

LOCAL THEOLOGIES IN THE LOCAL CHURCH: ISSUES AND METHODS

As we become more accustomed to thinking about the reality and identity of the local church in view of the ecclesial possibilities opened up to us once again by the Second Vatican Council, we will, at the same time, need to be attentive to a concomitant growth of local theologies, which will give expression to the witness of these communities to the power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ in their concrete situations. Indeed, this process of the localization or contextualization¹ of theologies has already begun. The theologies of liberation coming out of Latin America and southern Africa provide us with one set of examples. The concerns which motivate people in situations which are defining themselves as distinctive local churches are many as they develop their local theologies. Ofttimes it is a matter of an urgency for a clearer and more pointed response to the circumstances in which Christians find themselves. At other times, it is the sheer inadequacy of the responses which have been developed previously by other local churches in the two millennia of Christian history.

The shift in interest to the reality of the local church has raised important ecclesial questions for the whole Church. So, too, will an interest in local theologies. The purpose of this paper is to examine some of the issues which talking about local theologies is bound to raise (and, indeed, has already done so). I intend to concentrate here on four such basic issues which recur in discussions about developing local theologies. Through the last number of years, these issues have become more clear in the minds of those working in such theologies. However, a second area, the methods needed to address these issues, is less clearly worked out. I will try to raise some questions in this area as well by discussing three

¹Many different terms are used for this process of theological reflection. "Indigenous theology" was an early suggestion, but its negative connotation among former British colonists in eastern Africa and in India (as parallel to "indigenous leadership") has led to it seldom being used any more. Some Protestant evangelicals have suggested "ethnology," but to many this sounds too much like certain European terms (ethnosociology, ethnophilosophy) which suggest to Anglo-Saxon ears that such theology would only be for Third World peoples. "Contextual theology" is gaining wider acceptance, since it is a more neutral term and emphasizes the role of context. It is, alas, also yet another neologism in a vocabulary already too overloaded with such creatures. I have used "local theology" here because it is simple English, and because of its correlate "local church." It has its disadvantages as well, but one does have to settle on one, intelligible term.

methodological areas which become important in a developing local theology. Between the presentations on issues and methods there will be a short interlude which will try to set out what is going on in the creation of a local theology.

Theologians and others working in the area of local theology stress over and over again that the creation of theology under these circumstances is not a solitary enterprise of an individual theologian. What is being presented here grows out of such common undertakings. This is essentially the experience of the Local Theology Project, begun five years ago at the Catholic Theological Union in Chicago, and continued today by the Chicago Institute of Theology and Culture, a research institute located at CTU. The purpose of this research has been to develop methodologies for local theologies, and to work with interested research centers and local communities around the world in developing their responses to the Gospel in their immediate contexts.²

ISSUE ONE:

TRANSLATION OR CONTEXTUALIZATION?

If one were to ask for some preliminary definition of local theology, it might run something like this: Local theology is the result of a continuing adaptation or translation of the Gospel message and ensuing Christian tradition in local, concrete contexts. The purpose of this adaptation is to make the Gospel message more intelligible and lively within the local church, and to make the larger church tradition and practice a better vehicle for responding to the Gospel in the local situation. So defined, local theology can be seen to be part of a long history of historical development within the Church.

But this commonsense definition of local theology begins almost immediately to run into all sorts of problems. The most obvious question that arises is: How far is one to go in such adaptations? To what extent is one bound to forms and formulae which have been part and parcel of the Christian tradition? For example, may one abandon the use of wine and bread as eucharistic elements in those parts of the world where these mid-Eastern staples are unknown, or where (as in some Muslim countries) the importation of wine is forbidden? Or, to take another case of problems of form, what is one to do when the symbol has an

²Literature on this project includes Ernest Ranly, "Constructing Local Theologies," *Commonweal* (November 11, 1979), 716-19; Joseph Spae, "Missiology as Local Theology and Interreligious Encounter," *Missiology* 7 (1979), 479-500; John Boberg, "Contextual Theology at Catholic Theological Union," *Verbum SVD* 21 (1980), 37-83; Louis Luzbetak, "Signs of Progress in Contextual Theology," *Verbum SVD* 22 (1981), 39-57.

opposite effect of the one intended? Among the Masai of Eastern Africa, to pour water on a woman's head is to curse her with infertility. Should the local church continue then to administer baptism in the traditional fashion? How should one communicate the meaning of metaphors of shepherd and sheep to peoples who have no acquaintance with such things? Formulations of doctrine can cause something of the same problem. The doctrine of the Real Presence has caused genuine problems in some parts of Papua New Guinea among peoples whose neighbors practiced cannibalism. They considered Christianity inferior religion because of this.

The question of how far one is to go in adaptation usually prompts a response in which the task of theology is seen as undoing a husk of cultural accretions from the core Christian message, and then rewrapping that core in a new set of cultural symbols and values. Most liturgical adaptation follows this pattern, and many official Vatican documents encourage this kind of approach.

While this response can sometimes ease the difficulties in a situation, seldom does a core-and-husk approach work so easily. Christianity was not put together in that fashion in the first place, and core and husk have tended to become co-constitutive over a period of time. It is for this reason that such projects as the "dehellenization" of Christianity proposed by Harnack and more recently by Dewart seldom work out as well as their proponents would anticipate. Secondly, there is the problem of who will determine what may be adapted. This is an increasingly difficult problem. The current pope's refusal to participate in the so-called Zairean rite of celebrating the Eucharist during his recent visit to Africa illustrates the ambiguities which arise in the area of decision and implementation.

These adaptation or translation approaches, while laudable in their intent, suffer from a basic weakness. Despite their avowed concern with the local situation, they do not take the local church seriously enough. What happens in translation approaches is that people are busy adapting answers before the questions have been asked by the local situation. Solutions are provided before problems are adequately defined.

For this reason, there is a need to try to begin from the other side; namely, the needs of the local community. One needs to begin with an analysis and evaluation of the local situation, and only then turn to the Gospel and the larger church tradition. This is what is generally understood as the contextualization approach; i.e., an approach where emphasizes sensitivity to the context of the situation before presuming to be able to understand how the Gospel

might best find its voice there. To put it another way: in the matter of evangelization, it becomes the difference between evangelization as bringing Christ to a situation (translation approach) or finding him already there in the life, values and symbols of the culture (contextualization approach).

The main reason why the translation approach has seemed so commonsense and has so often been used is that we have developed a custom in our Church whereby the leaders of the local church are often not from that community, but have come there from another place. Since the development of the idea of absolute ordination, leaders are often no longer called by and for a local community in our tradition.³ The translation approach becomes the most usable approach for such leaders. It can be developed more rapidly, and allows for a good deal more control on the part of the leaders than does the contextualization approach, where the emphasis is laid upon the discerning processes of the community. Such considerations bring me to the second issue in the development of local theologies.

ISSUE TWO:

THEOLOGY—ITS AUDIENCE, INTENT, AND AUTHOR

When one begins to speak of local church, and then of local theology in a local church, one has to become more highly sensitive about the audience to whom this theology is addressed. Indeed, because of the growing call for local theology, we have become much more aware of the audiences to whom we have been addressing most of our theology.

While theologians are aware of the rootedness of their work in a confessional tradition, and their responsibility to address members of the Church (or to address world issues as members of the Church), I would hazard to say that most of what we theologians write is ultimately addressed to other colleagues in the academy.⁴ This is not surprising, since we receive our legitimation to be considered theologians from the academy,⁵ and maintain our

³The Council of Chalcedon (canon 6) condemned absolute ordination; the Third and Fourth Lateran Councils restored it. For a discussion of this, see Edward Schillebeeckx, *Ministry: Leadership in the Community of Christ* (New York: Crossroad, 1981).

⁴David Tracy's book, *The Analogical Imagination* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), speaks of the three "publics" of theology: the academy, the church, and society, and urges theologians to strike a proper balance between them. It would seem at the same time fair to say that the theologian's own social context will heavily determine how he or she sees the proportion among these three publics.

⁵The recent outcry (and puzzlement) over a theologian like Hans Küng's being declared as no longer being a "Catholic theologian" points up the ambiguity about who constitutes whom as a theologian. The discussions going on around the

standing primarily, though not exclusively, by being held accountable to other members of the academy. All of this is not surprising, since the academy has been the locus for theologians *par excellence* since the thirteenth century. The fact that the academy has formed our primary audience has also affected our intent. The classical definition of theology as *fides quaerens intellectum* has meant for us a clarification of the revelation received from God, especially in terms of other attempts at such knowledge. The best kinds of theology have presented faith in clear terms, especially as it would relate to other forms of knowledge, be that rationality as such (in the Middle Ages and in the post-Cartesian period), or the natural and social sciences (in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries). This kind of theology has a two-fold purpose: locating faith within a given world view, and providing the basis for an apologetic in dialogue with competing forms of knowledge.⁶

Moreover, the kind of theology most of us engage in has become so complex that only such "experts" as ourselves are genuinely good at it. Theology has become a full-time profession, whereas for much of the first twelve hundred years of the Church's existence, it was an occasional enterprise, engaged in as the need for such reflections arose.

If local theology in local churches has done anything, it has made us much more aware of theology's context and intent. Local theology is addressed in the first instance to a local believing community, where it tries to answer its questions and struggles, and to illuminate its concerns and values on the basis of the experience of the Gospel and the ensuing tradition of the larger Church. Much of the theology which is now coming from local churches resembles more closely the older wisdom tradition of theology which predominated in the patristic period, and continues today in the Christian East. In that tradition, how one is to live provides the focus for the *intellectus* which faith seeks. Despite some of the polemics against the wisdom tradition put forward by liberation theologians as to its introverted and individualized focus, I think it is fair to characterize liberation theology as a wisdom theology turned outward, concerned as it is with a life-style and with the crucible of praxis.⁷

Secondly, the fact that such theology is addressed primarily to believers and those struggling with belief within their communities

"*missio canonica*" proposed as part of the revised code of Canon Law can point to attempts to rearrange relationships in this matter.

⁶ Perhaps one of the best statements on this kind of theology is still Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia, q. 1, aa. 2-10.

⁷ I develop this point in "Theologie in context: Naar een sociologie van de theologie," *Tijdschrift voor Theologie* 17 (1977), 3-23.

means that the academy becomes a secondary audience. Thus many of the questions with which we busy ourselves (e.g., the status of the truth-claims of Christianity) do not take on the same importance. Others of our questions (e.g., whether one has to be a believer to do Christian theology in the university context) become well-nigh superfluous.

Third, local theology heralds the return of theology to a much more occasional exercise. While many theologians today would admit that the pluralist situation in which we live does not make system-building as possible as it once was, we still tend to address ourselves to many system-generated questions. Such activity tends to be looked upon as a luxurious enterprise within local communities. Theological expression becomes tied more closely to genuine need and questions of a community, rather than what can be safely and adequately said within the confines of a journal article or a dissertation.

Finally, local theology in local churches redefines the authorship of theology. To use Marxian categories here: the mode and means of production change hands. Whereas in the more common situation today it is the professional theologian who, by dint of extended education and ownership of the amount of time needed for such reflection, controls the means of theological production, in the situations emerging in local churches it is the common reflection of the community itself which provides the base out of which a theology is to emerge. It is for this reason that models of theological reflection have become the focus of so much attention. To be sure, the professional theologian continues to be an important resource in the theological process. The theologian is the bearer of knowledge of the larger church tradition, and as such is indispensable to the theological process. The point here, however, is that the solitary role of theologians is significantly reduced.

In sum, then, local theology heightens our awareness of the process whereby theology is created, the conditions under which this happens, and the actors involved in the process. The development of this kind of theology does not make forms of theology emerging from the academy obsolete; such continue to be needed. Most local theologies lose in comprehensiveness what they gain in particularity, and a balance needs to be struck here. This brings me to the third issue.

ISSUE THREE: PARTICULARITY AND UNIVERSALITY

If one can legitimately ask what is the relation between the local church and the universal Church—an important question for

Roman Catholics—then one can also ask what is the relation between local theology and more universal manifestations of the Gospel.

There are actually two different concerns here. The first has to do with the relation between the theology produced in and for a local situation, and the theology which is not produced in such circumstances. Those coming from the more universal perspective will ask: What are the limits of the legitimacy of local theology? Those coming from the local perspective will ask: Is there any theology which is *not* local; i.e., produced as a response to some local context? Is the so-called more universal theology actually imposed on other local circumstances for the sake of uniformity and control? Is this concern for universality masking a deeper interest in such ecclesiastical control on a centralized basis? While some theologies may have more transcultural appeal than others, what this reflection prompts is the idea that perhaps all theology is ultimately local theology—arising out of a particular context and most suited to that context. In view of this concern, the matter of particularity and universality needs to be addressed with great care. While the local church may see the criterion of universality as a way of imposing hegemony, the universalists feel they may be seeing nothing more than sectarian growth under the aegis of local church and local theology.

A second concern has to do with the relation of local theology to the sources of theology shared by all local churches: the Scriptures, the ensuing tradition, and (for Roman Catholics) the magisterium in the variety of dimensions in which it can be construed. How are these relations to be understood and legitimated? How is a local church called to task if other local churches deem its theological expression inadequate or even wrong? What kind of normativity do the traditional sources of theology just named exercise in the local church when we realize that they, too, grew up in a concrete context and as responses to concrete situations?

In regard to both of these questions, there is a strong sense in the Roman Catholic heritage that, while the fullness of Christ may dwell in the local church, the local church cannot be genuinely church in isolation from the worldwide community of Christ. There has always been a history of dialectic between local and universal manifestations of church, and how the current realities of being church today will influence this dialectic still remains to be seen. After some encouragement of the development of local communities, there are signs that this process is beginning to contract. From a theological perspective, the questions of legitimacy arising out of the local-universal dialectic brings me to the fourth issue.

ISSUE FOUR:
CRITERIA FOR CHRISTIAN IDENTITY

Much of the concern about the ultimate legitimacy of local theology centers around what, in the last analysis, constitute the criteria by which genuine Christian identity is to be measured. This becomes especially important when the theology which emerges from the local church does not resemble anything achieved in theology heretofore, or when the results look like what at one time may have been considered heresy. In other instances, the interaction between Christianity and culture may come up with a result which some would call syncretistic. In developing local theologies, how do we know if our desire to escape a dogmatic fundamentalism imposing itself upon the culture has led us instead into a kind of cultural romanticism which attenuates the Christian message in an accommodationism to every value or whim of the culture?

This matter of criteria for Christian identity is one of the major concerns of the theologies developing in local churches. In situations where the categories of thought and expression do not correspond to those more familiar to us in the West, the adequate translation from the one world to the other becomes extremely difficult. In view of the fact that the Euro-American churches are only gradually coming to terms with the impact of historicity upon the classic *loci theologici*, what does this mean for situations where we understand the context, as outsiders, even less than we do the historical circumstances surrounding certain pronouncements and statements within our own culture? To not be willing to come to terms with this question condemns local churches throughout the world, whose membership is rapidly approaching the majority of those who profess the Christian faith, to becoming Western in order to be Christian. Certainly this could be considered the most urgent of the tasks facing theology.

THE MULTIPLICITY OF ROOTS OF LOCAL THEOLOGY

From what has been said about the major issues facing the development of local theologies, it becomes clear that any such development depends upon a multiplicity of contributing factors. It is for this reason that any one-directional method or application of principles will be unsuccessful. Rather, some dialogal, or even dialectical, approach will be necessary to hold all the factors together.

For this reason I would say that the process of developing a local theology involves a multiplicity of roots or sources. I would see such theology as characterized by dialectical movements between Gospel, church and culture.

Gospel here means more than the Scriptures, although it certainly includes them. It refers to the Word of God as an event needing proclaimer, message and hearer for its proper enactment. The Word of the Gospel, the living presence of the Risen Lord in the local community, needs all three of these elements for its efficacy. We are often concerned about the preparation of the proclaimer and the purity of the message. But without hearers, and indeed hearers who can hear in such a way as to have the message transform their lives, can we really say that the Gospel has been fully enacted?

It goes without saying that without the Gospel being alive and present in this sense, there is quite simply no theology to be done.

Yet our faith is a *fides ex auditu*, brought to us or identified for us by members from another local church in a network of such communities encircling our planet and reaching back in time. The proclaimer represents a tradition of understanding and response to the Word which colors the proclamation (and therefore the response) given to us. Without church, the Gospel cannot come to full flower. It becomes prone to being but the echo of the ego of the proclaimer. Moreover, against what will the local church test the veracity of its own response to the Gospel but that of other local churches, alive now or part of the Christian past? To think of some proclamation of the Gospel apart from a church tradition is sociologically, and theologically, naïve.

Finally, culture is the context in which all of this happens. Culture provides the hearers. Culture represents its own network of traditions, values, symbols, meanings, and ways of life for a people in a given time and space. To abstract from these realities in order to establish a "universal" church or a *theologia perennis* leads to a paternalist and oppressive situation. To ignore cultural realities is to engage in a kind of theological docetism which ultimately undermines our belief in the reality of the Incarnation. At the same time, an undialectical relationship which grants the culture anything and everything and does not offer a challenge to transformation is cultural romanticism. One would wonder why one would want to see the Gospel proclaimed in the first place in such instances where this romanticism may have taken hold.⁸

There needs to be a countinuing movement, then, between church and culture in the light of the Gospel for a genuine local

⁸Local theologies, in their concern for the cultural context, stand open to the accusation of repeating some of the worst mistakes of the nineteenth century, such as a Ritschlian Kulturprotestantismus, if they allow that attention to culture to become undialectical, and see the local culture as some prelapsarian state inhabited by noble savages. Any good local theology will also raise questions about what is wrong with the culture, but only on the basis of an understanding of the culture which has developed in a patient and thorough fashion.

theology to develop. Local theology needs the latitude to find its own voice, but also needs the critique of other local communities, both present and past. And the larger church tradition needs the challenge of the theology of the local churches to come to a deeper and more textured understanding of the meaning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ for the world. To understand this movement, we need to turn to the methodological questions which give direction to the dialectical process. Most of these are familiar to anyone who has been engaged before in the theological process. But there are specific considerations which bear some treatment here.

METHODS: THE ANALYSIS OF CULTURE

When people begin to be concerned about local theology, they usually find themselves already in the midst of the process. Ideally, however, the process should begin with listening to the culture and analyzing the results of what is heard. Put another way, the process should begin with an analysis of the situation in which the local church finds itself.

This may seem to be a truism, but in practice it is seldom observed. More often than not, the culture gets a half-hearing as the theologian rushes to the tradition to begin what was called above a translation process. Many theologians recognize the importance of listening to the culture,⁹ but it still seems to receive secondary attention.

"Culture" here is used in the broad, anthropological sense, encompassing the values, beliefs, habits, customs, behaviors and institutions which make up a way of life for a people. It includes the phenomena to which the social sciences—sociology, economics, psychology, anthropology—address themselves.

There are many modes of cultural and social analysis, depending upon what one wishes to examine the most closely. And indeed, theology has always assumed at least some of this kind of analysis, at least on a philosophical level. Whatever kind may be used—functional, structural, semiotic, Marxian, or other forms—three things need to be kept in mind from the methodological perspective necessary for developing local theologies.

First, the mode of analysis must be holistic; that is, it must be capable to some extent of embracing the totality of the culture. Often our analyses have restricted themselves to one area, such as the rational or the intellectual, as was the case in much of the

⁹To cite a recent example: Tracy, *op. cit.*, 339-70, devotes a well-presented section on the Euro-American cultural situation. A local theologian would ask how a systematic theology can be developed (in Tracy's case, a Christology) when these considerations follow, rather than precede, the interpretation of Christian theological classics.

theology in the Western Church. The analysis cannot be complete if it stays on one such level, be that intellectual, socioeconomic, or even the patently religious. The reason for this is that religion is not only a view of life, it is also a way of life, and so any analysis must be able to embrace a wide variety of manifestations. This is particularly important because much of what happens to be religious may not on the surface look religious in nature, or is rejected as irreligious too quickly. In pluralist and tolerant settings such as North America, where religion is a voluntary undertaking, much religious behavior takes place not in churches, but in domed stadiums or on psychoanalytic couches. Another example of this would be the once-disdained *religiosidad popular* of the peoples of Latin America. It is now clear that one cannot understand the reality of the culture in those settings without a more sympathetic and positive valuation of this phenomenon. At the same time, phenomena not genuinely religious may be presented under the guise of religious behavior. Need for esteem and belongingness has a profound effect on church attendance in the United States. Also, one must realize how much religious forms, even within the same denomination or church, can be influenced by considerations of class, race and economic or educational status. To ignore these realities is to impoverish the response to the Gospel.

Second, the mode of analysis must be able to address the question of identity—what it is that gives the local church definition. What are the values, the relationships, the ideals, and the ills of a people, and what are the symbolic expressions given to them? The sense of identity, given in establishment of group boundary and agreement upon common world view, is a deep human need. Certainly one of the ultimate intents of local theology is to give identity to a local church, to help it find its own distinctiveness and its place with the larger mosaic of the Christian Church. And one could read much of church history, especially the history of heresy, as an attempt to establish such boundaries for communities. It is interesting to note that some of the most dramatic heretical movements or schismatic developments were often ostensibly about doctrine, but were responded to with great vigor because of their implications for group identity. In retrospect, the doctrinal differences may seem small. Some dimensions of Arianism, the Albigensian crisis, and the sixteenth century reformation all come to mind here.

What are the best methods to analyze culture in a holistic fashion so as to discover the underlying roots of identity? Each mode of analysis has its particular strengths. I prefer some of the methods developed in symbolic anthropology, especially the

“thick description” of culture proposed by Clifford Geertz.¹⁰ I also use some of the semiotic modes of description, which see cultural forms as a network transmitting messages of meaning via a system of signifiers.¹¹ Some of these methods can be quite complicated, and are being adapted for use by non-expert people in local situations. But both of these approaches raise questions important enough to the theological enterprise about the dominant values guiding a culture and their symbolic expression, and how ill will and dissonance are coped with in a community.

Third, the mode of analysis must be able to address the issue of social change. Often the very need for theology arises from changes which need to be identified, analyzed and integrated into the network of meaning in the community. In situations of culture contact, urbanization, and sudden economic and social shifts, the need to deal with what change does to a community is obvious. Often change is a threatening reality to a local community and for that reason alone needs to be addressed.

There are a variety of models for analyzing social change. Some are based on a model which sees change as the attempt to restore equilibrium in a community. In this regard, many of the models proposed by Talcott Parsons and others in American sociology comes to mind. Other models, such as the Marxian models, are based upon notions of conflict and the resolution of conflict. The latter kind of models have been used especially in liberation theology, a kind of local theology which addresses especially the need for social change. Some may question whether using a model with assumptions about conflict is compatible with Christian theology. This debate is too complex to take up here; suffice it to say that some model for analyzing change needs to be part of the tool kit for theology in a local church.

In summary, any process for developing local theology will need to employ methods which address these three areas in adequate fashion for that local church. To center in upon one to the exclusion of the others will result in a weakening of the emergent theology at best, and alienating ideology at worst.

METHODS: THE QUESTION OF CHURCH TRADITION

A comment was made above that, from the perspective of the local church, all theology is really a series of local theologies. Such

¹⁰ See the essays in Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

¹¹ Semiotics (the study of signs) is a burgeoning field. One introduction which can be helpful for its use in the study of culture is Edmund Leach, *Culture and Communication* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976).

a view is important for local theologies since it allows for a more even-handed dialectic to be set up between the larger tradition and the local church. Without it, a struggling local church would be confronted with a monolithic presence.

The tradition of response to the Gospel of Jesus Christ is essential for the development of the self-understanding of the local church. It provides the touchstone against which it can measure its own responses. But this does not mean that all which has happened in that tradition is of equal value, nor that it need be emulated. Yet it does represent a history of responses to a variety of different circumstances which both enrich and limit the results of reflection.

One task which needs to be given more attention is a study of the tradition which allows it to re-emerge as a series of local theologies. I have suggested elsewhere that a judicious use of the sociology of knowledge, which studies the relation of forms of thought to social contexts, might be a profitable way of going about this.¹² What needs to be done is an identification of the various forms of theology (i.e., the genres of expression), and then an investigation of their relations to specific contexts. In other words, does theology shaped in certain fashions fit some circumstances better than others? For example, the kinds of theology which emerge from the academy can be shown to be particularly useful in university and urban settings, and where Christian belief needs to be legitimated in the face of competing forms of knowledge. Much of patristic theology could be characterized as variations on a sacred text (hymns, homilies, commentaries). The tradition has also seen theology as *sapientia* (wisdom), as *scientia* (sure knowledge), and as liberative praxis. These distinctions become important in the local context when one wants to discover just what kind or form of theology is best suited to a circumstance. The patristic forms, for example, are often quite usable today in predominantly oral cultures. The *scientia* approach with which we are most familiar works best in pluralist situations where that pluralism needs to be acknowledged and confronted. The *sapientia* approach works best when the concern is for spirituality. Liberative praxis is important in situations of conflict and oppression. Such identification of different forms for different situations allows us to retrieve segments of the tradition otherwise lost to us, and prevents one kind of theology from exercising an hegemony whereby it is considered the sole, legitimate form.

A second task for method in the matter of church tradition is the development of a more adequate theory of tradition itself. This has been recognized for some time already as a problem in cultures

¹²Schreier, *op. cit.*

such as those of Europe and North America where the impact of Enlightenment thought has been to denigrate the role and authority of tradition in life. The questions which have been with us for some time—how does a tradition legitimately develop, what is the authority of a tradition (the issue of magisterium, normativity of documents marking key moments in the tradition), what constitutes departure (heresy) from a tradition—become even more pressing under the matter of developing local theologies. To my knowledge, such a theory of tradition has not yet been developed which deals with these questions, especially in light of the needs of local churches and their theologies. The concept of tradition itself has been critiqued much in recent years, and some more positive valuations of its role in post-Enlightenment societies are beginning to appear.¹³ But much work needs to be done here. Without such work, the dialogue envisioned for the building up of local theologies will be impeded in its progress.

METHODS: CRITERIA FOR CHRISTIAN IDENTITY

The whole issue of the development of local theologies devolves finally upon one point: are the results faithful to the Gospel and consonant with church tradition? And how is this fidelity and consonance to be ascertained?

Just as the development of local theologies makes us more sensitive to the multiplicity of roots in any theology, and the dialectical relationship which needs to obtain between them, so too the criteria for ascertaining Christian identity will share in that complexity.

The tradition has always used a variety of different ways of establishing the Christian nature of the identity of a local church and its theology. We know from history that whenever the dialogue is complicated by cultural pluralism (as in the Christological controversies of the fourth and fifth centuries), difficulties increase exponentially. With that in mind, I want to make a proposal for consideration in this matter.

It seems to me that history has taught us that there is no single criterion which in itself can guarantee the continuity of a new response with the Gospel and the ensuing Christian tradition. What we perhaps need, for our own safety, is a set of multiple criteria which, taken together, might come closer to achieving that desired

¹³The Frankfurt School of Social Criticism (Habermas, Wellmer, *et al.*) developed an extended critique of the role of tradition (and especially Hans Georg Gadamer's interpretation of it in *Truth and Method*) in the early 1970's. They stressed the oppressive nature of tradition. A recent positive approach to tradition can be found in Edward Shils, *Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).

end. For that reason I would like to suggest here five such criteria. The idea would be that for a theological development to pass but one, or even two or three of these would not be sufficient. All five would have to be taken into consideration. The five are as follows:

1. *Cohesiveness of the Christian Symbolic Network.* Close study of the tradition indicates that there is a remarkable cohesion among the symbolic assertions which we as a Church have tried to make. This consistency, which involves the scriptural witness, major conciliar and magisterial statements, and the mainstream of the theological endeavor, do not form an airtight and fully rigorous system, yet do provide certain key assertions that need to be taken into consideration if any symbolic statement is to be considered complete, and also some limits on the range which reflection may undertake. To get at these assertions and the expressive range involves a delicate hermeneutical operation, sensitive not only to the historical context and the language used, but also to the intent of the statements and how those intentions have been perceived in history. This is a complex area, and the details of it cannot be gone into here. But nonetheless I cannot imagine any assertion coming from a local church which can forego this kind of test for ascertaining Christian identity.

2. *The Worshipping Context of the Community.* The worshipping community recognizes the presence of its Lord in a subtle blend of *pneuma* and *anamnesis*, of the Spirit present and the memory treasured of Jesus Christ. It is this blend which through the centuries has made the *lex orandi, lex credendi* such a powerful yet illusive criterion of Christian identity. It has often been evoked in the past (as in the Arian controversy by Athanasius and in the Pelagian controversy by Augustine), and continues to be a major source of theology for the Eastern Church today. One can test new theological formulations in the worshipping context by asking: do they find a genuine home there? How are they experienced in this context? Can they be "prayed"? There is a dictum from medieval times about good theology leading to good preaching; that can still be a guideline for us today.

3. *The Praxis of the Community.* The scriptural admonition, "By their fruits shall you know them," has long been used to characterize and to anathematize certain practices. It still remains a powerful resource for ascertaining Christian identity. It works in a twofold fashion. On the one hand, the behavioral result of certain theological stances can be examined. Does an advocacy of direct use of violence by Christians extirpate the structural violence of a situation, or does it simply reverse roles, with the oppressed becoming the new oppressors? On the other hand, new formulations

can be brought forward which do not seem to be accepted by the community. If this happens, one has to ask whether they are indeed part of Christian identity in any necessary sense. The reception of the injunctions of *Humanae vitae* by what seems to be a majority of Christians in the world Church might be considered an example of this.

4. *Openness to the Judgment of Other Churches.* A local church which closes in upon itself and refuses dialogue and judgment from its sister communities has been considered traditionally as being in schism, outside the pale of the Church universal. This judgment, provided mutually by sister churches, is part of the voice of the Lord. This dialogue is to be held not only with contemporaneous communities, but also with the experience of the local churches of the past as well. In such mutuality, the possibility of genuine fidelity to the Lord is increased. At the same time, it should be remembered that the exercise of this criterion is incumbent not only on newer churches, but on the older ones as well. The example of what has been coming from the base communities of Latin America, and how their commitment to justice has been a word of judgment upon churches in North America, is an example of how this might work.

5. *Prophetic Challenge to Other Churches and to the World.* New theology should provide new insight into Christian discipleship, and new formulations should challenge other local churches and the larger social context to a deeper fidelity to the Lord. If a community closes in upon itself, and really has nothing to say to other churches; if it settles into a comfortable non-dialectical relationship with its cultural context; if it can only speak comfort and not justice; then one has to wonder about the fullness of the Christian character of such a community.

To sum up, no single criterion in isolation from the others can be considered adequate. And there may be others which should be added to this list. In times past, the tradition has tended to use the first and fourth of these criteria more than the others. But this combination seems to me to offer a better guarantee of Christian identity and fidelity in view of the welter of cultural and linguistic differences which mark a universal Church which takes its local churches seriously.

CONCLUSION

There are, of course, many other issues important to the formation of local theologies in local churches. There are other methods emerging that deserve our consideration as well. But these were chosen as issues which reach beyond any one local

situation, and in one way or another affect much if not most of what is going on now in these areas. Even these could not be developed here in any detail.¹⁴

But one thing is certain: it will take communal effort and reflection on the part of more than a few individuals to achieve the desired goals in this area. It seems to me that professional theologians such as ourselves have a special responsibility and task in both thinking through the methodological issues and in reflecting upon our tradition in a way which will aid in this process. While the task of the professional theologian is changed in such a theological process, it is in no way diminished. And this needs to be kept in mind as we respond to the task of helping shape a theology in a local church which is true both to the local situation and to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

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¹⁴I develop these and other points in *Constructing Local Theologies* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, forthcoming).