

In hope of a graceful event

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On the morning of this inauguration, it falls to me to convey my understanding of theology and role at this seminary. An inauguration is an important moment in the life of an academic institution which allows a faculty member to situate his or her philosophical perspective on what he or she has to offer to theological education. Today, my lot has come up, and I will be the first of a number of faculty this semester to do so.

I hope, therefore, for a graceful event. But I'm aware that this talk is too complex, too theoretical. Still, the remarks I give reflect hours, days, months, and years of deep reflection on the role of theology in contemporary culture. Whether or not I achieve my goal today, you will decide. As an event, this inaugural message will come and go before we can fully understand what is happening, or what I'm trying to express. But I trust my words will be received with gracious hearts by those attending this event this morning.

So, to begin, I attempt to do three things. First, to communicate my understanding of theology and its place in contemporary society. Second, to briefly lay out my theological project and its dialogue partners. And, finally, to express the interruption and value of systematic theology in the life of the Church.

Theology and its place in contemporary society

For eleven years, I served in pastoral ministry in four different churches. Most of these years I worked as an assistant pastor under the leadership of two senior pastors: Dr. Frank Robinson and Dr. David Vardaman. Those years of experience have marked my work as a theologian. Pastors and the people from former congregations appear in my mind as I read (often) esoteric philosophical writings and engage in theological thinking.

Recently, I earned my doctorate from the Catholic University of Leuven in Belgium. During my years of study at the faculty, I participated in the research group "Theology in a Postmodern Context." At Leuven, we were trained in a form of theology that follows the dictum Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109) put forward in the eleventh century: *fides quaerens intellectum* (i.e. faith seeking understanding). In short, these words express the conviction that theology should seek a greater understanding of the faith in dialogue with disciplines like philosophy. Surely for theologians – and other Christians – love stands at the heart of our faith. Anselm argued that our love for God, in fact, drives us to learn as much as we can about God and what He has done. Simply said, we want to better understand our Beloved.

Perhaps we could say that such a faith seeks to comprehend who God is and what He has done in creation and redemption; who we are in relation to Him; and how we should live in the world in which we find ourselves. Our love for God inspires us to seek to understand, to reflect on, and to bear witness to our faith in the midst of our contemporaries.

Technological change and disruption

How are we to do that today? How should we bear witness to our faith in Jesus Christ in an increasingly complex age? How should theology engage in a world of dizzying change? To say the increasingly obvious sounds cliché. But here I go. As we all know, everything is speeding up. The growth of knowledge is staggering. Communication between continents is common-place. And so on. In my home country, in the United States, an internet retailer regularly offers two-day service. When Amazon.com first introduced their service it delighted people. You could order almost any item from their website and receive it in *two* days! With only a few clicks, a person could order almost any item, and it would appear in the mail sometimes in a single day. But people have grown accustomed to such prompt service. Two days – or even a single day – is too slow. Now Amazon.com is working on drone service for people living in large metropolitan cities. Within 30 minutes of making your order, a drone will bring your package to your work address or place of residence. If they ever accomplish this feat, it too will someday become routine. More and more, those in the postindustrial world live in what Jeffrey Nealon describes as the post-postmodern or “just-in-time capitalism.”¹

Simply the rate of development and change disrupts culture and identity in places all over the world. In fact, many of us carry around in our pockets perhaps the greatest disrupter of all – the smart phone. This device is radically changing (youth) culture around the world. Millennials around the planet are uniting around an online culture that their parents do not understand. Attitudes, tastes, opinions, and beliefs are shaped every day by communications occurring between cell-towers. But the young are not alone. Even their parent’s view of the world shifts when *they* pick up their smart phones. Commonly held convictions in cultures around the world come now into question, simply because of our access to information and our awareness of differences.

Last year I attended a missionary retreat in Houghton, New York. There I met a friend. We took a leisurely walk between two waterfalls and talked about how life has changed in Central and South America. Rev. Rick West has more than forty years of service to countries in this part of the world as a missionary with The Wesleyan Church. Rick said that the biggest change is this: no matter where you are, whether in a city or in the jungle, people know what’s happening in the world. Everyone has cell-phones and connections to the Internet. You cannot assume that people don’t know what’s going on. Even those in the poorest and remotest countries instantly know whatever happens somewhere else on the planet.

¹ Nealon argues that the process of development in capitalism has intensified. Indeed, “late” capitalism, about which Fredric Jameson wrote, present in the 1970’s and 80’s, “has intensified into the ‘just-in-time’ (which is to say, all-the-time) capitalism of our neoliberal era.” See, Nealon, Jeffrey T., *Post-Postmodernism: Or, the Cultural logic of Just-in-Time Capitalism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford Univ. Press, 2012), x-xi.

Access to this flood of information produces other effects, as well. Traditions no longer transfer automatically from one generation to another as in the past.² Increasingly, a disconnect develops between young people and their elders. Those with access to modern forms of communication see and hear different ideas, perspectives, beliefs, and tastes. Suddenly mores, beliefs, and practices come into question. All of these can be different, as everyone can see on his or her cell-phone. Sociologists call this social process “detraditionalization.”³ One’s culture stands at risk when traditions no longer easily pass from one generation to another. The foundations undergirding a culture erode, as people become more aware of the contingencies of cultural development. Increasingly an awareness develops which says, “Things could have been different; after all, look at those other cultures!”

As individuals come into contact with people of different cultures, they tend to respond in one of two ways. Some resist the other – the person who is different – and retreat into their own cultural identity. We see this, perhaps, with Brexit, the rise of Marine Le Pen in France, and Germany-first parties. At the same time, other individuals fully embrace whatever is new as inherently good (i.e. as progress). Often these people are not truly happy with their own cultural identity. It must change somehow. Today we see these responses occurring as cultural forces affect different countries and cultures around the world.

Theological education takes place on a complex social, educational, philosophical, and religious field. In some ways, Asians are familiar with such a diverse social environment. However, as technology continues to develop, social groupings in Asia come under ever greater pressure and continue to fragment. Thus, the question of tradition remains germane for a seminary that trains and equips pastors and church leaders; for Christianity, as a faith, confesses long-standing traditions. These very traditions come under pressure in today’s world due to the factors I already mentioned: the development of technology, the use of digital communications, and the explosion of knowledge. I constantly wrestle with this question: how do we pass on the Christian tradition to future generations? On a pastoral level, we can restate the question in biblical terms: today, how do we follow the apostle Paul’s instruction to Timothy to “entrust to reliable people” “the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses” (2 Tim 2:2)? Or to speak as a theologian, how should *theology* reflect on its project, on its form of knowledge, in our current world?

My theological project

As I already said, my training lies in the area of the postmodern. Thus, following the Anselmian dictum, my dialogue partners tend to be French postmodern philosophers. In particular, I am interested in the writings of Jean-François Lyotard, who rose to international fame through the publication of his report on knowledge presented to the government of Quebec. In 1979,

² See, Lieven Boeve, *God Interrupts History: Theology in a Time of Upheaval* (New York: Continuum, 2007), 21-23, 74-75, and 141-144.

³ For thought-provoking reflections on the processes of detradditionalization and retradditionalization, see *Detraditionalization*, Paul Heelas, Scott Lash, and Paul Morris eds. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996).

Lyotard's pamphlet *La condition postmoderne: rapport sur le savoir* (published later in English as *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*)⁴ described the social developments arising in the most highly developed countries due to the advance of science and technology. He writes as a philosopher, but in the vein of sociology. Much of what he said can only be fully understood if you read a further work which he announced in that report.⁵ Very few people have read this second work, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, because of its exceedingly difficult text.⁶

I do not have time to fully explain Lyotard's analysis of phrase pragmatics as he practices them in *The Differend*; however, I *can* relay the heart of his project. Lyotard attempts to "bear witness to the event." In philosophical terms, an event is any occurrence that asks to be expressed by a phrase, or by a sentence or gesture. An event is something that occurs. It's a happening. Therefore, an event can be a momentous occurrence in history – Lyotard often uses the example of the French Revolution in 1789. Or an event can be something as simple as a cat's tail. Americans will, perhaps, immediately think of the events of 9/11. However, an event also occurs when a boy steals a glance across a room at a girl. The question arises, "What's happening?" What is the cat saying with its tail? What does this tumult in the heart of France mean for royalty across the European continent? How did a plane fly into a skyscraper; which becomes "Who's attacking us?" Events come too quickly for reason. However, a thought must follow, something must be said. Therefore, a phrase must follow, or a gesture, or silence. Somehow we must express the event in language, even if it's as simple as "The cat's hungry."

In *The Differend*, Lyotard demonstrates the dispute that breaks out around any event. Many different ways of phrasing what happens is possible, but only one phrase will win. One of the myriad of possible phrases will succeed in expressing the event. When a phrase finally links to the event, all other possible expressions fall away forgotten. A wrong is suffered and the wound heals. Ultimately, no one particular phrase can possibly express the event, because other possibilities presented themselves, which are ignored (e.g. descriptions, denotations, prescriptions, jokes, etc.). Lyotard attempts to resist the modern metanarratives by calling people to recognize the limits of language, as well as through his call to "bear witness to the *différend*" (i.e. to the dispute).

⁴ Lyotard, Jean-François, *La condition postmoderne: rapport sur le savoir* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1979). For the English translation, see Lyotard, Jean-François, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Theory and History of Literature, Vol 10, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

⁵ Lyotard admits that his report is written "from a somewhat sociologizing slant," which "truncates" but also "situates his analysis. He consoles himself, however, "with the thought that the formal and pragmatic analysis of certain philosophical and ethico-political discourses of legitimation, which underlies the report, will subsequently see the light of day." See, Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p. xxv. That subsequent work appeared later as Lyotard, Jean-François, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, Theory and History of Literature, trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1988).

⁶ First published in French as *Le Différend* (Paris: Les Éditions Minuit, 1983).

Lyotard argues for the radical heterogeneity of phrases, phrase regimen, and genres of discourse. To say this in an overly simplified manner, Lyotard thinks about the complexity of experience and language's limitations in bearing witness to the event.

Why this concern for the event and the limits of language? It emerges because of the horrors of Auschwitz. After the Allied forces liberated the camp and freed the survivors, a question emerged: "Why don't the detainees speak?" They remained silent for years after the war. Lyotard notes that that silence is a phrase in abeyance. It's an event struggling with language, trying to find a way to express in words the horrors of the death camp. How can one possibly put into language the event of Auschwitz? Decades flew by, and survivors died. Then some Jews started talking. Deep in their hearts lay the conviction, "Never again!" Something must be said, lest people forget. And so – years after it was already passed – they began to narrate the event of Auschwitz.

A theology that attempts to follow *fides quaerens intellectum* will look deeply at postmodern writings, especially those dealing with the death camps, because these events lie deep at the DNA level of our current culture. International law, entertainment, philosophical thought, novels, screenplays, and artistic works reflect and wrestle with life after the death camps. After the last century, when hundreds of millions of people were imprisoned in work camps, fed starvation diets, gassed, shot, and dumped in mass graves, how could it be otherwise?

Too few evangelical theologians have taken the postmoderns seriously. We neglect their writings, often with an arrogant attitude that we already have the truth. We haven't listened to what they tried to say. As a result, we are not part of a conversation happening all around us. In fact, we're not even aware that it's taking place. I want to help pastors and churches better understand the complex world we live in, to recognize how the traumas of history, as well as the technological and commercial processes influencing the world, create an ever-more complex environment in which to practice pastoral ministry.

I think Lyotard correctly notes that "science has always been in conflict with narratives."⁷ Stories fulfill an important function. They undergird our culture(s) and give us a sense of identity. But science delegitimizes these as "myths." In postmodern cultures, the modern metanarratives come into question. They are replaced rather by the technological, which legitimizes knowledge based on performativity. That is, "It works." This produces a problem for people alive today; for as Lyotard says, the technological "has no relevance for judging what is true or just."⁸ Perhaps this indicates why people struggle with determining truth and justice in a technology saturated world.

⁷ See, Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p. xxiii.

⁸ See, *Ibid.*, p. xxv.

I follow Lieven Boeve's suggestion that theologians begin to think in terms of the event. In that case, God's activities in time and space are thought of in terms of "interruption."⁹ Revelation occurs as God interrupts the normal course of our lives – our narrative – in order to accomplish His will. In this case, we would think of these moments of divine activity – what Wesleyans call, for instance, prevenient grace – as "events of grace." Events that happen too quickly, before cognition, but which change everything. In such a case, the incarnation, the life, teachings, miracles, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth are seen as "events of grace" *par excellence* for theology. Events upon which we are called to reflect on and follow.

The interruption of systematic theology

As a young pastor, I confess that systematic theologians bothered me. Their writings often pose difficult questions, which upset young Christians. Consider my surprise to find that God has led me to become a systematic theologian! But as I said earlier, my mind always turns to pastors and their people.

I believe that systematic theology should function as an interruption in people's thinking, for the world is constantly changing. Former theological expressions, which adequately conveyed truth to previous generations often lose plausibility, because knowledge changes. When this occurs, theology needs to find new ways to express the Christian tradition in terms that are plausible for contemporary people. This interrupts our tradition and spurs on its further development. However, as Boeve argues, interruption is not rupture. I do not believe the systematic theologian's role consists in rupturing the tradition – i.e. making a complete break with the faith we have inherited from prior generations. Rather, theologians should courageously seek new thoughts in search of plausible ways of expressing "the faith that was once for all entrusted to God's holy people" (Jude 3). When cultural and philosophical understandings change, older ways of expressing that faith lose plausibility. As a result, they lose their ability to convey the Gospel and their ability to speak in meaningful terms for people today.¹⁰ I believe our Master has called me to help with this.

Here I follow my mentor, Boeve, who writes of the Gospel as God's interruption in history.¹¹ And, as I attempt this, it is a privilege to serve the community here at Asia Pacific Nazarene Theological Seminary.

Conclusion

I follow the Anselmian project of *fides quaerens intellectum*. I am a systematic theologian who engages deeply in conversation with Lyotard, because he is arguably the "father of postmodern philosophy." His writings have deeply touched the fabric of Western culture, especially in the

⁹ For more on Boeve's view of interruption, inspired by his deep conversation with Lyotard's philosophical thought, see, Boeve, Lieven, *Interrupting Tradition: An Essay on Christian Faith in a Postmodern Context*, Louvain Theological & Pastoral Monographs 30 (Leuven, Belgium: Peeters Press, 2003).

¹⁰ This is a major argument in Boeve's essay, *Interrupting Tradition*.

¹¹ See, Boeve, *God Interrupts History*.

field of literature, and thus continue to have a profound influence on world culture. They give us a good glimpse into the current critical consciousness. Lastly, I believe that the Church needs new ways of expressing the faith we have received from prior generations. As a seminary, we need to equip pastors and church leaders for the current contemporary context. We do so in hope of the “event of grace” when God interrupts our narrative(s) and makes all the difference.

Now as this event concludes, faculty and students will begin to phrase what happened. Will this inaugural address receive a gracious reception? I hope so. But the event is now over. Narrations follow. Was I understood? Will the audience receive it with grace? I don’t know, but you will decide, even if the phrase that follows is silence.