

“To live is to change; to be perfect is to have changed often”: Challenges, imperatives and opportunities for theology in the 21st century

Anne Hunt

Abstract: Two centenary celebrations in 2010, that of the World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh and the establishment of the Melbourne College of Divinity, prompt a consideration of the new moods and movements, and the challenges, opportunities, and the imperatives which present themselves to theology and, no less importantly, to theological education one hundred years later in the 21st century in Australia. 2010 also marked the beatification of John Henry Newman’s beatification and it is his challenging dictum, “**To live is to change; to be perfect is to have changed often,**” which prompts the choice of “change” as the lens through which to examine the issues. This article considers (i) the changes in the broader socio-cultural-institutional context; (ii) the impact of these changes for theology today; (iii) the constants that remain amidst the contextual changes; and (iv) the changing cartography of theological education in Australia. It then offers a number of proposals for theology and the praxis of theological education for the 21st century, not as replacements for the core disciplines in biblical, doctrinal and theological studies, but rather as fresh areas of engagement or attunement.

Key Words: Theological education; secularization; atheism; plurality; fundamentalism; detraditionalization.

Two significant centenaries occurring in 2010 prompt this reflection on the challenges and opportunities facing theology in the 21st century in Australia.¹ Firstly, the World Missionary Conference, which was attended by over twelve hundred delegates from all over the world, and met for ten days in Edinburgh in June 1910. This gathering was to prove one of the most important events in mission history in the twentieth century. It heralded a new and distinctly global context for Christian mission to the world. This new understanding of mission would later find expression in the notions of “prophetic dialogue” and “bold humility.”² That historic conference heralded not only a new context for missiology, but also a new and distinctly missiological context for theology.

¹ A shorter version of this paper was delivered at the Melbourne College of Divinity 2010 Centenary Conference in July 2010.

² See David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991), 489; see also Stephen B. Bevans and Roger P. Schroeder, *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 284-285.

The second event, while not of immediately global significance, was of great significance for us in Australia: the establishment of the Melbourne College of Divinity, the centenary of which we celebrated in 2010. Founded by Act of the Parliament of the State of Victoria, the first members of the College, representing the Church of England, the Baptist, Congregational, Methodist and Presbyterian churches, and the Churches of Christ, were appointed in December 1910.

Those delegates who gathered at the World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh and those founders who met in Melbourne to establish the Melbourne College of Divinity lived a world that was very different from the one in which we live and work. So much has changed, politically, economically, technologically, scientifically, and indeed ecumenically. Admittedly, no Catholics were included in either event. It was not until the 1970s that Catholic colleges would join the Melbourne College of Divinity. However, Archbishop of Melbourne, Thomas Carr, while explaining that Catholics had no need of the Melbourne College of Divinity venture, expressed his warm support for its establishment, and Archbishop Geremias Bonomelli in Cremona, Italy sent a long and supportive letter to the World Missionary Conference.³ Interestingly, Bonomelli's young protégée, later papal nuncio in Istanbul, was a young priest, Don Angelo Roncalli, later John XXIII, who fifty years later would convene the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) which would mark a turning point in both ecumenical and inter-religious relations for the Roman Catholic Church.

In addressing the challenges and opportunities facing theology in the 21st century, there is firstly the changing context in which we do theology in the 21st century. Here, I wish to probe the new moods and movements, the challenges, opportunities, and the imperatives which present themselves to theology; and, no less importantly, to theological education as we move further into this century. Then, having examined the changing context, I want to assess the impact of those changes on the ways in which theology is done with special reference to educational praxis. There have also been significant changes in the cartography of theology in our country over the last fifty years and which are germane to the issue. Throughout, I am referring specifically to the discipline of theology as the activity of faith seeking understanding, and thus excluding the wider domain of religious studies. I will therefore consider changes impacting on theology in the 21st century under four headings: (i) changes in the broader socio-cultural-institutional context; (ii) the impact of these changes for theology today; (iii) the constants that remain amidst the contextual changes; and (iv) the changing cartography of theological education in Australia. I hope, thereby, to identify some key questions and to propose some possible answers.

In what follows, I speak as a theologian working in the field of systematics in the Roman Catholic tradition. Moreover, I cannot but be influenced by my present responsibilities as Dean of the Faculty of Theology and Philosophy in a publicly funded national University, where we face the challenge of teaching theology in the public domain and university setting, including the interdisciplinary concerns and opportunities which that setting entails. I hope that this contribution will be no less catholic for being Catholic,

³ See Joan Delaney, "From Cremona to Edinburgh: Bishop Bonomelli and the World Missionary Conference of 1910," *The Ecumenical Review* 52/3 (2000): 418-31.

and no less constructive for emanating from a Catholic university in this country, and in all the ecumenical associations that are emerging.

1. CHANGES IN THE SOCIO-CULTURAL CONTEXT IN WHICH WE WORK AS THEOLOGIANS

A range of changes in the broader socio-cultural context in which we live and work as theologians comes quickly to mind. The following are especially noteworthy.

(i) *The secularization of the culture*

The phenomenon of secularism, and/or secularity or secularization, quickly surfaces in discussions of contemporary western culture, although often without a clear and shared understanding of what precisely is meant by the notion. Charles Taylor, in his magisterial book, *A Secular Age*, distinguishes three senses of the word “secularism”: the separation of church and state; the decline in religious faith and practice; and, thirdly, a change in the “plausibility structures” within a culture so that non-religious explanations of life become increasingly convincing.⁴ The American journalist and Catholic Church commentator, John Allen, observed that, in his view, western Europe is probably the only place on earth where secularism in all three senses identified by Taylor is truly a grass-roots phenomenon.⁵ I suggest that Australia belongs in that category too, though in a way somewhat different from that of Western Europe.

A question immediately surfaces, however. Does secularism or secularity or secularization, whichever term you prefer, actually serve adequately to describe the phenomenon?⁶ Some scholars suggest that it is not in fact the most apt way to describe the actual change in the culture we are seeking to express and that the phenomenon emerging in our culture is more far-reaching and more complex than the notion of “secularization,” as generally understood, connotes. Lieven Boeve (Dean of Theology at Katholieke Universiteit Leuven), for example, suggests that the context is better described, certainly in the European context, as one of “detraditionalization.”⁷ He argues that “detraditionalization” is a much more accurate descriptive category and a more helpful tool of analysis. There is, he suggests, a much more sweeping phenomenon in evidence in our culture, not only in regard to the Christian tradition, but also, for example, in a detraditionalization in gender identity and family traditions, and indeed in all traditions, even in non-religious or atheistic forms.

Accompanying detraditionalization, there is the erosion of the authority of institutions per se: this brings to light the associated phenomenon of deinstitutionalization. Together, detraditionalization and deinstitutionalization contribute in large measure to a third phenomenon in the culture, namely, that of individualization. It is important to stress that this is not the oft-noted and oft-bemoaned phenomenon of individualism with its implications of self-referential choices and a diminished moral

⁴ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2007), 3.

⁵ John L. Allen Jr., *National Catholic Reporter*, “Benedict in Portugal: A different crisis, secularism, and ‘Marian Cool,’” 7 May 2010.

⁶ Of the three terms, I prefer secularization as a descriptive category, as the ‘-ization’ terms better serve to describe the phenomena, without the ideological connotations of the ‘-ism’ terms

⁷ Lieven Boeve, “Religion after Detraditionalisation: Christian Faith in a Post-Secular Europe,” *Irish Theological Quarterly* 70 (2005): 99-122; idem, *God Interrupts History: Theology in a Time of Upheaval* (New York: Continuum, 2007).

range of reference. Individualization is not reducible to the self-centredness of the “me-generation.” The issue is, rather, the individualization that is born of necessity. One’s identity in a detraditionalized deinstitutionalized world is, by virtue of there being no other option, a matter of individual choice. Effectively, this signals the end of any easy and automatic transmission of identity and of once taken-for-granted allegiances. Personal identity and religious affiliation have now become matters of personal choice. In a detraditionalized, deinstitutionalized and individualized cultural milieu, religion and spirituality thus lie beyond the control of religious organizations or traditional loyalties.

“Cultural amnesia” is the result, wherein a pervasive and profound loss of long-term memory of our history and tradition prevails. But to have no memory of our history and tradition is to have no frame of reference for our identity and our meaning-making. It is to have no identity and, indeed, no ready markers for its construction. Disinherited and disconnected from our cultural roots, one’s identity is, perforce, a matter of individual choice.

(ii) The rise of atheism

While the data regarding religious affiliation from the Australian Bureau of Statistics demonstrate Australia’s religious profile is still predominantly Christian, the proportion of Australians stating an affiliation to some type of religion has dropped significantly. And it continues to drop—from a relatively stable figure for the period 1933 until 1971 of slightly less than 90%, to 73% in 2001. Further, there is a growing tendency among Australians to state that they do not affiliate with *any* religion, rising from 7% in 1971 to 16% in 2001. The proportion citing no religion or not stating a religion is clearly increasing. In 2006, 3.7 million people (18.7%) reported “No religion” on the national census, while a further 2.4 million (11.9%) chose not to state their religion (or inadequately described it), that is, just over 30%.⁸

An atheist convention in Melbourne in 2010, with celebrated atheist Richard Dawkins as its honoured luminary, also suggests that atheism—or at least the self-description of having no religious affiliation—is an increasingly socially acceptable and popular option. In his numerous appearances in the media, Dawkins, to the evident delight of his audience, derided religious faith as patent ignorance, mindless superstition and sheer irrationality. Pitting science against religion, again to the evident approval of his audience, Dawkins insisted that science, in stark contrast to religion, is the endeavour worthy of one’s allegiance and trust.

To think that this emerging contemporary popular atheism is all of one kind would however be mistaken. The phenomenon of contemporary popular atheism is by no means so easily categorized. It is truer to speak of contemporary atheisms—one of which is the Dawkins’ variety. In fact, the recent atheist convention drew a wide range of people—some atheists by illumination or philosophical persuasion, some in the grip of empiricism, some angry with religion and rebelling against it, some caught up in a naive atheism (not unlike the naive faith of previous generations), and some whom one might describe as detached or disconnected (because never connected) from any experience of religious

⁸ Australian Bureau of Statistics, at <http://www.abs.gov.au>.

tradition of faith and thought. Here again, Boeve's notion of detraditionalization strikes me as close to the mark.

(iii) *A heightened consciousness of plurality*

One particular aspect of western culture has been particularly conducive to the growth of atheism in popular culture and that is a heightened consciousness of the reality of cultural and religious plurality. It is the phenomenon of plurality that fundamentally underpins the appeal of religious, moral and cultural relativism as an increasingly plausible and defensible option.

In a counter to the more popular notion that modernization *per se* secularizes (i.e., with the rise of the liberal democratic state), sociologist Peter Berger argues that it is not modernization but rather pluralization that secularizes. Now a global phenomenon, with the onset of mass communications, mass mobilization and massive urbanization, it is pluralization that has a relativising effect, in the consciousness of both individuals and institutions, because pluralization *per se* brings with it the undermining of the taken-for-granted beliefs and values.⁹ A consequent dilemma for our age has been articulated with piercing clarity by moral philosopher, Alasdair MacIntyre, in his magisterial book, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theology* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), the interminable character of the debates on moral issues, with no rational way of assessing the competing moral claims.

One of the institutional consequences of pluralization is a shift from the once taken-for-granted allegiances to freely chosen voluntary participation in belief systems, be it religious or moral. Religions and churches thus become *voluntary associations* in post-traditional societies. One *chooses* whether or not to adopt a religious identity. Indeed, the choice is made from a number of religious options, each with its distinctive worldview and reservoir of narratives, rituals, and practices. As Berger points out, modernization and its accompanying globalization thus results, not in a society without religion, but rather in a society with a plurality of religious options from which to choose.¹⁰ The resulting phenomenon is a culture of detachment. Ready markers of identity are blurred. Every person must construct his/her own identity. Moreover, in the detraditionalization that results, the media gains in power and influence, filling the power-gap left by the demise of previously influential formators of identity and opinion. Hence, the phenomenon that we might describe as the 'mediatization' of our world which is manifold, and the now extremely powerful role of the media, alongside the perennially formative influence of peers, in the project of identity construction.

In the phenomenon of pluralization also lie the seeds for the project of deconstructionism. A growing consciousness of irreducible plurality gives rise to a heightened consciousness of the variety of master narratives, and, concomitantly, of the particularity of one's own narrative. It is hardly surprising, then, that postmodernity

⁹ Peter L. Berger, "Introduction: Between Relativism and Fundamentalism" in *Between Relativism and Fundamentalism: Religious Resources for a Middle Position*, ed. Peter L. Berger (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2010), 1-16. Berger uses the term modernity but in the sense of modernization.

¹⁰ Peter Berger, "Introduction: Between Relativism and Fundamentalism," in *Between Relativism and Fundamentalism: Religious Resources for a Middle Position*, ed. Peter L. Berger (Grand Rapids, MI/Cambridge UK: William B. Eerdmans, 2010), 1-13.

would reject the very project of modernity and subject all master narratives to deconstruction.

(iv) The rise of fundamentalism

Seemingly in contradiction to the relativization of all absolutes is the emergence in today's culture of the phenomenon of fundamentalism. It is characterised by an uncompromising and sometimes militant adherence to truths that are perceived to be *absolute*. Ten years ago, in 2000, we may well have lamented the demise of religion and God-talk in the public domain. But the terrible events of 9/11 catapulted religion and God-talk back into public discourse in radically new and often uncomfortable ways. The public sphere was made vulnerable to the intrusion of a virulent religiosity, whether it took the form of Christian, Islamic, or Hindu fundamentalism. Now religious concerns are back on the scene, however unexpected and however unlikely the sources.

This brief survey suggests some of the changes significantly affecting the theological context in which we, at least in the West and in Australia in particular, live and work. This complex situation can be named "the postmodern context," so as to include the various elements of detraditionalization, deinstitutionalization, pluralization, relativization, mediatization—and fundamentalism. The point is that this is the world which informs the attitudes, values, world-views, and choices of young people in Australia and indeed in most places on the planet. Moreover, this is the world in which theological graduates will work, minister, teach and preach.

There is also the research on young adults themselves, Gen Y and their cultural world, attitudes and values to inform our considerations. A recent Australian study of Gen Y indicated that 46% of Australian Gen Ys consider themselves Christian.¹¹ Gen Ys demonstrate progressively lower church attendance rates and less confidence in the church. The phenomenon of 'unchurching' is now widespread, with generations of young people having grown up without ever belonging to a religion. Unlike older generations, young women are now no more religious than young men. Definitely gone are the days when Christianity serves as the taken for granted and unquestioned horizon and an available marker for one's individual and social identity. Yet, a certain religiosity is in evidence in some quarters: it is more autonomous and subjective and claims no institutional allegiance. This resurgence of religiosity has been described by some as "believing without belonging."¹² We may well argue about the interpretation of the data, even the correct naming of the phenomena that are unfolding, but we cannot but agree on the fact that, at the very least, modernization has resulted in a transformation of religion and belief.

Something new is clearly being demanded if we and they are to communicate effectively in this new context. This shift in culture and context clearly demands a shift in the task of faith seeking understanding. Without an effective transposition, there is the risk of sliding into implausibility and irrelevance, and, at worst, even into alienation from the culture. The task of theology continues to be one of mediation between faith and the

¹¹ *The Spirit of Generation Y: Young People's Spirituality in a Changing Australia*, Michael Mason, Andrew Singleton, and Ruth Webber (Mulgrave, VIC: John Garratt, 2007).

¹² See, for example, Lieven Boeve, "Religion after Detraditionalisation," 99-122. See also the work of Yves Lambert and Grace Davie to which Boeve refers.

culture. It necessarily demands a continual recontextualization and reconceptualization of the convictions at the heart of faith in order to mediate meaning to contemporary culture. This reconstructive responsibility of theology is a contemporary form of bearing witness to the in-breaking of God's abundant grace in this time and in this culture. It will mean a re-telling the story of that super-abundance of love as it is revealed in the person of Jesus Christ and in the events of his death on a cross and resurrection. The challenge as ever, is to understand and to communicate the faith anew by recognising and appealing to the cultural context of Christian life today.

It is not only the changing socio-cultural context which has had a radical impact on theology in the 21st century. The theological landscape itself has been altered in recent decades so as to affect the resources at our disposal and the methods we bring to the theological task. There is firstly the burgeoning of historical critical scholarship, including the dramatic advances in specifically biblical scholarship. Theological reflection and exploration is carried forward in the rich streams flowing from this. There is also unprecedented access to a vast range of documentation and critically edited texts easily available and in various languages. The sheer range, depth and quantity of the resources now available to theologians in the 21st century is remarkable. A further outstanding development, with particularly high impact for Australia, once subject to the tyranny of distance and time delays and costs of the postal service, is the ease and speed with which theologians can now communicate—and collaborate. These are developments of momentous proportions and together they have opened up radically new vistas for re-examining the development of doctrine and the formulation of theological positions. In tandem with these developments, theologians now are aware as never before of the necessarily contextual character of all theologies. Different socio-cultural-economic milieux clearly prompt the emergence of different questions, exigencies, theological perspectives, and theological methods, styles and emphases. In short, different contexts necessarily stimulate different ways of faith seeking understanding, different mediations of the meaning of Christian faith. In this brave new world, there can be no going back to a propositional or manualist style of theological exposition. A theology for the 21st century will be characterized by a confident and competent pluralization that is attuned to the pluralization of the very milieu from which, in which and to which it speaks.

2. SOME PROPOSALS FOR THEOLOGY AND FOR THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

With these factors in mind, let us put forward a number of proposals—at least pointers—for theology and the praxis of theological education for the 21st century. These are not meant to replace the core disciplines in biblical, doctrinal and theological studies, but rather point in the direction of fresh areas of engagement or attunement for a theology in the decades ahead. Our treatment is necessarily brief.

(i) Critically and creatively engaged with the culture

The rise of contemporary popular atheism poses a serious challenge to theology. It calls us to sharpen our attention to the issues raised by our atheist interlocutors. Giving an account of our faith and the hope that is in use will mean engaging with the cultural and intellectual resources within the culture. As preachers and teachers, we need to be much more persuasive—and much less dogmatic—in engaging in the public domain and in

participating in public discourse. This must entail an ongoing critical and creative *interaction* with modern and post-modern secular philosophical outlooks. Indeed, this is a vitally important apologetic exercise. In effect, there is need for a new apologetics, in the true sense of defending and commending the Christian faith.

This critical engagement with contemporary atheism also requires a sound level of historical literacy. Not to know our history is to be left mute in the face of the barrage of criticisms of the kind offered by, for example, Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens. Theological students must know their tradition and history at its best and at its worst if they are to be confident and competent in addressing the challenges and problems of their own day.

As for the sciences, the physical and the social, we need to acknowledge that, while the sciences feel no obvious need of theology, theology needs them. The relationship between theology and science is not symmetrical. Theology is interdisciplinary of its very nature, and therefore unthinkable without dialogue with the sciences. The classical theological strategy of interconnection (nexus), as articulated by Vatican I,¹³ applies not only to the tracts within theology but to all areas of scholarly endeavour, the “secular” as well as the sacred. Consider, for example, the great advances in scientific understandings of the origin of the universe and of life which have occurred in recent years. Contemporary theologies of creation that do not attend to those scientific advances appear foolish and naive. Theology needs actively to engage with the sciences and to interact with scientific discourse, especially in the areas of evolution, cosmology, biology and physics. Here, for example, the Australian theologian, Denis Edwards, in *How God Acts: Creation, Redemption, and Special Divine Action* (Fortress/ATF, 2010), *Ecology at the Heart of Faith* (Orbis, 2006), and *The God of Evolution: A Trinitarian Theology* (Pauline, 1999), offers very useful resources which take seriously the insights of modern science.

(ii) *Ecumenically attuned*

With the multifaith phenomenon woven into the texture of our pluralized culture, it is neither possible nor desirable to do theology as if in a vacuum, hermetically sealed from the other Christian denominations or indeed from the other religions of the world. In suggesting the theology needs to be ecumenically attuned, I do not mean to reduce our different theological traditions to some bland amalgam or some lowest common denominator. I mean rather that each of our theological traditions be attentive to the other, in dialogue with each other, within the horizon of “the whole.” There is no question

¹³ In its Dogmatic Constitution, *Dei Filius*, the First Vatican Council (1869–1870), addressing the relationship between faith and reason, enumerated what are recognized as the three classic techniques for advancing theological understanding of the mysteries of Christian faith: “If reason, illumined by faith inquires in an earnest, pious and sober manner, it attains by God’s grace a certain understanding of the mysteries, which is most fruitful, both from the analogy with the objects of its natural knowledge and from the connection of these mysteries with one another (nexus mysteriorum) and with our ultimate end. But it never becomes capable of understanding them in the way it does the truths which constitute its proper object. For divine mysteries by their very nature so excel the created intellect that, even when they have been communicated in revelation and received by faith, they remain covered by the veil of faith itself and shrouded as it were in darkness as in this mortal life we are ‘away from the Lord; for we walk by faith, not by sight’ [2 Cor 5:6-7].” Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Filius*, H. Denzinger and A. Schönmetzer, eds, *Enchiridion Symbolorum: Definitionum et Declarationum de Rebus Fidei et Morum*, 36th edition (Freiburg: Herder, 1976), §3016; J. Neuner and J. Dupuis, eds, *The Christian Faith in the Doctrinal Documents of the Catholic Church*, 6th revised and enlarged edition (New York: Alba House, 1996), §132.

of repudiating one's particular tradition, but of being genuinely true to that tradition in its most authentic expression. Here, there is need to appeal to the best historical scholarship, particularly when confronting the controversies and confrontations of the past. An informed ecumenical dialectic can thereby emerge and serve the dialogue of unity and reconciliation. Here, for example, there is a wealth of resources to be mined in the documents that have emerged across a wide range of issues from the various ecumenical dialogues, both national and international—The Faith and Order Papers of The World Council of Churches, The Anglican-Roman Catholic Commission for Unity and Mission (ARCIC), The Luther-Roman Catholic Commission on Unity, the Catholic Church-World Alliance of Reformed Churches dialogue, and the Roman Catholic-World Methodist Council dialogue.

(iii) In dialogue with the world religions

The challenge here is for theology to engage respectfully and confidently with both the great world religions and indigenous spiritualities. Again, to urge interfaith dialogue is not to envisage a vague consensus or to force correlations between differing faith traditions. Nor does it mean sacrificing the doctrines which are held dear in a particular faith tradition, be it Christian, Muslim, or any other. Genuine engagement is not served by resiling from the truths we most cherish, nor by glossing over our differences. Indeed, one of the goals and the fruits of interfaith engagement is to arrive at a deeper understanding of *ourselves* and *our own* faith traditions, precisely in and through coming to a deeper understanding of the other.

The perennially missiological context for theology which the World Missionary Conference of 1910 heralded remains. The great commission remains: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Mt 28:19-20). We are ever called to "proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles" (1 Cor 1:23), "to bring good news to the poor" (Lk 4:18), "to become all things to all people" (1 Cor 9:22), and to "give an account of the hope that is in [us]" (1 Pet 3:15). But, as Stephen Bevans and Roger Schroeder insist in *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today* (Orbis, 2004), while the imperative to mission remains a constant in Christian life, ever new contexts call us to ever new mediations of the meaning of the gospel. Moreover, as Bevans and Schroeder also insist, we need also be mindful that witness lies first and foremost at the heart of mission and that our commission is a sharing in what is God's mission. The work of Bevans and Schroeder is most helpful here. There is also much valuable material emerging from theological studies regarding Christianity in Asia and its dialogue with the great religions of the East. The work of Francis X. Clooney is most helpful here, most recently, for example, *The New Comparative Theology: Interreligious Insights from the Next Generation* (T&T Clark, 2010).¹⁴

¹⁴ See also Paul J. Griffiths, ed., *Christianity Through Non-Christian Eyes*, Faith Meets Faith Series (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1990); Hans Küng, *Christianity and the World Religions: Paths of Dialogue with Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism*, trans. Peter Heinegg (New York: Doubleday, 1986); Michael Barnes, *Theology and the Dialogue of Religions*, Cambridge Studies in Christian Doctrine (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

(iv) *Ecological and global in perspective*

Information and communications technologies together with mass mobilization have had an astonishing impact on our sense of self in the world and our sense of self *in* the universe. We now recognize our world as a global village, an interconnected and interdependent web of life. Theology similarly is now called, as never before, to be consciously and intentionally ecological and global in its scope and outlook. Its authenticity and integrity demand that it be more attentive than ever to *all* creation—human and other—and to engage ecologically and globally, both theoretically and pastorally. A Christology for the 21st century, for example, demands attention to its distinctly ecological as well as global dimensions and ramifications. Here the recently published book by Neil Ormerod and Shane Clifton, *Globalization and the Mission of the Church* (T&T Clark, 2009) is a valuable resource, as is Stephen Bevans' work, *An Introduction to Theology in Global Perspective* (Orbis, 2009) and Denis Edwards' work, previously mentioned, on theology in a determinedly ecological perspective.

(v) *Engaging the arts and nurturing interiority*

Karl Rahner SJ famously commented that “the devout Christian of the future will ... be a mystic ... or he will cease to be anything at all.”¹⁵ Indeed the mystics also offer a wealth of resources and a distinctly experiential approach to theology for students and teachers of theology in this postmodern context.¹⁶

The very phenomenon of detraditionalization and with it the individualization of identity construction, together with the mediatization which flourishes in its service, also urges us to engage *new media*—particularly the creative arts—in our theological endeavours and communications, particularly in theological education. Theology cut off from the arts can so easily sink into esoteric nominalism. Yet, when working with the arts—the visual, literary, musical, and performative—theology possesses a buoyancy and vitality, and a consciousness continually open to refreshment of its creativity.

As Rahner recognized, our goal in engaging the arts and in critically and creatively engaging with contemporary culture and the questions it raises is to open up and nurture a deep interiority, to foster a profound transformation of consciousness, indeed a distinctly mystical consciousness, in regard to our sense of God, our sense of self as a ‘new self’, of a new community of belonging in God, and a new world-shaping praxis grounded in the following of Christ through faith, hope and love. It is the faith of the mystic, nurtured by a deep interiority, that will persist and prevail in a detraditionalized, deinstitutionalized, pluralized and individualized world.

In effect, in all of this I am pointing to *a new theology of theology*, a theology that engages critically, creatively, vigorously and enthusiastically with the culture; a theology that engages new media, and particularly the arts; a theology that engages with the hopes, joys, and sorrows of humanity; a theology for and at the heart of the world.

¹⁵ Karl Rahner, “Christian Living Formerly and Today,” in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 7, *Further Theology of the Spiritual Life*, trans. David Bourke (New York: Herder & Herder, 1971), 15. See also Harvey D. Egan, “Mysticism and Karl Rahner’s Theology,” in *Theology and Discovery: Essays in Honor of Karl Rahner, S.J.*, ed. William J. Kelly (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1980), 139-158.

¹⁶ See Anne Hunt, *Trinity: Insights from the Mystics* (Collegeville MN: Liturgical Press, 2010).

3. THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION IN AUSTRALIA

Lastly, we turn to consider theological education in Australia. In the course of recent decades, very significant and important changes and developments have unfolded that bear on the question of theology for the 21st century in Australia.

In terms of the students: Theological education, in Australia as elsewhere, was not so long ago the domain of ordination candidates, taught by the ordained to those who were to be ordained (and many if not most of them financially supported, to varying degrees, by the churches to which they belonged). Now, in most institutions of theological education in Australia, there are more non-ordination than ordination students, with the great majority of students not aiming for a career in ministry as such. There has also been a phenomenal increase in the number of women studying theology. Lastly, compared to just a few decades ago, the age profile is distinctly different, with many semi-retired and retired people studying theology for personal interest and development, although the evangelical schools of theology and bible colleges are notably different in this regard, with flourishing enrolments and strong numbers of *young* students.

In terms of the institutional providers: Theology was once confined to the theologates wherein theological education was geared to ministerial preparation and formation. Nowadays, in response, at least in part, to the changes in student clientele, the theologates speak more in terms of offering transformative learning to their students. The new comers to the theological education scene are the universities, and here there are two distinct groups: (i) Australian Catholic University and the University of Notre Dame Australia, for which the provision of theology and philosophy is embedded in their very charters, not for ministerial preparation *per se*, but as academic disciplines lying at the core of their Catholic identity and mission;¹⁷ and (ii) universities, such as Charles Sturt, Flinders, Newcastle, Macquarie, and the University of Queensland, officially secular universities, with theology in their portfolios, but removed, to varying degrees, from any explicit ecclesial context, control or commitment, the provision of theology in their portfolios having emerged more from opportunistic and pragmatic considerations than from principles explicitly articulated in their mission and vision statements. Further, the cartography of institutional providers continues to be in flux, with Melbourne College of Divinity currently seeking “specialist university status.”

In terms of the faculty involved in theological education in Australia: The rise of the lay/non-ordained theologian and the emergence of theology in the universities have brought with them new financial imperatives and burdens. But the staffing issues facing theological education in Australia are not just financial. The current age profile of theological educators in Australia, with significant numbers of faculty approaching retirement age, challenges us as a sector to be much more strategic and intentional in preparing the next generation of theologians and preparing for them in terms of sustainable and financially viable structures. A vital aspect of the challenges and the opportunities we face, as I see it, is much closer collaboration among theological providers, in service to the discipline of theology and to the churches we serve. We have so

¹⁷ Australian Catholic University does have seminary students in its theology programs, for example, at its Brisbane campus, with the provincial seminary providing other elements of the ministerial formation program.

much more to gain from collaboration than from competition. Those who gathered one hundred years ago at the World Missionary Conference and those who gathered to establish the Melbourne College of Divinity continue to inspire us to muster the courage and commitment to work together more effectively. Together we can do even greater things in this 21st century.

4. CONSTANTS IN CHANGING CONTEXTS

Amidst all this change, it is important to reflect on what does not and must not change, if we are to be true to the essential task of theology, faith seeking understanding. John Henry Newman's memorable words which form the title of this paper are all the more thought-provoking in the light of the context of a discussion on doctrinal development in which he expressed them.¹⁸ They too continue to challenge us, as does Pope John XXIII who, when opening the Second Vatican Council, spoke of the substance of the ancient deposit of faith as one thing, and the way in which it is presented as another.¹⁹ That ancient deposit of faith is the unsurpassable revelation of God in Jesus Christ. It is this which does not change, nor our conviction that theology is the task of faith seeking understanding and of mediating the meaning of that unsurpassable revelation of God in Jesus Christ in ever new ways in ever new and changing contexts, ways that effectively convey meaning and value in the milieu to which they speak. Even more importantly, what is also not changing is our conviction that the Spirit is with us, and that God is at work in the world *in this and every context* in the missions of Spirit and Word. God's grace, providence and care for all creation endure and prevail. This current moment in our history is assuredly no less blessed than any other. Let Newman's words continue to encourage and inspire us, "To live is to change, to be perfect is indeed to have changed often." We need have no fear of change. To be perfect is to have changed often.

Author: Anne Hunt is systematic theologian. Her particular area of interest is the theology of the Trinity, on which topic she has published four books and numerous articles. She is currently the Dean of Theology and Philosophy at Australian Catholic University, one of the new institutional comers to the theological education in Australia.

Email: anne.hunt@acu.edu.au

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¹⁸ John Henry Newman, *Essay on Development Doctrine of Christian Doctrine*, ed. J. M. Cameron (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1973), 1.1, 100.

¹⁹ Pope John XXIII, 11 October 1962 on the occasion of the solemn opening of the Second Vatican Council: "...The Council...wishes to transmit Catholic doctrine, whole and entire, without alteration or deviation...To be sure, at the present time, it is necessary that Christian doctrine in its entirety, and with nothing taken away from it, is accepted with renewed enthusiasm, and serene and tranquil adherence... it is necessary that the very same doctrine be understood more widely and more profoundly as all those who sincerely adhere to the Christian, Catholic and Apostolic faith strongly desire ...it is necessary that this certain and unchangeable doctrine, to which is owed the obedience of faith, be explored and expounded in the manner required by our times. For the deposit of faith itself, or the truths which are contained in our venerable doctrine, are one thing; another thing is the way in which they are expressed, with however the same meaning and signification." *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 54 (1962): 791-792. See http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20070629_responsa-quaestiones_en.html, n. 1 (accessed 5 January 2010).