

Readiness For Theological Study A Framework for a Preliminary Year

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Archbishop Robert Runcie, when he was principal of Cuddesdon Theological College, described the task of a theological college as being:

to think through a theological problem, relating it to the documents of the Christian faith, and to the coherent totality of Christian doctrine, and thus aiming at some relevant formulation in modern terms. The procedure in our study of ethics is first to awaken an awareness of the moral problems of men and women today, and the situations, which gave rise to them; then to consider the tools, which the Christian tradition has made available for handling ethical problems; and, finally, to use the tools in such a way that a piece of teaching, or counselling, or direction, can be given, which has not only been assimilated as the truth, but as the truth for the teacher or counsellor, as part of the basis of his own personal life.¹

What sort of priest do we need in the church in Melanesia today? What kind of personal and spiritual qualities must he possess? What sort of person comes to us for training, and what kind of educational processes must he undergo, in order effectively to meet the needs of the church in PNG and Melanesia today?

These were the questions we, the present staff at the Anglican seat of priestly formation, Newton College, faced early in 1991, as we sat down, with the help of a consultant, Professor Michael Horsburgh,² to discuss the curriculum at Newton College. This paper will attempt to outline these discussions. I first want to look at issues related to readiness for theological study, then, in the second part of the paper, give a brief background to the teaching situation at NTC, as currently practised, and then to give a background to the discussions we had, focusing particularly on the preliminary studies. Finally, I will outline the structure of the preliminary studies, as we hope to see it – starting in the 1993 academic year.

¹ W. Browning, *A Handbook of the Ministry*, London UK: Mowbray, 1985, p. 84.

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My hope is that, in so doing, it may assist theological colleges of other denominations, and in other parts of Melanesia, who may be undertaking similar processes, either now, or in the future. I make two comments at the outset: firstly, I will use the masculine gender throughout, with some diffidence, but recognising the reality in Melanesia today; secondly, my references will be to the Anglican tradition, where applicable, but recognising that, in most instances, this could apply more widely.

The Person on Entry to College

One of the first questions we faced, when looking at an appropriate curriculum, was to look at the kind of person we receive from the various selection processes. His educational background will have an important bearing on his ability to receive and process what he learns whilst in college, but, equally important, is his background in the Christian faith, and the kind of spiritual milieu, from which he comes. Most of our students come from villages, where there is still an extremely strong influence of traditional beliefs, even in those places, where Christianity has been in place for some time. It would be worth pausing to reflect on this.

Many doctrines, accepted, and taken for granted, in the church, took several hundred years to take shape. The idea that sins committed after baptism could not be forgiven is a good example. Nowadays this idea is so firmly rejected, that we hardly give it a second thought. We forget that it was a widespread belief for several centuries. The connection between Easter and baptism, and the ceremony of baptism taking place at the Christian Pasch, took 700 years to fully sever – to the church's disadvantage. The idea that those who were not baptised were under the influence of the devil, thus requiring exorcism during the rigorous training period before baptism, was also widespread. When we remember these examples, we can see how unrealistic it is to expect those, from villages, who come to us for study in the Christian faith, whose culture has had contact with it for less than a century, in, most cases, to be free of traditional influences and beliefs. Many of the men, coming to NTC, have only a rudimentary knowledge of what I would call basic Christian knowledge – and, by this, I mean an understanding of the basic doctrines of the church, the scriptures, the life and ministry of Christ, worship, spirituality, and prayer. We are, in every sense, starting at the ground floor. It is this background that will determine a man's true readiness for theological study.

Tad Guzie, the Roman Catholic scholar, in his book *Jesus and the Eucharist* – a text, as the name suggests, on eucharistic theology – talks of

three stages we go through, in the interpretation of the meaning of God, religion, and all the “concepts tied up with religion”.³ Guzie uses these three stages to assist in an understanding of eucharistic theology. I believe they can be more widely applied, and, in particular, can be applied to the human dynamics of readiness for theological study.

Guzie says:

In our growth as persons, our own personal past history feeds into, and shapes, what we are now, and what we have become. We might reject what we have done in the past, undergo a change of heart, follow a new course, but we never throw off the past.⁴

He goes on to remind us that,

if some important stage of personality development, whereby a child learns how to relate to others, is short-circuited in infancy, or adolescence, this will naturally affect how the person behaves as an adult. Everyone has short circuits of some kind, and the constant challenge of the adult is to understand what he has become.⁵

The primary task of the theological college, as Runcie says “to think through a theological problem . . . aiming at some relevant formulation in modern terms” can only be effective, if, in the process, the man is able to have some understanding of who he is, and what he has become. It will have a profound effect on his ability to manage study, and may, quite likely, undergo a profound change during the course of his college education. Some might say that, indeed, this is part of a college’s job – to induce such a change, whereby the person can make what must become, in Runcie’s terminology “the basis for his own personal life”. Guzie calls this “personal process”. It is to this that we now turn.

Guzie’s three stages of understanding the meaning of God, religion, and related concepts are:

- (1) Systemic control;
- (2) Idealisation;

³ T. Guzie, *Jesus and the Eucharist*, New York NY: Paulist Press, 1974, p. 129.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 128.

⁵ *Ibid.*

(3) Personal process.⁶

By “systemic control”, we mean the consciousness of primitive man, that life is tied up with what goes on in the world of nature. God, man, and nature were indistinct and undifferentiated. Guzie talks of a “soul substance”⁷ forming a bond between man, animals, and crops. Man’s rituals renewed, and kept charged, the productivity, and fertility, of nature. Animals and plants shared the same sacred energy as man. So “systemic control” consists of keeping on the right side of God, and keeping a hostile, and largely unfriendly, and uncontrollable, force friendly. At this stage, religion is tied up with reward and punishment; the right prayer will get me what I want, whether it be good crops, a PMV, or a “ghetto-blasters”, bigger, better, and louder than my previous one. It is useful to remember that Christian festivals, such as Christmas and, most importantly, Easter, were celebrations held at times associated with pagan festivals, such as, the winter solstice, and the first fruits. It’s not as far below the surface as we would like to think, as St John Damascene points out.⁸

’Tis the spring of souls today;
Christ has burst His prison,
and from three days’
sleep in death, as a sun has risen:
all the winter of our sins,
long and dark, is flying
from His light, to whom we give
laud and praise undying.

This stage of “systemic control” is the one we go through as children, when we see parents as all-powerful figures, who mete out rewards for “good” behaviour, and punishment for “bad” behaviour. This is tied up with our childhood idea of God. Traditional village religious consciousness would have built within it this kind of systemic control. It is important to see it as an essential stage of religious consciousness for an individual and – as in PNG village life – for a society. It is also important to see these three stages as points along a continuum, from birth to death. Others have reflected on this kind of process, too – Fowler’s stages of faith being another more well-developed example.

⁶ Ibid., p. 129.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ St John Damascene, John Mason Neale, tran., in *Hymns: Ancient and Modern New Stand*, p. 163.

The second phase along this continuum is *religion as idealisation*. In this stage, the emphasis moves to man himself, and immortality becomes a primary religious preoccupation. This stage is exemplified in the mystery cults, based on the death and resurrection of a divine hero. The search for abundant life, and the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth are humanised in these cults.

Guzie says of this stage:

We have to go through a stage of identifying with heroes, and contemplating ideals, before we can make these ideals our own. This, of course, is a basic human truth. There is no way our inner strengths and resources can be tested in the fire of experience, unless we have realised, through idealisation, which strengths and resources make the battle worthwhile. One of the very important functions of religion, is to present an ideal, with which one can identify.⁹

So, in this stage, conception changes from God the enforcer, the punisher, the withholder, to the concept of God as love, and the imagery created around the risen Jesus: new Adam, new creation, new man, and so on. Worship is an important part of this experience. So is commitment. But it is commitment to an ideal, and not necessarily to engagement *in* the process itself. This brings us to stage three.

The third stage of *personal process* is what we do, when we make death and resurrection an interior part of our own histories, and not something carried through by someone else. It is the process of coming to a new attitude to suffering, conflict, and the unexpected. It is the process of Job: he emerges from his trials with fewer answers than before. It's the process of the people of Israel, as seen through the voice and visions of the prophet Ezekiel, seeing that the experience of exile is not just a punishment for sin, but an occasion for conversion, change and a new self-understanding. In this stage, we begin to move out from a purely personal relationship with the divine hero – Jesus, my personal Lord and Saviour – to seeing horizontally to my neighbour as well. Love of God, and love of neighbour, are tied up with each other. Perhaps, we could see this as the phase of the Good Samaritan.

⁹ Guzie, *Jesus and the Eucharist*, p. 136.

This is a stage, characterised by strong resistance. We all have marked resistance to moving into this stage. Guzie likens it to falling below a line drawn between the second and the third stages.¹⁰ It is the stage, whereby we see experientially, not just intellectually, the sense of life coming out of death. We are making the experience of Christ our own – to use Paul’s language of Romans 6: “baptised into His death”. In this stage, too, with Wesley,¹¹

bold, I approach the “eternal throne”, and claim the crown of Christ my own!

In places of theological education, we get people at all stages along this continuum, and, hardly surprisingly, those in the first two stages predominate. The man with a chronic foot condition asking for leave from college to consult his favourite witch doctor; the man who leaves before the first term is through, in the belief that a “bad spirit” is stopping him. Systemic control is strongly at work, with people coming from places where that kind of religious consciousness is present.

Then there are those at the second stage – those who are attracted by the emotionality, and “high” experiences, offered by many of the charismatically-oriented Christian groups. Some of our students come to us directly from a place, which has emphasised personal faith, and whose vocations have been nurtured in this kind of environment, and who may find, after a while, that Anglican worship becomes dull, uninspiring, and boring. They, once again, look to the “high experiences”, when Anglicanism does not provide sufficient stimulation to their consciousness of Jesus as personal Lord and Saviour. They prefer worship, which emphasises this personal relationship with Jesus, and the experiences implied by the rhetoric around “baptism in the Spirit”. They do not have sufficient grounding in the faith of the church as community to sustain them in one denomination, with admittedly-human foibles of dullness and institutionalisation.

The problem is, of course, that institutions cannot move people into the third stage of personal process, and many kinds of religious experiences, such as those characterised by the second stage, create a kind of insulation against moving on in faith. The rhetoric, the “party line”, is all important.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 140-141.

¹¹ Charles Wesley, in *The Australian Hymn Book*, Sydney NSW: Collins, 1977, p. 164.

Only people can move on, and only people can be ready to move on – institutions cannot do it for them. But, as theological colleges, our task must be aimed at encouraging people to move on from where they are to understand that resurrected life is not just some vague immortality after death, but the wholeness of life, that comes out of death, in any form. We must encourage our students to engage in religion, as personal process.

It would seem, from my own teaching and ministry in theological education, over the past two years, that most of our students – at least in the Anglican tradition – are at the second stage of religious consciousness, and that some are struggling with moving to the third stage. I express the view that people at the stage of “systematic control” are not ready to ask the deeper questions, implicit in stages two and three. These people will not be able to formulate, for the most part, the theological questions, and will, invariably, find theological study and reflection beyond their reach, in most cases. By coming to college, they are short circuiting what is an important part of growth and self-understanding. For them, theological study should be postponed, lest it become what Harry Williams calls “the spiritual equivalent of hormone treatment”. We must all grow at our own pace. Our selection processes can be more efficient if we keep these factors in mind.

Our curriculum structure must, however, reflect the reality that we are dealing with those who are in the first two phases of systemic control and idealisation. We should acknowledge that we, ourselves, as staff, are also engaged in the lifelong task of making death and resurrection a personal process, or, to use the language of the New Testament, “growing into the stature of the fullness of Christ”.

It is now time to turn to seeing this in practice, and the progress we, as the staff at Newton College, have made in our discussions on the preliminary year of theological education. I first want to look at our teaching situation, as it is currently practised.

The Teaching Situation at Newton College

Our current enrolment is 25 students, and we have five full-time staff: four are expatriate, and one, our Principal, Fr James Ayong, is a national. The college course consists of four years. The first two, and the last of which, are undertaken in the college itself. The length of this course is currently under review, as part of our curriculum discussion, as we offer courses only to diploma level at this time. Each student spends the third year attached to a parish, working under the supervision of the parish priest.

We have a minimum entry level of grade 10 in the PNG schooling system, but, for many, particularly our older students, it has been some time since they were in a formal learning environment. The differences in educational level, within the country, also has to be taken into account, as our intakes come from all of the five Anglican dioceses. Some students have had difficulty settling into such an environment once again. This, I suspect, is a difficulty faced in theological education universally.

The daily timetable, for each of the three years, consists in five periods of 50 minutes each, between the hours of 8.20 am and 1 pm. With some free periods, this amounts to some 70 periods per week. Each student has 23 class periods, and, with equal division among the five staff, there is a teaching load of about 12 hours per week each.

Thus, we have a large number of hours available for teaching, but few resources available for us to engage in more-progressive teaching methods, apart from lecturing, and small group work. This has been a strong feature in our discussions on the curriculum.

The simple fact is that, to date, there has been no curriculum, and thus little in the way of reflection and critical thought about what was to be taught, how, and when. It was evident to me, on taking up my appointment in February, 1991, that the subjects were there because they were there, and had always been there. For example, homiletics in the first year of a course, liturgical studies for two hours per week in each of the three years. An extreme example is the teaching of NT Greek. Opinions differ about its value, but in an environment, where English is the language of instruction, and of the church in general, and where the available translations of the scriptures into local languages has been done from English, one would have to ask whether Greek (or Hebrew, for that matter) has a valid place on a Melanesian theological curriculum. Added credence is given to this argument, when we see the overall standard of written and spoken English, which ranges from average to poor, in most cases. When it comes to reading aloud, the standard is almost uniformly poor, this is true, not only of English, but of Tok Pisin, as well. Thus, the view is expressed, that time would be better spent elsewhere.

This is, incidentally, not a view that Martin Luther would have agreed: for him, education, for girls, as well as boys, should centre around the sacred languages:

We will not long preserve the gospel without the languages. The languages are the sheath, in which the sword of the Spirit is contained.¹²

Or, as Robert Runcie once said to a student pleading exemption, “I’m afraid you’ve struck a Principal, who believes in the subject.”¹³

At Newton College, two periods a week, in each year, are spent on the following subjects: New Testament, Old Testament, church history, doctrine, ethics, pastoral studies, and liturgy. One hour per week is spent on Melanesian religion, homiletics, Greek, English, and Christian education. In addition, the students in the second and final years undertake teaching of religious instruction in the local Popondetta schools.

Each lecturer decides the content of each course, and the risk of overlap is significant. Where, for example, do theories about the eucharist fit? In liturgy or doctrine? We have put it in liturgy for the moment. Why? Because it seems that it has always been that way.

This, then, was the raw material, with which we tackled the question of curriculum planning, to put the teaching of the college on a more-solid, effective, and professional footing for the future.

Our Discussions on the Preliminary Studies

A taxonomy for professional education¹⁴ was used, which drew distinctions between personal characteristics, skills, and knowledge. It was used originally for engineering courses, and was of particular usefulness, because it included spiritual qualities, and was chosen with this in mind. It was given, as a blank sheet, to all six staff, and we filled them out individually.¹⁵

Under personal qualities: imagination, inventiveness, independence, and objectivity were listed. Attitudes and values considered important were: acceptance of difference, personal responsibility, and concern for social

¹² H. Bornkamm, *Luther in Mid-Career*, Philadelphia PA: Fortress Press, 1983, quoted in Browning, *Handbook of the Ministry*, p. 86.

¹³ *Ibid*, p. 87.

¹⁴ Richard Carter, “A taxonomy of objectives for professional education”, *Studies in Higher Education* 10-2 (1985), pp. 117-134; and used by Michael Horsburgh, in “Report on Curriculum Discussions at Newton College, 1991”, privately circulated.

¹⁵ At the time of these discussions, we had six staff members at Newton College.

justice. Personality characteristics, listed in the collated results, were: resilience, courage, integrity, and industry. Spiritual qualities included: Christ-centred spirituality, and search for God. Skills included: reasoning, attention, critical thinking, leadership, ability to delegate, tact, and articulateness. Also listed, were action skills, such as “liturgical behaviour”, music, first aid, and maintenance of machinery.

The knowledge factor was divided into factual and experiential knowledge. This included standard items, such as Bible, and church history, as well as general knowledge.

Our decision to introduce preliminary studies came, about due to a number of factors:

- (a) The need to introduce material of a general educational kind.
- (b) The recognition of the educational level of the students, and that they arrive less-than-prepared for their studies.
- (c) The need to allow students and staff to examine a candidate’s suitability for continued theological study. Thus, completion of preliminary studies, is a requirement for continuation in the course.

These in turn lead to the issues:

- (a) The need to give preliminary studies sufficient interest and content to be of educational value, and also to whet the appetite of the student for what is to follow. This must be done in such a way as to avoid giving the student the impression that he “knows it all” on completion. This calls for careful planning.
- (b) The need to teach general and theological studies, in a way useful to adult students, applying the strict test of direct relevance.

These discussions have taken place throughout 1991 and 1992.

We had originally planned these preliminary studies to occupy the entire first year of the four-year course, but, as a result of further discussions in mid-1992, we made the recommendation that the college course comprise the following:

- An introductory component in semester 1 of year 1;
- A theology component in semester 2 of year 1, and in both semesters of years 2 and 4, making five semesters altogether for the theological component; and
- A pastoral component in year 3.

We also recommended that successful completion of the first semester of the first year be a requirement for continuation in the course.

The new curriculum is to commence for all students in 1993.

General approval was given to the contents of the report of the 1991 discussions, but some recommendations were not endorsed. This required that some aspects of the 1991 report needed rethinking. The most important, and most necessary, subjects in the introductory semester are English, study skills, and general knowledge. With a classroom load of 15 hours/week, the following areas are to be studied in the first year – the first semester of which is the introductory component:

Semester 1	Hours/Week	Semester 2	Hours/Week
History of Israel	2	OT	2
Life of Christ	2	NT	2
Anglican identity	2	Church history	2
		Doctrine	2
English	4	English	2
Study skills	2	Pastoral	2
Worship/Prayer	2	Homiletics	1
Human society	1	Communication	1
Current affairs	1	Spirituality	1

The second and fourth years of the course will be broken into modules of core and secondary units, with the classroom load reduced from the current 23 hours/week to 15 hours/week. Thus, the inclusion of a study-skills component in the preliminary semester is important, so as to prepare the students for more self-directed study.

Much of the success of this plan will depend on staffing, and the commitment of future staff. The problem of getting suitably qualified staff is neither unique nor new, and will continue to be a problem in the years to come. Ongoing success will also depend on the content being reviewed

regularly, in the light of the many rapid changes in Melanesian society. An example would be greater preparation for ministry in towns, as distinct from villages, where the Anglican church has traditionally been strongest, and where it has done its best work. Ministry in towns will call for skills in counselling, social needs, awareness, family life and health, and the needs of the unemployed. In the villages, the need for courage, and good Christian knowledge, is increasing, as the base established by the mainline churches is diminishing in favour of Pentecostal/fundamentalist groups in many areas. Defending orthodoxy is more important than ever before. All this must be reflected in the theological curriculum. "The study of theology", as one report on the subject said over 40 years ago, "is the systematic study of the gospel of God, in its manifold relevance to human knowledge, and to human life".¹⁶ That is true of Melanesia today.

The preliminary studies at Newton College have the aim of providing a bridge into full-time study, and to provide an environment for further testing of suitability for continued professional training. It aims to provide a balance between general knowledge, and aims to whet a student's appetite for further learning, and to provide necessary skills to enable that process. We, at Newton Theological College, believe that it will provide a greater balance in the overall theological curriculum.

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¹⁶ Browning, *Handbook of the Ministry*, p. 86.