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TOWARDS AN "ENGAGED" SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY?

ABSTRACT

This article explores the question of what the scope and focus of theology should be, by considering two closely connected suggestions in this regard. The first suggestion comes from a group of theologians from the mid-twentieth century who played an important role in instigating the ressourcement *movement. These theologians, it is shown, aimed at moving beyond the dualisms of Neo-Scholasticism, by turning anew to the theological style and method of the earliest Christian thinkers. The second related suggestion comes from the contemporary systematic theologian, Graham Ward, a scholar who draws on the thought of the* ressourcement *theologians in his development of what he calls a "culturally engaged" or simply "engaged" systematic theology. After examining the contributions of both the* ressourcement *theologians and Graham Ward, the article asks how these insights could inform the way we approach and do theology in our own context.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, there is, arguably, a renewed interest in the study of theology – within and beyond the confines of academia (see Scott 2008:170-186; Ward 2019:1-23). This interest has largely been instigated by the resurgence, or, some would contend, persistence of religious beliefs, practices and, particularly, language in our so-called secularised age.[1] Unlike

1 In recent years, various scholars have explored this continued presence of religious beliefs, practice and

Elvis, religion has not left the building, but has continued to play a significant role in societies in both the developing and the developed worlds, prompting many to emphasise anew the importance of, and urgent need for responsible theological reflection, also in the contemporary university setting, a milieu in which theology has often been sidelined in the past (Webster 2016:157-172; Hauerwas 2007:1-11).

With this renewed interest in theological thought, there has also been an upsurge in queries regarding what the scope and focus of this discipline of theology should be, and how theology's relationship to other academic disciplines, as well as the lived lives of ordinary people, should be viewed and understood (see, for example, Coakley 2013:1-33). In this article, I consider two closely related suggestions in this regard. The first comes from a group of Jesuit and Dominican thinkers from the mid-twentieth century, who played a leading role in instigating the *ressourcement* movement, which aimed at moving beyond the staunch dualisms of Neo-Scholasticism, by drawing anew on the theological style and method of the earliest Christian thinkers. The second comes from contemporary systematic theologian Graham Ward, a scholar who has not only been influenced by the *ressourcement* theologians but also set out to further their thought by his insistence on, and development of, what he calls, a "culturally engaged" or simply "engaged" systematic theology.[2] Having explicated and shown the continuities between the *ressourcement* theologians and Ward's contributions, I suggest that this trajectory of thinking about theology – as discussed throughout the article – could potentially play an important role in addressing the question of what theological inquiry, also in the context of South Africa, should entail.

2. THE *RESSOURCEMENT* MOVEMENT AND JEAN DANIÉLOU'S PROGRAMMATIC ESSAY

Ever since Pope Leo III's 1879 encyclical, *Aeterni Patris*, which aimed at upholding the objectivity of divine revelation in the face of the supposed subjectivism and immanentism stemming from the Enlightenment, the Catholic theological landscape came to be dominated by what would be called Neo-Scholasticism, a rigid theological system marked, among other things, by its dualistic conception of the relationship between the creaturely and the divine (Del Colle 2010:375-394; McCool 1989:1-36; Boersma

language in modern societies, in spite of many predictions that the opposite would occur. See, for example, Ward and Hoelz (2008), Micklethwait and Woolridge (2009), as well as Nynäs *et al.* (2012).

2 This part of the article draws on a larger consideration of Ward's notion of a "culturally engaged" systematic theology in the author's dissertation.

2009:36-41). Neo-Scholasticism held – in much the same manner as the philosophies of modernity it was trying to counter (but, ironically, ended up imitating) – that a fundamental distinction ought to be drawn between the natural and the supernatural, between the immanent order of pure nature and the transcendent order of grace, and that theology's attention should only be focused on the latter, without reference to creaturely existence and the subjective experiences of human beings (Boersma 2011:107-108; Howsare 2009:11-13). Neo-Scholasticism thus disembedded theological inquiry from all history, context, culture, and language, in pursuit of abstract truths that could be asserted in technical propositional statements that did not have much bearing on our embodied life on earth. It was a form of doing theology that involved a retreat from the world into the mind; a theology not marked by incarnation, but by "excarnation" – to use a term by Taylor (2007:301, 615).

Since this approach to theology – with its stark distinction between the realm of creation and the reality of God – was officially sanctioned and underwritten by papal authority, it became the standard way of engaging in theological reflection at almost all Catholic seminaries and theological faculties by the turn of the twentieth century (Boersma 2009:36-41; Jodock 2000:1-19; Kennedy 2010:34). This approach to theology was taught in classes, and grounded and informed the work of most of the leading Catholic thinkers of the time, including figures such as Joseph Kleutgen, Matteo Liberatore and, above all, Réginald Marie Garrigou-Lagrange (McCool 1989:20). There were, however, also some voices who, against the theological currents of the day, openly and defiantly opposed the Neo-Scholastic method; voices who, increasingly, called for a radical reconfiguration of the way theology was done. Some of the prominent names that could be mentioned in this regard include the Dominicans, Marie-Dominique Chenu, Yves Congar and Edward Schillebeeckx, who were mostly based at the seminary of Le Soulchoir in the town of Kain in Belgium, and the Jesuits, Henri de Lubac, Jean Daniélou, Hans Urs von Balthasar and Michel de Certeau, who were mostly based at the seminary of Fourvière in Lyon in France.

Although the theological project of these Dominican and Jesuit thinkers had different accents and diverged from one another at certain important points, their critique of Neo-Scholasticism and their vision for the renewal of contemporary theology shared many similarities (Mettepenningen 2010:7-13). These views were, to a large extent, summarised in a spirited programmatic essay written by Jean Daniélou – one of the youngest members of the group – in 1946, titled "The present orientations of religious thought" ("Les orientations présentes de la pensée religieuse", in the original French) (Pottier 2012:253; D'Ambrosio 1991:530-555). In this now-famous writing, Daniélou (1946:7-8) speaks out against what he calls the "rupture between theology and life";

against the way in which theology had become disconnected from the realm of creation, people's everyday lives and the liturgical practices of the church (see also Boersma 2009:1-3). According to Daniélou (1946:9), the Neo-Scholastic method with its hollow "theoretical speculations" about an almost alien God, who is above and beyond the created order, did not only make the discipline of theology irrelevant in the contemporary world, church and university setting, but it also stood in contradiction to the classical theological tradition that emerged in the patristic era; a tradition which – *contra* Gnosticism – took the created world seriously, and continuously attempted to engage theologically with the embodied realities of the creaturely realm (see also Boersma 2009:1-3; 2011:11-16).

In order to move beyond Neo-Scholasticism, Daniélou – together with the other theologians mentioned earlier – argued that it was important and necessary to look, once more, to the Patristic sources, from the West and the East; to retrieve and learn from theologies that were developed and espoused by the Latin and Greek Fathers in the beginning of the Christian theological tradition. This vision of and for theology would be encapsulated in the French word *ressourcement* (re-sourcing) (Kannengiesser 1991:59; Mettepenningen 2010:144). They held that, in reading patristic theology, one encountered Christian thinkers who, in the face of Gnostic theosophy – which aimed to negate and denounce all corporeal reality, and turn salvation into a "flight" from creation – continuously endeavoured to view and investigate the whole of creation, everything that existed, in the light of its source and end, the triune God (Boersma 2011:1-16, 33-34; see also Blowers 2012:1-17; Williams 2014:24-48).[3] For the Church Fathers, with their analogical and participative conception of the relationship between the creaturely and the divine, a conception stemming from the belief that God created the world *ex nihilo*, as well as their unremitting emphasis on the scandal of the incarnation, the event where the Word of God became flesh, theological reflection could not only be concerned with the so-called supernatural, heavenly realm, but needed to engage with, and make sense of all creaturely reality (Daley 2005:198; Nicholas 2013:1-3; Hart 2004:249-317).

This was a way of doing theology that resonated in a profound manner with these mid-twentieth-century Catholic theologians, who have become completely discontented with the breakdown of the synthesis of God, nature

3 It is important to note that there were many different schools of thought within Gnosticism, at large. Yet, as Williams (2014:34) writes, despite the "enormous variety of Gnostic 'stories' about the cosmos", there was a "clear central motif, summed up by some modern scholars as the doctrine of the 'alien God'". "God and the world" were indeed viewed as "strangers of one another". Thus, "the historical and temporal order, the world of conditions and determinations, was in "no way within the purposes of God"; it was "an abortion, a calamity".

and the self in the modern era (Fédou 2019:51-83). What attracted Daniélou and the other Dominican and Jesuit theologians to the Patristic thinkers was their specific vision for theology; the way in which they understood the calling and task of the theologian, and the style and scope of their theological thinking. In their reading of the Patristic texts, the focus would not be on finding certain technical theologoumena, hidden in the contingencies of history, that could be repeated, *verbatim*, in the modern world (Daniélou and especially von Balthasar were very clear on this), but principally to learn from these early Christian thinkers' approach to theology; from the way in which their theologies were immersed in, and engaged with the world around them and spoke to the real, embodied lives of ordinary people (see, for example, Hollon 2010:68; Daley 2005:364, 369; Kannengiesser 1991:61).

Daniélou and the others indeed attempted to imitate the style of the Church Fathers in their own constructive theological undertakings, showing a radical openness to the realities of creaturely existence, other fields of knowledge, and even other forms of Christianity and religious beliefs, in the work they were doing. It was a retrieval in order for renewal; a drawing on the church's ancient theology and practices in view of the future. Far from demonstrating a nostalgic longing for a pre-modern world, their theologies thus looked to the past, in order to recognise and develop new, unexplored theological possibilities in the present. In doing theology in this manner, they also called upon the rest of the Catholic Church to follow them – to "raze the bastions" that have been erected between the church, its theology and the world, to quote the title of one of von Balthasar's (1952) books from around this time. At first, this call was strongly opposed by the Neo-Scholastic order of the day, and many a warning was issued against this so-called *nouvelle théologie* (new theology), issuing from Le Soulchoir and Fourvière (Boersma 2009:17-34; Holsinger 2005:165). Increasingly, however, sentiments within the Roman Catholic Church were beginning to change, and by the time Pope John XXIII was elected and the Second Vatican Council was called together, Daniélou and many of the others were asked to play a central role in the Church's reform, and *ressourcement* theology came to provide the bedrock for many of the theological developments that occurred during and after Vatican II (Kirwan 2018:204-251).

Ressourcement theology has – since the Second Vatican Council – continued to influence theological thought both inside and outside the Roman Catholic Church (see Kirwan 2018:252-280; Sarisky 2017). Since the 1980s, for example, a number of Anglican theologians, specifically associated with the Universities of Cambridge and Oxford, have explicitly been drawing on these theologies of retrieval in their own theological projects, which have, to a large extent, been aimed at overcoming the dualisms marking modern

theological thought. I would like to turn to the work of one of these British theologians, Graham Ward, for the remainder of this article.

3. GRAHAM WARD AND HIS "CULTURALLY ENGAGED" SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

It was during Graham Ward's theological studies at the Faculty of Divinity at Cambridge University that he first became aware, in his own words, of the "abstract, even idealist levels" towards which the vast majority of modern systematic theologies "were being pitched" (Ward 2013:184). Ward (2013:184) indeed found that many systematic theologians of the past few centuries "seemed to be building … great cathedral[s] that hovered above our heads", without taking proper account of, or engaging with the contexts from which and to which they spoke. At the time, this realisation also came to be shared by a number of other up-and-coming British theologians, and together they began searching for alternative ways of thinking about and doing theology. This search eventually led to the very *ressourcement* theologians, who, a generation earlier, also recognised, spoke out against, and attempted to overcome the "rupture between theology and life" marking modern theology. This turn to the *ressourcement* theology and the patristic sources on which they drew, would, in many ways, lay the foundation for what came to be known as Radical Orthodoxy, a theological movement of which Ward, Milbank and Pickstock would be the main representatives (see Milbank *et al.* 1999:1-20; Smith 2004). It quickly, however, became clear that, although these three theologians shared many theological sensibilities, their work would have vastly different emphases and that Radical Orthodoxy would not be marked by uniformity in thought or method (Ward 2017:30).

Milbank and Pickstock's respective projects would, for example, have a strong genealogical focus and include abundant research on the theologies of the late Middle Ages and thereafter. This was done in an attempt to explicate how the so-called classical theological tradition (as found in Patristic and early and high Scholastic thought) supposedly became corrupted in the late Scholastic period, as Duns Scotus moved from an analogical to a univocal conception of being, and the followers of William of Ockham rejected the metaphysical realism that had grounded theological reflection up until then in favour of nominalism (see, for example, Milbank 1990:305; 2013:50; Pickstock 1997:88; 2003:3-46). Ward's writings, on the other hand, would be much more interested in the complexities of the contemporary world, and attempt to bring the Christian theological tradition, in all its richness and diversity, into critical conversation with the embodied and encultured realities of our present-day existence. Instead of focusing on how and when the dualisms underlying

modern theology came about, Ward focused on how these dualisms could potentially be bridged; on how contemporary theology could "engage" with the concrete, space-and-time bound realities of everyday life.

When one reads through Ward's extensive oeuvre, one notes that the word "engage" features prominently in his work. From the beginning of his theological career, he constantly uses it to describe what he is trying to do in and through his writings, and over the years, he increasingly refers to his larger theological project as an attempt at constructing a "culturally engaged" or simply "engaged" systematic theology (see Ward 2005:1-11; 2009:15; 2012:55, and so on). Given the continued concern for what theological inquiry should be about (as mentioned in the article's introduction), Ward decided to devote a substantial section of the first volume of his planned four-volume dogmatics, titled *How the light gets in* (2016), to clarifying what he means when he speaks of doing theology in an "engaged" manner. I now turn to this section, titled "So what is an engaged theology?"

After giving a cursory overview of the ways in which systematic theology has evolved throughout the ages, from the times of the first ecumenical creeds to our present day, Ward commences this programmatic section of his book – in which he hopes to give, in his own words, a "speed-camera shot" of his theological vision – by stating that, in short, a "culturally engaged" systematic theology can be viewed and described as a mode of theological inquiry that seeks to relate Christian doctrine to "cultural and social life" (Ward 2016:115-116). This, he holds, is done by actively resisting and moving beyond "the set of binary distinctions bequeathed to, and dominating 'modern theology'": distinctions between, for example, the supernatural and the natural, grace and nature, the transcendent and the immanent, and the sacred and the secular (Ward 2016:117). For Ward (2016:116), an "engaged" systematic theology is thus a "corrective to some of the less benign" changes that have occurred within the field of theology over the past few centuries; changes that have frequently resulted in the created realm being set over against the reality of the divine, as the *ressourcement* thinkers had also recognised.

In continuity with the thought of the theologians mentioned earlier, an "engaged" systematic theology is, accordingly, not interested in merely upholding certain abstract, propositional truth-claims about the divine – propositions that are disembedded from creation and the contexts from and to which the theologian speaks (Ward 2016:116). It is likewise not interested in merely "imitating the dominating secular modes of reasoning of the day", without any concern for the *theos* in "theology", as regularly happens, for example, in certain strands of modern biblical scholarship (Ward 2016:116). Rather, it deliberately sets out to transcend these dualistic paradigms, by focusing its attention on what it regards as the transcendent God's continued

"operations of redemption in and through the materialities" of our embodied and encultured lives on earth (Ward 2016:ix). In an "engaged" systematic theology, the whole created world is indeed perceived to be pervaded by, and constantly transformed through God's ever-persistent self-communication of love, which is definitively expressed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Ward (2016: 69, 169) states that, for an "engaged" systematic theology, nature is always "already graced"; the realm of the immanent always already opens up to the transcendent, and the holy is always already "lurking" in the mundane. Ward (2016:189) writes that all things "rise from dust to doxology", for those who "learn how to read the world correctly".

Working with what he calls a deep "sacramentalism" and "incarnationalism", where the Christian doctrines of *creatio* and *incarnatio* stand at the very core of everything that is said (Ward 2016:48, 130), while also constantly recognising the mediatory nature of all "God-talk" (Ward 2016:123, 127), Ward's theological project attempts to engage with, and make theological sense of everything that "is", much like the theologies of the *ressourcement* thinkers and the Patristic theologians at the very beginning of the Christian theological tradition. From its own specific "locatedness", it sets out to investigate all of the socially, politically and culturally embedded realities around it, in relation to God. Ward (2016:289-290) holds that, for an "engaged" systematics, nothing can be excluded from theological scrutiny, as it works with the premise that every inch of creation comes from, and analogically participates in the reality of God, and moreover is receptive to, and is being transformed by God's redemptive Word, who, in Jesus Christ, became flesh and, even today, is "continually given" to and for the world, through the working of the Spirit (Ward 2016:130). This also makes it a decidedly interdisciplinary enterprise.

Ward writes that, as an "engaged" systematic theology is concerned with everything *sub ratione Dei*, it necessarily learns from, draws upon and even adopts the language and knowledge of other sciences (as Aquinas also argued in the opening section of his *Summa*), in its attempt to discern, grasp and appreciate more deeply the "good and graceful hand of God's providence" in the world (Ward 2016:140, 142). Quoting Webster, Ward (2016:140) argues that by "entering the terrains of other disciplines" and learning to use their language, an "engaged" systematic theology does not "leave the domain of the Word behind but continues to trace its full scope" (see also Webster 2012:20). Ward holds that other disciplines, provide an "engaged" theology with ways to name and interpret God's working in and through the "givenness" of created things, to reference the title-phrase of a work by the American author, Marilynne Robinson (2015). Interdisciplinarity "neither liquidates the intellectual discipline of dogmatics, nor suggests theology can be translated without remainder into any other intellectual fields" (Ward 2016:140). It rather

"enables the particularity of what Christian's believe to become more visible for what it is", that is, "enmeshed" within the "material realities", "discursive effects" and especially "cultural productions" of our embodied lives here on earth (Ward 2016:140).

According to Ward (2016:289-320), an "engaged" systematic theology also has a strong ethical dimension and is concerned – in and through its theological engagement with the various realities of our embodied existence – with how we ought to live in this world; with what Hegel came to call *Sittlichkeit*. Far from only aiming at "intellection" and "ratiocination", which would lead, once more, to a form of "excarnation", it explicitly focuses on our embodied actions on the world stage, as we learn to follow Christ in our daily lives (Ward 2016:112, 143). Ward (2016:110) asserts that, in a "culturally engaged" systematic theology, Christian doctrine is treated as a "verbal noun", as something that can and should be enacted, lived-out, in real-life contexts. It thus encourages a way of "doing" amidst, and in response to the realities of everyday life, as God's Spirit gradually changes our "hearts of stone into hearts of flesh", and we come to learn, with others, what it means to live like Christ in the contemporary world (while knowing that, even in our shortcomings and failings, our lives remain "hidden with Christ in God", as Paul writes) (Ward 2016:136). It is indeed with regard to ethics that Ward's strong Christological focus comes into play. Ward views the ethical Christian life as an *imitatio Christi*, as a life where the truth of Christ is not only confessed, but performed, through certain embodied practices in the very communities where we live and work. This, he argues, is done to engender God's *salus*, that is, God's salvation, healing, and flourishing, in a world desperately in need thereof. The objective of an "engaged" systematic theology is thus ultimately the cultivation of an *ethos* imitative of Christ and attuned to the triune God, the One who is wholly good and wholly just.

4. AN "ENGAGED" SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY IN SOUTH AFRICA?

Much more could be said about *ressourcement* theology and Ward's notion of an "engaged" systematic theology (also with regard to the importance it attaches to ecumenism, liturgy and the practice of prayer – all of which is discussed at length in *How the light gets in*). Our discussion, however, reveals that we are dealing – at a fundamental level – with theologies that attempt to uncover and overcome the "secret temptation" of dualism, which has arguably made a strong reappearance in modern times (Hart 2004:21-22). Following O'Reagan (2001), one could indeed speak of a certain "gnostic return in modernity", where God and the world are continually set against one another,

so that theology ultimately becomes a discipline that could either focus its attention on certain faith-propositions about the existence and decrees of a distant God, or, in an attempt to conform to the other sciences, study the realities of this world without any real reference to transcendence and revelation. Daniélou recognised and spoke out against this gnostic impulse in the context of Catholic Neo-Scholasticism. A generation later, Ward also came to recognise and challenge it in his own dealings with what could arguably be called modern theology.

In South Africa, we have not been immune to the dualistic thinking expressed in many modern theological projects. Jaap Durand (2002) has, for example, highlighted how South African Reformed theology from the early- and mid-twentieth century, mostly followed the Reformed Scholasticism of especially the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in drawing stark distinctions between the eternal, unsearchable truths and decrees of God and the historical, contextual realities of people's everyday lives (which is, perhaps, part of the reason why these theologies could be used to support apartheid and turn a blind eye to the injustices people were suffering). Durand's own generation of systematic theologians (who would include thinkers such as Willie Jonker, Johan Heyns and Adrio König) – while having different views on apartheid than those who came before them – would, for the most part, keep their dogmatic reflections apart from their reflections on the realities of everyday life. For them, as Venter (2016:158) writes, dogmatics – dealing with the transcendent God – was to remain "sanitised from the travails of history and its conflicts".

This practice of bypassing the material world when thinking and speaking about the divine, on the one hand, and of thinking and speaking about the material world without substantial reference to the reality of God (which is, obviously, grounded in the separation of the transcendent from the imminent, the religious from the secular, the holy from the mundane, and so on), on the other, undoubtedly remains a temptation in contemporary theological discourse in South Africa, with there often being a division between, for example, contextual, public or practical theologies (exploring people's lived realities, typically in conversation with insights from the social sciences) and what is deemed to be work in "pure" systematic or dogmatic theology (dealing with, for example, themes such as the doctrine of God, Soteriology, Eschatology, and so on). Within this context, insights from both the *ressourcement* theologians and Graham Ward might prove helpful. What exactly an engaged theology in South Africa would entail is something that needs to be worked out contextually and explored in further academic work. In essence, it would be a theology that actively engages – from the depths, riches and diversity of the Christian tradition (also, as it has come to expression in South Africa)

– with all aspects of people's daily lives. It would, for example, involve work in Christology being done in dialogue with concrete socio-political realities; work in Eschatology being done in dialogue with ecological concerns; work in Pneumatology being done in dialogue with the arts, and work in Ecclesiology being done in dialogue with issues of economic and social transformation, and so on.

5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, *ressourcement* theologians such as Daniélou, von Balthasar and De Lubac teach us, also in South Africa at the present moment, that the "rupture between theology and life", marking many strands of modern theology, can and should be confronted and challenged. They would argue that one way to do so is by turning anew to the rich theological tradition that emerged in the Patristic period amidst, and in response to the various forms of Gnosticism of the time. While some early theologians, at times, adopted dualistic positions (for example, Origen of Alexandria, even though this interpretation of his thought is also often disputed; see McInroy 2013:20-35; von Balthasar 1984:1-23), we largely find a style of theological thinking during theology's first few centuries, which – on account of God's acts of creation and incarnation – seeks to study all creaturely reality in relation to God. This theological posture is found in Ward's "engaged" systematic theology. In continuity with the earliest Christian thinkers, as well as the mid-twentieth-century *ressourcement* theologians, Ward shows us how theology can – also in our time – be a pervasive and holistic undertaking that studies the reality of God by taking the materialities of our creaturely existence seriously. This, indeed, makes of theology a highly interdisciplinary endeavour that constantly enters into conversation with the other sciences, and also asks to be embodied and performed in our daily lives. Such an understanding of theology does not involve a retreat from the world, but an authentic engagement with it. I believe that this is also needed in South Africa at present.

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