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A Long Rumour of Wisdom

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During the past year, the predecessor who has had most attention has been the great Reformation theologian, Martin Bucer, the quincentenary of whose birth we have celebrated. He was trained as a Dominican, steeped in Thomas Aquinas ; he was then deeply influenced by Erasmus and also by Luther and Zwingli ; and he in turn influenced leading Reformation theologians, notably Calvin. He had a genius for friendship and also for peacemaking across deep divisions. On his extensive travels through Europe he communicated and tested his theology in debate with allcomers, academics and non-academics, Catholics and Protestants. He focussed above all on the city of Strasbourg, its politics and economics as well as its church life. When he was forced to leave there he came here to be Regius Professor of Divinity in 1550 and wrote one of his most important works, *De Regno Christi*,¹ on the reshaping of English society. Sadly, he could not withstand the Cambridge climate and he died the next year in 1551. It was a turbulent life, thoroughly involved in the formative events of his time with all their twists and turns. Professor Gordon Rupp called him, in a neat, anachronistic metaphor, 'the greatest ecclesiastical spin bowler of the age'.² He is also a good example of passionate dedication to the search for a wisdom which engages with the best available scholarship and with the deepest issues of religion and society.

Three responsibilities

Over four hundred year later we find ourselves in a Europe undergoing comparable transformations. The question I want to ask is : What is theology in this situation ? And, in particular, what about the sort of theology, united with religious studies, represented by this faculty ? My short answer is that theology is the seeking after a wisdom which has at least this much in common with Bucer's theology, in that it has three main responsibilities : to the academy, to religious communities and

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to the wider society. I will treat each in turn, with most attention paid to the academic responsibilities, as is appropriate in this setting. But it is worth bearing in mind the source of my title in the last stanza of Micheal O'Siadhail's poem 'Motet'. Let us listen to that poem.

O my white-burdened Europe, across
 so many maps greed zigzags. One voice
 and the nightmare of a dominant chord :
 defences, self-mirroring, echoings, myriad
 overtones of shame. Never again one voice.
 Out of malaise, out of need our vision cries.

Turmoil of change, our slow renaissance.
All things share one breath. We listen :
 clash and resolve, webs and layers of voices.
 And which voice dominates or is it chaos ?
 My doubting earthling, tiny among the planets
 does a lover of one voice hear more or less ?

Infinites of space and time. Melody fragments ;
 a music of compassion, noise of enchantment.
 Among the inner parts something open,
 something wild, a long rumour of wisdom
 keeps winding into each tune : *cantus firmus*,
 fierce vigil of contingency, love's congruence.³

'Something wild'—that quite provocatively goes somewhat beyond the notion of responsibility that I will be exploring. The connotations of responsibility are perhaps too sober, too cool and even moralistic (in the bad sense) to allow for the inebriations that have been part of the full-blooded pursuit of wisdom, whether in Plato, Augustine, Dante, Luther, Mother Julian, Gandhi, Einstein or Donald MacKinnon. There are desperate wrestlings with reality at its darkest points, leaps, strange intuitions, doubts that can, and sometimes do, subvert the whole enterprise, perseverance through years of aridity, frustration or bewilderment, experiences that put the self in the passive voice — one is gripped, addressed, judged, forgiven, illuminated, called, consoled, loved — and there are intoxicating joys. This wild and dangerous side to theology should qualify any domestication of it into a set of responsibilities to the passing forms of university, religious community or society. Yet those responsibilities remain essential. We will return to the poem later. Now I want to take a sober look at the responsibilities, beginning with a general description of the type of theology that is done here.

Public Theology

First, we need to keep university theology in perspective. If theology at its broadest may be defined as a thinking relation to religions and to the questions of truth and life that they raise, then it is obvious that most theology is not academic. It goes on as part of ordinary life among those, estimated at between three and four billion,⁴ who make up the membership of the world's main religions, and also among those of the remaining two billion or so who are provoked to thinking by encounter with the religions and the questions they raise. And even within academic theology, most is not done in universities.

Next, we need to recognize the distinctive institutional setting for theology and religious studies that we have in English universities. Its crucial feature emerges most clearly from a comparison with the situation in Germany and the United States. Put simply, in Germany university theology is publicly funded and largely confessional along lines laid down by the Reformation — there is usually a Catholic and Protestant faculty in the same university and the churches have control over most senior appointments. In the United States, with its strict separation of church and state, public funds may only go to religious studies, and other theological pursuits are variously funded, usually through churches, charitable donations and fees. In this country, as the confessional constraints in university theology in the older universities were slowly removed and as newer universities started departments afresh, there developed, often with conscious rejection of both the German and American models, a publicly funded realm where the polarity between theology and religious studies need not dominate. This is a precious achievement to which the greatest danger is, perhaps, a failure to recognize its strengths and a tendency to fall back into fruitless polarities. I want to describe it so as to elucidate its wisdom and its potential.

In this faculty the clearest sign of moving beyond any dichotomy between theology and religious studies came in 1969 when it was decided to change the BA course from the Theological Tripos to the Theology and Religious Studies Tripos. This move was late in comparison to many other English universities ; it was an attempt to do fuller justice to other religions besides Christianity. When a theology or divinity faculty (I sometimes find the ancient term 'divinity' attractive in face of the manifold misunderstandings and misrepresentations of 'theology', but on the whole, despite the official title of my chair and this faculty, I prefer to use 'theology') which is not

confessional extends its studies to cover more religions, that is a change in scope rather than basic academic character. What I mean is that there is no aspect of a religious studies faculty that should not also be found in a good theology faculty : the same disciplines apply to each religion. What then is specifically theological beyond these shared aspects ? It is dangerous to generalize because there is no widely agreed distinction between theology and religious studies. But what theology tends to include, whereas religious studies need not necessarily do so, are such elements as the encouragement to discuss and take positions on the truth claims of a religion, and the freedom to contribute constructively as well as critically to the lively contemporary debates within, between and beyond religious communities as well as about them. This allows for and even encourages a theological truth and wisdom which I will explore further towards the end of this lecture.

What term might be applied to the discourse that goes on in this faculty and in other faculties and departments like it around the country ? The least inadequate that I can find is 'public theology'. It is engaged with the worldwide public presence of the religions. There is no single agreed definition of religion. In many ways I find the term 'religion' unsatisfactory, but I use it in a fairly low-key way to refer to the sort of entities that Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, Judaism, Islam and so on are. More important than agreement on definitions is the need to recognize the multidimensional nature of religions. My colleague Professor Nicholas Lash has recently described the main dimensions under variations on headings from Schleiermacher (feeling, knowing and doing) ; from Newman (devotion and passion, fellowship and organization, and thought, philosophy and theology) ; and from von Hügel (the mystical, the institutional and the intellectual).⁵ What does public theology do ? It encounters specific religions in all these aspects and it tries to adopt the methods of study appropriate to them. This encounter may be 'in faith', with personal involvement in a particular tradition, or it may not. It seems to me to make no more sense to try to define and legislate for the appropriate subjective condition in which to come to the academic study of theology than it does to do so in the case of poetry, economic theory or music — though that is not to say that there are not important differentiations in capacity. Surprising things happen in the theological encounter, both to those within the religion studied and to those outside it. And one thing that commonly happens in that the crude spatial picture of 'inside' and 'outside' is replaced by a more sophisticated notion of boundaries and relationships.

Clearly, a thoroughgoing encounter will have to draw on many disciplines, and here we enter the public world of international academic life. It is hard to think of a discipline that is not related to the questions raised by the study of religions. This underlines the obvious fact that theology is not one field in the way in which, for example, geology is. It does not have a subject matter that can be neatly circumscribed, because it is the nature of religions to pervade the whole of life, individual and corporate, and to offer a comprehensive horizon embracing all reality. In this respect it is more like philosophy (at least in some of philosophy's self-understandings) than any other discipline and for theology one of the most important relationships is with philosophy. (Happily, this relationship at present shows some signs of entering a more interesting and mutually respectful phase in this country and elsewhere.) One danger for theology, as for philosophy, is that it may be fragmented into all the fields where it may be relevant. So why not have religious history in the history faculty, philosophy of religion or philosophical theology in philosophy, Hebrew in oriental studies, New Testament in classics, sociology of religion in sociology and so on? That happens already in some cases, though usually in this university with joint affiliation to two faculties. And in some universities there is no theology or religious studies as a separate unit. There is a fundamental issue here, on which I will simply give my summary judgement: that a specific religion is not adequately studied if it is fragmented into specialist aspects without coordination. Its aspects are coinherent in ways that quite often make nonsense of attempts to deal with it in fragments. Justice is not done to the complexity and dynamics of its distinctive existence over time. Above all, its multidimensional wisdom is missed.

Responsibilities to the Academy

So public academic theology has as its subject matter the religions in their various dimensions, encountered and responded to through various disciplines, with the questions of truth and life pursued wherever they lead, but needing some integration if the pursuit is to be adequate. How can its responsibilities within the university be summarized?

First, it needs to be as good as possible at the study of languages, texts, history and traditions, laws, practices, institutions, politics, economics, social life, intellectual life, psychology, science, art, music, architecture, and so on, in so far as these are relevant to the religions. These all appear in

religions as mediations of meaning and life. In all of these studies, specialists in theology have wider peer groups with whom to be in communication over content, criteria and the whole state of particular fields. I take it for granted that most of the academic study and research in theology and religious studies comes under this broad heading and that a faculty which fails in this is not academically credible. It is also obvious that it is intrinsic to such studies that they constantly expand, bringing a perpetual longing for more colleagues !

Secondly, through all that, questions about truth as well as about norms and practice need to be asked, and both critical and constructive contributions encouraged. Here it is especially important to be able to handle religions as wholes, to engage with their particularity rather than with religion in general. One of the implications of this is the need to relate specialities to each other where questions which transcend any one of them are at stake. Theology is in a good position to try to achieve models of good practice in relations between disciplines. It is also a field where profound disagreements cannot be avoided, not least about the nature of the field, and so it can help to contribute to the university an ethos of dialogue without suppression of fundamental disputes.

Thirdly, there is the responsibility to give a good education to undergraduates and graduates. There are few subjects that allow engagement with such a wide range of areas and skills and with such intensity. A student can specialize in some of the fields already mentioned as well as take part in the overarching questions of philosophy, hermeneutics and systematic theology. There are many themes and issues of considerable existential importance to the student and of wide relevance to society. The result is that theology can at its best offer an education well suited to our complex world. It can be imaginative and richly rational and can offer as much as any other the sheer joy of understanding and even wisdom. It is also significant that the centuries-long limiting of university theological education in this country to those preparing for official church ministry has long since ended. Education of clergy of course continues to be important but this is not the vocation of the large majority of our graduates. They range over the whole gamut of careers, and these lay theologians are, I believe, in their own statistically small way, an important presence in our society.

The Task of Universities

So much for the main responsibilities of theology in the

university. But universities themselves are not unproblematic settings. In the face of enormous changes they often seem curiously unable to state a convincing public case for themselves. When challenged to justify themselves their rhetoric has often run hollow. Not only that, but there seems to have been a constriction of the very space to debate vital issues transcending specialties, such as the relation of knowledge to power, rational justification and the nature of truth. The creation of institutional space for this sort of fundamental dialogue and dispute to happen is, I believe, one of the primary justifications for the university in a pluralist society. Theology needs to be part of this ; and the universities, unless they are to limit the debates quite arbitrarily, need to do academic justice to the religions that billions are members of and to the questions that they raise.

The most embracing way to characterize this is as a search for wisdom. I will say more about theology as wisdom later. For now I use wisdom in the sense that the philosopher Mary Midgley (a wise representative of the 'common sense in plain language' tradition of British philosophy) does in her sharp and, I think, convincing analyses of academic life at present.⁶ Wisdom here is about taking the risk of facing the large questions, about refusing to separate specialization from human wholeness, being alert to the powerful hidden and sometimes open agendas of those shaping our 'knowledge industry', and about meeting the demands of people outside the universities for serious discussions of wide topics. One task of the university is to help society transcend itself in various ways, above all in its knowing, its perspectives on itself and the world, and its quality of judgement. That is both a risky task and one which it is ultimately fatal for the university to ignore. There is a great thirst for meaning and wisdom. There is also, of course, widespread disillusion with many of the 'packages' of meaning that have been passed on (in the religions and in other ways), and there is much despair that there are meanings to be found. But in this situation it is extraordinarily important both that the profundities of meaning from the past be studied, criticized, retrieved and made available for the present, and that there be meditation and discussion about their implications and about new possibilities. The academic study of theology has a role to play here.

Responsibilities to religious Communities

I turn next to the responsibilities of academic theology to the

churches and other religious communities. It seems to me an undoubted advantage that admissions, appointments and curricula are no longer determined according to one church. But what does that mean for particular faith commitments in the study of theology ?

I would suggest that these do and should play a full part in the discipline. Everyone has commitments and the properly academic approach is, when they are relevant to any topic, to try to identify them and discuss them. Yet this is of course a very sensitive area. On the one hand there is the view that faith is a disqualification in the academic study of religions, leading inevitably to bias and inappropriate advocacy. Those are serious dangers and have often occurred, but they are by no means limited to theology. They are just as relevant to economists commenting on the economy, lawyers with deep convictions about justice and punishment, historians, architects, literary critics and so on. The answer to improper advocacy or manipulation of a discipline to serve one's own belief or ideology is not to ban all advocacy but to have it take place in a setting where rigorous argument and consideration of alternatives are normal.

On the other hand, in the communities of faith there are also fears and prejudices. These too can appeal to much evidence. The dominant modern academic discourses have on the whole given some cause to religions to be defensive — they have variously patronized them, explained them away, historicized them, marginalized them, ignored them, privatized them, trivialized them, refuted them, neutralized them, and in general suspected them. Often theology has been felt as giving the unkindest cuts of all. Yet it is sad to the point of tragedy when this leads, as so often, into a suspicion of intellectual life as such, as if faith might be unintellectual or anti-intellectual. The main religions present in this country, Judaism, Christianity, Hinduism and Islam, all have distinguished intellectual heritages. They are also at present involved in complex and rapid transformations. For them not to think about these matters is not an option. The question is about the quality of thought and whether whatever contribution the academy can make is offered and welcomed.

What are the theological needs of the main religious communities ? I would suggest that they are for a high quality of engagement with what comes from the past, for discernment and judgement about the present and future significance of their traditions, and for the provision of 'ordered learning'.⁷ This shows how much an overlap there is with what I have taken the tasks of university theology to be — studying the elaborate

particularity of religions, exploring questions of truth and practice and offering a good education. The overlap means that there should be (and in fact, of course, there are) close links between church and university. Indeed, historically the differentiation of the two came late and the nature of the differentiation is the pivotal issue. For example, how does theology in this faculty differ from that in the ecumenical Cambridge Federation of Theological Colleges? It differs not necessarily in content, standards or even in personnel; but primarily, I suggest, in the priority the theological colleges must give to the welfare of the particular faith communities they represent and to preparing their students for one type of vocation. As institutions, the faculty and the colleges have primary responsibilities towards different, though overlapping communities, the universities and the churches. But if either loses its sense of responsibility towards the other then both are impoverished. This is not necessarily an easy relationship, least of all for those who wear both hats, but the sustaining of its complexities (and sometimes ambiguities) is essential to the health of public theology. And here again there are instructive analogies in other faculties such as law, medicine and architecture.

I would make one final point on this relation of universities and religious communities, with the Christian churches of this country in mind. I see the most important item on their theological agenda at present being the education of their general membership for living in truth and wisdom. As traditional habits and supports for faith weaken in the society generally, as faith becomes less a part of the atmosphere, so the need for thorough learning of the faith increases. A religion is at least as many-layered and complex as a language and culture, and if people are to be more than tourists in relation to their traditions then there needs to be ordered learning of them and of their contemporary significance.

Responsibilities to society

The third responsibility of academic theology is to our society as a whole. This will of course be achieved largely by fulfilling the other two responsibilities. But besides those there is, from society's standpoint, a wider reason for having public theology. It is desirable for a society to have as high a quality of public discourse as possible in relation to the religions and the questions of truth and life that they raise. If religions are not studied in universities then they do not go away; what happens is that the level of public debate on religious matters and on

the wide range of issues to which religion is relevant is to that extent impoverished. A dimension of our social and moral ecology is distorted. The Chief Rabbi, Jonathan Sacks, in his Reith lectures, 'The Persistence of Faith',⁸ has made an eloquent plea for the public importance of religion in terms of that metaphor of a moral ecology. I would extend his conception by including academic theology as one niche. It draws its social significance not only from the intrinsic importance of the questions it pursues or the quality of the education it can give but also from the sheer historical and contemporary impact of the billions of religious adherents. Like it or not, the religions not only persist but often flourish. Many of the major international developments this century have been closely connected with religions. Even the standard objection to religious participation in the public sphere, that it means bigotry, fanaticism, wars, intolerance and insoluble debates, looks less persuasive when one notes the performance of religion's replacements in the marketplace : nationalism, capitalism, communism, fascism and other ideologies have an unrivalled record in human killing and misery. One need not even think that religions are on the whole beneficial in order to see the wisdom of promoting high-quality discourse within them, between them and about them. This is not a recipe for harmonious public life — rather it guarantees the airing of deep differences — but at least the sponsoring of spheres of respectful study and communication is a step in that direction.

Of its three responsibilities theology is probably least adequate to this one. If one looks at formative discourses in our society in recent decades there is relatively little high-quality theological contribution. On the whole, it is hard to think of theological treatments of the legal system, the economy, education, science, technology, medicine and the formation of our culture that have entered the mainstream of debate. This is not only the fault of theology — there is considerable resistance to seeing religion as living, thoughtful and publicly significant — but theology has often allowed itself to be marginalized or confined within restricted areas of philology, history, sociology or philosophy. That would have been unthinkable to Bucer or to his great predecessor against whom he reacted, Thomas Aquinas. To imitate them is not necessarily to say what they said but to do what they did in such diverse ways : they engaged with their contemporary world and rigorously related it, critically and constructively, to what they found in Christianity and in several intellectual traditions. The organization of academic theology on the whole severely limits this in ordinary theological education. We have the irony of students studying the law and

economics of ancient Israel but having no place to engage with contemporary parallels.

What this amounts to is a one-sided orientation to the past which is to the detriment of present public significance. But we need to be very wary of any sense of competition between engagement with the past and the present. It is not just theological wisdom that insists on the inseparability of the two. Nor do we want to suggest that rigorous specialties are to give way to dilettantist involvements in current affairs. Disengagement from the past and failure to cultivate scholarly and philosophical skills would be betrayal of the whole enterprise of theology and religious studies. What is needed are ways to focus collaboratively across disciplines on aspects of the shaping of contemporary life. The aim is to offer analyses and assessments of issues and new developments, and, in Edward Farley's phrase, 'vividly imagined and severely criticized' possible courses of action.⁹

Now let me sound a different note about this responsibility to society. I have emphasized the powerful, formative public discourses and developments. But vast numbers of people find themselves apparently written out of those scripts. They are not spoken to or spoken for and they have little possibility of speaking for themselves. They are marginalized, unable to take a worthwhile part, perhaps overwhelmed by the complexity, rapid change and vast scale of what they are part of, perhaps members of those diverse (and constantly changing) groups who find themselves severely disadvantaged in our late modern world. In relation to these, the public profile of theology is higher. Recent decades have seen a transformation in the theological scene as a growing number of theologies of liberation (largely within Christianity but also in Judaism and Islam) insist that genuine theology must be rooted in resistance to oppression — of the poor, of some racial groups, of lower classes, of women, of homosexuals, or minority cultures, of animals and of nature. These highly controversial theologies have changed the consciousness and the agenda of the theological world even where they have been largely rejected. Each theologian has to face a multiple confrontation with their claims. They have provoked many theological crises, not only among those they identify as oppressors but also among those they champion. They probe, sometimes crudely, sometimes with nuanced perception, the ways we have been shaped in the dimensions of our identity — gender, class, race, nation, wealth, status and so on — and they challenge us to change our perceptions, commitments and practice.

These prophetic voices are not to be domesticated. I am not

now going to attempt the task of following through their many implications, but I would make just two points about their role in the university, each of which would need further discussion if time allowed.

First, I think there is wisdom in the sort of phrase that is preferred by my colleague Dr Janet Martin Soskice, 'women and religion'. It draws attention to new voices until now largely absent from theology. The field has been changed irreversibly by these and the other previously unheard voices around the world. But the phrase also avoids any suggestion that there is a common 'line' or even that issues of gender are the main determinant of what all women contribute to religion and theology. It may be in some cases, but it is an open question. There are also 'men and religion', 'Jews and religion', 'Christians and religion', 'atheists and religion' and so on, with complex overlaps and interrelations between them. What I think needs to be avoided is the threat of a new sort of confessionalism in which not religious orthodoxy but political correctness is the criterion. This threat of quasi-confessionalism is one to which the wisdom learnt from handling the more usual confessionalism should be applicable — perhaps we have learnt a little about how to cope with religious divisions without either losing integrity of engaging in violence. It raises again the difficult issues of proper and improper advocacy, the other side of which is the nature of the university as a place where fundamental disagreements can cohabit in dispute and dialogue.

Secondly, I would argue that these theologies are by no means alien to my description of a public theology with three responsibilities. They all tend to major on the transformation of society, but those which have developed most also have strong connections with both universities and religious communities, often in challenging forms. The very use of the term 'responsibility' embodies one of their main contentions : that there is no divorcing the ethical from the academic. The question is whether it is a better or worse ethic and how far it serves a wisdom that is in tune with what that last stanza of 'Motet' calls 'a music of compassion'.

Wisdom

But what about that wisdom which has cropped up as a seeming cure-all from time to time ? I choose it as a term that has deep resonances in the Hebraic, the Hellenic and many other traditions. It is characteristically particular yet reaches for universality. It is long term and social, an achievement of generations. It is involved in the good shaping and reshaping

of character, of patterns of life, of institutions and of discourses. It is about insight into the many-faceted complexity of reality combined with right practice within it. It refuses to be content with knowledge that does not raise further questions about its relations with other knowledge and with the whole ecology of reality. Wisdom grows through habits of attentiveness, listening and respect that allow for otherness to the point of mystery. It is expressed in many genres, perhaps most typically in the epigrammatic wisdom saying. Yet it is more appropriately associated with people than with texts, and with their engagement in the complexities of living. Its presence is most urgent and apparent at the raw edge of life, responding to the new in ways that are impossible to catch adequately in sayings, principles or theories.

Yet the wisdom that has been written down in the past has extraordinary potential for transforming the present and the future. I think of two formative encounters in my own life. Years before deciding to study theology I accidentally picked up Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Ethics*¹⁰ and was gripped by that rich intensity of rigorous thought, faith and practicality. It gave content for the first time to the word theology, and I remain grateful that that was the source of my first impression. Years later, while studying classics, I remember being taken over for a whole evening, lengthening into night, by this passage from Plato's Seventh Letter :

If the hearer has the divine spark which makes the love of wisdom congenial to him and fits him for its pursuit, the way described to him [Plato has just described its rigours] appears so wonderful that he must follow it with all his might if life is to be worth living . . . Only after long partnership in a common life devoted to this very thing does truth flash upon the soul, like a flame kindled by a leaping spark, and once it is born there it nourishes itself thereafter.¹¹

How easy it is to do years of academic study without much glimpse of any thing like that !

And so on down the years — the pivotal points of theological pilgrimage have been times of encounter with wisdom in many forms — teachers, colleagues, students, friends critics, novels, philosophies and so on. Not the least important has been poetry, of which you have heard that example by Micheal O'Siadhail. The first stanza of 'Motet' suggests the present situation of Western civilization in the shadows of past imperialisms and other forms of dominance and exploitation.

O my white-burdened Europe, across
 so many maps greed zigzags. One voice
 and the nightmare of a dominant chord :
 defences, self-mirroring, echoings, myriad
 overtones of shame. Never again one voice.
 Out of malaise, out of need our vision cries.

That reflects something of the postmodern diagnosis of a hopelessly fragmented culture, compromised by the corruptions of power, and it echoes the postmodern determination : 'Never again one voice.' But then in the second stanza there is another note, a hope for renaissance. I am reminded of the suggestion of the philosopher Stephen Toulmin that after the Enlightenment's preference for grand overviews, systematic integrations and projects that homogenize people, places and knowledge, we have the possibility of recovering in a new way some of the attractive wisdom of the Renaissance about diversity without fragmentation, many voices with a *cantus firmus*.¹²

But can we be so positive ? 'And which voice dominates or is it chaos ?' There we have two radical doubts about the very possibility of wisdom of the sort I have been talking about. 'Which voice dominates ?' — is it ultimately about power relations that are a function of violence ? Is the imposition of meaning by force the only form of unity or harmony ? Is there no true peace, *shalom*, to be hoped for ?

'Or is it chaos ?' — this perhaps goes even deeper, the suspicion that there is no meaning, despair about the point of the quest for wisdom. I see widespread despair of this sort around in our universities. It is often well disguised — as Kierkegaard, in his unnervingly penetrating account of modern despair, *The Sickness unto Death*,¹³ said, despair is frequently embodied in hectic activity and busyness. The bracketing out of large, apparently insoluble questions is often wise for specific purposes, but as a habit it has terrible effects on the academy. In the face of a pervasive despair about energetic academic pursuit of those big questions, is it surprising that many theologians take refuge in respectable specialties and many philosophers find ways to constrict their scope of operations drastically in comparison with other periods ? The rumour of wisdom can be ignored or even actively denied.

Then there is the final question put by that stanza : 'does a lover of one voice hear more or less ?' In a pluralist situation, that is the pivotal one for academic theology, and my vision of theology and religious studies turns on the answer. There do have to be the generalizations, attempted overviews and embracing concepts. The first part of this lecture has used such

concepts as responsibility and wisdom in order to sketch how the heterogeneous practitioners in this field might be part of a common enterprise. But you may have sensed a certain abstraction, the inability of that level of talk to come to grips with many of the most urgent and interesting issues. The main reason is that one does not have to press far before one comes upon the deep particularity of concepts such as responsibility or wisdom. In theology this leads to conceptions that are both particular and transcendent, such as responsibility before God and the wisdom of God. How can these have academic justice done to them? Of course one can bring many disciplines to bear on them, say what they have meant to others and so on. But what about actually listening and speaking in responsibility before God? What about receiving the wisdom of God? Unless one is quite arbitrarily to limit the human quest for truth and wisdom one must allow for this. No one here can escape his or her own particularity: Hindu, Jew, Christian, Muslim, agnostic, atheist or some other.

What might that involve for the lover of the voice of the Christian God? It means, first, being in the tradition of wisdom communicated by the Old Testament. Here wisdom is above all identified with God — as the opening of Ecclesiasticus says:

All wisdom is from the Lord ;
she dwells with him for ever. (Eccles. I.I)

so that intrinsic to the formation of a wise mind is habitual relationship with God in love, praise, prayer, and a wide range of responsibilities, but above all the responsibility for passionate, whole-hearted and disciplined pursuit of wisdom wherever it is to be found. This wisdom is as much political and economic as it is personal and religious. It is also strongly self-critical and revisionist — as in the Book of Job's devastating critique of key elements in its own wisdom tradition. This theocentric and self-critical understanding is further specified in Christian thought. To see Jesus Christ crucified as 'the wisdom of God' (1 Cor. 1.24) is to find oneself wrestling, in continuity with Job, with a range of radical questions about death, suffering, evil, sin, bodiliness, weakness and foolishness — but above all about Jesus Christ. Further: to affirm this God as trinitarian is to be part of one of the most extraordinary adventures of wisdom. It is partly about discerning a dynamic order of love and truth that is infinitely abundant, generous and welcoming. It stretches the mind in all directions — God, the cosmos, history, religion, society and self. It draws one into confrontations, unexpected alliances, mysteries and commitments. The mind is disciplined

and challenged by trying to conceive radical otherness, by qualification of all positive statements and by the need never to forget the *via negativa*. And it is a particularly fascinating adventure at present as we find that in the twentieth century (in some contrast with the nineteenth) this deep grammar of Christian faith is helping to generate new trinitarian speech and theology among Catholics, Protestants, Orthodox, Pentecostals, liberationists, feminists, Asians, Africans and others. Might Geoffrey Wainwright even be right in his (to some) astonishing verdict that for our period the doctrine of the Trinity is especially the one by which the Christian church stands or falls ?

Does the lover of the voice of this God hear more or less ? There are no inevitabilities here but the crucial possibility is that the voice bearing this rumour of wisdom might be so heard and loved that the result is fresh and fruitful wisdom for today.

I come to this chair with a great hope. It is a hope, for others and for myself, for wisdom with something of that quality, engaging critically and creatively with the religions and their questions of truth and life. I do it, of course, in my particularity. I am a lover of one voice. I trust that this will help in hearing more, not less.

It is worth meditating theologically on that hope. In classical Christian theology¹⁴ there are two principal temptations which threaten a life of hope. The first is presumption, thinking you have already what you hope for and relaxing the arduous tension of living in hope. One version of this is the dominant voice asserting mastery. There are many other forms of academic presumption, greatly encouraged by the pressures to publish. The second temptation is to despair, believing that there is no fulfilment possible. This, as I have mentioned, is the more serious academic threat. But there are also two virtues which are especially supportive of hope. There is magnanimity, which both Aristotle and Aquinas call 'the jewel of all the virtues'. It is about aspiring to great things, stretching the spirit always towards greater possibilities. The vision of public academic theology that I have sketched risks doing this. It would be much simpler to limit it to just one of the responsibilities or perhaps two of them — and there are many who advocate that. Sustaining the complexities of all three and also seeing wisdom as the goal will always seem too much. But here the other supporting virtue comes in : humility. This is about recognizing limits and proportions. It balances any claims to *docta sapientia*, learned wisdom, with severe reminders of *docta ignorantia*, knowing what we do not know. If one plays further with the fanciful etymology that traces it to the latin word for ground, *humus*, then one

might say that in my vision it is about the disciplined, long-term and ecologically sound cultivation of each specialty field in theology and religious studies. Excellence here is the *conditio sine qua non* of a good faculty. The study of all that wealth of particulars and the patient discerning of their character and interconnections is the staple, humble task of most of us most of the time. The challenge, in the hopeful pursuit of wisdom, is to keep together magnanimity without presumption and humility without despair.

Now to return to the final stanza of the poem, indeed to its last line. 'Love's congruence' is the ultimate hope. But it is preceded by that 'fierce vigil of contingency'. In our universities, religious communities and societies we are faced with extraordinarily diverse threats, risks, possibilities and challenges. In the midst of rapid change, rumours are often decisive for how people act and otherwise respond. And of course one person's rumour can be another's reliable testimony. Public theology is engaged in a vigil that concerns long traditions of testimony and their present participation in the contingencies of our world. I hope that all of us, in our own particular ways, will join with magnanimity and humility in this vigil and that we who are theologians and scholars of religion will do something for our part to substantiate some particular rumours of wisdom as testimony to be trusted.

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- 3 *The Chosen Garden* (Dublin 1990) p. 82.
- 4 See D. Barratt, *Encyclopedia of World Christianity* (Oxford 1982).
- 5 Nicholas Lash, *Easter in Ordinary. Reflections on Human Experience and the Knowledge of God* (London 1988) p. 140.
- 6 *Wisdom, Information, Wonder, What is Knowledge For?* (London and New York 1989).
- 7 Cf. Edward Farley, *The Fragility of Knowledge. Theological Education in the Church and the University* (Philadelphia 1988) chap. 5.
- 8 London 1991.
- 9 Edward Farley, *Fragility of Knowledge*, chap. 7.
- 10 London 1964.
- 11 Plato, *Phaedrus and the Seventh and Eighth Letters* (London 1973) pp. 135 f.
- 12 *Cosmopolis* (New York 1990).
- 13 Soren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death. A Christian Psychological Exposition for Upbuilding and Awakening*, ed. and transl. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton 1980).
- 14 For a clear account see Josef Pieper, *On Hope* (San Francisco 1986).