# Chaplaincy and/as public theology


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Abstract

This paper explores the need for a renewed and creative engagement with theology on the part of chaplains so that it articulates and assists in chaplains' public work in (mostly secular) institutions. Acknowledging the current performed public theology of chaplains and the dearth of formal theological activity, possible inhibitors to engaging with theology are then discussed. Images and metaphors of theology are advanced with a view to showing the pluriformity of this activity. It is then suggested that chaplains could adopt more creative and imaginative approaches to the theological tradition that might enable prophetic and apologetic roles within organisations, to the benefit of those organisations and chaplaincy itself.


Key words: Chaplaincy, theology, public theology, metaphor, imagination

# Chaplaincy and/as Public Theology

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> *The secular society must become post-secular, i.e. sceptical and open-minded towards the voices of religion. Permitting religious language to enter the public sphere should be regarded as enrichment, not as intrusion. (Beck 2010, 156)*

> *Theology is not primarily an explanatory, rather an exploratory discipline. (Young 2013, 415)*

Chaplaincy in the UK is no longer solely a Christian, nor necessarily a religiously-linked activity (Gilliat Ray et al. 2013; Swift 2014). It may, then, seem retrogressive to write an article that appears to hark back to a former time in discussing specifically the relationship of Christian theology to chaplaincy. My purpose is neither imperialistic nor nostalgic. I would argue that all practices and world views, whether Christian, religious or secular have undergirding action-guiding ideologies ('faith and belief systems') that can be articulated and analysed (Pattison 1997). My hope is that chaplains of all traditions and none might therefore be able to gain something from considering the relationship that one particular well-elaborated action-guiding world view and ideology might have with practice and organisation. And given that many chaplains and much chaplaincy has been, and continues to be, informed by Christian world views, it is to be hoped that this exercise in making theology more overt and perhaps useful might be of particular interest to professional adherents of that particular tradition.

As I have already implied, the words, 'chaplaincy' and 'theology' often do not easily hang together these days. One chaplain recently said to me, slightly wistfully perhaps, that he did not think there was going to be much place for theology in his thinking about the future of chaplaincy, given the multi-faith context of his practice. Another person told me that many of the chaplains he knows regard themselves as anonymous Christians — they would actually quite like to talk about the faith tradition which brought them into chaplaincy and sustains them in it, but it no longer seems appropriate. It would be less

controversial to talk continuously to patients and colleagues about being a fanatical football supporter than occasionally and circumspectly about religion, even as a paid religious professional. This is not to say that chaplaincy is not an activity which is in some ways an implicit performance of theology in public (theology being understood to be a vital constituent of an action-guiding world view, whether overtly religious or not) – how could it not be thus? But it is to say that publicly talking about or addressing theology, especially perhaps Christian theology, is not popular. Some chaplains appear to regret this situation, but do little to address it. Others seem content quietly to acquiesce in it.

To the chaplain who said that he could not see much place for theology in a multi-faith context, I responded that perhaps there might be more place than he thought for theology. At the very least, theology forms part of the underpinning knowledge and understanding that chaplains use for understanding their role and function. Indeed, it is precisely articulate, inhabited knowledge and understanding of particular religious traditions that lay people and employers would, naively perhaps, expect of chaplains. That, if anything, is their expertise, and often even non-religiously literate people are often less interested in permissive but vague spirituality than in inhabited religious habits and convictions, however bizarre and unacceptable they may seem (Cadge 2012). Much of the suppression of overt talk about theology and religious traditions is a species of internally-generated self-censorship rather than an external requirement (though clearly organisations employing chaplains would feel uncomfortable about proselytization as opposed to some kind of contextually relevant witness and discussion undertaken with sensitivity and consent). So in this article, I want to speculate upon some of the factors that make overt theology, Christian or other, such a problematic part of chaplaincy life and work today, before advancing some ideas for making some kind of more overt and intentional theological work a larger, more essential part of the public institution of chaplaincy.

*The performed public theology of chaplains*

To say that chaplains are not engaged in theology would be misleading. However, they are not always articulate, verbal or particularly theoretical in their theological discourse; their theologies often appear to be relatively unimportant, a side line at best. To pick up any book on chaplaincy looking for rich, substantial theological insight and sophistication is mostly to be disappointed (Threlfall-Holmes and Newitt 1011). However, I want to suggest that while overt theoretical or verbal theological activity in chaplaincy and expression is limited, it is not insignificant.

While chaplaincy theology is not prolific or elaborate, it is significant. It is a fairly flat, with few landmarks. But those landmarks are very important and are clung on to as points of practical orientation. To reverse the imagery, the picture I have in my mind is of a tent peg, something that is rather thin but which is deeply rooted, firm and an essential if not elaborate or prominent anchor. Thin but vital chaplaincy theologies become enacted in practice rather than enscripted in texts. Many of them can be traced back to central Christian doctrines and practices (often shared with other religious traditions, of course).

The theological tent peg I am talking about comprises the importance of presence, being alongside people whoever and wherever they are (whether they have any religious affiliation or not), the importance of listening, empathy and respect for persons, not being judgmental, preachy or conversionist, and hanging about to be available (Swinton 2003). While these values are very compatible with apparently secular norms of inclusion, non-discrimination and valuing diversity, they can also be traced back, at least in part, into formal theological ideas. These include the ideas that all humans, whoever they are, are equally made in the image of God and so can reveal something about God, that God's love and care are universal and available to all, that God is a God of infinite compassion, that God comes alongside humans in the incarnation of Jesus Christ in all aspects of their lives (including places of sin, suffering and sorrow) to enable flourishing. Thus, the work of chaplaincy is to witness to this universal love and care in all places.

This necessarily demands an accepting rather than a judgmental attitude and willingness to value persons, presence and diversity.

This kind of literally 'practical' theology does not need extensive elaboration. It merely needs to be enacted in a diversity of settings and practices by chaplains who genuinely take it to heart. It is not, then, in theoretical verbal elaboration that chaplaincy theology is to be found and explored, but in the rich exigencies of chaplaincy practice. The richness of chaplaincy theology is thus likely to be found buried within narratives and stories of everyday practice as, at best, primary theologal utterance (Fierro 1977). It seldom gets as far as abstracted and generalised books and articles.

And why should it? It is both the joy and task of chaplains to be practical, engaged people, not pseudo-academics. Like managers and other service providers, they are called to be pragmatists, practical respondents, not reflective critics; the richness of their experience probably and quite rightly involves most of their mental creativity and energy (Pattison and McKeown 2010). This means that there is not much demand for academic-type activity compared with practical activity. And even if it were demonstrably useful, which might be very difficult to show, it is unclear how it would be justified as a priority to managers in hard-pressed practical situations such as prisons and hospitals. Developing theological language, concepts and critique is not the most important task in multi-lingual, multi-disciplinary contexts; it might be much more vital to learn the languages of clients and fellow professionals so that chaplaincy can take its proper institutional place.

So far, so commonsensical, perhaps. But there are, perhaps, deeper, less visible reasons for the neglect of overt theology in chaplaincy. I would like to explore these now before going on to suggest that chaplaincy might engage more fruitfully and vitally with theology.

A clue perhaps is to be found in the fundamental nature of chaplaincy work. In some ways chaplaincy seems to represent an acceptable face of religion, even a separate kind of

religion that stands over against the kind of religion that Christianity has become in its formal, institutional shape in the UK (Pattison, unpublished). There is some evidence that some chaplains themselves are refugees from the certainties and intolerances of the institutional churches (Hancocks et al 2008). They seek a form of activity that honours the sacralities of ordinary people (Lynch 2012); these comprise values such as tolerance, inclusiveness, diversity and honouring the individual choices and journeys of individuals seeking to shape their own lives and meanings.

Charting the rise of spirituality and the decline of formal, organised religion, Heelas and Woodhead (2005) distinguish a fundamental cultural change in British society and practices towards valuing the person and subjectivity – the 'subjective turn'. This represents 'a turn away from life lived in terms of external or 'objective' roles, duties and obligations, and a turn towards life lived by reference to one's own subjective experiences (relational as much as individual)':

> The subjective turn is thus a turn away from 'life-as' (life lived as a dutiful wife, father, husband, strong leader, self-made man etc.) to 'subjective-life' (life lived in deep connection with the unique experiences of my self in-relation).

This relativises the importance of external and traditional communally-based authorities, knowledge and practices and it gives importance to the subjectivities of individuals as the source of authority, significance and satisfaction as they attempt to become 'what they really are' (Heelas and Woodhead 2005:2-4; Lynch 2007).

The effective sacralisation of the individual and her experience has led to the rise of spiritual practices that are congenial and convenient. They have left heterogeneous, communitarian religious organisations like churches, requiring conformity to authority, tradition, ritual and the past, struggling to maintain their numbers and influence. So it is perhaps very significant that chaplaincy represents exactly these sorts of person-centred, tolerant, individualistic values. Significantly, if a chaplain from any tradition were not able to respect and adhere to these values and sacralities, e.g., by being overtly intolerant

of sexual minorities, by proselytising for their own faith, they would probably be unable to remain a chaplain and would be expelled from the institution.

If this thesis is correct, it provides an important clue as to why theology is treated as of relatively little worth and value in chaplaincy. Far from being a resource for ministry, it may be an irrelevance, even an obstacle. Chaplains are involved in crossing boundaries and their work is necessarily complex and messy – so, for example, Christian chaplains find themselves ministering to Muslims and *vice versa* and often testify to the value of this kind of apparently 'transgressive' practical encounter (Gilliat-Ray et al. 2013). Chaplaincy work is often 'impure' and complex, hybrid and responsive. It constantly calls into question what might be thought to be fundamental beliefs and practices. So, for example, is it possible to pray for, or to baptise, a still born child? Traditional church teaching and theology would prima facie say no, baptism and prayers are for the living. For years, churches with a very narrow view of identity and belonging have tried to define the boundaries of membership and orthodox practice, to create a kind of ideal organisational purity. This stands in direct tension with the experience that emerges in the sorts of boundary situations faced by chaplains where both faith and society are found in reality to be hybrid, heterodox and impure (Beck 2010, 139-40).

Chaplains often complain that the churches take little notice of them and do not want to learn from their very interesting experience on the boundaries of worlds, between religious communities and the plurality of practices in secular institutions. But the truth may be that this is just as well, for neither chaplains nor churches would easily be able to sympathise with each other's practices and beliefs.

And if the different practices of institutional churches and chaplains are in tension, then it is clear why theology is so problematic. If institutional religious groups seek clarity and purity in practice, it is their theologies which seek to extend this kind of purificatory practice to the minds and spirits of adherents. Professional theologians then enact the task of authoritative abstraction by analogy with trying to obtain the objective and objectifying perspective of the orthodox Christian God (who, being one God, necessarily

has a unified and unifying perspective (Harvey 2013)). If much of orthodox religious practice is about defining clear boundaries of purity and defilement, then theology is often the abstracted theory that accompanies this. Insofar as Christian ecclesial practice and theology have tended to emphasise the primacy of the verbal, the cognitive and the creedal over other, messier aspects of lived material religion (which include its hybridity, its dialogue with social practices and gods, its non-rational practices), its hand servant, formal theology, has served as a main agent of intellectual hygiene, disinfecting and excluding heterodox thoughts and experiences to maintain doctrinal conformity and clarity. If institutional religion seeks corporate conformity and purity of identity and belonging, emphasising belief, theology polices the minds of adherents. In doing so, it tends towards a monolithic abstracted clarity that is bound to alienate and displace much spirituality and religion that does not look like 'orthodox believing Christianity'. As Christians from different denominations found in the heyday of the ecumenical movement, theology got in the way of active practical collaboration with people of different doctrinal beliefs while practical activities brought them together. Getting rid of theological discourse may thus be vital in a multi-faith, pluralistic setting. Here, theology is a potentially a frightening, destructive heteronomous and abstracted system of thoughts that appears deeply unhelpful in trying to honour the diverse, often hybrid sacral forms and practices present in pluriform social institutions. It has enormous capacity to create division, hatred and shame in the hands of its elite clerical and academic guardians (Beck 2010, 139).

It could be said, then, that like laughter, theology emerges with humanity out of the past 'with a dagger in its hand' (Koestler 1989, 52). Or perhaps with the whiff of burning heretics about it (Beck 2010, 110-15). Maybe we are not so far from the Reformation and the religious wars in Europe not to have some sort of corporate implicit memory that doctrine and theological ideas mar and even kill people in the name of institutional purity and intellectual conformity (Toulmin 1992). This is the last thing that the skilled boundary crossers called chaplains need anywhere near their messy, 'polluting', impure

and fascinating work if they are to survive, fit in and help the people about whom they care.

*Prospects for chaplaincy engagement with theology*

I have, in some ways unfairly, caricatured traditional orthodox-type theology abstractly as a kind of unwanted authoritarian ghost at the diverse, diffuse feast of life, religious and non-religious, in institutions where chaplains serve. For a variety of sociological, intellectual, ecclesial and practical reasons, explicit and systematised theological activity as traditionally practised in Christianity is deeply problematic in its ends, methods and practical implications. It can cast a deep shadow over the creative, messy arena of chaplaincy experience.

However, I want to make the case that different kinds of ways of thinking about and engaging with the theological and religious traditions of Christianity and other religions might be sought. It is often the traditions that create motivation and commitment in chaplains in the first place. Chaplains themselves value aspects of these traditions to sustain themselves and their work, however cursorily they may think about them critically. Their institutions and clients probably would expect them to be able to engage critically with their own religious traditions. (Why have a chaplain in a professional environment if he is not a reasonably articulate expert in some kind of lived religion (Pattison 2007, 132-43)?). And these traditions themselves can be seen as part of the treasure trove of common humanity, even if only as a record of humanity's greatest hopes, illusions, mistakes and triumphs in thought and often correlatively in practice (not least the dangers of exalting monolithic correct belief and thought over complex, pluriform experience) – so why should institutions be deprived of them? More specifically, chaplains cannot help enacting their action-influencing world views in practice (inclusion and diversity and compassion and tolerance do not come from nowhere, even if these words themselves are abstractions). And without some kind of conscious critical reflection on these world views, values and ideas, they may be in

danger of being uncritically possessed by a particular way of looking at the world rather than being responsible, responsive owners of their systems of belief and practice.

More seriously still, if chaplains do not have a critical perspective and engagement with the worlds of thoughts, theories, beliefs and values, they may have no means of choosing or criticising them. In this context, they may unwittingly adapt the values and beliefs of British institutional 'religions', shaped by managerial, economic and other forces and so fail to exercise a proper critical function within their organisations and professions (Pattison 1997). If institutions systematically exclude important values, how are those values to be reinstated and insisted upon if there is no critical ideological perspective from which to evaluate them?

It is my contention that religious traditions, values and beliefs can sometimes bring such an alternative critical perspective with them and so chaplains abandon them at their peril. At the very least, the theological tradition provides a schedule of important questions that are important for individuals and organisations to continue to consider:

- What fundamental understandings of life and its purposes are being embodied and fostered?
- What sort of flourishing is being nurtured and what prevents this from succeeding?
- What is regarded as ultimately real and important?
- What is regarded as good and evil? How are evil and suffering dealt with?
- How are outsiders, strangers and 'otherness' regarded and accommodated? How are conflicts dealt with and resolved?
- Are structures and arrangements created to serve or to dominate people?
- What sort of justice is being sought and enacted?
- What 'gods' are worshipped and respected as of ultimate importance? Are they worthy of the respect they receive?
- How are loving and creative relationships forstered or obstructed?

- Are the ends sought only about self preservation and survival or are they directed towards a larger more inclusive purpose and end?

All these questions derive directly from fundamental Christian doctrines of creation, soteriology, pneumatology, ecclesiology and eschatology (Pattison 2000, 245; Thompson et al. 2008, 108-09). It would be possible, more positively, to insert insights from the riches of the theological tradition in considering them in any particular chaplaincy context. But equally, it should be noted that they are not questions exclusively couched in overt theological language or incapable of an answer from non-religious sources and groups. Theology is in fact not a separate or separable discourse from the rest of human life. It is actually a hybrid discourse incorrigibly shaped by and shaping other, non-religious discourses around it, and so inherently public, if not always comprehensible or useful. It can thus make common cause with the quest for human flourishing in all kinds of human institutions.

What I am suggesting, then, is a rehabilitation of dialogue with theological ideas and traditions, not a wholesale retreat back into the world of abstracted purification and conformity, which would clearly be neither relevant nor appropriate.

*Getting theology in perspective*

Theology, the articulation and critical systematisation of beliefs and values underlying and connecting experiences and practices, is not the most important part of religion. Religion is a complex, often indeterminate and hybrid mixture of material, bodily and intellectual practices that help humans to create identity. It is often more a matter of relationships and attachments than of words and ideas (Orsi 2006; Pattison 2010). Its function is to help humans negotiate relations and boundaries of intimacy and difference with others in such key areas as eating, sex, and dealing with strangers (Harvey 2013). In this context, the articulation and formulation of words and concepts is only a small part of religious activity, just as conscious will and action is only a small part of embodied human existence generally.

Of all the religions in the world, it is really only in Christianity that the theology and cognitive belief have been of crucial importance as a measure of identity and religious performance. This overemphasis is so unusual that one recent critic has argued that 'Christianity is not a religion' compared to the other religions on earth (Harvey 2013, 43ff.) Verbal performance and assent have been crucial markers for Western Christian communities, particularly since the Reformation (Ellul 1985). This essentially dualistic, logocentric and hyper-separatist stance has particularly characterised the ruling elites of Western churches whose legitimacy often depends on a lengthy immersion or training in theology as a formal subject. Theology is then used in various ways as a vehicle of power and manipulation, often as an ideological cover for interests and emotions that are not primarily about rationality and ideas but more about areas of boundary negotiation and dispute, e.g., anxieties about sex and the 'otherness' of women's bodies in the churches. This elite theological emphasis on the power of (especially written) words and thoughts has spread from Christianity into other parts of Western culture via universities founded by churches. Thus, it is generally expected in influential, 'educated' circles such as government and management, that words and documents will be decisive in determining direction and action. Without the right words, practitioners of many kinds feel naked to defend or commend themselves in professional environments (Pattison 1997).

The rational logocentrism of orthodox theology is easily detached from the hybridity and messiness of human life and existence. Small wonder, then, that it is so difficult for chaplains to deploy or contribute to. And not surprising that a training in academic theology often provides so little usable basis for pastoral work in pluriform situations. One can only be sorry for theological students who feel that they are being pressed to become 'good' at something that does not come easily to many, ie, clarity, abstraction and intellectualism. If theology becomes an abstract method of elite formation and for the exclusion of impurity in thought, practice and relationship (communal or personal), it is unsurprising that it is both over-estimated in its official importance and found to be an arena of fear, anxiety or indifference for many of the practitioners who feel that they

have been inadequately shaped in its image and are unable easily to relate it to their practice. Experience and thought will often not comfortably coalesce.

In this context, and given that theology and abstract professional discourses will not go away any time soon, being integral to the modern post-Christian world, it is important to get abstract, formal theology in proportion, to de-bunk and de-throne it a little, perhaps with a view to making it more of a stimulating friend and servant than a godlike (God-imitating?) master. Bonhoeffer (1997, 111) points out that the first theological conversation in the Judaeo-Christian tradition – significantly a conversation about God, not addressed to God - is initiated by the serpent, an antagonist of God and humanity, in the garden of Eden. This in itself might be enough to prompt the thought that theology, systematic, articulate thinking and questioning in Christianity, might be somewhat suspect and prone to misuse, objectification and distortion. Part of the solution to putting theology in its proper place might then be to think about it more pluralistically and creatively.

To this end, it is worth thinking about theology is, or might be, in terms of its imagistic and metaphorical ecology. This can allow us to see the various ways in which theology might be used and thought about, for good and for ill. Theologies are not lapidary either in conception or use. They are created by embodied human beings, formed of metaphors and images drawn from the material world. They form imaginaries that have emotional, as well cognitive content, however abstract they may appear (Johns 1990; Lakoff and Johnson 1981; Taylor2003). Theologies, like poetry, can be seen as having affective as well as intellectual content. They can thus perhaps come nearer to experience than often appears from their most abstract and theoretical forms. Exploring the inherent pluralisation of theology in terms of metaphors and images in use and practice might help to get it in perspective and inspire chaplains and others to engage with it more freely and fully. This is a way of thinking slant about theology that may help us to see theology and involvement with it in a slightly different way. Attending to images and metaphors is one way of becoming more aware of ourselves, of theology as a discipline, and of its

implications (McFague 1982). This might help us to be more aware, critical, and even committed to its use and production in the public sphere.

*Images and metaphors*

The images and metaphors of theology I want to draw attention to fall roughly into groups. First, there are *medical and therapeutic images*. From before the time of Augustine, therapeutic ideas, images and metaphors have percolated theology. Thus, it can be regarded as a *disinfectant* for maintaining purity and eliminating evil – this is the usage to which some try to put theology in thinking, e.g., about women or gay marriage. Right thinking then keeps the community safe from that which might pollute or destroy. More specifically, it can be imaged as a *scapel* for carefully dissecting and understanding concepts, ideas and experiences. It is here historically that more traditional academic, systematic theology perhaps fits in.

Clearly, some people feel that in its wordiness, obscurity and dogmatism, theology is like a nasty *medicament* that is taken for some real but imperceptible benefit, a necessary evil perhaps. This links closely to the image of theology as *inoculation* – studying theology is a *rite de passage* that enables you to join the professionals and can look down on, confuse, or refute the laity – you only need to engage with it in a limited way, perhaps during training, then you can get on with the rest of your life untroubled by it. But, to be more positive, theology can also be seen as '*saving' or healing work* (Bondi 1995) that allows people to understand themselves, God, and their world better, to better commune with truth and reality.

Theology can also be imaged as *injuring work* – people kill and die for theologies. Consider the theological cleansing of the Reformation in Europe and the wars and conflicts subsequent to this. So there is a whole group of metaphors and images that relate closely to the language of *struggle, warfare, offence and defence*. Theology can be seen as a *shield* or *rampart* that protects from error and isolates a community of believers safely inside clear ways of thinking and acting. Perhaps it might also regarded as *camouflage* that

distracts or misleads opponents from getting too close to the real issues that bother people.

On the more offensive end of things, theology can be imaged as a *bludgeon*, a blunt and weighty instrument used to stun, silence, or disable opponents, particularly those who supposedly do not understand theology and so have no business to have any opinion about things. Those who wield theology thus might prefer to image it as police *truncheon* which is legitimately used to curb the lawless and wayward and to maintain community order and discipline. It can also be regarded as a *sword* or *rapier* that is used to impale, injure and dispose of enemies within and outside religious communities. It is certainly the case that many individuals and groups within and outwith church communities may feel that they have been wounded and harmed by the theologies of others.

While nature may be red in tooth and claw, it can also provide less offensive and more varied metaphors and images for the nature and practice of theology. Thus theology can be conceived as a kind of *wilderness*, a tough alien place which is demanding and far too large to get your head round. On the other hand it can be regarded as a *territory to be occupied and colonized* – something over which mastery can be gained which can then be controlled and fruitfully used once subdued. For some, perhaps theology is a kind of *tall, misty mountain* to be assaulted and conquered with complex equipment and much training. Or maybe it might be thought of as a *valley, woody and intimate*, to be explored and wandered around peacefully and at leisure

Staying with geographical images and metaphors, some seem to conceive of theology as a *straight path* with a clear destination and end that must be pursued without deviation or dallying. But it could equally be regarded as a *maze* where one wanders around a sometimes gets lost but values the process for itself. This is a kind of *wayfaring* and *wandering* that contrasts with the instrumental linear travelling that characterizes much activity, including theology, in the contemporary world (Ingold 2007). And if theology is a great living river flowing past us from the past into the future, it may be possible to bathe or fish in it. Unless that is it becomes a kind of *frozen sea* which is very impressive

and monumental, beautiful, awesome even, but impassive and alien from us, dwarfing and chilling us and freezing the present with the water of the past that remains visible but unusable in its refrigerated magnificence.

Looking to the arboreal realm, theology might be thought of as a *tree* with deep roots and many branches, spreading and luxuriant, where birds of many species can sit in the branches and sing their different songs. Or maybe it is better characterized as *a pole* — where only one bird can sit and sing while others are fended off.

Turning to the human domain and specifically to metaphors from architecture, buildings, and spatial organization, theology can be a kind of small *cage* designed to constrain our instincts and emotions that closes down the mind and imagination, chills, forbids, excludes. Perhaps it is appropriately regarded as a *partition wall*, something that is erected to avoid encountering and relating to otherness and presence, whether divine or human (Orsi 2006). Or maybe it is a kind of *polyfilla*, a way of putting words and ideas in spaces to make them look solid and convincing when actually there is nothing solid really there. Perhaps it's a kind of *monument like a cathedral* — large, impressive, beautiful, authoritative, ancient, eternal, apparently immortal and impervious to the contemporary concerns of mortal worms and their environment. By contrast, it might be thought of as a *a tent* — a temporary and flimsy structure where we dwell in many locations for a while, but which can be folded up and carried away so that we can live in new, differently shaped places. Back indoors, theology can be imaged as an *old attic*, with lots of quite interesting but very strange things in it that were useful once, but are no longer so, except as curios. Here, theological activity may be a kind of nostalgic antiquarianism. Pehaps, however, it is *a treasure chest* where rare things glint and intrigue, make one ponder and wonder — but only perhaps if you know where the chest is buried and can find all the keys to open it.

Moving to become more active, theology can be seen as a kind of game. But what sort of game might it be? A *competitive game* like cricket or bridge in which some people win while others lose and walk off the pitch ashamed and miserable? Or is it a *collaborative*

*game* like wine tasting where people add to each other's knowledge and enjoyment by participating? Is it a professional preserve or is it most enjoyed and valued when shared by more people at different levels of ability and engagement? Should it be imaged as *cerebral*, primarily involving the mind, like chess? Or should it also involve the *body* and be a corporeal activity, expressed and informed by our physical lives (important in incarnational religion – see the work of feminist scholars like Elaine Pagels (1982). Is it *solitary and focussed* like solitaire or solving a crossword? Or should we image theology as a *mass sport,* like football, in which there is mass participation and much camaraderie? Is theology a *spectator sport*, like Olympic athletics where most people just have to stand back and admire a few people exerting themselves in extremis once every four years? Or should we think of it more as the Chinese think of Tai Chi – something that everyone would benefit from participating in, at whatever level they can, on a regular basis? If theology is a game, is it *vital part of training for discipleship for everyone*, or is it just an add-on for people who like that sort of thing? Is it an important part of everyday life, or a *pass time for people* who are particularly interested in it, like *reading car magazines?* Personally, I rather like the image of theology as being like *cooking* together or *making a patchwork quilt*, so that it is social and collaborative.

I could go on multiplying images and metaphors of theology, but I hope that I have now adequately made the point that theology and theologies could be imaged and understood in many different ways and often have been. Theology is, then, a spacious room, a place of liberty (Ps 18.19). I like Frances Young's assertion that, in the context of faith seeking understanding, 'Theology is an exploratory rather than an explanatory discipline' (Young 2013, 412).

Some of the images I alluded to above are naturalistic. Some are artifactual. Some focus on humans, some on the natural world. Some are aggressive, others passive or receptive. Some are normative. Some are permissive. Some are tight and restrictive. Others are wide and flabby. Some are positive and creative, others are apparently more negative and even wounding. Some of them sound rather conservative, others rather

liberal. Some seem to imply lots of discipline and organization, others to require nothing but good intentions and a hopeful heart. None of them is necessarily exclusive of others – and I suspect that, as with values, we flip between them and use them differently in different contexts – for example, I think we are probably all guilty of using theology as a bludgeon or truncheon from time to time when we see other people doing things we don't like in a way we don't like (Pattison 2007, 29-46). Perhaps none of this matters, so long as we know what we are doing with theology and why we are doing it. We owe it to ourselves and others to know what we are doing as theologians and to take responsibility for this in our own lives and those of others.

All these ways of imaging and pursuing theology imply things about humans and about God. They implicitly involve dynamics of power, intention and inclusion/exclusion; the ways we image theology will inflect the way we think about God and other people. They also imply structures and forms for exploration, and institutional structures. Assaulting a mountain is different from swimming in a lake, thawing out an ice cube is different from writing a poem – different tools, methods, training, and contexts are required to do these things. Both the structures and the images of theology they support will actually affect humans and what they are allowed to think, say and be, both in public organisations and in personal life. The challenge then is to move beyond engaging with theology as duty or cliché to create the kind of theology that makes a difference and really helps.

In this context, all religious professionals need to ask themselves what sorts of theology they value and want to engage with. For whose benefit will it be undertaken? Whose interests will it serve? Who will benefit? Who might be diminished or damaged by particular approaches to theology? Who and what will be included or excluded by the process and outcomes of theological work? Should it be done in a solitary context or with other people? In words? In pictures? In essays? In poems? In actions?

*Engaging with theology: poetry, prophecy and apologetics*

There is not and never has been any one way of thinking about and working in and with theology. It can be seen as a creative, innovative endeavor like weaving a quilt or as a preservative, conservative endeavor like curating a collection of remains, as corporate or individual etc. It is important, in the present context in thinking about chaplaincy and public theology that, in addition to appreciating the critical, insightful interrogative qualities for thinking about practice and professional and institutional norms, chaplains should think more concertedly about the sorts of theologies and theological activity in which they want to engage. If theology is seen as poetic and creative, there should not really be a problem about seeing theology as valuable enacted performance. And this makes much sense in the context of chaplaincy practice which generally values hearing stories, helping to make sense of narratives and aiding people in creating their lives in all their material and non-material dimensions. So my challenge is, Throw off your assumptions about theologies and engage with them more creatively – you have nothing to lose but your chains!

One kind of public theological performance that might make a lot of sense and carry a great deal of credibility is that of the enacted parable (Brown et al., 2012). Enacted parables are to be found in the NT where Jesus enacts his poetic and creative teaching in practice, eg, by healing people thus making visible the defeat of evil. In enacted parables images and metaphors become realities in the material world – words and convictions are enfleshed in actions and institutions. The growth of the hospice movement, the foundation of the Samaritans, the development of schools for everyone, and many other movements, are all examples of at least in part enacted poetic, creative theologies which were uniquely fuelled by religious convictions and insights. These were then recognised to have value by those outwith formal religious communities. This kind of loosely 'poetic' creative theological endeavor is necessary and acceptable now as much as ever. It can lead to important, even prophetic social innovations that benefit all of human kind.

Perhaps then the main challenge to chaplains is to help to think of theologically-informed and inspired parabolic actions that they might facilitate so that theology really helps

rather than hinders in the messy complexity of modern professionally-dominated organisations. Imagination is called for here (Brueggemann 2001; Nussbaum 1997, 2012; Pattison 2007, 261-89; Robinson 2010). Part of that imagination should be informed by questions, insights, images and traditions emerging from the lived community of faith and action down the centuries.

What is not needed is simply abstracted propositional rationalism but rather what Graham (2013) calls 'the apologetics of presence'. Christians and members of other religious traditions are called to give a public, outward-facing, intelligible account of the truth that is in them and of their motivations. If they fail to provide this, then they deprive public institutions and society of their insights, strengths and values as well as failing to nurture the sources of their own vocation and religious performance.

This revised apologetic stance does not seek to convert society to theological norms and ideas. It is rather a standing alongside individuals and institutions to nurture citizenship and human flourishing. In Christian terms, it is seeking the good of the whole city.

To be credible, such an apologetic stance must be enacted in practice in solidarity with collaborative attempts to achieve common moral objectives in public, non-religiously dominated places, recognizing and valuing difference, diversity and different voices. It must seek and promote justice for the non-person and help to witness to hope for the godless and God-forsaken, prophetically speaking the truth to power when power would rather not acknowledge the implications of what it is and does.

Thus understood, theology is a rooted, indispensable pragmatic discourse of vocation and religious practice, not an optional theoretical abstraction that can be marginalized or ignored. It is a source of nurture, challenge and insight, enriching faith members and the communities and contexts in which they work by stimulating new and critical performances springing from, but not confined to, religious community, motives and practices. This kind of theological endeavor potentially helps to make the world a larger,

more caring place. Its enactment is less likely to be in pronouncements than in enacted parables of care and witness.

Chaplains are in an ideal position to embrace and develop exactly this kind of creative endeavor, as they already often do. If it were done more openly, articulately and self-consciously this might increase the chance that it might occur more often and with more intentionality, learning and pleasure for all concerned.

Within the many very positive narratives shared by both religious and non-religious people about the value of chaplaincy, there is, then, scope to become more self-consciously religiously rooted and theological for the good of organisations and fellow citizens as well as for that of the professional chaplains. This does not mean being narrow, obscurantist, backward looking or prescriptive. In the spacious room of theology, there is capacity for exploring many, very different kinds of public apologetic presence and performance in multifarious media and forms.

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