

## John Thornhill: Theologian of the Church

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**Abstract:** This is written in tribute to Marist theologian, John Thornhill, in recognition of his contribution to theology and theological education in Australia. Specific references are made to John's article in the Journal, *One Theologian's Personal Journey*. It begins by outlining distinct habits of mind that inform John's approach to theology: philosophical realism; historical consciousness; and the original experience of the Gospel. This provides John with a theological template for interpreting the complex relationship between human history and divine revelation. Influences in John's theological project are then discussed under the self-explanatory headings of Marist, Vatican II, Ecumenism and Australian. Finally, it is proposed that John is first and foremost a theologian of the Church.

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**Key Words:** John Thornhill; theological influences; theological themes; theological methodology; formation

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### *Habits of Mind*

As a young student in the mid-seventies, it was John Thornhill who introduced me to the delights of theological thinking. These were the heady days of the post-Vatican II Church, what John now refers to as "when the world was young." Three aspects of John's approach to theology struck me as particularly significant, then as now: the importance of a coherent philosophical framework for developing a critical, engaging theology; an appreciation of the power of history and tradition in the formulation and embodiment of the Christian Gospel in various epochs; and a renewed emphasis on the original power of the Gospel to transform personal and social distortions in the Church and world.

### *Philosophy*

John's own indebtedness to the philosophical realism of St Thomas Aquinas is something he readily acknowledges as providing him with a certain "habit of mind" that undergirds his theological life. Interpreting Aquinas for a post-Enlightenment Age imbued with historical consciousness is an ongoing pursuit evident in the works of such theologians as Marechal, Maritain, Rahner and Lonergan with whom John often finds himself in dialogue. His first major publication, *The Person and the Group*,<sup>1</sup> signifies John's own commitment to this enterprise of mediating classical philosophical wisdom to the empiricist culture of modernity. In his later work, *Modernity*,<sup>2</sup> John develops his own critique of the misunderstanding of Aquinas's metaphysics. In brief, he shows that Aquinas was not presenting his principles as "a closed, self-sufficient system" but as a dynamic

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<sup>1</sup> John Thornhill, *The Person and the Group* (Milwaukee: Bruce, 1967).

<sup>2</sup> John Thornhill, *Modernity: Christianity's Estranged Child Reconstructed* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000).

methodology for exploring reality in every age and circumstance.<sup>3</sup> As John's works eminently testify, a proper understanding of the critical realism of Aquinas actually encourages a theological dynamism for ongoing interpretation of the Christian Gospel. Moreover, it does this without falling into the incoherence and irrationalism of some contemporary theologies.

### *History*

As we now know, the Church only exists in history. Most influential in the development of John's theological thought have been the works of historical theologians such as Bouyer, Parsch, Durrwell, Lyonnet, Sabourin and Chenu. His reading of these works was more profound on account of his own doctoral dissertation on Arnold Toynbee's *A Study of History* and subsequent reading of other historians, notably, Eric Voeglin and Christopher Dawson. Historical and cultural awareness may lead one to a defeatist attitude if they encourage a way of thinking in which history and culture alone are responsible for the development of human life and society: everything is explained according to psychological needs, economic forces and/or social constructions. In short, human freedom and divine grace are omitted from the equation of plausibility. John's historical analysis, based on sound philosophical reasoning, does not fall into this modern kind of aberration. His historical readings demonstrate the utter importance of the metaphysical "habit of mind."

### *Gospel*

If it was Arnold Toynbee who led John to appreciate the multiple factors involved in the rise and decline of cultures and societies, it was his sense of the irreducibility and power of the Gospel which breaks into human life in forms both original and new that provided him with a theological template for interpreting the complex relationship between history and revelation. Cultural transformations within the Church and outside it may distort or enhance the ability of God's Word to be received at any particular historical juncture. In the history of the Christian West, it was the Reformation above all else which demonstrated the profound challenges confronting medieval Catholicism. Subsequent development in Catholic theology became so focussed on correct doctrinal formulation that it relegated the experience of divine grace and revelation to the background. Certainly, says John, dogmas and doctrines reflect the truth of the Gospel, but they do not replace it. The experience of God's Word and Christian faith requires diverse theological expressions according to different times and cultures. However, it is the original and irreducible experience of the Gospel which is pre-eminent.<sup>4</sup> Only this reality founded on the mystery of the Incarnation enables us to take the world, history and human experience fully seriously.

### *Influences*

I venture to suggest that John's theological imagination has been formed and extended through many significant life-experiences as a person and theologian. I will now suggest how his critical openness to some of these experiences has informed his theology.

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<sup>3</sup> Thornhill, *Modernity*, 225-233.

<sup>4</sup> There are significant parallels between Thornhill's emphasis on the original power of the Gospel and what Ricoeur calls "the originary expressions of divine revelation." See Paul Ricoeur, "Toward a Hermeneutic of the Idea of Revelation" in *Essays on Biblical Interpretation* (London: SPCK, 1980), 73-118.

*Marist*

As a fellow-Marist, I appreciate the manner in which John states his theology has been aided by his Marist calling. The Society of Mary was founded in a time of immense social and religious upheaval in the wake of the revolutions sweeping through Europe at the beginning of the nineteenth century. The first Marists understood their mission as nothing more and nothing less than founding the Church anew; their model and inspiration was Mary in the midst of the Apostles. Politically speaking, the anti-clericalism of the day demanded a less triumphalistic and more pastoral approach to being Church. Here, the original power of the Gospel intercepts or interrupts the dominant ecclesiology of the day with a fresh power of appeal more in tune with the experiences and aspirations of the common people. It is also a counter-cultural movement in which the nationalistic excesses of the time are confronted with the truth of the Gospel--but in a way that emphasizes the love and mercy of a redeeming God. John's theology is imbued with this deeply-held Marist vision that is profoundly pastoral. This has led another Marist, Tom Ryan, to suggest that John may well be described as a practical or pastoral theologian.

*Vatican II*

In fact, this Marist vision of Church pre-empts many of the theological tenets of the Second Vatican Council which have, in turn, significantly shaped John's theological project. Vatican II also needs to be interpreted through the dual prisms of history and revelation. The post-Tridentine Church was no longer effective in mediating God's Word to many in the post-War world. The twentieth century had witnessed profound changes such as post-colonial independence movements, emergence of secular, atheistic, totalitarian and communistic ideologies, and the poverty and alienation of entire societies on a scale hitherto unknown. The Church was seen to be increasingly redundant and out of touch. This called for a renewed openness to God's Word and a new experience of God's Spirit. John embraced these challenges theologically in his efforts to redefine Catholic Christianity, provide a more faith-filled and mission-driven ecclesiology, open doors for dialogue with other Christians and secular movements,<sup>5</sup> and to re-express the Christ-event as good news for today's world.<sup>6</sup> Importantly, John challenges theologians "to build bridges between old expressions of our unchanging faith and the vision of a renewed faith brought by the council." Here we see the pastoral theologian at work in his call to overcome polarization between so-called left and right which does so much to impede the work of Christ and the Spirit.

*Ecumenism*

John's work for the International Theological Commission, ARCIC II and the Australian Lutheran-Roman Catholic Dialogue is well documented. Here, I just wish to highlight his commitment to developing an authentic Christian theology in conversation with theologians of other Churches. One imagines that John's earliest Catholic upbringing was not especially attuned to ecumenical activities. As he now acknowledges, his involvement in ecumenical dialogues has proven to be a catalyst for deepening and extending his theological thinking. He notes, for example, that "a shared faith in the gospel" can provide common ground for "genuine if not complete communion" as a precursor for full Christian unity. Committed as he is to the importance and cogency of the doctrinal formulation of

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<sup>5</sup> For example, in the mid-seventies John taught a course on "Christianity and Marxism."

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, his *Sign and Promise: A Theology of the Church for a Changing World* (London: Collins, 1988) which is a systematic reflection on the Church in the light of Vatican II; this is extended in his *Christian Mystery in the Secular Age* (Westminster, MD: Christian Classics, 1991).

the faith, time and again he returns to the priority of the Gospel and the Christ-event. These are existential and dynamic categories that continue to inform his theology as they enable him to recognise the need for ongoing interpretation in the ever-changing realities of Church and world. In this sense, Vatican II has not yet finished: the real task of incarnating a more authentic Church and People of God still awaits us. With John, we await the movement of history and the Spirit. John's very Catholic and yet authentically ecumenical voice is a theological catalyst for this venture.

### *Australian*

Christian theology is regularly critiqued for being too European. Like many Catholic theologians of his generation, John undertook his major theological studies in Rome (Angelicum University). Consequently, what can we say about the manner in which John's Australian imagination has informed his theology? Perhaps this is the wrong question. A better question might be: to what extent has John enabled his Australian imagination to dialogue with the more universal theology of the Church? John's major answer to this question is his book *Making Australia*.<sup>7</sup> He states that his study convinced him "there is a remarkable consonance between the values essential to the gospel and the way of life we have developed in this strange old continent." He reflects theologically on the egalitarian spirit, the wisdom found in adversity, and the land as icon. The Gospel deepens and extends these dimensions of the Australian experience. Here we have genuine insight into John Thornhill the *Australian* theologian who brings the Gospel into dialogue with Australian culture so that the former is incarnated and the latter transformed wherever Christian faith is authentically lived.

### *Theologian of the Church*

This all-too cursory glance at some aspects of John's theological vocation can be summarized by stating that he is first and foremost a theologian of the Church. His theology stems from his commitment to the Gospel and his faith in God's Word. Such commitment and faith do not emerge in a vacuum. They stem from his identity as a baptized Christian, a professed member of the Society of Mary, and an ordained minister. His formation in Thomistic studies situates him in the best theological tradition of Catholic scholarship. Not content to be a purely academic theologian, John understands his theological work as a ministry. All that he writes is imbued with a deeply pastoral concern.<sup>8</sup> He admits, for example, his teaching is also a learning process in which the faith of others influences his ways of thinking and theologizing. This is also what makes John such a good educator. He stands in the great tradition of the teacher-theologian.

John also has a deep love for the Church which arises, in part, from his Marist vocation with its focus on founding the Church anew in every time and culture. The Gospel always calls us beyond. His is, if you like, a critical loyalty: he knows the Church is both sinful and holy. It is always in need of reform; and yet it remains the sign and instrument *par excellence* of God's Word in history. It is this dialectic between history and revelation which shapes his theological project with its original blend of critical realism, historical

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<sup>7</sup> John Thornhill, *Making Australia: Exploring Our National Conversation* (Newtown NSW: Millennium, 1992). Elsewhere in this Journal, Tom Ryan provides an excellent reflection on the book and its significance for assessing John's overall theological project. See his "Faith and Culture in Conversation."

<sup>8</sup> This is evident in such recent works as *Questions Catholics Ask in a Time of Change* (Strathfield, NSW: St Pauls, 2001). This pastoral concern is also evident in his most academic papers.

awareness, existential openness and pastoral concern. I venture to suggest, he provides an enduring model for theologizing in the Australian context for the third millennium.

On a more personal-academic note I should add that no fewer than three members of our McAuley School of Theology staff at ACU are John's former students; others teach theology throughout Australia and overseas. Most are Catholic lay theologians. While I doubt any of these would describe themselves as a Thornhill clone, it is John's lasting legacy that he has played his part in this particular transformation of ecclesial culture in which the future of Australian academic theology will be increasingly in the hands of lay theologians. May they also develop the habits of mind to enable them to communicate the Christian mystery in a manner that evokes faith and calls for the transformation of our Church and world.

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