

## Why does theology matter?

Churches have a problem. There is a crisis of belief which has become increasingly obvious over the last twenty or so years. This is evident in the reaction to a number of popular books<sup>1</sup> which have been highly critical of the Christian faith that have been published over the last few years. For myself, I am not concerned that books have been written seeking to undermine Christian beliefs. Just because another person says something we disagree with is no reason for them not to be published. That way lies totalitarianism. As Oscar Wilde said, “There’s only one thing worse in the world than being talked about, and that is not being talked about.”<sup>2</sup> The need to attack Christian belief and understanding underlines its continuing power and the presence. It is there to be undermined. The battle may be on but it is not over. No, what worries me much more than atheists and secularists is the response by the Christian community. There have been some good responses,<sup>3</sup> but many of the responses are very limited. Typically they reveal a level of knowledge, and awareness of current theology among ordinary church going Christians even those who regularly read their Bibles and attend study groups, and even some clergy that is on the whole lamentable.

So much for my response but what would Jesus do about this crisis? We can of course make some guesses. We might say he would listen to the critics and respond, perhaps with a difficult question (Matt. 21.24-26; Lk. 20.4-6) or a parable (Lk. 10.25-37). He might of course adopt a more confrontational approach by metaphorically overturning the tables of the money lenders and driving them out of the Temple (Mk. 11.15-17; Matt. 21.12-16; Lk. 19.45-48; Jn. 2.13-16) or refuse to answer the questions (Mk. 14.61; Lk. 22.67-70). But for us to answer the question: “What would Jesus do?” we need to know as much as possible about Jesus, what he did, how he did it and his character. Only when we have as full a picture as possible can we begin to answer the question with any confidence. The problem is that to build up a picture which is superficial takes effort. To do this you have to have some theology. It is the lack of theology and the seeming lack of concern about this by many people who go to Church that lies behind this book. But I am not alone in my concerns.

First, John Hull a Methodist Local Preacher and retired professor of education at the University of Birmingham suggests that adult Christians are ambivalent if not resistant to learning ‘seeing danger where a child sees only another exciting fact to arouse his[her] curiosity’.<sup>4</sup> He continues by asking that given many adults have left the Church and given up on Christian faith what is different about those who stay? The answer he suggests ‘is all too clear. They have stopped learning.’ And why have they stopped learning? Because learning ‘would be confusing.’<sup>5</sup> Secondly Mark Noll the American

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<sup>1</sup> Brown, D. (2006) *The Da Vinci Code*. London: Corgi Books; Dawkins, R. (2006) *The God Delusion*. London: Bantam Books; Hitchens, C. (2007) *The Portable Atheist*. London: Da Capo Press; (2008) *God Is Not Great*. London: Atlantic Books.

<sup>2</sup> Wilde, O. (1891) *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. London. Chapter 1.

<sup>3</sup> McGrath, A. (2007) *The Dawkins Delusion*. London: SPCK

<sup>4</sup> Hull, John. M. (1985). *What Prevents Adult Christians From Learning?* London: SCM. P. 9

<sup>5</sup> Hull, 1985, 10.

evangelical Church historian says the ‘scandal of the evangelical mind is that there is not much of an evangelical mind.’ Furthermore evangelicals

have failed notably in sustaining serious intellectual life. They have nourished millions of believers in the simple verities of the gospel but have largely abandoned the universities... evangelicalism has little intellectual muscle.<sup>6</sup>

He suggests that ‘[u]nlike their spiritual ancestors, modern evangelicals have not pursued comprehensive thinking under God or sought a mind shaped to its furthest reaches by Christian perspectives.’<sup>7</sup>

Thirdly, in a robust statement the retired Cambridge professor of theology and Roman Catholic Nicholas Lash suggests:

It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that devout and educated Christians who refuse to acquire a theological competence cognate with to the general level of their education simply do not care about the truth of Christianity or, at the very least, do not care sufficiently to seek some understanding of that Word through whom all things are made, into whose light we have been called, and which will set us free.<sup>8</sup> (Lash, Nicholas. (2004). *Holiness, Speech and Silence*. Aldershot: Ashgate. P. 5.)

The fourth example is a parable by Dave Tomlinson who describes himself as post-evangelical.

Jesus told a parable to a gathering of evangelical leaders. “A Spring Harvest speaker and a liberal bishop each sat down to read the Bible. The Spring Harvest speaker thanked God for the precious gift of the Holy Scriptures and pledged himself once again to proclaim them faithfully. ‘Thank you God’, he prayed, ‘that I am not like this poor bishop who doesn’t believe your word, and seems unable to make his mind up whether or not Christ rose from the dead.’ The bishop looked puzzled as he flicked through the pages of the Bible and said, ‘Virgin birth, water into wine, physical resurrection. I honestly don’t know if I can believe these things Lord. In fact, I’m not even sure that I believe you exist as a personal Being, but I am going to keep on searching.’ I tell you this liberal bishop rather than the other man went home justified before God. For everyone who thinks he has arrived at destination has actually hardly begun, and he who continues searching is closer to his destination than he realizes.”<sup>9</sup>

Dave Tomlinson’s concern from a clear evangelical background is the denial of uncertainty and the claim to know all the answers. He identifies two problems on the one hand the failure to acknowledge the cultural assumptions that run through all theology. On the other hand the ability to recognize that divergent views might be possible.

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<sup>6</sup> Mark A. Noll. (1994) *The Scandal Of The Evangelical Mind*. Eerdmans: Grand Rapids. P. 1.

<sup>7</sup> Noll, 1994, 4.

<sup>8</sup> Lash, Nicholas. (2004). *Holiness, Speech and Silence*. Aldershot: Ashgate. P. 5.

<sup>9</sup> Tomlinson, D (1995) *The Post Evangelical*. London: Triangle. P. 61-62.

All four agree there are serious problems within the Christian community. Although Dave Tomlinson's argument is more overtly experiential and autobiographical than the others essentially he is calling for Christians to embrace their humanity and not be afraid of ambiguity. None are calling for purely academic theology but a level of theological understanding among Church goers sufficient to be open and Christian disciples in the world. It is these complaints which shape what I wish to say.

First, Nicholas Lash in a sharply critical comment made in a series of public lectures at Westminster Cathedral suggests that most Christians do not have a level of knowledge and therefore the ability to think theologically one might expect given their general education. Furthermore they are not concerned by their ignorance which he says implies they 'do not care about the truth of Christianity'. If Lash is right then Christians are leaving the door wide open for Richard Dawkins or Christopher Hitchens and others to offer an understanding of theology to which most Christians cannot respond if questioned by family, friends or colleagues. For example a basic grasp of the early history of Christianity and the writing of the Gospels would have enabled Christians to respond with some confidence to the *The Da Vinci Code*<sup>10</sup> instead of the level of high anxiety that it provoked.

Secondly, all too often Christianity has proclaimed that theirs is a simple faith regarding theology as intellectual mumbo jumbo. True faith is unquestioning. Belief is the ability to 'believe impossible things.'<sup>11</sup> Faith is not an inoculation against reason. Indeed for some curiosity and asking questions rather than leaving your intellect at the Church door is regarded as unchristian. Karl Barth suggests that people 'think "simply" when they pretend to know what they do not know.'<sup>12</sup> Allied to this there is often a deep suspicion of theology and theologians. Mark Noll's complaint is that as a result Christians have not been able to engage intellectually. Richard Dawkins' argument is that theology is subjective and built on insubstantial foundations. But theology remains on the university curriculum, however, what is worrying is the ever widening gap between what is taught and learnt in theological faculties and ministerial training and what is taught and preached week in, week out in local churches.

Lest you think this doesn't matter the debate engaged by Richard Dawkins about the origins of the world, creation and evolution is actually a debate which began with Darwin in the middle of the nineteenth century. One hundred and fifty years later it has become sterile with conservative Christians and conservative evolutionists repeating well worn arguments with no discernible result. However, elsewhere biologists, cosmologists and theologians have moved on considerably. Indeed for most people who go to Church the debate is simply a *cul de sac*. They have no problem believing in God as Creator and accepting evolution is compatible. So why is this a problem for others?

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<sup>10</sup> Dan Brown (2004) *The Da Vinci Code*. London. A very good and accessible response is: N. T. Wright (2006) *Decoding Da Vinci*. Cambridge: Grove Books

<sup>11</sup> In: *Through the Looking Glass* (Chapter 5). Carroll, Lewis. (1954). *Alice in Wonderland & Alice Through the Looking Glass*. London: Collins. P. 197.

<sup>12</sup> Barth, K. (1933) *The Epistle To The Romans* (ET.). London: OUP.

Over the last fifteen years I have been constantly amazed by the lack of intellectual curiosity among the majority of Christians and in particular those who would preach and teach. For example I was asked by someone whether I believed in creation. My answer was affirmative. I tried to explain that I did not see either Genesis or Darwinian evolution as being either or but both and. Indeed I suggested that in order to understand the biblical account of creation we have to take seriously that the stories told in Genesis 1 and 2 resist harmonization. It is not possible for both accounts to be historical and literally true. Their response suggested that my words were scandalous for a clergyman. When I explained the reasons, for example in Genesis 1 the creation of human beings is the penultimate moment in the story, whereas in Genesis 2 man is created and then observes and names creation and women is the last moment or the climax of the story. Finally all they said was, 'It's alright for you, you're a clever theologian you've studied these things.' But this knowledge is available to everyone. So why are most Christians unwilling to study, to think to ask and answer these sorts of questions?

Thirdly, there is the problem of fear as identified by John Hull. But why is theology so frightening for Christians? Anecdotal evidence suggests fear takes two basis forms. First, there is the fear that they will no longer be able to claim that they have a simple faith. Secondly, they are afraid that not only will their faith no longer be simple but that it will be demolished in the process. But I want to say that fear is personally debilitating and prevents people growing into Christian maturity. After all imagine if a father told his child that reading and writing wasn't a skill they should try and acquire. We might ask why? And the answer might be that he the father has never learnt, that his father never learnt and they had always managed, always been in work and for the child to learn to read would cause the family to grow apart. In the same way many Christians seem to fear theology. There is a real sense that a reasoned theology is the opposite of faith as belief. But I want to argue that it is theology is fundamental for all Christian talk. Not only that but theological ignorance is a significant inhibitor of Christian mission. To explain the faith to another and more importantly to be able to talk with and respond to questions asked demands some understanding. The more you understand, the greater the confidence and the more able you are to engage in a creative dialogue.

Finally, there is laziness which is implicit in Nicholas Lash's complaint. Imagine if I decided I wanted to learn play the piano. Perhaps I wish to surprise my wife with an impromptu musical evening or to provide accompaniment for hymns in Church due to the lack of other players. But because I am busy so while I am prepared to take lessons I don't have time for practice. The result will almost certainly end in failure. The reason for this will be my laziness and lack of commitment. As everyone knows to learn anything takes hard work, practice and study – whether it's learning the piano, taking up golf, learning to drive or a foreign language. Why should it be different for Christians growing in the faith? Surely it is arrogant to assume that we know all we need to know and any more knowledge and understanding is unnecessary or even to be ignored to protect what we have gained? Imagine if a top sportsperson reached a stage where they had a choice. Either they could stick at their present level, not quite at the top but getting by winning as much as they loosing. Or alternatively they could take a chance

temporarily risking present security to push on to the next level and becoming a champion. Perhaps we need to remind ourselves of Paul's words:

Do you not know that in a race all the runners compete, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. Well, I do not run aimlessly, I do not box as one beating the air; but I pommel my body and subdue it, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified. (1 Cor. 9.24-27.)

Paul is not speaking about intellectual training but about learning for holy living which he compares with training as a sportsman. This is the cost of discipleship. But what if some theological learning means being able to speak confidently with understanding about what Christians believe and why? What if such an understanding help you to live you Christian life even more fully? The problem for the Church and individual Christians is that we have become comfortable and don't want to take risks, even if what we know or have is not ideal. We fear the risks entailed in becoming a champion are just too frightening. But imagine if God had thought that the cross was too much of a risk?

### **Theology Matters**

It is only the presence of theology that identifies an activity, including words spoken as distinctly Christian. This may seem like a bold claim but it's actually very simple. First, as defined by the medieval theologian Anselm theology is simply "faith seeking understanding." This is crucial. Much of the criticism of religion and therefore theology that is currently voiced suggests that it is irrational in a modern age. However, following Anselm theology is first and foremost concerned with our ability to understand what it means to speak about God intelligently. The word itself is simply a composite of two Greek words *theos* (God) and *logos* (word). We can say theology is the study of how we speak about God.

Secondly, it is how theology is done rather than what theology is. It is a book of theological matters rather than a book about theology. I shall attempt to provide some example of how theology can go about its business. If you can stick with this I hope you will be moved both to do more reading and thinking about what you believe and what that means for yourself. I hope that you will begin to see that theology is not a matter of cleverness but that to believe in God defensible. Theology is relevant and important for all believers. Theology therefore ought to a central concern of the Christian community rejecting ignorance and misunderstanding of religious faith. The problem for the Church is there have been generations of people who think they know what the Christian faith is and means but whose knowledge is at best partial. What I have in mind is the difference between thinking that "Money is the root of all evil", or knowing "The love of money is the root of all evil."<sup>13</sup> This problem is serious enough but is compounded by the fact that ignorance and misunderstanding is not limited to those outside the Church but those who

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<sup>13</sup> The latter is the correct version (1 Tim. 6.10). The inclusion of the word love significantly changes how this phrase is understood.

would describe themselves as Christian. Often at best genuine theological understanding and the ability to speak coherently and interestingly about God, has been replaced by a few clichés. This combined with a woeful lack of interest does nothing to redress a general and popular scepticism about the status of religious belief in the wake of the rise of modern science.

Thirdly, it's also an attempt to demonstrate the richness of theology and how if we work at what we know and develop our skills, not as academic theologians but as interested Christians who want a fuller, more detailed knowledge and understanding of what it means to believe in God it will enhance the faith we hold dear. A church, that is all the people of God, which has improved theological knowledge and understanding will be better placed and more confident when faced by the latest attack by a journalist or academic seeking to prove the Christian faith is as unstable as a house of cards and will simply collapse and under pressure. Theology I suggest is a form of Christian body building. As the adverts used to say it could transform the weakling into a strong man not to be messed with. Confidence is not triumphalism but the courage to reclaim a trusted position on the public stage.

Finally, historically theology is built upon a fourfold foundation: scripture, tradition, reason and experience. These are the foundation blocks for its claim to speak truthfully. Although we may wish to prioritize these each lends support to the other proving a more stable foundation. Philosophically this called epistemology or about how we can be sure about the reliability of what we claim to know. Ultimately if Christians cannot defend theological knowledge except by claiming it is somehow special or different from everything else then two problems emerge. There is the problem of engaging with other types of knowledge and there is the difficulty of getting others to take seriously what we say. To believe in God does not mean that we have to abandon our intellectual abilities or skills, after all these are God-given attributes. To not use them is to refuse the gift.

## **Theology and the Bible**

Even though books are constantly being published and almost every moderately sized town will have bookshop reading seems to be falling out of fashion. Most reading is limited to popular fiction and books by or about celebrities. In saying this I may of course merely be expressing my own prejudices. But most people know *Pride and Prejudice* from having watched the BBC series or the film not reading the book.<sup>14</sup> One result, evident to anyone working in education is that reading is regarded as laborious and hard work by most people. And yet at the very heart of Christian theology is the Bible a book which we speak of as the Word of God.

Christians are convinced that God speaks to creation. To do this God uses words. Words are essential for communication so the words used matter. Words convey

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<sup>14</sup> Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (London: 1813); *Pride and Prejudice*, BBC 1995 (DVD 2005); *Pride and Prejudice*, Universal Pictures, 2005 with Kiera Knightly, Matthew MacFadyen, Brenda Blethyn, Donald Sutherland (DVD 2006)

meaning. Wrong or inappropriate words are likely to convey the wrong meaning. But the meaning of a word may only be clear in the context it is used. So for example if we read that a person had a yellow streak we would not immediately assume that someone had painted a yellow line on them but rather it was meant to suggest that their actions were cowardly. Or again words spoken may sound the same but have very different meanings for example hair and heir. But what about the words that God speaks? Are they different sorts of words and how can we understand what he is saying? Like any other activity reading requires practice. If we don't read things generally then our reading practice is going to be limited. Some people argue that the Bible is a different sort of book from anything else. It is God's book and therefore to be understood very differently. However, while I firmly believe that the Bible is a special book it must be read with the same rigor as anything else we might read. In particular while I accept the Bible is inspired I do not believe that it is inerrant.

Inerrancy is the belief that the Bible is without error. As I shall argue the Bible is the result both of the divine, God's spoken Word and at the same time it is also a human work. The prophets and apostles whose names are attached to the various books are fallible human beings. Furthermore fallibility is not restricted to the named writers but also there are the translators. The Bible was originally written mostly in Hebrew (The Old Testament) and Greek (The New Testament). The Bible as we read it in English, or any other language that is not the original, is a translation, something Christians and Jews have always done. This is very different from the Islamic understanding of the Qu'ran. For a Muslim because God spoke directly to the prophet in Arabic to translate his words would change God's words for a human's. But there is a further issue, the fallibility of the reader. Even if we accept the inerrancy of the Bible who is to say which preachers or teachers of scripture are never get it wrong? Finally, the Bible was written over a long period of time and using different genres or writing forms. So for example the Psalms are poetry whereas Leviticus includes history and law codes and the Gospels are different again. It is neither possible nor appropriate to read all these books in the same way as if they were identical in purpose and style.

By acknowledging the fallibility of the named writers, the translator and the interpreters and the different types of books in the Bible I don't want to deny the importance or reliability of the Bible. My point is to insist upon the limitations of human knowledge. What I am saying is that all that we know is limited and therefore provisional and as a consequence it may yet be amended. This seems to me to be a simple statement of fact. Human beings are creatures. Perfection and therefore completeness of knowing – omnipotence and omniscience – belong to God alone. This is a fundamentally biblical statement. We are told in Genesis that the sin of Adam and Eve which results in their expulsion from the Garden is their attempt to seize equality with their creator to re-invent themselves to be 'like God' (Gen. 3.5).

### **Theology and Tradition**

Usually tradition means the handing down the same unchanging customs and beliefs by word of mouth from one generation to another. This can be very important in the life of

most churches. For example there is the tradition of having a Carol Service the Sunday immediately before Christmas or giving a small posy of flowers to all the ladies in church on Mothering Sunday. But in theology tradition is not like passing on a family heirloom but rather something “handed over”. A good example is from 1 Corinthians about the when Paul says about the resurrection:

the gospel that I preached to you, the gospel which you received, on which you have taken your stand, and which is now bringing you salvation. Remember the terms in which I preached the gospel to you – for I assume that you hold it fast and that your conversion was not in vain.

First and foremost, I *handed on* to you the *tradition* I had received[.] (1 Cor. 15.1b-3a [REB] – my italics)

According to Anthony Thiselton the *Revised English Bible* ‘captures the logical... force’ by translating the Greek word usually translated “what” [NRSV also: RSV, GNB, NIV, ESV]) which he says is ‘implied’ but recognises ‘the mistakenly negative overtones generated by the notion of *tradition* by those who have not yet been liberated from the worst aspects of Enlightenment rationalism’.<sup>15</sup>

This quotation is taken from a commentary by Anthony Thiselton’s on the original Greek, but don’t worry about his language. I have included this to make a point about *tradition*. What I am saying is not just what I feel or believe but rather stands in a long line of Christian understanding of 1 Corinthians 15 which we can trace as far back as St Paul. Even the apostle is keen to make sure that his listeners know that what he handed on to them is not his own work but was handed on to him by other Christians.

As Christians what we believe is not something we have come to by our own deductive powers but has been handed on to us by other Christians. This handing on may have been through hearing of sermons or confirmation classes or home groups or reading books. The point is we do not discover and invent the Christian faith for ourselves. It is given to us from a long line of Christian believers. Even when we read the Bible on our own we do so in the light of this long history of Christian knowledge and understanding. This we make our own through our experience which leads us to accept or challenge and rethink what we have learnt. Faith is learnt in the context of being part of a wider, larger Christian community. Just as this is true for us so it is true of the heroes of the faith and the great Christian thinkers like Athanasius, Augustine, Anselm, Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, John Calvin, Jonathan Edwards, Charles Wesley, John Henry Newman, Karl Barth or Tom Wright.

But it is a mistake to assume that the *true* Christian faith is fixed and unchanging throughout history. One simple example would be the Christian understanding of slavery. For eighteen centuries Christians not only did not object to slavery but many kept slaves. The Bible itself does not oppose slavery and Paul even upholds the practice of requiring

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<sup>15</sup> Thiselton, A.C. (2000) *The First Epistle To The Corinthians*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans. P. 1186.



escaped slaves to return to their owners.<sup>16</sup> However, I doubt that any Christian would be prepared to argue that slavery is acceptable today.

Formally the Christian tradition is generally regarded as set out in the historic creeds and formularies<sup>17</sup> (For example: the Nicene Creed, the Chalcedon Definition, and the Apostles Creed; The Thirty-Nine Articles, Augsburg Confession and the Barmen Confession). As the philosopher Wittgenstein reminds us ‘every human being has parents’.<sup>18</sup> Tradition refers the continuous process of explaining and clarifying the Christian faith while trying to ensure that at the same time it remains faithful to its origins. So for example tradition is concerned to ensure that what Christians believe in the twenty-first century is still clearly in line with the beliefs of the apostles. Or that worship today is related to the worship of previous generations of Christians. In an evolving culture with new questions we need to ask, what does it mean to be Christian today?

### **Theology and Reason**

The word “reason” can mean the ability to argue rationally, faith seeking understanding. But it can also refer to a sound mind, a cause or motive, justification of belief or action as opposed to experience as a basis of belief. I shall use the word in all these senses though initially as the ability to argue sensibly. But secondly, as the motivation of the way we live our lives. Theology begins with understanding and must lead to action. But it is important to recognise that action and belief or understanding are closely connected. Neither exists without the other.

One interesting but unintended side effect of the Reformation was to recast faith in terms of the acceptance of certain key beliefs. By restoring the Bible to the centre of the Christian stage while at the same time playing down the significance of good works had held during the late Medieval period. Luther, Calvin and the other Reformers did not do this is but that they have been understood this way. The problem was that they were trying to correct an existing error which overemphasised the place of works. Medieval theology overemphasised the human aspect of salvation. In criticising the Medieval Church the Reformers did not believe they were formulating a new understanding. Rather they turned back on the one hand to the Bible and on the other hand the earliest theologians, like Augustine. They did not reject tradition they reasoned that the Bible as the Word of God has priority over human tradition. Even allowing for my earlier comments about the nature of the Bible the decision of the Reformers is a consequence of theological reason. But being Christian is consequent upon the gift of grace which results in belief which in turn shapes the way people live. Faith is real and takes on flesh when it shapes how we live.

One word which some theologians have started to use when speaking about how

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<sup>16</sup> See: Philemon.

<sup>17</sup> The historic formularies of the faith or confession are those classic statement of the faith historically grounded which are regarded as particularly significant often by particular Churches.

<sup>18</sup> Wittgenstein, L. (2201) *On Certainty* (ET. G. E. M. Anscombe) London: HarperCollins. 211

Christians live is “performance.”<sup>19</sup> This may seem like an odd choice of word which given its theatrical overtones seems to imply putting on an act. But it’s an idea that we might go back to Paul who reminds the Galatians that they “have put on Christ” (Gal. 3.27.). The image is one of putting on clothes and it may refer to the special robes worn by those who were baptised when they came up out of the water. But it could also be understood by reference to the theatre where actors put on masks to indicate they were not themselves but in character. In film and theatre performance is what transforms the script from a dead word to a living experience. But a good performance requires not just that the actor knows their lines and can pretend but that for the duration of the film or play they are the person they are playing. This demands that actions are truthful in both the context of the story and character. An good example would be the character of Edmund in *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe*.<sup>20</sup> The story is set during World War 2 and concerns four children who are evacuated to a big old house. While they are playing hide and seek the youngest child Lucy discovers a strange land which can only be reached through an old wardrobe but of course her brothers and sister don’t believe her. Later Edmund her younger brother follows Lucy into the wardrobe and discovers the truth for himself. Once in Narnia they go their separate way and Edmund allies himself with the White Witch who has imprisoned Narnia in the grip of a never ending winter for the promise of some Turkish Delight. When they return to normal time he does not back up Lucy’s story and as a result he is established as untrustworthy and selfish. Edmund is true to his character throughout. Even his conversion and restoration to his brother and sisters is a real moment of reversal in which his true character is resurgent despite our misgivings based upon the Edmund we have seen so far. But in both cases the truth of his character is confirmed by his actions. His actions are the inevitable outworking of how he understands himself and his place in the world.

Of course we might object that life is not scripted. But even here theatre and film can help us. One of the developments in modern film and theatre has been the emergence of improvisation which can be both comic and serious, but never random. The film director Mike Leigh has used improvisation in his work for many years. He begins with an idea and a brief plot synopsis. This will name the key characters and outline the story. He will then work with the individual actors to create a complete biography for each of the characters. Once this has been done he then brings the cast together with the story. This enables him and the actors by working together to create a realistic script which emerges from the interaction between the story and the characters. In this it is vital that each character is true to who they are and that this is reflected in the outworking of the story.

Understood like this reason is not simply a matter of rationality, logic and the scientific but is concerned with what is reasonable, including our actions. In the context of *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe* Edmund’s actions are reasonable in terms of who he is and the story that is told. That does not mean he is morally good but it does mean he is a good, that he is an effective and believable character in the context of what we know. It is in this sense that theology must be reasonable. Just because others find

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<sup>19</sup> Wells, S. (2004) *Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics*. London: SPCK.

<sup>20</sup> Walt Disney (2005).

theology unreasonable does not mean it is objectively so. It is possible that the opponents of Christianity have a limited understanding of what is reasonable.

## **Theology and Experience**

Experience is about personal involvement and the knowledge generated by what happens to us during the course of daily living. Experience may focus upon a single event for example being stung by a bee. Experience could be about a continuing series of events which are linked in some way, for example someone may be stung by a bee but due to an allergy leading to illness, treatment and recovery. Everyone has lot of experiences, including religious experience. On the one hand for a practicing Christian religious experience may be predominantly good. They believe in God and go to Church so the idea that God loves them, despite some difficult times seems plausible. On the other hand for someone who does not have religious belief the idea of God may seem implausible, after all, how could an all powerful and loving God let the dreadful things that occupy the television news occur. Their experience seems to contradict the theory. Theology is not about head knowledge it must chime with the reality of daily living. Human beings learn from the things that happen to them or the circumstances in which they find themselves. Such learning is not mechanical and sometimes people don't get it first, second or even twentieth time, but they learn. If every time I eat brussel sprouts I am sick sooner or later I will make a connection and begin to wonder if I don't eat sprouts I am less likely to become ill?

One example of experiential learning is the whole question of religion. Religion is a problem for academics because it is difficult to define. For example most people understand religion as being concerned with the supernatural and the divine. But Buddhism which is normally regarded as a religion does not include a belief in God. However, for our purposes we might say that religion is best understood sociologically as an observable phenomenon of observable practices, and habits, which are definable in relation to a framework of beliefs which serve to articulate an understanding of how the world is. In other words religion is the outward or visible experience of the consequences of believing.

In 2008 the *Sunday Times* newspaper published a summary of a survey undertaken by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation which suggested that it had “uncovered a [in Britain] widespread belief that faith – not just in its extreme form – was intolerant and used to justify persecution.”<sup>21</sup> The writer went on to point out that the Joseph Rowntree Foundation is a Christian charity originally established to voice social concern. It is important that Christians recognise this negative account of religion. The response of an Anglican Bishop to this Report was that: “People [of faith] meeting together week after week, for worship, support and education in church synagogue, temple gurdwara and mosque can only help people build local community but can teach children to become good citizens.”<sup>22</sup> This may be true but it doesn't accord with experience of many.

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<sup>21</sup> ‘Religion is “the new social evil”’ *The Sunday Times* (20.4.2008) p. 4.

<sup>22</sup> Tom Butler (Bishop of Southwark) in: *The Sunday Times* (20.4.2008).

Many people do not regard religion as a force for good within the world. This is reinforced by the experience of the 9/11 attack upon the World Trade Centre or the London Bombings.<sup>23</sup> Or television programmes like *The Weird World of Louis Theroux*, “America’s Most Hated Family” in which the presenter spent time observing, recording and questioning members of the Phelps family who attend Westboro Baptist Church in Topeka, Kansas. This is an ultra fundamentalist church in which much of the preaching announces God’s judgement of those whom he hates. The Church’s targets are not just gays or abortionists but extends to picketing the funerals of soldiers killed in Iraq suggesting that their death is evidence of God’s judgement of America’s and the soldiers sinfulness.<sup>24</sup> These are just a few examples from the recent past. Is it any wonder if observers conclude that religion is dangerous and to be resisted?

The books of Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens repeat very similar views to those recorded in the survey suggesting that it is voicing a widely held view. Indeed one only has to listen to any radio phone-in on the subject of faith schools to hear the same thoughts being aired, though often less coherently. It would seem that religion is a problem for many people. It is therefore a problem for the Christian community as well as other faith communities. Once again the problem is about human beings and how and why they act as they do.

### **Believing and Performing**

I have already suggested that theology is performative. According to the Epistle of James:

<sup>18</sup> But someone will say, ‘You have faith and I have works.’ Show me your faith without works, and I by my works will show you my faith. <sup>19</sup>You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder. <sup>20</sup>Do you want to be shown, you senseless person, that faith without works is barren? <sup>21</sup>Was not our ancestor Abraham justified by works when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? <sup>22</sup>You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was brought to completion by the works. <sup>23</sup>Thus the scripture was fulfilled that says, ‘Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness’, and he was called the friend of God. <sup>24</sup>You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. <sup>25</sup>Likewise, was not Rahab the prostitute also justified by works when she welcomed the messengers and sent them out by another road? <sup>26</sup>For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is also dead. (Jas. 2.18-26)

Some people find James problematic because in the whole letter he speaks mostly of God and only twice mentions Jesus Christ (1.1; 2.1). Martin Luther had a particularly low opinion of James. Famously in his Preface to the New Testament (1522, revised 1546) he said that compared to the Gospels, Paul’s letters and 1 Peter ‘that show you Christ and teach you all that is necessary and salvatory for you to know... St James epistle is really

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<sup>23</sup> 9<sup>th</sup> September 2001, the attack upon the World Trade Centre and the 7<sup>th</sup> July 2006 bombing in London perpetrated by terrorists who claimed to be religiously motivated.

<sup>24</sup> First broadcast on BBC 2, March 30 2007.

an epistle of straw'.<sup>25</sup> Luther believed that James appeared to contradict Paul's assertion that justification was by faith alone. Instead James seems to suggest that works are essential and without them salvation is not possible. For Luther this had real overtones of the Medieval theology that he challenged.

As suggested already to describe theology as performative is to adopt an idea from drama. But performance is not just a matter of actors or players and a script it also embraces an audience. If I watch a performance of a play I might know the story, perhaps I have read the play or the novel upon which it is based. But the actors breath life into it so it comes alive. In so doing it makes an impact upon me. Even if I am familiar with the story the way it is staged or the voices or style or appearance of the cast may challenge and even change my understanding. To speak of theology as performative therefore is to suggest that only when it is lived through works and enacted does it become real and alive not only for the performers but also the audience, those who are watching or get caught up in the action albeit unintentionally.

Medieval theology emphasised the importance of works. It believed in a doctrine of merit according to which the Church was where God's riches of grace was stored and which could be shared with all. Though it can be found in the work of the very earliest theologians it was only really was developed during the Middle Ages. The doctrine of merit acknowledged that anything done that was morally good, freely chosen, inspired by God and assisted by grace during the course of living an earthly life would be rewarded. For Luther and the Reformers the problem was sin which contaminated everything. According to James the contrast was not between faith and works but the recognition that they are two sides of the same coin, citing the stories of Abraham and Isaac and the prostitute Rahab. After sheltering the Israelite spies Rahab asks "Now then, since I have dealt kindly with you, swear to me by the LORD that you in turn will deal kindly with my family. Give me a sign of good faith" (Josh. 2.12.). The point that James makes is that both Abraham and Rahab are both people of faith which is evident through their actions. The truthfulness of their faith is sealed by what they do.

To take a silly example, if I really do believe there are fairies at the bottom of the garden then it ought to affect my attitude to he bottom of the garden. If there are fairies at the bottom of the garden then it will affect how I mow the grass there, after all I wouldn't wish to kill, one accidentally. Likewise to believe that God loves me and comes to me in Jesus Christ must shape all that I do. But how am I to know what to do? The answer we might suggest is in the Bible and in the Christian tradition. But the Bible cannot address every question. For example the Bible has nothing to say about nuclear power or invitro-fertilization. Therefore how is a Christian to respond to the treatment of infertility? Should the Churches work with or resist nuclear power.

Tom Wright, the Bishop of Durham and a leading evangelical biblical scholar of

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<sup>25</sup> Lull, T. F. (2005) *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*. (2<sup>nd</sup> Edn. Ed.) Minneapolis: Fortress Press. P. 111-112.

international repute discusses the authority of the Bible in terms of a five act play<sup>26</sup> of which we have four complete acts – Creation, the Fall, Israel and Jesus and the first scene of the fifth act in the rest of the New Testament. Furthermore we know the ending which is the restoration of creation to its original intended status through the second coming. He uses the analogy of finding a Shakespeare play which is not quite complete. Because it is incomplete for the play to be performed the actors have to improvise an ending because they can neither look it up nor can they simply repeat earlier parts of the story nor take an ending from another play. Instead they must immerse themselves in what they have so they are familiar with the characters, the style and the plot so that they are able to produce an ending which while not original is nonetheless congruent with and which is true to and therefore fitting with the existing acts. In the same way Christians today are living the period between from the end of the first act after the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the final denouement of the return of Jesus and the recreation of the world by God.

How do we know what it is to be Christian? We know it from the Bible and from tradition. From these sources we are able to develop logical reasons drawing upon experience in order to respond faithfully as disciples with informed improvisation. It is only by working to become familiar with the Bible and tradition that we can establish a firm foundation from which improvisation and faithful performance is possible. Without such a foundation we are like the foolish person in Jesus story about the two house builders (Matt. 7.24-27). In this parable is a story about obedience but also of foundations and strength. In this context improvisation enables the player to go beyond the script or perhaps better to write the script as they go. Such a process can not be individual but is necessarily relational. It is undertaken in relation to God and the over-arching biblical story of his engagement with the world (Creation, the Fall, Israel and Jesus); in relation to tradition, that is the history of Christian living and experience; and in relationship to other players on the stage – both believers and unbelievers. It is precisely for this reason that we are able to improvise, to live Christian lives in the midst of an increasingly complex world that theology is important. The challenge is to ‘not simply play-act; we must *become the parts we play.*’<sup>27</sup> To ask the question: what would Jesus do means you cannot simply mechanically look up the answer but to ask, if I were in Jesus position and if the circumstances that surround Jesus were mine what would I do? We are to be able to say, I believe that Jesus would act like this. This calls for imagination not ‘*simply to play a role but to project the main idea of the play.*’<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> ‘How Can the Bible be Authoritative’ ([www.ntwrightpage.com/Wright\\_Bible\\_Authoritative.htm](http://www.ntwrightpage.com/Wright_Bible_Authoritative.htm) (28/10/08) (The Laing Lecture 1989, and the Griffith Thomas Lecture 1989. Originally published in *Vox Evangelica*, 1991, 21, 7–32. He reworks the idea in: *The New Testament And The People Of God* (1992, London: SPCK. Pp. 140-141)

<sup>27</sup> Vanhoozer, K. J. (2005) *The Drama Of Doctrine*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press. P. 370

<sup>28</sup> Vanhoozer, 2005, 372 (*his italics*).