

Let's Do Theology

Resources for Contextual Theology

Completely revised and updated new edition

Laurie Green

Introduction

The first edition of *Let's Do Theology* was written in 1989 and, much to my surprise, twenty years later it is still being read and used by Christians around the world who are intent on using the wonderful gift of theology as a tool for liberation and transformation. But as I pick up that first edition and re-read it today it seems so lacking in many ways and I have therefore been grateful to Andrew Walby at Continuum, its present publisher, for allowing me this opportunity to re-write the text substantially and introduce into the book a considerable amount of new material.

Let's Do Theology began its life after twenty years of ordained ministry in the British industrial city of Birmingham. Building on my experience of studying theology in London and New York and my abiding interest in adult education since working for an educational psychologist in a mental hospital, I began to formulate a method of doing theology which kept context very much in mind. I honed this methodology amongst the laity of my working-class parishes and later with theological students when, for seven years, I had the honour of training them for ordained ministry. The methodology had already resulted in an earlier book, *Power to the Powerless: Theology Brought to Life*,¹ which was my account of how our small group of inner-city Christians had come to make for themselves a theology which was vital and relevant to their urban experience. My Brazilian contacts assured me that they felt that the book described an authentically British example of what they were calling in Latin America, Basic Ecclesial Communities, for the group's theology was reflective and yet active, committed and yet thoughtful, questioning and yet substantial. For me, that book raised some basic questions that were demanding an answer. What is the nature of theology? What is actually going on when we do it? Why has theology become the preserve of specialists? Why can it sometimes appear so distant from the worship and devotional life of the Church? *Let's Do Theology* was in part my attempt to answer those questions.

At that time there was also an impenetrable reluctance on the part of academic theologians to mix it with ordinary Christians, and that had been giving theology a name for being remote, erudite and book-bound. It was assumed that theology was rightly the preserve of white, western, male academics and any theology produced by women, black, Asian or working class Christians was looked upon as an interesting oddity. How far we have travelled in just a few decades!

The first chapter of the first edition of this book was therefore arguing into a context of bookish theology that seems so different from where we now are. The Asian theological voice is being heard at last as never before in the West, African and African American experiences are all generating new theological insights, and feminist theology is now considered by most thinkers as crucial and mainstream. Liberation Theology, so fundamental to the first edition of this book, has helped us on our way to the deeper insights of the new Postcolonial Theology, and we no longer have to fight against those who portray theology as a corpus of revealed information – most know that theology is an activity rather than a substance, even if some theological teachers still find it hard to get their heads round that. It has therefore been a great delight to rework this text substantially, with all these developments in mind, and I have taken opportunity to introduce some of the insights and newly-developed methodologies into the body of the book. In this I have been substantially helped by the opportunities I have had to travel to other continents and to survey the scene for myself. I have been invited to run seminars on theology in the United States, Brazil, in India and Europe, and in the process I have been introduced to new thinking and have been in awe of the work being done as the practical outcome of doing theology contextually.

Since publishing *Let's Do Theology* twenty years ago, many others have now published their thoughts about how theology should be practised and I have introduced a brand new chapter into this edition which surveys the new scene, carefully describing and critiquing the new contributions, and revising my own model in accordance with the best of their insights. I have been surprised, nevertheless, to see how rarely new writers have substantially deviated from the model and style of theology I proposed all those years ago, and perhaps that is why the first edition of *Let's Do Theology* ran to so many reprints and remained in the catalogue for twenty years, despite its many obvious deficiencies.

But there remains a long and challenging journey ahead and this is why this second edition of the book, which is so thoroughly reworked and updated, is important to me and I hope will be welcomed by its readers.

The first challenge which this book seeks to address is the fact that the term 'contextual theology' is still being thought of by some to mean that theology should be understood to be a body of crystallised truth which can then be 'applied' to various contexts as required. I have seen many a seminary or college syllabus offer courses in 'contextual theology' which merely teach students the best ways of introducing old wine into new wineskins, rather than how to look in the new wineskins – the new situations – and find exciting new theological insights already there. Theology from the roots up, which actually derives from the context in which it is set and incarnated, and which is discovered and mined out by those already experiencing the full subtleties of that context, is the stuff of the model I propose. And it is because this theology is so imbedded in the culture and fibre of the locality, that it resonates there with the felt experiences of the place, the time and the people, and leads them to new awareness and to new exciting possibilities. When we look to the life of Jesus himself, we see there precisely this incarnational model of deep engagement and so we can have every faith that we will find transformative theology if we do our theology in this same way. It will uncover local truths that speak of eternity. As I am fond of saying, 'Act locally, think universally!'

This leads me to the second challenge which this book seeks to address, for I do believe that any theology worthy of the name must be transformative theology. Good Christian theology is able to change us and change situations. The style of theology which this book proposes is designed to integrate action and reflection, and yet all too often theological reflection alone is offered as the full content of theology. I believe theology to be a spiritual exercise through which we are brought to awareness through the process of reflection, but then the theological process continues by challenging us to repentance and empowers us by the Holy Spirit for our own transformation, the transformation of other individuals involved, and the transformation of the related societal structures. Good theological reflection should raise awareness but if the theological process ends with reflection, then it is only doing half of what transformative theology is intended to do. In this book I make a clear distinction between ‘theological reflection’, which is largely a cognitive exercise, and ‘doing theology’, which involves the whole of our being. When we consider that central tenet of the Christian faith, the Incarnation, we are reminded that to be fully human, as in Jesus Christ, we must, like him, be an integrated unity of body and spirit. So it is that our contextual incarnational theology must likewise model an inextricable unity of action and reflection. It is theology which seeks to serve humanity holistically through theological reflection and responsive transformative action. Theology is a much more powerful and transformative instrument than many give it credit for and this book sets out to explore the extent of its possibilities.

Third, although we’ve come a long way in twenty years, in the UK theology has not yet been sufficiently democratised. It does not yet fully belong to the people, the whole ‘laity’ of God. If we ask where we see theology presently being done, our answer will almost certainly be – theology is being done in the universities among academics, in the seminaries and colleges among ministers and ordinands, and in those courses designed for laity who will be moving into specialist, accredited lay ministries within the institution. But I dream of the day when we will see women and men doing theology in order to decide each and every church policy; see it being done by young Christians as they plan drug addiction or outreach programmes; see theology driving our budget planning, our Vision setting, and the actions of every Christian group and organisation. We see the first exciting glimmers of this in our churches but we still have so far to go. As it is, most of the crucial elements of our Christian corporate life are decided on the basis of pragmatic expediency or the latest bright idea. When a way forward is offered which is clearly and overtly based in theological analysis and reflection, it is welcomed with open arms as strikingly unusual and refreshingly faithful. This book seeks to offer a way of doing theology which can become second nature to every Christian.

I believe that the reason for such a dearth of everyday theology among Christian people is that we are still not quite sure how to do it, and we still feel that theology is for others who have special skills who will then, after they have done it for us, feed us with their resultant insights. Even the clergy are not exempt from this reluctance to do theology for themselves. I recently attended a seminar for clergy who were within three years of retirement age. Most had been ordained all their adult lives and so we expected that the session entitled ‘theological reflection’ would open up all sorts of fascinating insights into the theology of the aging process, physical diminishment, transition, loss and recreation. Instead, these experienced clergy simply did not know what to do or where to begin. It became clear that their ministerial formation had

occurred almost forty years ago when it was not expected even for clergy to make the connections between the theology they read and the realities they faced. It was therefore doubly difficult for them now to make the faith connections with the reality of the retirement which was looming up before them. Doing theology, making the transforming connections between our real life issues and the fundamentals of our Christian heritage, is not something that the older generation of church leaders were trained to do naturally and easily and it is only through their own later determination that any have made that transition to a more dynamic use of theology. My hope and prayer is that this book and this new edition of it, will continue to help that transition for those already in ordained or lay ministry and that it will be of substantial service too for those who are just starting out on this wonderful adventure of 'doing theology'.

So, although theology has come so very far since the first edition of *Let's Do Theology* was published some twenty years ago, many challenges still remain. I hope therefore that this new edition, so substantially revised and enlarged, will continue to help make the doing of contextual theology an essential and natural instrument in the tool bag of every Christian, ordained or lay. It will always be a work in progress and I hope that readers will take the ideas in this book and develop them further as their own situation demands. I will always be pleased to hear how their group experiences have progressed and where improvements can be built into the ideas developed here.

Countless people have helped me to write this book and some will never know how much they have influenced it. Many have been group participants, some have asked of me really penetrating questions at conferences, so that I have been made to go home and think again. Some have been close associates and friends. Special thanks must go to the Revd Michael Allen and Joanna Cox for their helpful critique of the old edition, and to Becki Green, and the Revds Chris Mann and Frances Drake, for their invaluable I.T. skills. Thanks, as ever, are due to my work colleagues and my family for their encouragement and practical support. But I want to register my especial thanks to the Revd Dr John Vincent, the founder of the Urban Theology Unit, who has, through many years, been a source of inspiration for those of us here in the UK who have sought to do theology with contextual integrity.

Laurie Green

www.lauriegreen.org

July 2009

¹ Green, L. (1987), *Power to the Powerless: Theology Brought to Life*. Basingstoke: Marshall Pickering.

"Let's Do Theology" is an intensely practical book drawing examples from parish life and educational experience in the UK and overseas. It will describe how to strike the balance between unthinking but faithful action and careful theological reflection. The book offers a proven method for contextual theology, with full analysis and radical critique. It enables ordinary women and men to take part in the theological enterprise (democratizing theology).