

CREATING YOUR OWN THEOLOGY

By JOHN VINCENT

The word "Theology" does not immediately attract people. Too often, Theology is regarded as the stuff that "theologians" produce – dull, theoretical, wordy, out of touch with reality.

Indeed, Theology has often been used as a vehicle of oppression. It has been one of the ways that a self appointed and institutionally confirmed elite have produced ideas, truths, principles and guidelines which others have to swallow, and which then can become the means by which the orthodoxy – or the degree of enlightenment – of others can be tested.

"I'm no theologian", is a cry often made when theological issues are introduced. But it's wrong. Theology is for everyone. Theology is simply "words about God", or "speaking about Reality".

At the beginning of a Theology course, I often ask people to write down "I am the most important theologian alive today". They look up at me with some incredulity. Some write down "John Vincent says he is the most important theologian alive today"! Then I clarify it. Every Christian is for themselves the most important theologian alive today.

UNIQUE

Look at it this way. Every person is unique. No-one else has had the background in terms of family, home, location, culture, class, education and friends that you have had. Your "context" is unique. Further, no-one else has had the exposure to the variety of people, ideas, experiences, books, lectures, sermons and discussions that you have had. Your "formation" is unique.

Then put on top of all that the even more fundamental thing. You are not just the result of the variety of elements in your context, or the variety of experiences in your formation. You also are a unique person in your own right, with your own temperament, personality, hunches, prejudices, convictions and ways. And you are also male or female, which usually also makes a difference!

So, when this amalgam of context, formation and personality which is distinctly "you" comes to deal with any part of reality, it is going to do so in a totally distinctive and unique way. The result of "you" dealing with anything is unique. It is unique also in the area of theology.

So, a good start in theology is with yourself. At UTU, a key part of our Study Year is the Personal Theology and Mission Course. It occupies ten two-day periods over 9 months. It begins with a whole series of ways of helping participants to look at the

three elements of their past – context, formation and personality – and to ask what specific influence specific pieces of Christianity or Bible have had upon them.

We then try to open up different ways in which they can look at those elements of Christianity and Bible, so as to help them have some new perspectives, and try them out on themselves. Then, we ask them to sort out for themselves the models, people, bits of Bible, hunches, convictions, experiences, ideas and stories which are important to them, or through which they hear some kind of “call”. Finally, they write a tentative vocational self-projection – the “My Future Mission” paper.

Just such a course is likely to be used more widely in Methodism, I gather, for the Vocational Review Preliminary Year to which all candidates for any kind of ministry will be going from this Autumn.

Creating your own Mission is actually part of Creating Your own Theology. You cannot (or should not!) have a Theology which is not created by and supported by, and visible in, your own Mission. And you certainly cannot stay long in a Mission which is not supported by and coherent with your own Theology.

Thus, the Theology of Christian people, and Mission by Christian disciples, are constantly renewed and recreated.

CONTEXTS

There used to be a great debate as to how far Context influenced Theology. But then it became clear that all Theology was, in fact, Contextual – that is, it was done by people in particular situations, in the thought forms of the time, using the current language available.

When, in September 1969, I persuaded a few friends to create with me the Urban Theology Unit, it was immediately greeted with catcalls and ridicule. You cannot have an Urban theology, critics said. Particularly, opposition came from the then Industrial Mission Sector. “We were never allowed to have an Industrial Theology – you can’t have an Urban one!”

Actually, 1969 saw the origination of several contextual theologies – Black Theology (James Cone), Feminist Theology (Letty Russell), Theology of the Poor – Liberation Theology (Gustavo Gutierrez). Urban Theology in fact had to wait for approval till 1990, when the Anglican Archbishop’s Commission on Urban Theology was formed – and Methodism even sent its first ministerial students to UTU!

Nowadays, theology and theological education often follow these lines. In 1990, I became an Honorary Lecturer in Biblical Studies at Sheffield (unpaid!) and we created an MPhil/PhD programme in Contextual, Urban and Liberation Theologies..