

Prophetic Dialogue as a Practical Theological Category¹

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Abstract: Stephen Bevans and Roger Schroeder suggest that “prophetic dialogue” is the most appropriate category or metaphor for Christian mission today.² This paper explores the significance and implications of “prophetic dialogue” for the task of practical theology. Whereas “prophecy” gives priority to the Word of God in scripture and tradition, “dialogue” highlights the importance of respectful human, cultural and religious encounter. Both components are necessary; their relationship is dialectical. Whether we are concerned with worship and liturgy, prayer and contemplation, justice and peace, the integrity of creation, interreligious dialogue, evangelization, inculturation or reconciliation, prophetic dialogue is a significant category for gauging the effectiveness and authenticity of the theological task. Panikkar’s “cosmotheandric” dialogue and the “triple dialogue” advocated by the Federation of the Asian Bishops’ Conferences are two possible avenues for advancing “prophetic dialogue.”

Key Words: prophetic dialogue; Christian mission; interreligious dialogue; worship; social justice; evangelisation; inculturation; Raimon Panikkar

Theology is used to dealing with dichotomies of faith and life, action and contemplation, mysticism and politics, inculturation (Christ for culture) and cultural critique (Christ against culture). Christian theology in the West is beset with a certain dualism sometimes associated with Catholic emphasis on sacrament and incarnation and Protestant concern for prophecy and judgment. The best ecumenical theology attempts to bridge the gap, to see the two poles of theology in creative tension versus divisive polarity. The category of “prophetic dialogue” is one such attempt to develop a practical, missionary theology that appreciates human experience and reason while being suspicious of all human structures in Church and society. Christian commitment to liberating praxis needs to be equally attentive to the power of the Gospel—the voice of prophecy—and the reality of the human situation—the voice of dialogue. The relationship between the two voices—prophecy and dialogue—is dialectical: that is, they need to be understood together and in reference to each other.

¹ Official Roman Catholic Church Documents used in the text. Available in English translation on the Official Vatican Website: <http://www.vatican.va/> accessed 20th March 2007.

Lumen Gentium (1964) Vatican Council II Dogmatic Constitution on the Church

Gaudium et Spes (1965) Vatican Council II Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World

Evangelii Nuntiandi (1975) Apostolic Exhortation of Paul VI

Redemptoris Missio (1990) Encyclical Letter of John Paul II

Dialogue and Proclamation (1991) Joint Commissions for Interreligious Dialogue and Evangelization of Peoples

² Stephen Bevans and Roger Schroeder, *Constants in Context* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004), 348-395.

The actual term “prophetic dialogue” was introduced at the fifteenth General Chapter of the Catholic Missionary Society of the Divine Word.³ As developed by Bevans and Schroeder, who are incidentally Divine Word Missionaries, the term is proposed as the most appropriate metaphor or category for articulating a Christian missionary theology for contemporary times. They understand Christian mission in terms of: participation in the life and mission of the Trinity; continuation of Jesus’ mission to preach, serve and witness to the “already/not yet” reign of God; and proclamation of Christ as the world’s only saviour.⁴ The essential components of mission are presented as: witness and proclamation; liturgy, prayer and contemplation; commitment to justice, peace and the integrity of creation; interreligious dialogue; inculturation; reconciliation.⁵ In various ways, these will form the bases of our theological reflection on prophetic dialogue as a primary category for practical theology throughout the remainder of the paper.

Witness and Proclamation

The experience of the first Christians after Pentecost is one in which witness to and proclamation of the presence of the risen Christ and the Spirit in their midst is foundational. Word and deed belong together: “You are to be my witnesses in Jerusalem... (and) even to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8); “Go, therefore, make disciples of all nations...” (Mt 28:19). Witness and proclaim: authentic witness is necessary for effective proclamation; and effective proclamation is itself a form of witness. In Luke’s version, Jesus tells the Emmaus disciples that it is written in the Scriptures that “the Christ would suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that, in his name, repentance and forgiveness of sins would be preached”. To which he adds: “You are witnesses to this” (Lk 24:47-48). Witness and proclamation are not primarily about doctrines, but a way of life lived by Jesus and taught to his disciples. Jesus’ own mission is one in which his teachings express in word what his healings demonstrate in action. His common ritual of table-fellowship with the poor and marginal witnesses to what he proclaims in word and parable.

Christian evangelization inevitably fails where the proclamation of the Gospel is not at the same time expressed by “the witness of an authentically Christian life” (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 41). Indeed, as stated by the Second Vatican Council, “this split between the faith which many profess and their daily lives deserves to be counted among the more serious errors of our age” (*Gaudium et Spes*, 43). Whereas Catholics speak of “evangelization”, Protestants and Evangelicals use the term “evangelism”. Both signify, perhaps with different emphases, that witness and proclamation are integral and interrelated components of mission. This is made clear in Protestant missionary theologian David Bosch’s description of evangelism as:

that dimension and activity of the church’s mission which, by word and deed and in the light of particular conditions and a particular context, offers every person and every community, everywhere, a valid opportunity to be directly challenged to a radical reorientation of their lives, a reorientation which involves such things as deliverance from slavery to the world and its powers; embracing Christ as Saviour and Lord; becoming a living member of his community, the church; being enlisted into his service

³ Bevans and Schroeder, *Constants in Context*, 458 n.1.

⁴ Bevans and Schroeder, *Constants in Context*, 348.

⁵ Bevans and Schroeder, *Constants in Context*, 351.

of reconciliation, peace and justice on earth; and being committed to God's purpose of placing all things under the rule of Christ.⁶

In other words, proclamation of the Gospel occurs *through* the authentic witness of Christian lives and the real experience of God's purpose, Spirit and reign in the world.

Although it is true that "proclamation is the foundation, summit and centre of evangelization" (*Dialogue and Proclamation*, 10), the manner of that proclamation should be carried out, again to use David Bosch's phrase, with "bold humility."⁷ This means that proclamation of the Gospel needs to take place in the context of respectful dialogue, solidarity and collaboration with the human family. In this context, witness has priority over proclamation because without authentic witness the true Gospel is not being preached. Neither will it be heard. Proclamation should be in the form of an invitation and as an answer to a question: it is genuinely dialogical. One proclaims with a listening heart, humbly and even from a position of weakness and vulnerability. One also proclaims in recognition that we always have something to learn and receive from others and their traditions (*Dialogue and Proclamation*, 49) since the Spirit of God knows no bounds. Authentic, witness-based proclamation disclaims a position of superiority and so approaches dialogue as the meeting of persons on common pilgrimage.

Practical theology can be described as an evangelical activity which emerges from the heart of the life of the Christian community. This is the place of witness or what Terry Veling calls the *vocational* aspect of practical theology as "response to the call of God in which we come to realize that our purpose for 'being in the world' is to respond to the purposes of God."⁸ The practical theologian is called to be a witness to the Word and to the world—or, perhaps better stated, to witness to the Word in the world. This requires attentiveness to the Word of God in the Scriptures; but, equally, "we must be aware of and understand the aspirations, the yearnings and the often dramatic features of the world in which we live" (*Gaudium et Spes*, 4). The task of interpreting God's Word for this people in this place and time—surely the goal of all practical theology—is then a work of both witness and proclamation. It is a work that arises from a deep listening to the Scriptures and profound attentiveness to the 'signs of the times' in order to speak authentically of justice, peace, salvation and God's purposes for our world.

Liturgy, Prayer and Contemplation

Not only are liturgy, prayer and contemplation central to Christian life and mission, they are—or should be—central to practical theological reflection. John Fuellenbach speaks of the Church's triple responsibility:

- (1) to proclaim in word and sacrament the definitive arrival of the kingdom in Jesus Christ;
- (2) to offer herself as a sign that the kingdom of God is already operative in the world today; and
- (3) to challenge society as a whole to transform itself according to the kingdom values of justice, love and peace.⁹

⁶ David Bosch, *Transforming Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991), 420.

⁷ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 489.

⁸ Terry Veling, *Practical Theology: On Earth as it is in Heaven* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2005), 12.

⁹ John Fuellenbach, *The Kingdom of God: The Message of Jesus Today* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1995), 270.

In order to witness to and proclaim the saving presence of God in the world, the Church and its theologians are first invited to experience something of that reality in their own lives.

In most Christian traditions, the liturgy—in particular the Eucharist—is recognized as the source and summit of the Church's life: it is here that the definitive arrival of the kingdom in Jesus Christ is most authentically proclaimed in word and sacrament. Far from being a break from the pressures and complexities of life, the liturgy is the place where the events and unredeemed realities of the world are brought to and by the community in worship to enlarge our vision and challenge our ways of being and acting. This should also extend our theological horizons by raising new questions about God's hopes for ourselves, our Church and our world. The liturgy is also the place where we are nourished and empowered to serve and live our lives for others and to experience the "dangerous memory" of Jesus Christ who came not to be served, but to give his life as a ransom for many (Mt 20:28). This is the heart of the Eucharistic sacrifice symbolizing the broken body of Christ and the healing power of the Spirit. The liturgy does not end as long as its participants carry its message of hope, healing and salvation to the world within and beyond the Church.

Sometimes our view of Christian liturgy may be what I would call too "in-house". Let me explain. Liturgy is not simply about my or my faith-community's relationship with the living God. It is certainly that. But it also witnesses to those who are not normally part of the worshipping community or are there in varying degrees of separation or even alienation from the Church. They are there for the funeral or the wedding; they may have little understanding of what the Church or its liturgy is about; they may carry deep wounds from past church experiences. This is certainly a challenge for liturgical presiders, pastoral associates and practical theologians to devise liturgies that are genuinely welcoming of the pilgrim, stranger and passer-by. It is not simply a matter of using appropriate hymns and prayers and the sensitive planning of the liturgy. All that goes without saying. More poignantly, it is a question of authenticity in witness and worship that is finally the gift of the Spirit, enabling the Church to offer herself as a sign of God's kingdom in the world today. Without such authenticity the Church's responsibility to challenge people and society according to the kingdom values of justice and peace will fall on deaf ears. Without such authenticity, the pilgrim, stranger or passer-by is unlikely to be troubled by whatever the Church or its theologians have to say.

I am not only saying that liturgy, prayer and contemplation are appropriate activities for practical theological reflection. More radically, it is to say that the practical theologian him/herself needs to be challenged and nourished through a liturgical, prayerful and contemplative life—or at least by a life in which liturgy, prayer, contemplation and ongoing conversion fuel the fires of reflection on what God asks of the Church and its theologians today.

Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation

Contemporary practical theology is notably committed to the work of justice, peace and the integrity of creation. Evidently, this is a ministry and mission of "prophetic dialogue" in which witness and word, action and preaching, need to reflect each other to be credible and effective. Liberation theologians have played an important role in highlighting the

intimate relationship between the promise of salvation and the demands of justice.¹⁰ They have also provided a methodology which is applicable for practical theology and worth summarizing in this context.

Clodovis Boff speaks of a three-fold mediation.¹¹ *Socio-analytic mediation* seeks to establish the root causes of poverty and oppression in social systems. It uses both sociological and narrative tools: the former investigates ideological and economic factors; the latter listens to the voices of the poor and marginalized so that the poor stand up for themselves as subjects and voices of the disfigured children of God. *Hermeneutical mediation* asks what the Word of God has to say to situations of injustice especially in the light of privileged justice texts such as Exodus, the Prophets, Gospels, Acts and Revelation. It also seeks to retrieve and emphasize social justice teachings in the Christian tradition. *Practical mediation* sees praxis as the starting point and goal of liberation theology. It seeks to establish criteria of action that are non-violent, historically viable, related to the overall strategy of incarnating the reign of God, and includes specific programs of decision-making, implementation and evaluation. All three mediations dialogue with diverse voices—sociology, scripture, tradition and the poor—with a prophetic and public-practical theological. This is a significant model for prophetic dialogue in which the Church not only speaks *to* and *for* the poor and marginalized, but also empowers them to speak in their own voice and stands *with* them in praxis and solidarity.

The Church's mission of justice as integral to the reign of God is also expressed in its commitment to peace-building and the integrity of creation. Israel's dream of peace is epitomized in Jesus' own ministry of peace. The Church is not only called upon to live as a community of peace, love and justice, but to be a sign and instrument of that peace in the manner of its life and theology. It must promote peace among peoples, cultures and religions, support prophets of peace, provide programs that encourage reconciliation and reverence for life. The witness aspect of peace is also expressed in prayer and penance for peace: one thinks of the initiatives of John Paul II in joining with people of all religious traditions at Assisi (1986 & 2002) to pray for world peace.¹² Practical theology has a particular responsibility to assist in mediating ways of peace in a world marred by human conflict. To achieve this, practical theologians need to dialogue with cultural anthropologists and representatives of other disciplines who contribute to the growing literature in the field of "Peace Studies."¹³ They also need to be open and self-critical especially in regard to the Church's less than impeccable historical record in regard to peace issues.

Theologically speaking, ecological awareness and respect for creation have not been at the forefront of the Church's thinking—although this is now beginning to change. Perhaps this is a case of a dialogue enforced on the Church through new circumstances of global warming and increased environmental devastation. An over-individualized theology of sin and grace ignored the social and cosmic aspects of salvation—with its vision of a new heaven and a new earth (Isa 66:22; Rev 21:1). Other critics point to the

¹⁰ "All liberation is an anticipation of the complete redemption brought by Christ." South American Bishops' Conference, Medellin, 1968.

¹¹ Clodovis Boff, *Theology and Praxis: Epistemological Foundations* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1987).

¹² See, for example, Wayne Teasdale, *Catholicism in Dialogue: Conversations across Traditions* (Oxford: Sheed & Ward, 2004), 54-57.

¹³ To mention one significant work with an extensive bibliography of literature in the field, see Raimon Panikkar, *Cultural Disarmament: The Way to Peace* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Know Press, 1995).

dissociation of the theologies of creation and salvation.¹⁴ Not that the notion of the sacredness of the earth is an entirely new idea. A hermeneutic of retrieval connects us to the largely repressed cultural and ecclesial memories of the cosmic perspectives of saints and mystics such as St Paul, Irenaeus, Francis of Assisi, Hildegard of Bingen and Teilhard de Chardin. All this is known. What may be less well known is Raimon Panikkar's description of an emerging terrestrial—or cosmotheandric—dialogue which advances this discussion in today's pluralistic context and challenges practical theology to dialogue with what he calls "contemporary mysticism."¹⁵

Cosmotheandric Dialogue – Divine, Human, Earthly

For Panikkar, the divine, human and cosmic realities all belong to the real and interpenetrate one another so that everything displays *anthropomorphic* features as well as *divine* and *material* ones. The cosmic no less than the divine is an irreducible dimension of reality—and neither is subservient to humanity, although humanity is unthinkable without the interpenetration of divine and material dimensions. Until contemporary times, this vision has been integral to all known cultural and religious traditions, albeit expressed with unique symbols, idioms and rituals. The Western-inspired project which now sees itself repeated throughout the world—humans are individualized egos, God/gods/heaven no more than human projections, and the cosmos reduced to a devitalized, dead earth at the whim of human exploitation—has reached its crisis. A new mystical awareness is emerging to rescue humanity from its excruciating isolation, to save the earth from extinction, and to reconnect both to the divine mystery at work everywhere.

Features of what Panikkar calls the emerging cosmotheandric insight are the following:¹⁶

- (1) It is a new innocence that cannot be imposed but must be allowed to emerge spontaneously. For this to occur, there needs to be amnesia, a radical conversion of mind, heart and spirit. It is occurring despite efforts of powerful governments and corporations to deny its reality.
- (2) It is not a philosophical, scientific or even theological hypothesis; it is a spirituality not an ideology; it may be expressed in many different thought-systems, but it is not in the first instance the result of thought; it is a myth.
- (3) The earth is not inferior to humanity; nor is it superior. Humanity and the cosmos are both ultimate and irreducible—not equal (they are not mathematical data). Their relationship is advaitic, non-dualistic; they are distinct but inseparable.
- (4) Our relationship with the earth is constitutive; it is integral to who we are and to our self-understanding. What is ultimately good/bad for the earth is in equal measure good/bad for me—and vice versa. It goes without saying, humanity and the cosmos are not—or should not—be in conflict, let alone at

¹⁴ See authors such as Thomas Berry, *Evening Thoughts: Reflecting on Earth as Sacred Community* (Sierra Club Books & University of California Press, 2006) and Matthew Fox, *A New Reformation: Creation Spirituality and the Transformation of Christianity* (Inner Traditions Bear and Co., 2006). Perhaps Fox did a disservice by pitting salvation and creation in such apparently opposing camps. Berry's work shows a more integral appreciation of the interrelationship between creation and salvation, as between cosmology and theology.

¹⁵ For his most systematic presentation, see Raimon Panikkar, *The Cosmotheandric Experience* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993).

¹⁶ Panikkar, *The Cosmotheandric Experience*, 149-152.

war, with one another. We cannot 'save' ourselves without incorporating the earth (and God) into the same venture.

- (5) Salvation, fulfilment, completion are not reducible to some far off timeless world; it is a tempiternal experience in which time present, time past and time future merge together. This is anathema to the pan-monetary economic ideology of advanced capitalism that awards greed and idolizes material possessions.
- (6) There is no dichotomy between the so-called nature mysticism of non-theistic systems and the theistic mysticism of those who seek communion with God. If I climb the highest mountain, I will find God there; if I go to the depths of an apophatic Godhead, I will find Ultimate reality there. Creator and creature are inseparable from the human heart which searches. The entire reality is committed to the same unique adventure.
- (7) This spirituality promises to heal the other open wound of our times: the chasm between the material and the spiritual, the sacred and the secular, the temporal and eternal. Service to the earth is divine service; love of God is human love.

Perhaps we advanced a little beyond what is normally entailed in practical theology. However, whether or not one is enthralled, inspired or critical of Panikkar's cosmotheandric vision, the importance of practical theology dialoguing with contemporary secular and religious spiritualities—as well as philosophies, theologies and ideologies—is surely integral to the notion of “prophetic dialogue” for peace, justice and the future of creation. Poets, mystics and prophets may often be found among the poor and marginalized peoples—and these are the voices that challenge all our practical theological ideas and programs.

Triple Dialogue – Liberation, Inculturation, Interreligious Dialogue

The most advanced program for prophetic dialogue is presented at the 1999 Synod of the Federation of the Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC).¹⁷ Here the bishops speak of the necessity of developing a triple dialogue with Asia's poor (liberation), its cultures (inculturation) and its religions (interreligious dialogue) in order to deal with the three contexts of Asia: massive poverty, cultural diversity, and religious pluralism.¹⁸ Although first conceived as three distinct dialogues, the FABC now conceives them as a three-pronged single approach to Christian mission in Asia. This position was argued most forcefully by Asian theologians such as Sri Lankan and Indian Jesuits, Aloysius Pieris and Michael Amaladoss, and has been repeatedly affirmed by the FABC. These three dialogues must be practised together: only then can each guarantee the authenticity and success of the others. Indeed, it is impossible to draw a clear dividing line among these three dialogues since not rarely it is, as Jesus' ministry makes abundantly clear, the poor and marginalized people who tend to be the most religious and most attached to their cultures.

Since we have already addressed the issue of liberation as dialogue with the poor in their pursuit of justice, these remarks will be largely limited to matters of inculturation and interreligious dialogue. Peter Phan suggests that on the success or failure of

¹⁷ See Peter C. Phan, ed., *The Asian Synod: Text and Commentaries* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 2002).

¹⁸ On this threefold dialogue, see Peter C. Phan, “Christian Mission in Asia: A New Way of Being Church”, in Peter C. Phan, *In Our Own Tongues: Perspectives from Asia on Mission and Inculturation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2003), 13-31.

inculturation hangs the future of the Church.¹⁹ Too often inculturation has been understood in rather cosmetic terms: an African drum here; an Aboriginal or Maori dance there; Asian artifacts somewhere else. But the real question of inculturation arises, for the most part, in context of hundreds of years of Western colonization along with the inevitable imposition of a European way of being Church. The relationship between religion and culture is always complex; and the process of learning to present Jesus Christ and the Church with an authentic indigenous face and heart requires deep listening and challenging dialogue. This can be as painful for Europeans as for indigenous peoples in raising consciousness about what constitutes “real Christianity”. Moreover, in the Roman Catholic tradition at least, there is often the additional issue of a highly centralized and hierarchical model of authority that needs to be transformed in the interests of enabling genuine local churches to emerge.

In the words of a James Blunt song—“I’ve got a plan!”²⁰ Or, I should say, Indonesian Carmelite Bishop Francis Hadisumarta has a plan. He suggests we need to “move from adaptation to inculturation” by establishing new patriarchates in South, South-East and East Asia:

These new patriarchates, conciliar in nature, would support, strengthen, and broaden the work of individual episcopal conferences. As the episcopal conferences, in communion with neighboring conferences in the same (new) patriarchate, move forward in mission, new Catholic Rites would come into existence. Thus, we envisage a radical decentralization of the Latin Rite—devolving into a host of local Rites in Asia, united collegially in faith and trust, listening to each other through synodal instruments at parish, deanery, vicariate, diocesan, national/regional, continental, and international levels. Then, almost four decades after the Second Vatican Council, we would truly experience a great synodal epoch.²¹

This church structure is not something new. It is rooted in the three classical ecclesiological principles of catholicity, collegiality, and subsidiarity. Moreover, it implements the triadic church organization of the first millennium: the particular church with its bishop; regional ecclesiastical units, especially the patriarchal churches with their patriarchs; and the universal church with the pope as its head.²² The importance of the “ancient patriarchal Churches” was recognized by Vatican II when it said:

It has come about through divine providence that, in the course of time, different Churches set up in various places by the apostles and their successors joined together in a multiplicity of organically united groups which, whilst safeguarding the unity of faith and the unique divine structure of the universal Church, have their own discipline, enjoy their own liturgical usage and inherit a theological and spiritual patrimony.
(*Lumen Gentium*, 23)

In theory at least, this situation already exists among Eastern Catholic rites. It is now time for this to be extended to non-European churches as perhaps the most important structural transformation that takes inculturation seriously. This would highlight in an unprecedented way the true nature of the Church as a communion of local churches—and in so doing highlight the importance of prophetic dialogue among the churches. Potential

¹⁹ Phan, *In Our Own Tongues*, xii.

²⁰ “You are Beautiful” in James Blunt, *Back to Bedlam* (2004).

²¹ *The Asian Synod*, 120-121.

²² Herman Pottmeyer, cited in Peter Phan, “Reception or Subversion of Vatican II by the Asian Churches? A New Way of Being Church in Asia”, *Australian eJournal of Theology* 6 (February 2006). http://dlibrary.acu.edu.au/research/theology/ejournal/aejt_6/phan.htm. Accessed 31 October 2006.

ecumenical implications are noteworthy and call for future exploration by practical theologians.

Interreligious dialogue is an equally crucial task for the Church in the emerging global situation. One has only to consider the rise of Islam since, at least in statistical terms, Christians and Muslims make up over half the world's population. From personal experience I can attest to the reality that Christian-Muslim dialogue is far from easy and not universally successful—even though there is significant good will on both sides. Yet, I find myself as a practical theologian increasingly committed to interreligious dialogue from both human and Christian perspectives. At one level, such dialogue connects me to the common humanity which I share with all people regardless of culture, ethnicity, religion, ideology or belief. As Wayne Teasdale states, “dialogue is a journey into perpetual discovery, continual wonder, the sheer joy of amazement in the realization that we are after all the same in the reality of our human nature and all the qualities of being human.”²³ I also find myself in agreement with Hans Küng's well-known words: no peace among the nations without peace among the religions; and no peace among the religions without dialogue among the religions.²⁴ Or, to quote Teasdale again: “Ultimately, dialogue is a survival skill, and interfaith dialogue may well prove to be the most valuable vehicle for promoting peace and harmony in society and the world.”²⁵ So, at this level, interreligious dialogue can be seen as a service to humanity and the world.

From a Christian perspective, I am inspired by my own Church's official teachings that highlight interreligious dialogue as an integral element of the Church's evangelizing mission (*Redemptoris Missio*, 55). Other documents speak of the fruits of dialogue: learning about the positive value of other traditions; overcoming prejudice; purifying cultures of dehumanizing elements; upholding traditional cultural values of indigenous peoples; and purifying one's own faith (*Dialogue and Proclamation*, 43-49). Although there is a certain tension between mission and dialogue in these documents, I find myself at ease “witnessing” to my own Christian faith in the context of interreligious encounter that is more intent on listening and learning than preaching and proclaiming. The image of Jesus with the woman at the well, or the picture of the risen Christ in his encounter with the Emmaus disciples, is a model of dialogue that does not impose. Is such an approach “prophetic”? Insofar as it is open to the experience of friendship and communion, new insights, genuine depth and ultimately a new consciousness—even in small ways—then the words of the prophet Ezekiel spring to mind: “I will give you a new heart, and I will put a new spirit within you” (Ez. 36:26). Interreligious dialogue seeks to respond to the prophetic challenge of playing our role in building the new heaven and new earth (Rev. 21:1) that includes rather than excludes the religious and secular other. This is certainly a—perhaps *the*—prophetic challenge of our times.

Conclusion

Practical theology is always a work in progress. My endeavour here has been to demonstrate that it is a work best carried out in a spirit of “prophetic dialogue”: it must be done with a listening heart as well as an intelligent head and articulate tongue. It is also the work of the Church, the community of faith. No single theologian can be involved in all

²³ Teasdale, *Catholicism in Dialogue*, 26.

²⁴ Hans Küng, cited in *Vision of Peace among Religions*, <http://www.interspirit.net/vpar/home.cfm>, accessed 31 October 2006.

²⁵ Teasdale, *Catholicism in Dialogue*, 27.

the kinds of prophetic dialogue covered in this paper less the dialogues remain superficial—and the theologies that spring from them equally so. My intention has simply been to suggest that whatever practical issues one is dealing with—peace, justice, reconciliation, liberation, inculturation, interreligious encounter—, the category of “prophetic dialogue” is helpful for understanding and evaluating the theological task. Specific methodological approaches will be developed by others—although I see in the triple mediation of liberation theology a helpful foundation with much potential for practical theology. The notions of “cosmotheandric dialogue” involving the divine, human and earthly realities and “triple dialogue” with the poor, cultures and religions are challenging and instructive. They remind us that analytical powers used to understand a situation only ever scratch the surface of the full earthly-human-divine reality in which we are privileged to play our part.

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