

From the Well of Life Nobody Can Drink Alone Fundamental Theology and Youth Ministry in Conversation¹

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Abstract

This article attempts to sketch possibilities for encounter between fundamental theology and youth ministry understood as practical theology. It argues that both specific disciplines may enter into mutually fruitful dialogue when they will open their respective disciplinal identities in terms of seeing their own theological task in a more holistic way. Endeavouring a holistic theology makes theology a more organic, welcoming, and hospitable place. This could become an argument for including the theological voices of young people into serious consideration as well.

Keywords: Christianity; Theology; Fundamental Theology; Youth Ministry; Practical Theology; Holistic Theology

Introduction

In his seminal work *Rethinking Fundamental Theology*, the Australian theologian, Gerald O'Collins, succinctly asserts: “We need theologies that know how to sit studying the past, that know how to walk the streets with the poor, and that know how to kneel in adoration of the Saviour who is come (O'Collins 2011, 331).” With this, he calls for a fundamental plurality of theological attitudes and styles in complex theological life of the Church. What I perceive as necessary in contemporary Christianity is an open dialogue of theologies focused on rational reflection, practical action and spirituality including silent contemplation. If we strive for an understandable and existentially relevant theology, we must assign ourselves with the task to pursue their convergence. This article wants to suggest a concrete step in the process of getting different styles and ways theology is done closer together. I would like to propose the encounter of fundamental theology with youth ministry. The first one is certainly closer to the world of academic theology and the second represents specific environment generating theological reflections in the context of a particular age-related group. Where are the possible grounds for their eventual encounter? Where can they meet and listen to each other's stories? I believe a meeting of fundamental theology and theological reflection within the realm of youth ministry has a strong potential to be fruitful for both disciplines involved as well as for theology as such at least in two ways: (1) it can contribute towards appreciating theology as a spiritual journey

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and academic reflection, and (2) it has the potential to strengthen the relevance of theology for contemporary society and make it again a voice that matters.

I. Fundamental Theology

Today, fundamental theology is understood as a continuous endeavour to search for signs of the God's presence in the world. It does not want to simply replace former classical apologetics. Rather, it aims to bring its traditional notions into new light; the light of the Gospel reflected in post-modern times. However different, contextualized and still re-actualized throughout history, fundamental theology is still dealing with the reflection of the grounds for Christian faith. This is sometimes with more emphasis on an external apologetics, giving an account of the hope of Christians in Christ (1 Pt 3:15), and sometimes more internal, reminding believers of what they believe and why. Thus, fundamental theology today shall create a new theological background for apologetics advising it not merely to mentor or oppose, but to dialogue and discuss that it may become what John Milbank calls, "a mode of apologetics prepared to question the world's assumptions down to their very roots (Milbank 2012, xx)." Avery Dulles speaks of such apologetics as about one of the functions of fundamental theology (Dulles 2005, 327). Even though it is clear that fundamental theology and apologetics overlap to great extent, they still remain distinct from each other in terms of their topics, target groups, as well as style. As for instance, while apologetics may deal with a selected topic, fundamental theology has a complex agenda which makes it a proper theological discipline. Fundamental theology has also a wider range of audience than apologetics which usually has a more clearly defined target group. And last, but not least, while apologetics usually takes the form of polemics, fundamental theology usually adopts less polemic and a more explanatory style (Cf. O'Collins 2011, 4–5).

However, fundamental theology today undergoes transformation, and as such it may seem to some as if this discipline is today "threatened with non-existence (O'Collins 2011, vii)." This may have been true for the last couple of decades, but, recently, in the unfolding third millennium, fundamental theology is receiving a new swing as a "discipline (...) to be relaunched (O'Collins 2011, vii)." A book by Hans Peter Geiser, entitled *The Community of the Weak* (Geiser 2013), may serve as one of the outstandingly creative examples matching the goal of relaunching fundamental theology in the third millennium as required by Gerald O'Collins. Geiser proposes fundamental theology based on shared subjective experience instead of objective explanations which are typical for apologetics. Fundamental theology in general is more linked to personal experience and engagement. But such a distinction would require a broader discussion which goes far beyond focus of this article. However, reading Geiser's book encouraged me to investigate what would happen when fundamental theology meets youth ministry; what would happen when academic theology embraces the everyday theology of ordinary believers (of specific age); what would happen when young people are recognized as sources of inspiration for fundamental theology; and how fundamental theology should be exercised and communicated which can inspire young people and resource youth ministry (and practical theology) in return?

II. Youth Ministry

Claiming youth ministry to be a form of practical theology depends to a great extent on whether theologians, ministers, or any of those concerned with youth and youth ministry are willing to consider themselves practical theologians and youth ministry as practical theology and not just as an “enriched” kind of social science, pedagogy, or psychology (Dean 2010, 115) as it was understood in the past and found its own disciplinary identity as a form of practical theology. One of the apostles of such a development, Kenda Creasy Dean, identifies four characteristic points of youth ministry understood as practical theology:

- (1) First, youth ministry matters to the Church. It has both pastoral and theological significance and is, thus, truly a theological discipline focused on practices and actions.
- (2) Second, youth ministry has an intrinsic inter-disciplinary nature.
- (3) Third, it is an orientation of action that makes possible a specific way of knowing – a practical knowledge which emphasizes Christianity as a distinctive way of life – analogically to Pierre Hadot’s philosophy as a way of life (cf. Hadot 1995), instead of a set of doctrines. Youth ministry tends to maintain the great Christian tradition of mystagogy based on reflective experiences with the revealing God.
- (4) Fourth, youth ministry as practical theology opts for human singularity and uniqueness. Each human story is relevant and correlates with the unique story of Jesus Christ (Dean 2010, 115–117).

There is no doubt youth is a theological question and youth ministry is a theological task (discovered or discoverable thanks to countless efforts of practical theology). While remaining anchored in practical theology (as a matter of maintaining its own disciplinary identity), youth ministry could flourish and be substantially enriched if engaged in dialogue with other theological disciplines. At this point, two central questions may be formulated. How to relate fundamental theology with youth ministry perceived as practical theology? Where could be the meeting point of these two, very different, yet, through being theological, closely related disciplines?

One of the possible answers to these questions I would like to offer is that both disciplines considered may set out in a new direction – closer towards each other – when they will open their respective disciplinal identities in terms of seeing their own (theological) task in a more holistic way. What do I mean?

Fundamental theology and youth ministry are both theological disciplines and that’s why I suggest focusing on “the theological” in pursuing the task of adopting a holistic paradigm of practising theology as proposed, for instance, by Terry Veling (Veling 2005, 4). As with regards to youth ministry, it is going through the process of its own theological turn (Root and Dean 2011). As such, it recognizes itself as fundamentally theological. It is trying to listen to the authentic voices of young people and to their theologies. Youth ministry creates an environment that encourages and empowers young people to theologize. At the same time, it exercises a proper theological self-reflection in dialogue with other theological disciplines and contributes a significant deal to the establishment of youth theology (so-called) as a specific contextual theology, bringing young minds and souls to the fore, dwelling amidst the youth cultures and

sub-cultures burgeoning in the contemporary world. In this way contemporary youth ministry represents a specific environment in which theology is not only accepted and transferred into practice, but is, further, lived – “taught and written, danced, and sung, sculpted, and painted, even dreamed, and cried (Sedmak 2002, 11).” As such it becomes very close to the discipline of fundamental theology which currently seeks its own new directions as well, to re-actualize its own theological commitment, interdisciplinarity, and concern for faith seeking understanding face to face with the “overwhelming power of the contemporary experience of world and existence and of the challenges which accompany this experience (Fries 1996, 5).” Pondering about a mutual relationship of fundamental theology and youth ministry as practical theology has brought me to the conclusion that seeking theology as one common discourse (despite a vast plurality of voices) becomes fundamental to any kind of contemporary theological enterprise. However, it is a matter of choice (fundamental option), while maintaining a quest for reasonable, understandable, and existentially relevant theoretical frameworks for Christian faith. As such, it is not merely a matter of speculative, academic reasoning, but also a matter of lived experience asking for reflection and interpretation – pursuing the holistic vision of theology and the task of doing and thinking theology together.

III. Towards theological creativity and improvisation

The American processual and Lutheran theologian Ann Pederson wrote a very interesting book entitled *God, Creation, and All That Jazz* (Pederson 2001). In this book, she emphasizes creativity and improvisation in the process of doing theology to the extent that she does in a jazz jam-session. This metaphor was used and celebrated by Hans-Georg Geiser. He proposes a new fundamental theology written in a “new key” (Geiser 2013, 437), considering all possible conversation partners from the realm of science, but also ordinary people and their experiences. New fundamental theology, according to Geiser, understands theology as fundamentally “autobiographical” (Geiser 2013, 438) and must be both surprised and surprising or else it is not “jazzy” enough (Geiser 2013, 441). And the same may be true for the realm of youth ministry. Trying to surprise and being opened to be surprised might be a new key for understanding youth ministry as theological task open to the Church wide (and even beyond) practice of doing theology together.

That, however, requires both, our own performances as well as moments of our own passivity and reception of others’ performances, when listening to what others perform, when we must pause to reflect on what we have been performing while exposed to the tunes (ideas, actions, etc.) that are strange and different from our own. Attentive listening (and, indeed, attentiveness, in general) to others inspires us and pushes our own performance on to a higher level. It enables us to perform together. Does this not sound like a method? A method of an “open mike”, a generous and welcoming space, where we may do music, sport, study, fun, meditation, grieving, suffering and theology together? The French fundamental theologian, Marcel Neusch, puts it this way:

Theology only assumes its task fully if it is able to show that the Christian fact has a universal significance, and that this universality is justified by the common destiny of

humankind. To give up its task would mean to enclose oneself in a sentiment and to take its share in making the Christian experience incommunicable. However, the claim of the Christian experience is to open up a space of meaning and life accessible to all (Neusch 2004, 327; qtd. according to Geiser, 2013, 231).

It means opening up boundaries. They should not be closed, devoid of any “iron curtain”, “Berlin wall” or “Trump wall”, closed borders with guards or “experts” selecting who is or is not allowed to cross the borderline. The frontiers between youth ministry and fundamental theology (as between all other theological disciplines) must be open and free, like those in the Schengen area. Yet they are not without natural barriers. There are moors with swamps, dark woods, and even wild animals between their actual territories. There are several dangers which need to be avoided, surpassed, and bridged so that people can travel safely to and fro and visit each other. We should constantly search for roads and paths to keep the connection open and passable from both sides. It will help all those who are out there on these roads to keep their theology alive, relational, spiritual (prayerful), biblical, committed, action-oriented, and public. In order to achieve this goal, I believe, theology, in general, must adopt a new, holistic mind. It is high time to start understanding theology as a whole, again. David Regan offers an argument for such a shift:

Much of the lack of interest in “religion”, as a subject, whether in secondary school or university, is bound up with the fragmentation of the content of the teaching. The division of the intellectual “content of faith” into so many truths to be learned and believed, or so many rules to be kept, soon dries up the innate curiosity or good will students may bring to the subject. The powerful and unified centre provided by focusing on the one Mystery of Christ overcomes much of this atomization. When this centre is not a truth to be learned, but a burning core to be experienced, the whole exercise changes character (Regan 1994, 146).

From Regan’s perspective, we need to think theology holistically (i.e., as a whole) in order to try to overcome the divisions between particular doctrines. They were separated and fragmented in the past for good reason: to find some sort of a system in the complex teachings of Christianity. But while we arguably lost a sense for theology, as a whole, over the centuries of detailed clarifications, the system prevailed. Now, we often have only such a system and, by consequence, have to dig deep if we want to find the meaning of theology, again. While a rationalist way of understanding theology as a systematic, purely academic endeavour was strong *in analysis*, a holistic approach to theology might yet become even stronger *in synthesis* while resonating with syncretic (not syncretic) method suggested by Comenius (cf. Woldring 2016).

Endeavouring a holistic theology makes theology a more organic, welcoming, and hospitable place. This could become an argument for including the theological voices of young people into serious consideration as is being recently proposed by youth theology (Štěch 2019, 171). Moreover, professional theologians and youth ministers as well as religious educators and church representatives may perhaps also find that it is not enough to take young people’s (or

children's) theologies seriously. A better way is perhaps to welcome them to do theology together. Refusing to welcome them, as such, is already a failure to take them seriously, in the first place. This requires a large capacity for humility that many academics, ministers, education council presidents or church officials are not often trained to have and too often lack. If we take academics as an example, they are usually trained for, and forced to, excel by the institutional standards of publishing a lot of "good science". But, as far as I am concerned, far too few academics really take care or *attend to* the vocation of humility (and fallibility). There's a well-known rule in today's academia, worldwide: publish or perish! Perhaps this is true. But perhaps it is preferable for academic theologians to perish than publish; to perish from universities (at least for a while) and get in touch, reacquaint, or re-attune themselves with real life (Geiser 2013, 228). Especially, when engaged in theology and youth ministry or religious education, we must know "yesterday's message in yesterday's language, is not an adequate answer to the problems the young face today (Regan 1994, 147)." Doing theology together in the contexts of encounters with contemporary young people requires us not to be shy or scared to tell them our stories and, also, to be ready to listen to theirs. These must be received not in a paternalistic way or from a presumption of already 'knowing it all.' We must be prepared, ready and willing to be surprised by them. Only then, "new things, new themes, new tunes, and new chords can be tried out, experimented with, improvised, and newly arranged (Geiser 2013, 430)." And maybe right then, we may experience youth ministry and fundamental theology improvising, and playing jazz together. Acceptance of the other in the authentic otherness is a key. Everyone has something to offer. It does not matter if young, adult, or old, we can always learn something from each other. Together, we may try to discover and create (an always) new harmony.

Conclusion – Doing theology together

Doing theology together is by no means an easy task. It involves entering relationships with others who do not necessarily view everything exactly as we do. In fact, it demands that we relate precisely with such people. It involves entering communities which are not always comfortable for our own individuality. But, at the same time, it is necessary when we want to understand better our humanity. From the well of life nobody can drink alone. It is an irony of our time that we emphasize individuality yet long for relationships and search for community. Doing theology together is an option (perhaps *the* "preferential option") for a theological method starting from ordinary, everyday, human experience and, from there, be creating generous spaces where anyone can join the process of doing theology from any background and perspective. This method has been suggested as suitable also to the specific needs of youth ministry. Bert Roebben's concept of "playground for transcendence" (Roebben 1997, 332-347) could serve as an example. Doing theology together is an inclusive method in the welcoming sense of the inclusiveness. Here, inclusivity does not mean simply that we comprehend everything and everyone automatically (as the term is sometimes interpreted). Instead, it becomes a principal, welcoming inclusiveness, emphasizing, and granting everyone freedom to join and leave. Doing theology together is messy and colourful. To put it simply, doing theology together is about life because theology, as such, is about life (Cf. Sedmak 2002, 1), it comes from life, and it returns to it.

“The neighbouring community, life experiences, stories and memories, newspaper articles and local histories, city spots, world events and art galleries, movie theatres and concert halls, peace demonstrations and community projects (Geiser 2013, 225),” are to be part of our theologies. As such, theologies simply cannot be done individually, but in the presence of and in community with others. That is true not only in the case of individuals grouping into communities of doing theology together, but also in the various cases of whole (theological) disciplines. It is suggested in this text that youth ministry (seen as a kind of doing practical theology), may do theology together with fundamental theology that is too often considered purely theoretical or only an academic theological performance (but it does not have to be necessarily the case). To put it simply, from the well of life, nobody can drink alone.

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