The Other Calling

Theology, Intellectual Vocation and Truth

Andrew Shanks

A rock-pool waiting in the sunlight for the tide to rise:

the Other calling, cry of exile-
lacerated skies . . .
The Other Calling
Illuminations: Theory and Religion

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Religion has a growing visibility in the world at large. Throughout the humanities there is a mounting realization that religion and culture lie so closely together that religion is an unavoidable and fundamental human reality. Consequently, the examination of religion and theology now stands at the centre of any questioning of our western identity, including the question of whether there is such a thing as ‘truth’.

ILLUMINATIONS aims both to reflect the diverse elements of these developments and, from them, to produce creative new syntheses. It is unique in exploring the new interaction between theology, philosophy, religious studies, political theory and cultural studies. Despite the theoretical convergence of certain trends they often in practice do not come together. The aim of ILLUMINATIONS is to make this happen, and advance contemporary theoretical discussion.

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Why Theology?/What is an Intellectual?

I

Why theology? Why this choice, when it comes to one’s sense of intellectual vocation, to define it so decisively in terms of loyalty to a community of faith?

Why this methodological starting point, from the hazard of faith; which straight away implicates me in so much bad, as well as good company?

I want to make the very boldest claims for theology. Not, be it noted, just for one particular form of theological doctrine, but for the whole questioning enterprise – as it brings me into the close company not only of those with whom I agree, but also of others with whom I utterly and passionately disagree. I want to affirm the whole enterprise, as such; not on any particular basis of supposedly correct metaphysical opinion, but on quite another basis.

On what other basis, exactly?

To get my argument underway, let me begin by shifting the terms of discussion. Consider: what is an intellectual?

II

What is an intellectual? What, dear intellectual reader, are you, in that capacity? (The way I am using the word, anyone who is prepared to give this text anything more than the most cursory of glances must ipso facto count as being one.) I would argue that an intellectual – any intellectual, every intellectual – is someone, ideally, called to be a priest.

In the biblical phrase, a priest ‘after the order of Melchizedek’.

The belonging-together of all true intellectuals, all thinkers, in the truest sense – I want to call it a ‘priesthood’. I mean: a priesthood which transcends all differences of religious culture or metaphysical persuasion. Indeed, ‘priesthood after the order of Melchizedek’, as I would understand it, is none other than the priestly service of the very purest open-mindedness. Thus, this is in principle a ‘priesthood’ which potentially includes intellectuals from every different sort of given religious background.
Only, I am thinking of my own experience of being, in the institutional sense, a priest. In my case: a priest of the Church of England. I am thinking of what it is that I most appreciate about that role, in so far as it transcends the specific institutional context in which I find myself. For it seems to me that what I discern here is a form of vocation far more generally extended.

And this, in the end, is the value I see in theology: that it is the direct thinking through of such vocation.

III

Of course I recognize that, in our – still, for the time being – increasingly secular European world, it may well seem odd, anachronistic, indeed somewhat overblown, to speak of intellectuality in these terms. I guess that to most people it will, at first sight, appear to be a thoroughly perverse suggestion. But hear me out.

I am talking about priesthood as a state of mind, a sense of responsibility. What concerns me here is the underlying state of mind which my job – with (as jobs go) unique directness – ideally requires me to cultivate. For what is it, to be a priest? A priest is first and foremost a representative figure.

As a priest, I am an intellectual forever seeking to relate intelligently, and so far as possible also intelligibly, to the very deepest concerns of a largely non-intellectual community. Or let us put it in more positive fashion: what term is there, untainted by condescension, for those who are not intellectuals? Although it is cumbersome, let us perhaps say: ‘the salt of the earth’ – this at least has the merit of being biblical (Matthew 5:13). It is my responsibility to think not only on my own behalf – and not only on behalf of those to whom I am united by a shared education – but rather, in the most rooted and genuinely responsive way, as a representative of the whole prayer community to which I belong; and therefore in the most open, soul-searching communion with the salt of the earth. I am meant to help the members of that community, in the most all-inclusive fashion, poetically articulate their very deepest hopes, fears, regrets and resolutions for the future, in the face of the highest truth we know, corporately reverenced as sacred. And so, in principle, my job is to be a solidarity builder, helping draw intellectuals and others, the salt of the earth, together into a real communion. That is to say: a communion bound together on the basis of an infinite aspiration to moral seriousness; an infinite demand for true self-questioning thoughtfulness, first of all in the sense of kindness; a maximally attentive liturgical appropriation of the corporate past.

But in seeking to fulfil this role, I think I am simply attempting, in my own particular institutional context and fashion, to live up to what is, in principle, a vocation common to all intellectuals. To be an intellectual, I want to argue, is straight away to have a calling. In this broad sense: a ‘priestly’ calling. Which, however, our secular
society – unfortunately – tends not to recognize. For secularism is all too often an over-reaction to the corruption of specific forms of corrupt institutional priesthood, resulting in an all too sweeping depreciation of ‘priestliness’ in general.

I want to speak here of a calling to ‘priesthood after the order of Melchizedek’. In Genesis 14:17–20, the priest-king Melchizedek appears just for a moment, symbolically right on the threshold of salvation history, to pronounce blessing on Abram – who, at this early stage, has still not yet become ‘Abraham’. And Abram, by way of homage, pays Melchizedek tithes. Borrowing the title from Psalm 110:4, where it is applied to a king, the author of the New Testament letter to the Hebrews also acclaims Jesus as a member of Melchizedek’s order; indeed, as its high priest (5:1–10; 6:19–7:19). For here is a form of priestliness pre-dating the Levitical/Aaronite priesthood, to which of course Jesus did not belong. This priesthood of Melchizedek – which precedes the confessional otherness of Israel, and which thereby also sets the pattern for the pre-ecclesiastical priesthood of Jesus – is thus a symbol for priesthood at its most primordial.

Melchizedek, in Genesis, is, one might say, a potentially symbolic figure, without as yet any clear significance; a name, as it were, in waiting for a role to play. But what else is the truly primordial ‘priesthood’ if not in fact, precisely, the authentic community of all true intellectuals, simply as such? ‘The order of Melchizedek’: let us appropriate this archetypal image for a poetic representation of what one might also call the primordial priesthood of all thinkers. In other words: the spiritual community of those for whom what is ultimately sacred is none other than the shaking power of the very purest, or most open, thoughtfulness.

A priest, in the biblical sense, differs from shaman or sorcerer in being a solidarity builder on the basis of ideals which significantly transcend the simple material self-interest of the worshipping community. This is moreover a form of solidarity which at least potentially transcends the given bonds of kinship loyalty – Abram, indeed, recognizes the priestly authority of Melchizedek even though he comes from quite a different ethnic group. True priesthood is the outworking of a certain aspiration both to have, and to deserve, moral authority in this sense: authority as a challenger of material self-interest and ethnic complacency. Sometimes it may perhaps also be mixed with coercive power – Melchizedek was a ‘priest-king’. But priesthood in itself involves a solidarity building quite different from that of conventional kingship; one not based on any quest for coercive power. And in affirming what I would call the ‘Melchizedekian’, or ‘primordial-priestly’, vocation of all intellectuals I am talking about what Jesus represents, for the writer of Hebrews: the way in which the meaning of Melchizedekian priest-kingship is transfigured by being identified with Jesus. For of course the ‘kingship’ of Jesus is one of pure moral authority; no one could have less coercive power than he whose hands are nailed to a cross.
This is priest-kingship as a form of prophethood. Biblical tradition, in fact, conceives of two basic intellectual vocations: that of the priest and that of the prophet. Whereas a priest represents the people before God, a prophet, conversely, represents God before the people. And so a prophet defines the goals for which it is the priest’s task to develop and implement an appropriate strategy. But, in a broad sense, all prophets are also priests, first. A prophet is just an inspired priest.

And a good priest is essentially someone who works to extend the sway of pure moral authority. Which, by its very nature, tends to challenge the pursuit of coercive power.

IV

Why theology? There are, of course, many possible levels of answer to this general question.

The church functionary, to begin with, has a very simple answer: we need theology in order to train good preachers, catechists, liturgists, church policy makers. Others then, more polemically minded, may also see the need for theology in essentially partisan terms. These may answer that we need good Catholic theology, to uphold the Catholic cause; good Evangelical theology, to uphold the Evangelical cause; or good Orthodox theology, to uphold the Orthodox cause. They may argue that we need theology in order to purge church life of fundamentalism; or, perhaps, in order to purge it of the corrupting influence of secular liberalism. Some will see it as the basic task of theology to recall the church to a proper solidarity with the poor. Or to a proper witness for peace. And others, again, may see theology primarily in apologetic terms, as a matter of the church learning to appropriate the fresh insights of the latest scientific modernity.

All of these responses, however, start from a certain presupposition of faith. In each case, theology is framed as an activity of Christian intellectuals seeking to develop a better, in the straightforward sense of more articulate, expression of their given Christian faith. My project here is different, in that I am – in this context – writing as a Christian intellectual primarily concerned to develop a better understanding of intellectuality, as a vocation in itself. Thus, I am concerned first of all with intellectuality, in itself, and only then with the specifically Christian character of Christian intellectuality. Why theology? To be sure, as I am a Christian, what I chiefly mean by ‘theology’ is Christian theology. And yet I want to give an answer addressed not just to other Christians, but, at any rate in the first instance, to all intellectuals, both Christian and non-Christian alike.

Nor, moreover, is this an exercise in specifically Christian apologetics. It is an argument addressed to all, and it is an argument tracing a way into Christian theology; nevertheless, my primary concern is not with the justification of Christian faith as such. But, rather, I want to explore the basic rationale for that whole type of thinking which theology
exemplifies, inasmuch as it is the particular Christian version. Let us call this ‘priestly thinking’, in general.

In a sense my argument converges, for instance, with George Marsden’s critique of what he calls the secularist ‘homogenization’ of university culture in the USA. Marsden indeed has traced the history of this process in some detail: the way in which the ‘pace-setting’ American universities, all of them originally Protestant religious foundations, first, in the nineteenth century, turned away from any overtly sectarian identity, and then, in the twentieth century, more and more sought to secularize themselves entirely.1

Although he writes as ‘a fairly traditional Protestant of the Reformed theological heritage’, Marsden’s work is not a lament for some supposed lost golden age of Protestant cultural hegemony. But, rather, he is pleading for a new cultural pluralism; not that there should be any sell out by the universities to the forces of religious bigotry – God forbid! – but just that there should be a bit more space allowed to confessionally framed thought of every variety. And so he deplores any discrimination against overtly confessional higher educational institutions, whether with regard to state or federal funding, or in any other way; he advocates the inclusion, within otherwise secular universities, of confessionally identified research institutes or affiliated colleges, as in the UK or Canada; he urges that scholars, in every area of the humanities, be freely allowed, even encouraged, quite openly to relate their scholarly work to their religious faith; he would like to see university departments of theology flourishing everywhere.

Amen, I instinctively say. But, again, why? Marsden, for his part, develops a very American argument. By contrast, I want to attempt an answer which, in the most systematic way, goes right back to universal first principles. That is to say: one which begins, not from any particular presupposition either of faith or of given cultural identity, but quite simply from what all truly thoughtful thinking presupposes, just by virtue of its thoughtfulness.

Thus, what does it mean to be truly thoughtful?

What, in the most general terms, does it lead one to value, and look for?

First and foremost, surely, it means that one values, and looks for, good conversation. A social environment in which all voices can be heard, and receive serious attention. A world in which the most diverse types of people are drawn conversationally close together, without having to submit to any predetermined consensus; so bringing to bear, on questions of moral and metaphysical truth, the most diverse experiences of life. An ethos absolutely focused on the moral preconditions for good listening. In a word: ‘Honesty’.

I write ‘Honesty’ here with a capital ‘H’ so as to draw attention to the particular sense of the word that I intend. In common parlance, it is true, the word ‘honesty’, as applied to intellectual matters, is often used as a straightforward synonym for ‘sincerity’, truly meaning what you say, or ‘frankness’, truly saying all that you might have in mind. But what I mean by ‘Honesty’ crucially transcends these other concepts, inasmuch as it signifies a patient openness to what other people have to say, and especially those others most different from oneself, with the most challengingly other perceptions of reality. Why, and in what sense, theology? Essentially, my answer is: because, and in the sense that, theology is the Christian form of what I have called ‘priestly thinking’. By which I mean precisely the science of the sacralization of Honesty. In order that Honesty shall flourish, I would argue, it needs to be rendered sacred; or, rather, recognized as already being the very essence of the truly sacred. Strategies are required to promote that recognition, among every category of the population. And the proper, urgently necessary vocation of Christian theology is none other than to be a devising of such strategies, in the context of church life.

Or, to put it another way, by ‘priesthood’, in the primordial sense, I simply mean a fundamental commitment, on the part of intellectuals, to the building of the most truly catholic sort of community, in the original sense of that word, ‘catholic’: that is to say, a community with a real will to Honest inclusivity, which therefore draws together, into the most genuinely open and engaging sort of conversation, people of every different level of intellectual attainment.

But the building of catholicism, in this sense, obviously requires the assent of all involved. It is equally obstructed both by the general strength of militant anti-intellectual sentiment at large in the world and by the reluctance of intellectuals themselves.

The militant anti-intellectualism of the present day may be said to come in two main forms: vulgar nihilist and fundamentalist. I am talking here not just about a perhaps quite justifiable contempt for the pretensions of intellectual elitism, but about a basic refusal to accord any sacred authority to the open-minded pursuit of Truth, and a complete lack of respect, therefore, for intellectualism as a commitment to that ideal. The vulgar nihilist is one for whom nothing at all is sacred, and every claim to authority, as distinct from popularity, simply requires to be debunked; the fundamentalist, by contrast, attributes sacred authority to a form of closed-mindedness.

These two naturally loathe one another. And yet, at the same time, they are really twin phenomena. For both alike belong to the world of

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2 I have previously developed this usage, in systematic fashion, in *Faith in Honesty: The Essential Nature of Theology* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005).
mass communications: what I am calling ‘vulgar nihilism’ is everything akin to the element of sniggering in any negative propaganda; fundamentalism is religion fundamentally adapted, or rather corrupted, to meet the requirements of propaganda effectiveness. And both thrive on their opposition to one another, each is the only opponent the other really understands, they need one another. In that sense, I think one may very well regard them as being, so to speak, the twin heads of one and the same apocalyptic beast – set over against ‘Honesty’ with a capital ‘H’, one might perhaps call it ‘Glamour’ with a capital ‘G’. For this is what cultural leadership is here reduced to: on the one hand the glamour of ‘celebrities’, on the other hand the glamour of great showman-evangelists.

How, in the most general terms, are truly Honest relationships to be fostered between intellectuals and the salt of the earth? The power of Glamour largely depends upon the operation of the mass media and the assembly of ecstatic crowds. Honesty, by contrast, requires face-to-face encounter, in the context of enterprises with the potential, at least, to be equally owned by participants of every kind. And, preferably, not just the face-to-face encounters of the classroom, in which conversation is essentially framed as a business of enabling people, if they choose, to move out of one world, the world of the masses, and towards the other, the world of the intellectuals. But, rather, what is needed is a context for the cultivation of a real reciprocity of mutual respect between the two worlds.

The need, as I would see it, is for intellectuals to think of themselves, and to be popularly accepted as, in the deepest sense, representatives of a catholic community. And note: this is quite a different sort of representativeness from that of the party politician, or the demagogue, within liberal democracy. Thus, while it is no doubt true that, in present circumstances, liberal democracy is the least bad form of government, nevertheless, the interaction it generates, between those in the role of representatives and those who are represented, is in fact precisely the opposite of what I would envisage as the true ‘primordial-priestly’ ideal. For the priestly-minded intellectual is the representative of a catholic community, in relation to the sacred. But the intellectual as democratic politician is, either formally or informally, the representative of a certain constituency, interest group, or set of interest groups, in relation to secular government. Here we have the intellectual as spokesperson for the aggressive self-assertion of a particular locality, a particular ethnic, economic or confessional group, primarily in criticism of the larger society; whereas, the primary role of the priestly intellectual, in the sense I intend, is on the contrary to be an articulator of communal self-criticism.

As far as I can see, the one and only sort of community capable of being truly catholic, at the deepest level, is that which is built upon a basis of shared non-fundamentalist liturgy. No other sort of enterprise is so well suited, in principle, to set up the sort of relationships required.