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Need Ministers be Theologians?

JOHN P RICHARDSON

In the *Church Times* of 7 January 1994, Hugh Montefiore, the former Bishop of Birmingham, wrote as follows:

It is the great weakness of Anglicanism that the actual teaching of theology is confined to theological colleges where the staff, however conscientious and informed, are seldom of the calibre of university lecturers, and where theology is only one subject in a crowded syllabus. Nor do we have a monastic tradition of theology like the great Jesuit, Dominican and Benedictine orders of the Roman Catholic Church. Our British universities have been profoundly affected by the Enlightenment, with its key concepts of the supremacy of reason and the idea of emancipated autonomous individuals. In such an atmosphere it is safer to engage with ancient texts or with philosophical concepts: the very idea of divine revelation becomes suspect. [. . .] This defect in theological formation has led to a dearth of Anglican systematic theology, to its great impoverishment when compared with Roman Catholic, Lutheran and Reformed traditions. It is above all necessary today that Anglicans should be able to give a rounded account of their faith. [. . .] Compared with [others] Anglicans often seem amateurs.

We must recognize that what Montefiore says of Anglicans generally is even more true of evangelical Anglicans, certainly as far as those in England are concerned. We are theological *amateurs* in every sense of the word. In the original sense we are, indeed, *lovers* of theology (whether we realize it or not) for we love the things of God—we love to speak of him and to know him better. We are also amateurs in the sense that we are not in it for the money—though some of us rightly make our living by the gospel, we generally expect such a living to be fairly modest. Unfortunately it also has to be said that we are theological amateurs in the sense of being ‘not very good at it’. We neither study theology carefully ourselves nor value theological study highly in others.

The Tractarian Heritage

Of course, this is not a problem for Evangelicals alone. Montefiore’s critique is aimed at *all* Anglicans. The lack, in particular, of *systematic* theology within English Anglicanism has a long pedigree. In a recent article, Colin Gunton blames this on nationalism in general and the Tractarians in particular. No fan of Newman, he nevertheless writes that

'apart from John Henry Newman there has been for nearly two centuries very little talent of the kind that will place English theologians in important—or even serious—places in future histories of theology'.¹ This is to a certain extent to be expected within a denomination which has long been dominated by Pietism overshadowed by Liberalism. In its heyday Liberalism was more concerned with debunking than constructing theological systems, and now that it has run its course it has increasingly little to say, having no basis from which to say it.² We can hardly expect systematic theology in particular, or Christian theology in general, to flow out of a movement which has sawn off the intellectual branch on which it sat. But at the time when continental theology was flowering, the response of the similarly flowering Tractarian movement in England was, according to Gunton, 'chiefly rhetorical'.³ Liberalism, he argues, was resisted not by an intellectual defence but by an a-historical and pietistic 'leap of authority' between the Church Fathers and the present. The outcome, however, was the consigning of the Anglican mainstream to the theological backwaters of history.

Such an intellectual dearth may have been tolerable for nineteenth century Anglo-Catholics. However, it is surely intolerable within Evangelicalism as a movement and within Anglicanism as a denomination which is now (so far as we are told) increasingly influenced by Evangelicals. Gunton has suggested some reasons for its origins. Montefiore, however, puts his finger on the awkward fact that the current weakness in Anglican theology is both reflected in and aggravated by the situation regarding theological training in general and the theological colleges in particular.

Education Under Pressure

Unfortunately, as he points out, within English Anglicanism at present, theology is both undervalued and under-taught. Theological education is under pressure from above, as can readily be seen in the attitudes of the hierarchy, who apparently believe that the intellectual centre of theological education can safely be held by the secular universities. Hence the more 'high powered' training for ordination typically consists of a two-year university degree followed by a year 'finishing off' in the theological college. However, this final year is acknowledged (and often experienced) as being intellectually inferior to the years in the university and it is only the less academically able who are taught entirely within the theological college itself. At the same time, there is an increasing pressure to do away with the full-time theological college course where possible. In future, older ordination candidates will be trained largely through part-time courses. Bearing in mind that the number of older candidates is itself increasing, this means that in future a substantial and growing proportion of Anglican clergy will have received no full-time training whatsoever.

In spite of frequent denials, it is hard to resist the conclusion that this reliance on the universities and the trend towards part-time courses are the

result of cost-cutting policies. However, if we take the more charitable view, that they are the result purely of changes in educational philosophy, serious objections must still be raised by those who regard a firm grasp on theology and the Scriptures as a prerequisite for effective ministry. It is therefore deeply worrying that even amongst Evangelicals in this country there is a low valuation of theological education and an acceptance of a 'minimalist' approach. For many Evangelicals, their time at theological college is a hoop through which they must jump in order to be ordained, rather than the intellectual 'honeymoon' of a lifetime in ministry. At best it is seen as a mixed blessing, sometimes stimulating, but often disturbing, their faith. Rarely does one meet an Evangelical with an enthusiasm for theology which began at theological college.

Hence there is another pressure on theological education, this time from below. On the whole, evangelical ordination candidates in this country do not want to be at theological college, do not make full use of their time there to study, and do not look back on it as foundational for their ministry. Thus, given that full-time theological training is not something the hierarchy wants to pay for nor something the candidate wants to do, it is not surprising that it is under threat!

An Alternative Experience

And yet this need not be the case. For example, I was privileged to spend 1993 taking a one-year course at Moore Theological College in Sydney, Australia. Here I found a community training people for ministry which placed the highest value on academic expertise and where the average student was deeply committed to academic study, and yet where the whole enterprise took place within a thoroughly evangelical framework. It is worth asking why this was the case and what lessons we might learn for our own situation.

Sydney is, of course, different from almost every other Anglican diocese in being overwhelmingly evangelical from its Bishops to the average person in the pew. Furthermore, Moore College is itself an expression of the mission aims of the Diocese. Instrumental to the evangelical ascendancy within the diocese was not only the appointment of Howard Mowll as Archbishop in 1933 but of T C Hammond as Principal of Moore. Between them they not only moved the diocese in a more evangelical direction but created an axis of cooperation so that the role of the college is now to provide ministers specifically for the diocese and the role of the diocese is to support the college. Thus during 1993 the diocese voted A\$1 million towards the work of the college, including the building of a new extension. But perhaps the key to the success of the college is the first feature I mentioned above, namely that academic expertise is seen both within the college and the diocese as a *value*. Significantly, this is reflected in the part-time programme provided by the college. For lay people, including those training to be Readers, the Extension Studies Department offers both a *Preliminary Theological Certificate*, largely based on private or group

study, and a *Diploma in Biblical Studies* which is more lecture based. For clergy, the college offers a modular MA which is designed to encourage them to go on reading after they have completed their full-time studies.

Almost inevitably, this valuing of academic expertise within the diocese is reflected in the attitude of students at the college. Even more than sport (this was, after all, Australia) the commonest interest seemed to be reading. In fact, the one criticism I had of life in the College was that there seemed to be very little socializing amongst students, even in the singles' quarters. As one who spent much of his previous college career in 'coffee and chat', I found it strange to feel I could not knock on peoples' doors in case I disturbed their work—and to feel a certain resentment if someone overstayed their welcome when I was trying to study for my own part!

It should, nevertheless, be emphasised that Moore is not full of 'academics' in the sense that we understand the word. Moore students are from all walks of life. What they share is a *commitment* to study, rather than an academic background. Nor is the typical Moore student a 'clone'. I met a wide range of individuals including a few 'college rebels'. But there was certainly an 'academic culture' where depth of learning was both desired and respected - even amongst the rebels! Unfortunately for our situation, it is this very culture which is the hardest thing to create. Once academic expertise becomes a value, people will pursue it with the minimum of encouragement, but at home we are locked into a downward spiral of a poor experience of theological education leading to an ever-poorer expectation of such education amongst those preparing for ministry. Where this is the case people will not even take advantage of what is available to them. However, Moore did not spring into existence overnight and there are other aspects of the college which are conducive to maintaining this atmosphere and which may help us attain a similar end.

Academic Inflation

Increasingly, my own feeling is that one of the chief contributing factors to the positive academic culture at Moore is the maintenance of rigorous academic standards. At home we have seen a growing tendency towards what Allan Bloom calls 'degree inflation'—the process by which last year's 'A' Level becomes this year's Degree.⁴ Newspaper accounts and anecdotes abound of situations where educational institutions or departments have simply increased the marks of their students to give a better impression of their achievements. Yet it is courting disaster when first-class honours are awarded for second-class work. The truly first-class student is then not properly distinguished whilst the impression is given that academic achievement is possible without academic effort. Of course, if we raise academic standards we will produce more failures and failure may be painful, but in the real world pain is also unavoidable. The answer is to deal with pain appropriately, not to pretend its causes do not exist. Early on in life I had to face the pain of realizing I was no footballer. Due to the

cruelties of childhood, that pain was perhaps more than it needed to be, but I still cannot play football and giving me a certificate for 'footballing effort' would not change this! In fact, the maintenance of high standards may actually make failure less painful. Where only a handful of students gain 'firsts' a 'second' does not seem so bad, and the less able student who gains a 'third' may feel rightly proud to be in with the degree candidates at all. By contrast, where standards are low a second-class student may feel cheated since there is so little to distinguish him from a 'first', and a third-class student may feel worthless since a 'second' is worth so little.

Ability and Effort

Some will object that ordination training which emphasises academic excellence will exclude from ministry the non-academic individual with 'pastoral gifts'. In reply I would make two points. First, a modicum of academic ability is in fact a biblical requirement for pastoral ministry. Both 1 Timothy 3:2 and 2 Timothy 2:24 emphasise the need for the minister to be an 'apt teacher'. The teacher can teach only what he knows, therefore he must have a demonstrated ability to learn. But second, people are generally capable of far greater academic achievement than they realize. In fact, as I have proved in my own experience, ability is less important than effort. This is particularly true of the older student. It is now recognized that adults learn faster and more economically than younger people, partly because they are more highly motivated, partly because they are more widely experienced. Since most people in theological colleges are mature students, they should actually be *easier* to teach than the typical university adolescent. (Unfortunately, the trend to part-time courses means that these people will be required to study whilst simultaneously holding down a full-time, and generally highly responsible, job. Given how many clergy complain of having 'no time to read' theology it is remarkable that we expect the laity to find it!) The problem for the less academically experienced student is usually not studying or learning but fear of assessment and failure. Once it can be seen both that success is possible and that assessment is not judgmental (surely possible within a theological college if not a secular university) mature students can flourish beyond their own expectations. Indeed, one of the more theologically astute clergy I know at present is dyslexic yet is studying part-time for a PhD.

Quality and Modelling

A second, and related, factor in creating the culture at Moore College is the quality of staff and the respect they are consequently held in by the students. Montefiore's criticism of the academic ability of theological college staff is perhaps over-harsh. We have some very good staff in our theological colleges and no one doubts that they work hard enough. Nevertheless, it must certainly be acknowledged that students respond well when their tutors are respected in their fields. To hear students past and present speak

of studying under Gerald Bray, Richard France, Alister McGrath or Alec Motyer underlines the importance of staff quality in giving the student both confidence and interest in the academic enterprise. The staff provide the students with a model of the relationship between academic study and Christian living. To see my lecturers constantly in the library at Moore was a considerable stimulus to me to emulate their desire to go on learning and to be faithful to my own calling. Unfortunately, in England we seem to respect titles more than academic ability and so Evangelicals are keener to see others from their number becoming bishops than theological tutors. Equally, our own academics seem to have felt the need to move either into the secular world of the university or to the United States to find recognition or funding. Perhaps we need to recapture a modern sense of the status the Lectionary confers on 'Teachers of the Faith'.

However, academic excellence is not enough. We are all aware that the term 'academic' is widely used in contrast to 'practical'. At Moore, staff are not simply 'recruited' but selected from those in the diocese or elsewhere who show not merely intellectual ability but pastoral gifts and evangelistic commitment. During the annual college mission week each staff member leads an evangelistic team and they are also involved in local parishes during the rest of the year. Thus, once again, in their own lives the staff model the link between academic study and the ministry of the Gospel.

The Difference it Makes

Following from this emphasis, a third factor at Moore is that academic excellence is not seen as an end in itself but as a means to effective ministry. More than once I have been asked since I came home 'But does it make any difference?'. The answer has to be yes—both for myself and for the Diocese of Sydney, though obviously the effects take longer to be seen in the latter than the former. From a personal point of view, the sheer gain in familiarity and confidence with a wider range of theological issues is of great significance in a world and a church where evangelical faith is seen as incompatible with intellectual achievement. Moreover, there is now a depth to my understanding of the Bible, and consequently to my preaching and teaching, which was simply not there before. As regards the Diocese of Sydney, ten months was not a great deal of time in which to make an accurate assessment, and in some respects I found the Anglican churches remarkably conservative—even dull! However, it seemed to me the best is still to come and if the quality of students currently at Moore is anything to go by, there will eventually be an explosion of gospel ministry. Many of us are already familiar with the benefits of 'Sydney theology' through the Proclamation Trust and the visits of people like John Chapman, Peter and Phillip Jensen and John Woodhouse. What we are perhaps less aware of is that these people themselves are products of, as well as phenomena within, the Diocese of Sydney. There are more where they came from! Moreover, the laity in the diocese are far better trained than is the case here. In stu-

dent work in particular, I was struck by the lack of disparate groups and opinions which dog us at home. This, I am sure, is at least partly due to the high standard of teaching and rigour in theology both in local churches and in student groups.

It is unfortunately often the case that people realize the value of what a theological college has been trying to teach them only when they go out into ministry. One way that the Sydney Diocese attempts to mitigate this problem is by appointing ordination candidates to 'catechist' posts. The catechist is attached to a parish or some other sphere of ministry for one day a week and is treated as a member of the staff team. Significantly, the catechist is also paid accordingly and this helps establish in the mind of both the catechist and the people with whom he (or she) is working that he is doing a 'real'—albeit part-time—job. I am sure that this financial commitment is one reason why, in the congregation I came to know best, it was clear that the catechist was a valued and loved part of the ministry team. Equally, the catechist begins to get a 'feel' for the work of ministry—including its pressures!

Bible and Theology

There are some other aspects of the approach at Moore College which I think further contribute to its effectiveness. One is the 'Biblical Theological' approach to the Bible - which we would perhaps recognize better as a 'Salvation Historical' approach. This was developed in the 1960s by the future Archbishop of Sydney, Donald Robinson, apparently inspired by an article written by Jim Packer. Those who are unfamiliar with it should read *Gospel and Kingdom* (Exeter Paternoster Press 1981) by Graeme Goldsworthy, *According to Plan* (Leicester IVP) by the same author or even my own *Get Into the Bible* (London MPA Books 1994). This approach is distinctive in that it treats the Bible in its entirety as a unified book telling one story. In this respect, it has some affinities with the 'Literary Critical' approach or the 'Canonical Criticism' typified by Brevard Childs.⁵ By contrast, in English colleges we seem to suffer from an excessive deference to the scepticism of an earlier generation of 'Source' critics. One cannot help feeling that our academic lack of confidence in the Bible as a *whole book* (and our consequent inability to relate the parts to one another) communicates itself early on to students and undermines their willingness to commit themselves to the process of study. This is particularly so when the syllabus elevates criticism of the Bible above submission to it. The Australian approach proves its value by constantly yielding convincing insights about the message of Scripture, particularly the Old Testament in relation to the New, which excite the student to further study. Indeed, it was seeing the success of Moore lecturers and graduates in handling Scripture which first attracted me to go there.

Of course, where the Bible is treated with scepticism or contempt on a university-based course, the result is disastrous. Montefiore, in his relative admiration for the universities, recognizes that the concept of divine reve-

lation is something to which they must inevitably sit light and which therefore renders them less suitable as places in which to pursue a truly *Christian* study of theology. This raises another aspect of Moore's approach which differs from our own. At Moore there is a commitment to evangelical doctrine and the authority of Scripture but this is coupled with a bold approach to the world of theological ideas. The balance is maintained by a strict control over the educational environment of the students, in particular through the careful selection of staff and speakers at the college and a gradual increase in the theological challenges students are expected to face. Contrary to rumours I have heard in this country, Moore is not a place where students are discouraged from reading non-evangelical material, but before they venture into the deep waters they are taught to cope by sympathetic and competent tutors. Our own 'sink or swim' approach, where students are sometimes exposed to teaching deliberately *designed* to disturb them, produces not only the obvious casualties of those who give up their faith or switch into Liberalism but the hidden casualties of those who remain Evangelicals but who cannot or will not read widely out of fear or contempt for what they perceive as the inevitable conclusions of 'scholarship'. More than once I heard it said by lecturers at Moore that students could handle anything provided the correct foundation was laid, and this was frequently demonstrated to me in practice.

Other Disciplines

Moore has also held on to some traditional disciplines which we seem to have lost. Considerable emphasis is laid on learning Greek and Hebrew, to the extent that incoming students attend a two-week Greek Summer School before the year even starts. Yet in the long term this produces a competence in engaging both with the text and with critical commentaries which reflects unfavourably on our own rather slack approach to Biblical languages. Philosophy also forms a major element in the courses, on the grounds that students need to understand what shaped the thinking of past and present generations if they are to relate the Gospel to the modern world effectively. Systematic theology is also emphasised, with BTh students being required to complete Calvin's *Institutes* (as well as the Bible) during their time in college. Our own nervousness of systematic theology arises out of a proper distrust of rigidity in the things of God, but as Gunton points out, there is 'an important distinction between a systematic theology that aims at a system, and one that more modestly aims at being systematic'.⁶ He explains, 'systematic theology is any activity in which an attempt is made to articulate the Christian gospel or aspects of it with due respect to such dimensions as its coherence, universality and truth'.⁷ Far too many of our own Anglican ministers have not thought through their faith as a series of *related* ideas, with the result that they take a piecemeal approach to both practical and theoretical issues.

Of course, not all the subjects taught at Moore are academic, and the courses are not all for ordination candidates. Though Moore offers its own

MA and MTh, there are one year courses for those going on to other spheres of ministry including missionary work. Counselling, evangelism and general 'pastoral' work are taught alongside the more 'academic' subjects. Neither is the college 'all work and no play', any more than the subjects are 'all theory and no practice'. In these areas, however, we in the UK are also quite strong. It is in our lack of academic achievement, and our apparent acceptance of this, that a college like Moore has something to teach us.

Convincing Ourselves

Yet perhaps in the end the hardest people to convince will be ourselves. As Evangelicals, there is always a danger of us slipping into a super-spiritual attitude towards theological education. After all, we did not need to become theologians in order to be converted, nor, most likely, were we converted by a theologian. Moreover, there are many people with a love for the Lord and an effective ministry whose theological abilities are distinctly 'amateurish'. Indeed, how often have we heard the speaker who proudly declares 'I am not a theologian'? It is all too tempting to assume that theological expertise is an optional extra to the 'real work' of ministry. And yet this is to ignore both our history and our contemporary situation.

On the one hand, we were born out of theological wrestling. An obvious example of this is the Reformation where, both on the continent and in England, new life ultimately came because the Reformers were able to convince not only their hearers but *themselves* of the truth of their propositions. Less obvious, however, is the fact that the Gospel itself was born out of theological wrestling by the likes of Stephen, Peter, Paul and John who had to come to terms with the implications of what God had done in Christ —and this latter wrestling is perhaps more obscure to us precisely because of our theological ignorance. On the other hand, we are surrounded today by competing theological claims, some of which must be wrong and which therefore should be resisted. Examples include not only the debate about contemporary prophecy or the place of miracles, but more complex questions about evangelical spirituality or ecclesiology. Moreover, the age-old questions about how we are put right with God refuse to go away, with conflicting claims being made by Roman Catholics and ARCIC on one side and the neo-Arminianism of Roger Forster⁸ and pietistic Evangelicalism on the other. The theological confusions, not only of the Church of England but of the country as a whole, may be in a large part due to the fact that our ministers are no longer competent theologians. There is only one truth, there are a thousand and one errors - and the minister must be competent to deal with them all!

Martin Luther, of all people, knew that the Gospel of Salvation was a simple truth before which his previous learning was as dust. Nevertheless, after his own 'conversion' he continued to insist on the need for learning as vital for the continuation of the Gospel. In 1524 he wrote as follows:

There is a vast difference . . . between a simple preacher of the faith and a person who expounds Scripture . . . A simple preacher (it is true) has so many

clear passages and texts available through translations that he can know and teach Christ, lead a holy life, and preach to others. But when it comes to interpreting Scripture, and working with it on your own, and disputing with those who cite it incorrectly, he is unequal to the task; that cannot be done without languages [ie Greek and Hebrew]. Now there must always be such prophets in the Christian church who can dig into Scripture, expound it, and carry on disputations. A saintly life and right doctrine are not enough. [. . .] Therefore, although faith and the gospel may indeed be proclaimed by simple preachers without a knowledge of languages, such preaching is flat and tame; people finally become weary and bored with it, and it falls to the ground. But where the preacher is versed in the languages, there is a freshness and vigor in his preaching, Scripture is treated in its entirety, and faith finds itself constantly renewed by a continual variety of words and illustrations.⁹

If to Luther's languages we add all the other disciplines of theological study then we should need no other convincing that ministers must indeed be theologians.

Thus in conclusion a word needs to be said for the concept of the theological college as a resource. Over a period of several years, I was privileged to know the late Canon Harry Sutton as a close friend and advisor. The last time we met, which was a few weeks before he died, Harry listed for me what he felt were the 'Evangelical Priorities'. In particular, he said that we should '*fight to the death for a biblical theological college*'. Harry felt that the key to the renewal of Evangelicalism in this country was a theological college which could act as an intellectual power house. Though we did not discuss it further, I suspect he had the model of Moore College and the Sydney Diocese in mind. In the current climate, the concept of a college which would renew Evangelicalism is likely to be *anathema* to the hierarchy. Unfortunately, it seems it would also be wasted on the rank and file!

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NOTES

- 1 C E Gunton 'An English Systematic Theology?' *The Scottish Journal of Theology* Vol 46 (1994) p 482
- 2 It is perhaps noteworthy that Liberalism has derived its most recent creative impetus from a feminism which historically has its sources outside Christianity.
- 3 Gunton p 479
- 4 A Bloom *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education has failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students* (New York Simon & Schuster 1987)
- 5 B S Childs *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (London SCM 1979).
- 6 Gunton p 485
- 7 Gunton p 485
- 8 See R T Forster and P V Marston *God's Strategy in Human History* (Minneapolis Bethany House Publishers 1973)
- 9 Luther *Letter to the Councilmen of Germany* LW 45 pp 363, 365