Introduction

The origins of this essay lie in the struggle to write the sequel to *Cities of God* (Routledge, 2001), a book concerned more closely with examining Christian social practice in the context of the contemporary city; a book attempting to rethink Christian social ethics in an age characterised by radical pluralism, strong public narratives, global economic interests, cyber-realities and post-secularism. In order to clarify how Christian practices relate to (or are marginalised by) what is commonly held to be true or possible,[1] I increasingly recognised that it was necessary to provide a model for how cultures change. I needed to have some understanding of how discourses of truth become credible;[2] how such discourses and their accreditation are produced and transform or fail to transform their cultural milieu. The question I am trying to sketch an answer for is: what makes a belief believable?

I recognise this is a question at the heart of several continental projects – Michel de Certeau's, Michel Foucault's and Pierre Bourdieu's, to name a few. I will in part be drawing upon their work for my answer. But it is necessary to recognise in their work, as in the social sciences more generally, that the framework within which their thinking is done is a secular one. In some respects it is a framework not neutral to the discourse of theology, but antithetical. For each of these continental projects stands within a tradition of critique that has been handed down to the social scientists by Kant, Marx and Nietzsche. And as Marx understood in his 1843/4 essay 'Towards a Critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*', the central

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[1] One might call this 'public opinion', rather than public truth. See Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into the Category of Bourgeois Society*, tr. Thomas Burger (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989), pp. 236–50.

[2] This evidently differs from accounts of truth as adequation, insofar as it emphasises the roles of interpretation, rhetoric and power in the production and dissemination of knowledge, and their inseparability from what Foucault termed 'governmentality'.

object of such critique is religion.[3] The resources that are theology's own –
liturgies, sacred texts, creedal statements, Church council documents – are
not analytical tools. They are not fashioned for theology's engagement with
its contextualising cultures and only partially fashioned to facilitate theol-
ogy's own self-reflection.[4] Theology needs to borrow, then, tools honed in
the social and human sciences, in order to understand the processes of
enculturation and accreditation that situate and govern any theologically
orientated project. The analysis issues from a Christian question; a ques-
tion fundamental to theological notions such as mission, apologetics, the
divine telos of being human, doctrines of time, history, *parousia*, eschatol-
ogy and ecclesiology: how do we read the signs of the times? So the critical
question about what makes a belief believable becomes more specific: in
understanding the operation of cultural forces in the production of public
truth, within any given social context, how do the discursive practices of
Christianity fare, and why do they fare in that way rather than in any other
way? Only by demonstrating how this question might be answered can an
account be given of the relationship between Christian living (and talking)
and the implicit values of public consciousness. Only by being able to give
an account of this relationship can a space be cleared for rethinking the
gospel's specific transformative practices of hope in the new urban land-
scape. And so theology has to engage with social, political and cultural
theory, cultural anthropology, philosophy, hermeneutics, contextual

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[3] '[T]he criticism of religion is the prerequisite of all criticism.' *Karl Marx: Early Writings*, trs.
Rodney Livingstone and Gregor Benton (London: Pelican Books, 1975), pp. 243–57. The goal of
such critique, whether it is voiced in Kant's *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* or Nietzsche's
Genealogy of Morals, is freedom from constraining dogmatisms, priestcraft and superstitions. It is
important to recognise for the operation of such critique that these constraining dogmatisms are
what Kant called 'self-incurred tutelage – chiefly in matters of religion' ('What is Enlightenment?').
The 'ecclesiastical despotism' ('What is Enlightenment?') that requires critique is man-made and
man-imposed. Foucault, in an essay responding to Kant's, entitled also 'What is Enlightenment?',
defines critique as 'a historical investigation into the events that have led us to constitute ourselves
and to recognise ourselves as subjects of what we are doing, thinking, saying . . . seeking to give a
new impetus, as far and as wide as possible, to the undefined work of freedom' (tr. Catherine Porter
in Paul Rabinow (ed.), *The Foucault Reader* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1991), p. 46). He is
following Kant, Marx and Nietzsche here. Religion is an historically constitutive event, an event in
the past (though its after-effects remain).

[4] It might be objected that the Scriptures have been used to pass judgements on wider cultural issues –
for example the use of Romans chapter   1 in the judgement of homosexual behaviour. But 'the
passing of judgement' is not an analysis. It is a ruling. And the ruling can only gain credence and
conviction among those who agree it is a ruling they wish to be constrained by. Furthermore, as the
debates by theologians on the issue of human sexuality have shown, to employ a first-century text as
a rule-book for twenty-first-century living begs more questions than it resolves – and the begging of
questions requires that there be analysis and demonstrates that of themselves the Scriptures cannot
provide such analysis.

accounts of epistemology, social semiotics and performative notions of gendered subjectivity (among a few of the contemporary 'sciences') – while remaining theological.

The burden of this essay is a description of that engagement. It is an engagement that is only made possible where the cultural conditions have allowed new objects for critique to emerge. As I said, the object of early critique was religion and the effect of that critique was to discredit religion and privatise its sentiments and practices. While such cultural conditions remained theology could not engage in a cultural hermeneutics. Where rapprochements were made in the past they either radically disengaged theology from its cultural context (Catholic antimodernism; conservative Protestantism) or said they were the same thing (Protestant liberalism). But a new public visibility for religion has led to its deprivatisation and calls for rethinking theories of secularism.[5]

Religion that was once the object of critique is now presented with an object for its own critique – the secular logics of Western global capitalism. Theology is in a new place, with questions to ask, and must attempt to fashion methods for analysing and answering the questions about where we stand.

In *Cities of God*, after considerable indecision, I eventually situated its theologically driven methodology in the opening chapter. It could have come at the end or even in an appendix since it articulated a level of thinking that emerged only after all the analyses composing the other chapters were in place. It was a metadiscourse, in all the complex senses of that Greek prefix. It was not the theory that subsequently would be demonstrated. No idealist intention lay behind posting it at the beginning. In fact, the argument of that book rejected the dichotomy of theory and practice, idealism and materialism, in the name of incarnational theology, while recognising the need to make some specific observations at a meta-level of generalisation heavily dependent upon various forms of social and cultural theory. The methodology was reflexively understood *through* and *after* the specific analyses. However, I finally opened the book with these observations on heuristic grounds: I hoped it would enable the readers to understand the approach I was taking to theology's relationship to the new

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[5] See here the significant work of Robert Wuthnow, *After Heaven: Spirituality in America Since the 1950s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Jose Casanova, *Public Religions and the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); and Peter L. Berger (ed.), *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1999).

urban environment. In trying, in the sequel to *Cities of God*, to identify the place where a more methodological and reflective section should come, I decided against opening the volume with a meta-account of the processes whereby any culture comes to believe certain things and reject others. I considered, once more, moving the section to the middle of the book – as an interlude – or placing it in an appendix. But, as this account grew and became more detailed in its attempt to become as comprehensive as possible (an impossible task to execute), it seemed best to separate it altogether from the sequel, establishing it as an independent, reflective essay on what is the focus of my own theological project: the negotiation between Christian living and thinking and the contemporary world.

The essay is divided, for clarity, into three sections; each section attempts to answer one question. The first section attempts to answer the question, from where does the theologian speak? And it attempts to do this by reading with and against Karl Barth's rejection of apologetics and demand for a purely theological discourse. The second section attempts to answer a wider question opened by the conclusions that follow from the examination of Karl Barth's work. That is, what are the processes by which cultures and, thereby, the public perceptions of reality change? I choose to emphasise cultures rather than societies for I am uncertain how we would define a 'society' today that would not also be a definition of a 'culture'. The neo-tribal understanding of societies (in Bauman and Maffesoli) and the description of the imaginary nature of society (in Anderson and Castoriadis), both tend towards the conflation of society and culture. I wish to argue for and retain a strong notion of the 'social' as the sphere of human interaction and affiliation – I want to resist the apocalyptic fantasies of the posthuman as the cyborg – but reflections on the 'social' are only mediated through the cultural. So my question is how cultures change, while recognising that such changes affect understandings of the social. To answer this question I draw upon a number of leading critical thinkers from de Certeau and Bourdieu, to Adorno, Taylor and Bernstein, to the work by a number of feminist philosophers on standpoint epistemology and Žižek's brilliant (though sometimes exasperating) explorations of the cultural imaginary. While, inevitably, the discussion of subjectivity, agency, intentionality, praxis and hermeneutics here is abstract, I attempt to anchor some of the thinking with respect to aspects of my own standpoint within the Christian tradition. But the main negotiation between the nature of theological discourse (the focus for section 1) and the processes of cultural transformation and transmission (the focus for section 2) takes

place in part three. For in section 3, on the basis of the two previous examinations, I attempt to answer the question of the relationship between Christian discursive practices and the production and transformation of public truth or shared knowledge. The answer to this question, it seems to me, will provide a new way of looking at theological discourse and therefore open up questions concerning theological apologetics and mission.

But there are several words, already employed in this introduction, that are not introductory and need some elucidation before we can proceed with the analyses and the argument of this essay. Specifically, what do I mean by culture, discourse/discursivity and practice? These are slippery and much contested terms. Most of the other terms will be discussed in what follows, but these are key terms that we need some grasp of before we can begin. (And they are often the subject of questions raised by those who have patiently listened to the working papers I have given on the way to writing this text.)

The most difficult of the terms, because historically it is the richest, is 'culture'. The critical theorists I am writing both with and against use the word in different ways. For example, Pierre Bourdieu and Theodore Adorno have a 'high' understanding of culture that associates it with social hierarchies and involves the production and appreciation of 'artistic' goods: painting, music, literature. Although neither would hold to a divorce between the social and the cultural, both would maintain the importance of a distinction between them in order to examine their structural relations to class and power. On the other hand, Michel de Certeau, Michel Foucault, Stephen Greenblatt, Clifford Geertz and James Clifford understand culture much more loosely in terms of certain semiotic systems that produce shared knowledges and values among groups of people, constituting their beliefs about the nature of reality. For each of these theorists, in different ways, the social is profoundly encultured. Neither can be rendered too distinct from the other, for each cultural grouping or system not only comprises a social body, but holds beliefs about the nature of what the social is or should be. I am employing the word 'culture' in this second way, as a symbolic world-view, embedded, reproduced and modified through specific social practices.

This understanding of culture has the advantage of being able to see multiple notions of the social being negotiated continually within and between various cultures that are simultaneously in operation and production. The motility of cultures and the exchanges within and between them are important to the construal of transformation that I wish to argue for; the fundamental syncretism that I view as bearing the projects of hope.

Cultures are polyphonic, hybrid, and fragmentary, always being composed and recomposed. They are sites of displacement and newly fashioned affiliation. They are dialogic entities, in the way Mikhail Bakhtin understands 'dialogic'. They are not monolithic and homogenous, though some cultures and views of the social are often more officially legitimated than others. Subject positions can be viewed not as belonging or aspiring to belong to a cultured, usually bourgeois, elite, but as belonging to several groupings and so moving across various cultures, each organising and practising levels of meaning and value, establishing goals and systems of belief.

The danger of treating culture in terms of semiotics, as Bourdieu has pointed out, is the pantextualism that results. That is, that everything is viewed in terms of a text and the circulations of signs composing these texts. This form of analysis can diminish the importance of agents and institutions; underestimating, on the one hand, the freedom to invert, divert and pervert the accepted while, on the other, underestimating the cultural domination and shaping effected by sanctioned social institutions and their power-bases: schools, courts of law, medical practices, churches, etc. We will have to treat this criticism, for cultural hermeneutics as a theological task cannot renounce agency or institutionalism – theologians speak from somewhere (as do social scientists, though some of them, even the most self-reflexive, forget that).

The second word is 'discourse' and the adverbial/adjectival form 'discursive'. Discourse is an act of communication, but usually refers to a spoken or a written act. Given the orientation of this essay towards cultures as semiotic systems, discourse refers not only to spoken and written acts by subjects but to other forms of composed communication – music, painting, architecture, liturgy, gesture, dance, in fact any social action. Both Charles Taylor and Paul Ricoeur speak of the text or text-analogue as the subject of hermeneutics, and I would speak of discourse in this sense: that expressive act that intends or means and is therefore immediately caught up in the receptive processes of translation and interpretation. Discourse as *expressive act* becomes inseparable from practices, and practices from hermeneutics.

The third word, 'practice', must be understood in relation to 'poetics', *poiesis* and praxis. 'Poetics' is the name given to Aristotle's text on 'poetry in itself and its various kinds'. The purpose of 'poetics', for Aristotle, was to examine poetry's 'essence and its several species and the way in which plots must be constructed if the poem is to be a success; and also with the number and character of the constituent parts of a poem'. He added, rather

more vaguely, that 'poetics' would examine 'all other matters proper to this inquiry'.[6] But when he came to down to the specificities of epic poetry, tragedy, comedy, dithyrambic poetry and the music of the flute and the lyre, he located what to him is the general object of his enquiry: 'modes of imitation'.[7] 'Poetics' then can be understood as an enquiry into modes of creative action, practices of production (for Aristotle literary and/or musical production). It is an enquiry into the general principles of their structure or the distinctive features of their composition. The word became fashionable more recently with structuralist approaches to literature where structural linguistics referred to the textual organisation of signs – among which would be the language's grammar, use of synonyms and antonyms, employment of narrative temporalities, genre, etc.

Poetics, then, is the organisation of the fashioning of the text. We can, I will demonstrate, examine the poetics of an action, particularly the cultural poetics, in order to see how certain forms of action transform or fashion. *Poiesis* names the fashioning itself. The Greek word means 'making' as in 'creating' and relates directly to the verb *poieo*, to produce, perform, execute, compose or, more generally, be active. Put in structuralist terms, 'poetics' is a synchronic, ahistorical explanatory map, while *poiesis* is a diachronic, historical operation concerned with creative action. As such, *poiesis* would constitute one aspect of a theory of action – cultural action – and in this way it is associated with praxis, from the Greek verb *prasso* meaning to act, manage, do or accomplish. For Aristotle there appears to have been a distinction between a specific form of making or production (*poiesis*) and the more general notion of doing and being involved in an activity (*praxis* or *pragma*). *Praxis* would relate to ethics and politics, for example.[8] I am wishing to view *poiesis* in a complex sense that would not over-distinguish aesthetic production from political and ethical activity. It is social behaviour more generally and the practices of everyday life. Furthermore, in English, Aristotle's term came to be translated in the Renaissance period as 'poesy' and with this translation – as Sir Philip Sydney's *An Apology for Poetry: or Defence of Poesy* (1581) makes evident – a new characteristic of *poiesis* was brought to the fore that will be significant

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[6] *Poetics*, trs W. Hamilton Fyfe and W. Rhys Roberts (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991), 1447a.

[7] Ibid.

[8] For a brief but useful introduction to the notion of 'praxis' see Richard J. Bernstein, *Praxis and Action* (London: Duckworth, 1972), pp. ix–xiii. For a more advanced meditation see Giorgio Agamben's excellent essay, 'Poiesis and Praxis', in *The Man Without Content*, tr. Georgio Albert (Stanford: University of Stanford Press, 1999), pp. 68–93.

for this investigation. 'Poesy' named the act of creating anew.[9] That is, given that according to Christianity the world was fallen – and Sydney, in particular, as a Protestant believed that – then what an act of poesy did was to refashion the world in a way that reorientated it to the paradise that was lost. Poesy did not simply mirror nature; it could recreate it.[10] This will become important in what I wish to suggest about Christian activity in the world and cultural ethics in the final section of this book. For now, let it stand that *poiesis* differs from social behaviour more generally, with respect to its power to create anew, to transform; it announces a production not a mindless reproduction.

By practice, then, I am naming the way in which any act of meaning or communication operates within, and is invoked by, certain sets of social and cultural forces. Any act is an embedded act that will be received and interpreted differently by the various other actants within that context. Some of these actants may be more powerful than others (and we will have to define the basis of that power later), but any act of meaning has to find its place (or disappear as irrelevant) within the wider productions of public truth. Attention to practice is then an attention to cultural *poiesis* – an attention to those other discourses that give rise to the need to act and that subsequently determine that action's orientation, position, meaning and possible value. Cultural *poiesis* involves also, necessarily, an attention to cultural politics, for as an operation it is empowered and works with respect to other power relations. The grid of forces within which it operates either lends or withdraws credibility from any creative act. By speaking in terms of actants and practices I am wishing to introduce faces and an historical materialism into cultural *poiesis*. It is not a matter of the circulation of anonymous cultural forces but of intentional acts done from specific subject positions with respect to defined institutions.

Finally, let me emphasise what I am and what I am not trying to do here. I am *not* attempting to discover a formula for the successful promotion of the Christian faith in contemporary culture. In fact, 'Christian theology' in this text could be replaced with any other cultural practice. Like Clifford Geertz's interpretative anthropology, this study is not an attempt to predict or engineer a future, but rather it seeks to diagnose a certain condition that embedded discourses take in any

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[9] It is closer to what Robert Miner distinguishes as 'creation' rather than 'crafting'. See his theological account of such creativity, *Truth in the Making: Creative Knowledge in Theology and Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2004).

[10] *An Apology for Poetry*, ed. Geoffrey Sheperd (London: Thomas Nelson, 1965), p. 101.

culture.[11] Sandra Harding, a feminist epistemologist whose work I will be examining in section 2 of this essay, writes concerning feminist stand-point theory that defenders of standpoint believe 'that social progress is desirable and possible and that improved theories about ourselves and the world around us will contribute to that progress . . . They debate what those theories should say . . . and who should get to define what counts as social progress.'[12] What I *am* pursuing and examining is the space for theological discourse and a Christian standpoint to be involved in such debates. I am investigating, from a theological perspective, how religious faith negotiates a position with respect to the other fields of symbolic production (to employ a metaphor from Bourdieu). In brief, I am seeking to elucidate the bases upon which one can conduct an examination of the social representation of Christian theology, and open a space for engaging with this social representation theologically. What is at issue, I believe, is the question of apologetics.

Why does the possibility of Christian apologetics matter? Any attempt to answer this question requires considering the nature and significance of theological discourse, and that consideration in turn requires thinking through the context in which such discourse arises. For whom is theology written and for what purpose? Or, who does the theologian address and what is the task undertaken in the address? Christian apologetics situates the theological task with respect to the gospel of salvation in Christ freely offered to the world; a world not divorced from Christ but whose meaning is only known with respect to Christ as the one through whom all things were made and have their being. The 'world' is not separated as nature from grace; secularity does not ontologically secure the world as independent of God. As such, apologetics orientates theological discourse towards a specific cultural and historical negotiation concerning public truth. Its task is evangelical and doxological. Upon the basis of apologetics rests, then, the Christian mission not only to disseminate the good news, but to bring about cultural and historical transformations concomitant with the coming of the Kingdom of God. This is why the possibility for Christian apologetics matters – for its task makes manifest the polity of the Christian gospel, its moral, social and political orders. Its task is Christological insofar as it is the continuation of, and participation in, the redemptive work of Christ. Without the orientation of Christian apologetics towards

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[11] See 'Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture' in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1973), p. 29.
[12] *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge?* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1991), p. 186.

the world, the theological task is merely an exercise in navel-gazing. And while reflexivity has necessarily to be intrinsic to theological work – for the theologian attempts to speak in the name of Christ, and that is a presumption the theologian must continually be scandalised by – that reflexivity cannot be the telos of the theological work.

The possibility for a Christian apologetics then is fundamental to the theological task. Apologetics has a theological warrant for the work it undertakes in the operation of the Word in the salvation of the world. But it has no unmediated access to that Word such that it can be wielded like a weapon or used like a tool. The basis upon which apologetics engages the Word with the world requires an understanding of both the character of that Word and the character of the world. This dual understanding involves an immersion in the words and works that bear witness to the Word and the words and works that characterise any particular cultural context. And here lies the risk, the dialectical risk that theology must run. On the one hand, in understanding the world theology comes to understand itself (what it has to say, what the *charism* is that it has been given to deliver). On the other, though the theologian is situated within the world, the revelation of Christ comes from that time and place 'before the foundations of the world' (John 17.5). The eternal makes provision for and maintains the temporal, challenging all that is fallen and misconceived. Being situated in the world at a particular time, in a particular cultural situation, the theologian takes up the theological task with the resources of the tradition and a mind-set formed in and through the words and works that constitute this *habitus*. The theologian can only understand the faith held and practised by the Christian Church, the theological task this enjoins and the people to whom this task is addressed through what is culturally and historically available. The theo-logic of theology itself, the faith that seeks understanding, is then constituted in a cultural negotiation between the revelation of Christ to the Church (rooted in the Scriptures, the sacraments and the tradition of their interpretation and application) and the 'signs of the times'. Both the danger and the possibility of apologetics lie in the degree of critical difference that can be maintained between the Christian *evangelium* and the ways of the world. But, and this remains fundamental, neither can be accessed without the other. The secular world is never confronted as such, without first being constructed as a homogenous cultural order from the standpoint of Christian difference; while the Christian difference is never defined as such without also being constructed as a homogeneous religious culture from the standpoint of the irreligious or de-divinised world-view.