

THEOLOGICAL ROUNDTABLE

Theological Roundtable on the Written Scholarship of Paul Lakeland

IV. With Burning Words

Looking back, I am increasingly sure that I blundered into this life of four decades as a Catholic theologian, the last two focused on issues of ecclesiology. My first love was literature, and if I had not been a Jesuit at the time that I completed my Oxford degree “reading English,” as they quaintly like to put it, I would probably have continued on that path. Instead, I spent a couple of years working in religious journalism and then went on to theological studies at London University. By the time I left the Jesuits during my doctoral studies in religion at Vanderbilt University, I was well and truly trapped. Trapped and then got lucky, when Fairfield University’s first choice for a spot in the Religious Studies department declined their offer and they turned to this Englishman who had never actually applied for the job (that was done for him by his *Doktorvater*, to whom he is of course eternally grateful), and invited him to interview, though he would have to pay his own way from London to Fairfield. The rest, as they say, is history.

My friends and colleagues whose generous words you have likely just read have discerned a pattern and path in my career that one can, of course, recognize only in retrospect. Did I know that my academic interests would develop the way they did? I don’t believe so, and yet . . . and yet. The one book that none of them mentioned was my first book, not much more than a large pamphlet really, written before I ever studied theology, as some of its critics were only too eager to point out. Still a Jesuit, I was sitting in my room one evening and a senior Jesuit stuck his head around the door and posed the question, “Is there anything you would like to write a book about?” Yes, I said, and thus was born my first literary child, *Can Women Be Priests?* One of the first such books in English, it was dedicated to the argument that there were (and still are) no genuine theological obstacles to the ordination of women to priesthood. And, by

the way, it had an *imprimatur* from the diocese of Cork in Ireland, something it could not receive today, though that *imprimatur* has never, to my knowledge, been removed.

What this story of my earlier life as a student may show is that the servant theologian role that Beth Johnson identified in my work was there from the beginning, even if I didn't know it at the time, because that little book blended theology and a concern for the life of the church moving forward. The presidential address that I gave in 2019 and of which Beth Johnson speaks was actually about that group of French theologians who proudly adopted the idea of being a "servant theologian." A good example of what that might have meant to them, once the occupation and war was over, is afforded by the practice of Yves Congar, surely one of the most workaholic of theological scholars, of spending almost a month in the winter traveling to rural areas of France on drafty trains to talk to ordinary people about the importance of good ecumenical relations. Bringing his learning into the local community, Congar was surely a precursor of Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz's vision of "the theologian as a professional insider." It is becoming increasingly clear to me that the local community, not the ivory tower, is where theology needs to be done today, not only because this is demanded by the move toward a more synodal church, but also because the academic theologian in a tenured position in a Catholic institution is an increasingly endangered species.

When I wrote that first little book it wasn't about the laity exactly, to be truthful. But to respond to Beth's question at the end of her remarks, it shows that from the beginning I had some sort of sense that gender identity ought to have nothing to do with any roles one might feel called to within the church. Today, the "sense of the faithful" is way ahead of the magisterium on many issues, including gender, and whatever work remains for me to do in the future, it will honor those intuitions and seek to further their acceptability. *Can Women Be Priests?* will reach its fiftieth anniversary in 2025, and I have found no reason to change a word of what I wrote then and do not expect to do so in the future.

I think the early work that I did between the little text on the ordination of women and what most people think of as my best book, *The Liberation of the Laity: In Search of an Accountable Church*, including the heavy lifting in the Hegel book and the books on critical theory and postmodernity, were probably, as Roger acutely sensed, propaedeutic to the five books I have written in the last twenty years. My friends are kind, but I suppose they are right that I have to a degree led the charge on developing a lay ecclesiology, though in the end these later books are works of *haute vulgarisation*, the classy French term for "popularization." Because I have mostly been writing not just *about* the laity, but *for* the laity, they should be seen as taking complex theological

arguments and putting them into plain English. So once again, if I am to be called a servant theologian, then I hope it is as a “professional insider.” The work that lies ahead of me, to respond to Roger’s question, will continue to try to take the temperature of the grassroots church and suggest a path of action to assuage whatever fears I discern there. He asks what I think is the most pressing theological question in the American context. If he will allow me to veer toward my theological subspecialty of ecclesiology, I would have to say that the challenge is one of finding the will to be a humbler church, even a kenotic community of faith, in the face of the acquisitiveness of a neoliberal capitalist culture to which so many of our fellow believers are held captive. How indeed do we address the polarizations within American society, and why are so many of them mirrored in the life of the Christian community?

One thing that has graced my final decade at Fairfield is that we got ourselves a pope who said all the things I have been saying for at least twenty years. It would be nice to imagine he had read my books, but the truth is that much of my own theological inspiration, like his, comes from his native Latin America. I have taught liberation theology for forty years, the first thirty of them under occasional episcopal suspicion, the last ten with what I like to believe is a papal blessing. I have, sadly, never traveled in Latin America, but I have been nourished by a theological method that first emerged there and soon nourished religious reflection across the globe. I think it is here that I first began to reflect on the need for a humbler church, distinguished by what I have called kenotic discipleship, whose method is inductive, thought out from below, among the laity. I just have zero tolerance for ecclesiastical cant. And I am grateful to Massimo for pushing me to think this through a bit further.

The questions Massimo offers me do in fact imagine that I will go on and do more with some key ideas in my work thus far: kenosis, inductive theology, ecclesial humility. For now, I can only say that I expect to write at least one more book, and this one will indeed pursue the ecclesiological significance of kenosis, which I think is worked out most fruitfully in Simone Weil’s analysis of the parable of the Good Samaritan. Many significant writers and thinkers have focused on this story, not least among them Pope Francis in *Fratelli Tutti*. I also examined the parable in some detail in my CTSA plenary address a few years ago. But like all the others, I overlooked something quite important. What about “the other Samaritan,” the woman at the well in John’s Gospel? Shouldn’t we also be looking to what we can learn from *that* story? I hope Beth Johnson will be pleased to hear that this has caught my attention.

It would be dishonest of me, however, not to admit that it is also possible that I may, instead or even in addition, come full circle to my Oxford days, “reading” English, though with theological intent. My most recent book has started me off in that direction, and I included a few lines from it on the little

event program that was given to the audience for this splendid event. As you may suspect, I do not see why theology cannot aspire to be literature, or literature to be theological. Literature, as I wrote in *The Wounded Angel*,⁴³ is always “bumping up against the transcendent,” and for many years now I have found it a far more useful genre for encouraging theological reflection among undergraduates than even my own theological writings. My hope is that it can also encourage the growth of epistemic humility, the philosophical term for at least part of what kenosis requires. So, with renewed thanks, allow me to conclude with another brief passage from *The Wounded Angel*:

What is sadly missing in our own day is the sensibility that will reach beyond fancy and be alert to the intimations of deeper mystery and of a sense of the meaning of the whole that all serious fiction of any quality has the power to suggest. It is within our power to rekindle this ability, and in all likelihood for most of us this will happen, if at all, through careful attention to what causes us to wonder—serious fiction, the mysteries of science, the arts in general, contemplation of the natural beauty of the universe. The choice here to focus on fiction is because it is so accessible to us, because it rewards slow and careful consideration (which is itself something our world today is sorely lacking), and because it approaches the mystery of the meaning of the whole, the mystery of the holy, through engaging us in the power of story.⁴⁴

My deepest thanks to all of you here, and most especially to Roger, to Massimo and to Beth for their remarks, and to John Thiel and Melissa Quan for bringing this gathering together. What a treat!

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⁴³ Paul Lakeland, *The Wounded Angel: Fiction and the Religious Imagination* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2017).

⁴⁴ Lakeland, *The Wounded Angel*, 222.