

principle that as the historical context changes, so does the formulation of church teaching. Theology is always related to the context in which it is done. Prior to the council, theology was thought to be perennial, the same yesterday, today and forever.

But it is not only the historical context but also the social and cultural context that affects how theology is practiced. Attending to this requires what Pope John XXIII and the bishops at Vatican II referred to as “reading the signs of the times.” No longer is Western Europe or the North Atlantic the sole context for doing theology. The diverse contexts of Asia, Africa and Latin America provide the bases for the non-Eurocentric pluralism that characterizes contemporary theology. An intensified awareness and experience of religious pluralism is one of the major signs of our times.

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This pluralism has been complicated recently by the processes of globalization. Globalization is not a single phenomenon, but a series of processes that lead to the interdependence and mutual influence of many actors—nation states, multinational corporations, nongovernmental organizations and “super-empowered individuals” like Osama bin Laden. Increasing interdependence occurs not only in the economic sphere but also in the political, social and cultural fields. These areas of human life can be distinguished but not separated. As a result, cultures that once seemed relatively autonomous are ever more porous and dynamic. Political upheavals in the Middle East or drought in China, for example, have immediate and tremendous impact on other economies and cultures around the globe.

More than currencies and commodities circulate globally. Ideas and values, like individual freedom and consumer lifestyles, are exported through the media to other contexts and are modified. A theological proposal that comes out of one particular historical, social and cultural context—like Latin American liberation theology—may be adopted and adapted in another. This is what Robert J. Schreier, C.P.S.S., of Catholic Theological Union in Chicago, Ill., calls “global theological flows.” The notion that salvation entails integral liberation, not only from sin but also from poverty and oppressive dehumanization, resonates not only in Lima but in Manila and Nairobi as well.

## Hubble Replaces Galileo

A second major change has been called the “new cosmology.” Our understanding of the physical universe has expanded

dramatically in what John F. Haught, of the Woodstock Theological Center in Washington, D.C., terms the “three infinities”: the infinitely immense, the infinitesimally small and the infinitely complex. We live in a universe of “unfathomable temporal depth and spatial extension,” writes Professor Haught, 13.7 billion years old and of an estimated 125 billion galaxies racing away from one another at an ever-increasing rate of speed. Actually, we may not live in a universe at all but in a “multiverse” with multiple parallel universes. The expectation that we are not alone in this universe, that intelligent life probably exists elsewhere, is part of our mental furniture.

In the direction of the infinitely small, consider the atom, once thought to be the ultimate building block of all matter. Particle physics has shown that the atom (ironically, the word means one, undivided) is composed of ever-smaller subatomic particles, which are made up of other almost unobservable particles (mesons, quarks, etc.). Discoveries in the biological sciences give ample evidence of the infinitely complex. Within this new cosmology, theology is carried on.

### Postmodernity

As the Rev. David Tracy, of the University of Chicago Divinity School, has said, “We live in an age that cannot name itself.” But we know that the modern world of the last century and a half is changing, so we call ourselves *post-modern*. The term postmodernity is ambiguous; it refers to different things in different times and places and in different academic disciplines. But some shared characteristics are an increased awareness of the plurality of cultures, races, ethnicities, religions and socio-political ways of organizing ourselves. We live with a variety of styles in art, architecture, literature and mores that are seemingly incompatible, without trying to harmonize them into a coherent whole. Indeed, we are suspicious of those who try to impose an overarching narrative on reality (like Marxism or neoliberal capitalism). There is an increasing awareness and acceptance of the “other” as other, despite the jingoist attitudes that still exist in U.S. society and elsewhere. We emphasize the particular, local and regional (international corporations tailor their products to local cultures in micromarketing). There is also an increasing expectation and emphasis on participation and dialogue in politics, international relations, education and religion. All of these characteristics and sensibilities affect how theologians ply their trade today.

### Theological Questions

Although theology has always been done in and from a particular context, theologians were not always conscious of this, nor did they intend it. Today theologians are much more attentive to social location. To read the signs of the times, theology not only addresses itself to philosophy, its

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perennial dialogue partner, but engages with the social sciences, literature and the arts. These are all sources for theological reflection. The signs of the times are read and interpreted in the light of both the Christian Scriptures (the soul of theology) and the whole of the Christian tradition, which in turn is read and reinterpreted in the light of ever-shifting contexts.

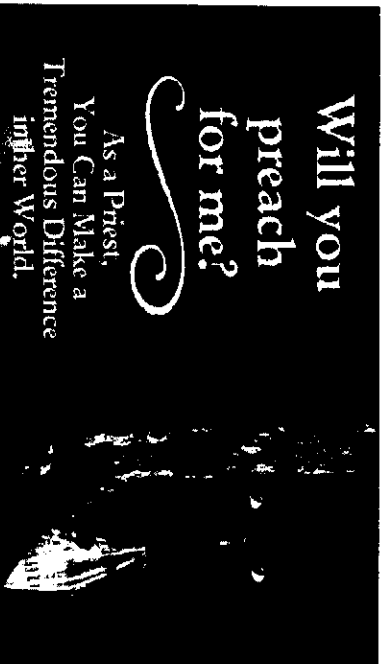
In whatever context theology is done, though, particular questions force themselves upon theologians: questions of war and peace, justice and inequality, massive poverty and oppression, globalization and the new international social, political and economic order. These issues are being addressed by moral theologians and social ethicists, biblical scholars and historical, systematic and pastoral theologians.

Other issues arise from an awareness of a new pluralism within Christian theology. Strangers or cultural "others" are no longer distant; through migration and the electronic media, they live next door. We theologians acknowledge the variety of ways Christianity can be understood and practiced in Africa, Asia and Latin America. How can we inculturate Christianity in these diverse cultures and also maintain some kind of unity, catholicity? Religious pluralism has become an urgent concern as we have recognized, since Vatican II, that there may be truth, grace and even salvation through non-Christian religious traditions. How are

Christians to understand the uniqueness of salvation in Christ; what is the mission of the church in this context? Do other religious traditions have a place in God's plan, or have they escaped God's providence? These questions concern many Christians, whose firsthand experience of non-Christian religion often comes when a family member marries someone of another faith.

Questions also cluster around the new cosmology. How do we rethink or re-imagine our notion of God, the Trinity and salvation in Christ in the light of Professor Haught's three infinities? How do we understand the beginning and ending of human life in the light of new discoveries in the biomedical sciences? Issues that once seemed relatively clear are infinitely more complex today. Expanding scientific knowledge raises the question of atheism all over again. And scientific rationality causes us to rethink the kind of knowledge religion is, the relation of logos to mythsos, as Karen Armstrong, a prolific author of religious books, suggests. How are these different forms of human knowing related? Many educated Christians today are comfortable with what they know of the universe from basic scientific discoveries.

Finally, all these questions give rise to a new pluralism within Christian theology and raise questions of theological method. How do theologians do theology in light of this expanding, exploding knowledge of the cosmos? The horizons of our work have been infinitely expanded, and theo-



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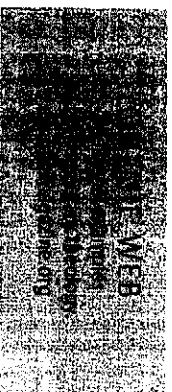
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ogy itself has therefore expanded.

To see how these new questions and issues are being dealt with today, consider a random sample of topics for some recent graduate theses and dissertations: "The Ecological Dimensions of Peace and the Church Mission From an African Perspective," "Towards a Kaiwiti Theology in Fiji," "Conversion and Retrieval of Fihavana Culture in Madagascar," "Imagination, the Spiritual Exercises, and Korean Protestants," "Globalization Interpreted: A Teilhardian World View," "A Reflection on HIV/AIDS in the Democratic Republic of the Congo," "The Poor as the Basis for Interreligious Dialogue," "Theology, Church, and Economic Globalization." This sample demonstrates not only a breadth of interests and concerns but also how different theological disciplines are converging or crossing boundaries after many years of relative isolation in their respective silos. Interdisciplinarity is the order of the day.

This is not to imply that more traditional topics in theology are being neglected. If anything, the present concerns of religious pluralism, poverty and injustice, inculturation and globalization and the new cosmology are forcing theologians to revisit and re-examine our understanding and way of imagining God, Christ, salvation, revelation and faith.

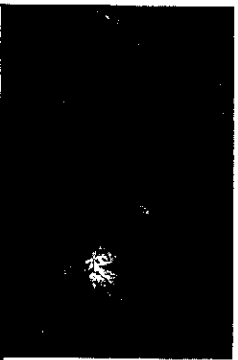


## Future Direction

What of the future? Some trends are likely to continue. Despite efforts to reach the U.N. Millennium Development Goals, the issues of poverty, injustice and inequality are likely to be front and center for concerned Christians. And despite globalization, religious and cultural pluralism will be an increasing part of the theological context. The unanswered questions will not go away and cannot be repressed.

We can also expect reactions against exploring these cutting-edge issues. There is always a legitimate concern that some aspects of the Christian tradition may be lost and a desire to preserve the fullness of the tradition. We will experience both continuity and discontinuity with the past. Conflicts in theology will persist, as will attempts to bring order and system to this pluralism. The task of theologians is precisely to pose questions to the tradition and, with modesty and humility, to formulate them as questions, not as firmly held assertions. Theologians have been compared to the research and development branch of a corporation, and management ignores them at its peril. The goal remains, as Scripture says, "Always be ready to make a defense to anyone who asks for a reason for the hope that is in you, and make it with modesty and respect." (1 Pt 3:15). ■

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