

Lessons from an Extraordinary Era

Catholic Theology Since Vatican II

by [Roger Haight](#) | America Magazine; March 17, 2008

Catholics should be amazed by how theology has developed over the past 40 years. From Karl Rahner to Jon Sobrino, from Edward Schillebeeckx to Elizabeth Johnson, the expanded territory covered by the theologians of our era bears comparison to the transition from the monastery to the university in the High Middle Ages. Different theologians would tell the story differently, of course, but the version that follows is not completely idiosyncratic. I present the plot in seven stages (stage three has two parts). At each stage I name theologians who embody the development described and present a lesson or two learned at that stage. I tell this story in an abbreviated form, skipping over much, for the point does not lie in the details but in what has happened cumulatively during this brief period in the history of Catholic theology. I conclude with two urgent matters for Catholic theologians to address.

Theological progress differs from development in technology, where one way of doing things supplants another—the computer making the typewriter obsolete. Instead, in theology one stage takes the former into itself, slowly widening its horizon and deepening perceptions, allowing a complexification of issues that leads to greater understanding.

Our story begins at the end of the [Second Vatican Council](#) in 1965. Certainly progressive theology existed before then, most significantly in the “new theology,” which lay under a cloud of suspicion and was implicitly condemned in the silencing of its practitioners in the early 1950s. (Two of them, Henri de Lubac and Yves Congar, were later made cardinals.) The prevailing theology at that time was taught in seminaries from standardized manuals. The distance covered since is best exemplified by the work of Karl Rahner, the most prominent theologian to react against the manuals.

Stage 1: Karl Rahner: The Turn to Experience

Rahner’s turn to the human person and experience represents a monumental achievement for Catholic theology. Deep parallels and analogies exist between Rahner’s theology and the Protestant shift at the beginning of the 19th century and the experiential method employed by such Roman Catholic modernists as Maurice Blondel and Lucien Laberthonnière. But while these thinkers failed to gain a hearing in the Catholic Church, Rahner became a 20th-century church father. His method of theology appealed to a universal structure of human experience, and it became the most significant successor to neoscholasticism.

Lesson 1: The house of Christian meaning lies in the experience of the Christian subject. Many generalizations could be made based on Rahner’s intricate theological method and huge corpus, but I single out an implication of the turn to human experience as the clearinghouse of Christian meaning. The method redirects the focus of theology to the significance that revelation from God bears for our lives in the world today. This may always have been the case, but Rahner’s theology draws out the relevance of revelation for the real questions people are asking.

Stage 2: Schillebeeckx, Metz, Tracy: Historical and Political Theology

These three theologians turn to history and intellectual culture in a way that Rahner did not. In 1965 Edward Schillebeeckx, at 51, was an established neoscholastic theologian, 10 years younger than Rahner. Influenced by Vatican II's embrace of the modern world, Schillebeeckx read secularization theory, hermeneutics and neo-Marxian social theory over several years and reinvented himself as a deeply historically conscious theologian. He wrote comprehensive works on Jesus of Nazareth, on Jesus as savior and the Christ, and on the development of the church. In each case he interpreted past teaching by reading it in terms of today's cultural experience and questions.

Johannes B. Metz, born in 1928, was Rahner's student and is famous for opening up the social-political dimension of human consciousness and drawing out its implications for theology. With his fellow political theologians, Jürgen Moltmann and Dorothee Sölle, both of whom grew to maturity in the shadow of the Holocaust, Metz urged Christian theology to take account of the tragic side of social history and to assume responsibility for the direction history takes. Christian theology, these thinkers argued, must take into account the history of suffering so as to minimize suffering in the future.

David Tracy's attention to method in theology and his far-ranging eclecticism demonstrates the breadth of the Catholic analogical imagination. His ability to converse with virtually the whole range of Western humanistic intellectual culture has preserved the Catholic intellectual tradition in the secular academy as few others have.

The study of these three theologians expands the presuppositions of theology in many ways, but two are worth noting here:

Lesson 2. Human knowledge, classic formulations included, is historically conditioned and thus particular. The universal relevance of any given idea or value cannot be presupposed. Its source and provenance differ from our own. One needs to interpret in order to draw out the relevance of authoritative witnesses from the past for the present and future.

Lesson 3. Human knowledge represents group interests and bias. This Marxian maxim is presupposed by almost everyone in the West today, whether or not they are educated, and sometimes in a most cynical way. Still, the point is clear: to bear witness to truth, theology too must explain itself. Theology cannot presuppose its own authority; rather, explanation must prove its authenticity by a matching behavior. For this reason Metz recasts fundamental theology as an ultimately practical discipline.

Stage 3: Gutiérrez, Segundo, Sobrino, Ellacuría: Latin American Liberation Theology

Two fundamental elements reflect the essential logic of liberation theology. The first is negative experience, which leads to an awareness of the dehumanized condition of large numbers of people. The experience has three dimensions: a situation is wrong; we know it could and should

be different; the contrast fuels an urge to right the wrong. What does Christian theology say to this situation?

The second fundamental element of liberation theology seeks to answer that question. The response appears embryonically in Luke's parable of the Good Samaritan, which can be read as dramatizing the principle that love of God is displayed as love of neighbor. The truth of the principle is conveyed with climactic force by the shocking fact that only the Samaritan had internalized it. Modernity adds a conviction that beyond tying up the victim's wounds, true love will make the road to Jericho safe for all. With this addendum liberation theology rewrites the parable for the whole world.

Lesson 4. Social practice is an intrinsic dimension of Christian faith from which one cannot prescind. One of the deepest principles liberation theology presents to the Christian community is that action and practice are not just the consequences of faith, but the intrinsic testimonial of its authenticity. As Ignatius of Loyola postulated in his *Spiritual Exercises*, "Love ought to manifest itself more by deeds than by words" (No. 230). For this love to be effective and authentic, it must be directed against the causes of human suffering.

Lesson 5. Social-ethical considerations are intrinsic to theological understanding. Catholic theology has come to a new realization of the social ethical implications of Christian faith. After a period of separation between theology and ethics, theology has recognized the necessity of accountability. In 1971 the essential link between faith and justice was written into magisterial teaching when the World Synod of Bishops wrote that "action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the gospel" (*Justice in the World*, Nov. 30, 1971).

Developing Stage 3: Johnson, Copeland, Aquino, Espin, Phan

Rather than chart the rise of the many liberation theologies that have followed the path of Latin American theology, I allude to the work of five figures. In North America, the single most important development in theology, beginning in the late 1960s, has been the flourishing of an extraordinary body of feminist or womanist liberation theology. Elizabeth Johnson's work has been translated and read around the world. Shawn Copeland is perhaps the deepest interpreter of Catholic womanist theology; the relevance of her work transcends the limits of black women's experience.

Maria Pilar Aquino and Orlando Espin are two representatives of many who bridge the exigencies of working for an immigrant community and meeting the standards of the academy. Hispanic theology, like the Asian-American theology of Peter Phan, is paradoxically truly American in being a theology of an immigrant population.

Lesson 6. Theology is and is recognized to be a pluralistic discipline. The lesson of pluralism was learned much earlier in a theoretical way, but these "constituency" theologies, which are more explicitly distinctive and different from others (which can conceal their bias under a cloak of objectivity), demonstrate the fact of pluralism—that is, differences within a common field. They are relevant to all in a community of solidarity in faith.

Lesson 7. Theology is a democratized discipline practiced by a large corps of theologians. The liberation theologies drive home two other facts about Catholic theology, especially in North America. First, from being an almost exclusively clerical discipline, theology has become laicized. A large majority of Catholic theologians consists or will shortly consist of laypeople. Second, the discipline has been taken out of the mouths of an aristocracy of the elite and become democratically diffused among a large corps of well-trained theologians. There are no more standard texts, but extensive bibliographies on everything—a healthy sign.

Stage 4: Catholic Bilateral Dialogues: Catholic Ecumenical Theologians

In the 40 years since the Catholic Church joined the ecumenical movement, ecumenical dialogues have accumulated a massive body of data and literature. The results of the dialogues have remained largely unknown to the faithful at large, and these theologians go unheralded. Although church officials have done little with the data commensurate with the effort put into gathering it, the literature still remains a latent source for theology. Estimates of the degree to which Catholic officials are truly committed to the ecumenical movement vary according to the diverse expectations of the appraisers.

Lesson 8. The expanded horizon of the ecumenical movement underscores the principle of a hierarchy of truths. This principle, taught at Vatican II, states that truths vary in their relationship to the fundamentals of the Christian faith. Yet the fences defining the boundaries and identities of the churches are set up in different places. This will always be a subject of debate inside and outside particular churches; but the principle is still valuable and must consistently be invoked. Appreciation of it requires measured language and concentration on the heart of Christian faith in God as revealed in Jesus Christ. This in turn urges the recognition that many divisions among the churches are based on mistakes about which issues are divisive and which are not.

Stage 5: Nyamiti, Amaladoss, Pieris: Inculturation in Africa and Asia

Decolonialization began in Latin America in the 19th century, but a sense of cultural identity and nationalism intensified after World War II. This process has generated a strong sense among non-Western Christians that faith and practice must be reinterpreted using the symbols of the local culture so that Christianity can cease appearing as a foreign and in some measure alienating religion. Around the world inculturation theology has never been so self-consciously pursued as today; it is producing concepts with multiple applications: for example, the idea of “hybridity” as distinct from “syncretism.” Analyses of the multiple relationships that constitute persons and groups show that there are no pure, stable identities in history. This softens the almost exclusively negative connotations of religious syncretism. The long-term effects of inculturation can be only dimly reckoned.

As Christians in the Anglican Communion will testify, inculturation is necessary, difficult and dangerous. Yet nowhere is Catholic theology more creative and vital than in projects like Charles Nyamiti’s effort to create an “ancestor christology,” or Aloysius Pieris’s appropriation of liberation theology’s option for the poor for Asia and his simultaneous engagement with Buddhism, or Michael Amaladoss’s dialogue with Indian culture and religion and its application to Christology.

Lesson 9. Catholic theology has transcended the West and become culturally polycentric. This lesson is only partially internalized within the Catholic Church. A billion-member organization produces a wide global consciousness; today's large corps of Catholic theologians spans continents. The prevalence of shared languages, like English and Spanish, allows theologians to read each other across cultures. Such cross-fertilization of concerns and insights holds enormous promise for theology.

Stage 6: Dulles, Knitter, Clooney: Comparative Theology

Comparative theology explicitly recognizes pluralism in its effort to understand a subject. It is an analogous term that allows for many different fields of application and methodological strategies, but the essential insight remains the same: theological understanding must be conscious of difference and able to integrate it into any given understanding.

This foundational insight can be seen in the work of theologians as different from one another as Avery Dulles, with his identification of multiple models of theological themes, like church and revelation; ecumenical theologians, usually working in commissions, who compare and contrast in seeking commonality; Paul Knitter, whose theology of religion compares Christian theological approaches to religious pluralism; and Francis X. Clooney, who practices Christian theology through a comparative dialogue with texts of other religions on a common theme.

Lesson 10. The expanded horizon of the religions opens up new sources for Christian insight. Everything appears differently once we realize that we are united by a common religious quest for meaning, which cannot be reduced to a single philosophical or theological framework. Rahner's anthropocentrism takes on new meaning against a background of a new hope for human reconciliation, where religion might help unite rather than divide people. Can religion cease being competitive and become reconciling?

Stage 7: Toolan, Haught, Edwards: Cosmologically Sensitive Theology

Educated people worldwide realize that the mid-20th century understanding of the cosmos is hopelessly out of date. In its place is a narrative of how the universe began that can be dated with precision. This story is awesome and religiously evocative. The mathematics of the size and age of our universe defies the human imagination.

A new understanding of ourselves as part of this universe has significant implications for theology, as great as the shift from a Jewish understanding of God and salvation to a Greek interpretation of both. David S. Toolan has explored the impact of the new scientific world on our Christian spiritual identity; John Haught interrogates the connections between the methods of science and theology; Denis Edwards places the doctrines within this new context of interpretation. It will take some time and much discussion before these new interpretations can be proffered, criticized and digested by the community at large. It is not too early, however, to draw at least one lesson from the beginnings of such a new Christian self-understanding.

Lesson 11. A new cosmic expansion of consciousness produces a new theocentrism. The size and complexity of the universe suggest something so massive, both on a macro level of astronomy

and a micro level of subatomic reality, that the imagination seems spontaneously drawn into ideas of infinite creative intelligence and power. Where are we as a human race in all of this? Anthropocentrism seems so inherent in human thinking that it cannot be escaped. The anthropic principle notwithstanding, the space-time coordinates of human thinking have been so expanded that it almost seems intrinsically wrong to see ourselves as at the center. Gradually this new framework is moving toward a new theocentrism for Christians. This is one of the new, growing frontiers in Christian theology.

The Future of Catholic Theology

Many conclusions can be drawn from the story of the development of Catholic theology over the last 40 years. Two areas of concern have special urgency for the Catholic Church; without special attention to them the church's health will be affected.

The first involves the doctrines of the Christian faith as formulated in the Roman Catholic communion, often referred to as articles of the Creed. Not enough creative effort is going into the theological interpretation of these doctrines so that they will make sense to people in the developed societies of the West. The Western world needs inculturation in its theology, too. Meanwhile, the new corps of Catholic theologians is occupied with questions of lesser importance in the hierarchy of truths, like: Can we even get along in a pluralistic community? The result is a kind of theological illiteracy among the laity and the clergy regarding the work of the academy. Even otherwise well-educated Catholics cannot find answers to their questions, and many are drifting away.

A second exigency lies in a need for a critically conscious piety or spirituality. Can Catholic spirituality find a place in a global human conversation that spans many religious traditions? Can it accommodate a picture of the universe that contemporary children take for granted? Or does religious piety require a more narrowly defined and enclosed self-understanding? Does a movement toward a more open and diffuse conception of the God-human relationship automatically result in a loss of religious devotion?

Theologians need to explore more fully the ways in which an open theology grounds a strong religious identity and a vital Christian spirituality. A critical understanding of how Christianity can be universally relevant and at the same time open to other religious experiences confirms rather than threatens one's Christian identity. Our professed faith in precisely the God of Jesus should convince us that openness to other churches and other religions is a proper Christian spiritual attitude. New times and new theologies call for new forms of spirituality.

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