



Incomplete Theology: Reflections on a Theology of Hospice Chaplaincy

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Living with incompleteness

The title of this paper would appear to indicate that the contents will offer a critique of a theology which is, of itself, incomplete. As a consequence, the expectation may be that an investigation of this incomplete theology will be offered, along with pointers and solutions which may take the reader towards an improvement of such theology. The hoped-for result, therefore, would be the creation of a theology which is complete in all its aspects, offering clarity of understanding to all facets of the human condition. If this is the expectation, then the reader will be disappointed. For I would wish to argue that not only is theology always, of necessity, incomplete, but that it is in this very understanding of incompleteness that one fully discovers the true nature of God and is enabled to respond completely to the embrace of this God.

Canon Roland Walls,¹ a lecturer when I was a divinity student in New College in the 1970s, once offered this remarkable insight into the way we might handle doctrine: 'We should take all the books on dogma and put them in a bin, put the lid firmly on the top and sit on top of that, so that these books on dogma never see the light of day again.' He went on to interpret this dramatic statement thus: 'Once we believe we have reached the truth, we stop learning. Once we feel we have captured God in our theology, we have killed our faith. Once we feel we understand God completely, we have lost God altogether.'

Years later my work as a hospice chaplain helps me fully understand this theological critique. The God whom I thought I knew I now know only a little part of. The God I felt I could define is now a God of mystery and wonder. The God whom I believed I could hold in

my dogma is a God who refuses to be trapped in my framework. A theology which I felt was moving towards completion now remains for ever incomplete, yet a revelation of God in that incomplete theology is more real than ever before.



God in the moment

Sally asked me if I would give her Communion before she went home from the hospice. She'd had a somewhat fractured relationship with the Church over the years, though she never told me why. What she did say was that she and her minister had had a long chat, and that both of them had agreed that there were things they needed to work on. Sally hadn't had Communion for years, and she confessed to me that it would still be difficult for her to have Communion in her own Church, at least at the moment, until things were 'sorted out a bit more'. So her request to have Communion in the hospice before she went home was clearly important to her, a bridge, she called it, to help her move on.

When we shared the sacrament together in the hospice Quiet Room on the morning of her discharge, she cried most of the time. In the midst of her sniffles and tears, she joined with me in most of the familiar words of the Communion, and held my hand very tightly when we exchanged the peace. When I said the blessing at the end of the service, 'The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with us all, now, and ever more. Amen.' Sally looked at me and whispered, 'Ever more? And I don't know how long I've got.' Sally went home that afternoon. I have never seen her nor have I had cause to be in contact with her since. Her life will not have survived to see the writing of her story.

I never knew what Sally's background was, what caused her hurt, what the nature was of her brokenness, or the journey of life and faith which brought her to that Communion. I never knew what Sally's future held, how her issues were resolved, where the journey of life and faith took her when the Communion was done. There was no preparation and no outcome. The Sacrament was enough. God's presence was in the moment. Here, therefore, was incomplete theology. Yet in the

celebration of that Communion incomplete theology was enough. God's grace needed neither preparation nor conclusion. It was fully known in the incomplete.

Twelve years of chaplaincy in the hospice has taught me that pastoral care, the healing of the spirit, helping people with end of life issues, will never be finished. In practical terms, a half-an-hour of deep and meaningful searching with a dying patient, where he or she is lucid and focused enough to talk about important things in life and death, may not end with a moment of revelation or clarity which can allow a caring chaplain or dying patient to know that 'the business has been finished' and death can be approached with peace and resolve. If good pastoral care is dependent on what happens next, on additional clarity, or clearer articulation, or a wise conclusion, or whatever, it is likely never to be achieved. The patient might have slipped into a coma, or even have died, before another opportunity could be grasped. Are we then to say that our theology determines that clear conclusions and blinding revelations are the only good outcomes? I think not. It is vital, therefore, to know God in that half-an-hour of deep spiritual companionship, and to believe that good has come from the incomplete.

In faith terms, the same thought process applies. Even in several periods of lucidity, in numerous lengthy explorations of the meaning of life and death, in regular sessions of wrestling with deep issues of faith with a patient facing their mortality or a grieving relative engaged in pre-bereavement work, can we ever expect to come to a neat and tidy conclusion? If faith is, as I believe it to be, a journey of exploration and growth, to arrive at 'the truth' is, as Roland Walls suggested, to stop learning and growing. God is in the travelling. Faith is in the stumbling articulation of our longings. Healing is in the incomplete.



Gospel truths

The only complete theology, therefore, is enshrined in the words of Christ on the cross, 'It is finished.' However, on *our* journey of life and faith, we can not and should not ever say, 'It is finished.' So we

live constantly with the incomplete, in the belief that God is there, that every moment is redeemed, that we are in God's hands on the journey and not only at the destination.

This is, I believe, anchored in Gospel teaching. There are those, for example, who interpret the encounter of Nicodemus with Jesus (John 3:1–21) as containing an injunction that being 'born again' is a once-and-for-all moment of conversion, a moment of revelation, the destination, if you like, of faith, and a necessary moment of encounter with Truth that is the essential door to the Kingdom of God. I have always preferred the interpretation that 'born again' is better translated 'born from above' and that the journey of faith is a series of necessary moments of revelation, each one turning you towards an encounter with God. Faith is a process, which, if you will, means being born again, and again, and again. Faith is a journey which is guided by a series of signposts, 'God moments', when we are, indeed, born again 'from above', and God is real and Christ's Way, Truth and Life becomes ours. The clarity at each signpost neither denies the uncertainties of the journey thus far, nor protects us from being lost at some time in the future. The new direction is enough. This was where Sally found herself in that hospice Communion. What came before and what might happen afterwards were irrelevant to that moment of clarity, insight and healing. It was a Eucharist in which the divine and the human truly intersected. It was a moment of faith which was complete of itself.

Let me return again to the Gospels, and look at two other encounters in Jesus' ministry. (There are many, of course, which could be illustrative of the points being explored in this paper, but, then again, one should always be allowed personal preference in these matters!)



The woman at Jacob's Well

Take first the encounter at Sychar, at Jacob's Well, between Jesus and an unnamed Samaritan woman (John 4:1–42). What began as a chance meeting and a request for water on a hot day, quickly moved into an exploration of meaning, purpose and fulfilment for a troubled soul.

(There are those who will wonder at how such a discussion could go so deep in such a short time-frame and who might be concerned, therefore, as to the veracity of such a story. But, in my work as a hospice chaplain, when someone's agenda has changed as they face the big issues of life and death, discussions can become very deep indeed in a very short space of time, if there is a necessary trust established and a willingness to seize the moment.)

Of necessity, there was an honesty of sharing in the background of that woman's life, and an articulation of where she was now and what her future circumstances might be. And in that profound exploration there was clarity, a moment of revelation, a signpost for the next stage of the journey. 'Come and see the man who has told me everything I have ever done,' she cried. 'It's all clear now,' she could have said. 'I have found a purpose. An unfulfilled life has come good.' 'Could he be the Messiah?' she mused. What happened next for this woman at Jacob's well? That is as unknown as my knowledge of what happened to Sally when she left the hospice. We know nothing of the next stage of the journey, of personal worth, of family reconciliations, of service to God, of the healing of memories, of the outworking of faith. So the encounter with Jesus, and an awareness of truth in that moment, has to be enough. For this Samaritan woman may have had no such encounter ever again.



The woman bent double

Now look, secondly, at the miracle as Luke describes it (Luke 13:10–17) of Jesus healing a crippled woman in the Temple on the Sabbath. I don't wish here to explore the subtle meaning of Jesus' interaction with the Temple authorities and their debate about breaking the law of the Sabbath. Nor do I wish to enter into an exploration of the nature and meaning of the healing miracles *per se*. And I would do well to leave aside the inference that the brokenness of the body is, as Luke suggests, about demon possession. I spend enough time reinterpreting bad theology such as this in my day-to-day work in the hospice to give me more than enough material for another paper! Let me give you an example. A colleague told me of a junior doctor who was treating

Joanna, a young Jewish woman, who had far-advanced cervical cancer. After undergoing debilitating and apparently unsuccessful chemotherapy, Joanna took the doctor into her confidence. She believed that her cancer was a punishment from God. She told of a brief affair some years before with an older, widowed neighbour, where sympathy in his loss had gone further than either of them expected. She told of a loveless marriage, yet how guilty she felt at betraying her husband. She cried tears of hopelessness, for she was being doubly punished, firstly with the cancer, and, secondly, as a woman who could never give herself to her husband again. God's vengeance was her illness and her shame. So, it would seem that bad theology is not confined to Christian teaching. Concepts of a vengeful God are clearly evidenced in the Jewish tradition too.

There is much territory here to be explored, but, as I say, that is for another time and for another person to take on. Instead, I want to draw a lesson from the physical healing of the woman herself that will take us in a more positive direction. For here was a woman who, for eighteen years, had been bent double – a congenital deformity of the spine, crippling osteoporosis, a childhood accident, we are not told. What we *are* given is a graphic picture of a woman doubled over in her infirmity. What kind of life could she have lived like that? What kind of limited view of the world was hers to know? What could she see of trees and stars, of smiling faces and Temple worship when her gaze could only take in people's grubby feet and worn sandals and a metre's arc of dusty ground?

The healing miracle was that she was enabled to stand up straight. The miracle of life and faith was that she could now see the world differently. Her perspective had been fundamentally altered. She could now relate to people differently, and the world would have a different understanding of who she now was. The moment of change and renewal was, most certainly, a moment of transformation, not just of the body, but also of the mind and the spirit, of perspective and personality. What was, on the surface, a physical healing, was also a beginning of wholeness, as a crippled woman had the opportunity to relate to herself, the people around her, the world she inhabited, and,

who knows, perhaps even her God in a new way. This was, therefore, and should now be seen us, a spiritual miracle and not just a physical one.

Do we know what happened next to this woman? Are we told how she made use of this new perspective? Do we know how her renewed personality developed? Do we have an ending for the story? No, indeed. We only have the beginning. And we have to believe that this beginning was enough. This was a point of departure, a new start, a born-again moment for a broken woman. This was a beginning pregnant with possibilities and amazing potential. In the incompleteness of the story of this woman's life, here was a God-moment which was complete of itself. Here, once again, was Sally with her Communion.



The pressure to evidence an outcome

The world of health-care is driven by procedures. Each procedure is underpinned by a protocol. Each protocol has a rationale and a standard-statement. Each standard has its audit cycle. Each audit tool has its process and its outcome. Each outcome informs best practice in carrying out the procedure. Nothing can be achieved, developed, delivered or improved unless there is evidence-based practice. Evidence is all. Outcome is god ...

In such a world, a theology which is incomplete, therefore, can be seen to be failure, and such failure can be a crippling burden for a chaplain, for example, to carry day by day. If, however, we seek value in the moment, find healing and wholeness in the immediate, then, for carer and cared-for alike, God is present, and that is more than sufficient as an outcome. (Spiritual care in the hospice context is defined as '... given in a one-to-one relationship, is completely person centred and makes no assumptions about personal conviction or life-orientation.'² Jesus, therefore, would appear to be the spiritual-care giver *par excellence!*)

Ted was a patient in our hospice, admitted for control of severely limiting symptoms of pain and nausea, but clearly with only a short

time to live. On admission, he asked to see the chaplain, and I was, therefore, involved with him right from the start. This profoundly Christian man knew he didn't have long to live, but, far from his faith sustaining him on the journey towards death, he was terrified of dying. Why? Because he was terrified of God.

The God whom he'd been taught to believe in was a God who needed commitment, responsiveness, contrition, confession, and much more from his faithful servant, and who would be vengeful towards those who did not match up. Ted knew he wasn't perfect. Though he went to church every Sunday, attended the Bible Study group and prayer-meeting, and carried out his Christian responsibilities with diligence, he never felt he was good enough. He always felt he was falling short.

Ted had lived with that throughout his life, always striving to be better, always throwing himself on the mercy of God, and beating himself up for his failures. And that was fine when he was well, when there was always the chance of moving closer to the ideal. But now that he was dying and time was running out, what then? What if he never made it? What if he was never going to be good enough? 'If God finds some un-repentant of sin,' he told me, 'he'll zap me when I die.' I talked with him about the grace of God. We unpacked the meaning of redemption, and much more besides. And all with a man who, weak and frail, was even yet prepared and able to wrestle with his fears. Ted's fears ran very deep. They all stemmed from a concept of a demanding and harsh God, a God who was never satisfied, who always needed more, and who, therefore, would vent his ultimate wrath on those who had failed.

Ted's faith and fears were, I believe, a product of bad teaching and inappropriate theology. His was a God who took a child's maths paper, saw that it had been marked at 98% and who immediately asked what had happened to the other 2%. His was a God who was never satisfied, who offered only conditional love, grace conditional on response, and a top-marks response at that. His was a vengeful God who was just waiting to zap him when he died.

This kind of theology served to reinforce Ted's perception of himself, and, in a faith context, justified his own lack of self-esteem. Specifically, his own inner turmoil and struggle for his own sense of worth, and the failure he felt in all of that, could be conveniently hung on the peg of God's retribution. Perhaps a clinical psychologist would have helped Ted more than a chaplain. Yet it was spiritual territory which was the landscape Ted inhabited in his dying, and not the psychological. And it was with the language of faith and belief we had to work in order to release Ted from his fears.

So we talked about a God who loves us as we are and for whom the moment of faith is enough. We talked about a redemptive Christ who had already won the victory over the grave, and who would embrace any lost child unconditionally. We talked about a Holy Spirit who was in the 'now' of life, and who would lift Ted up and keep him safe. For three days we spent time reinterpreting theology and the nature of God. Ted got there, just before he died, and let go of life with no fear. Ted was eternally safe. God is eternally good. Ted had been crippled with the demands, perceived or real, always to be a better Christian. The God of the immediate, and a faith in that God which was always complete of itself and which did not need any addition or embellishment, were foreign concepts to him. And it was, therefore, in the new territory of incomplete theology that Ted found peace in his dying.



An affirmation of uniqueness

I spent time with the family of a young woman, in her mid-thirties, who had just died. In the presence of the tender care of her mother, sister and best friend, there was a great deal of loving support in the midst of the pain and hopelessness of the loss. Through tears, the sister turned to me and asked the eternal question, 'Why?' Why so young? What sense is there? What purpose is there in this?

I have long since believed that the question 'Why?' in the face of suffering is not a question at all, even though it ends with a question-mark. It is fundamentally a cry of pain, and should be responded to

as such, not with reasons but reassurance, not with explanations but consolation. To be honest, I wasn't sure I should say anything at all. But, after a silence, I offered the words I'd heard in a workshop run by the Ecumenical Institute from Chicago in the 1970s. 'I don't know what you'll hold on to,' I said, 'but this might help. This young woman is unique in all the world. She is a child of the universe. And she has bent history.' What did I mean by that? Well, it was something about the mark that this unique and special woman had made by her being here – even in her brief life span – an indelible mark that neither time nor inadequate remembrances could erase. It was, the family told me later, a moment of healing for them, giving them a little of what they needed, a glimpse of something to make sense of when all was hopeless. And it may also have offered them a glimpse of a concept that their loved one had also died healed. Was the young woman a Christian? I don't think she had ever expressed any specific approach to faith. Were the family religious? Not that I could see. Was God in that moment? Absolutely! Would God make sense of what was incomplete? I certainly hope so, for the meaning of it all was way beyond me.



The broken contract

The inability or unwillingness of dying people to make sense of incomplete theology can be a crippling burden to carry and can be a major cause of 'a bad death'. In my book, *A Need For Living*³ I tell the story of Violet, a devoutly Christian woman who experienced the most anguished and tormented death. Like Joanna, she interpreted illness and the prospect of death as God's fault. But unlike Joanna and Ted, she felt she had done nothing to cause this visitation of suffering.

She had, as it were, made a contract with God. From her side, Violet had lived an exemplary life: regular attendance at church, leader of the prayer group, pastoral visitor, and much, much more. She would keep her side of the contract and God would keep her safe. She had done well, and, as she saw it, should experience no recrimination. But now that she was dying, it was God's fault. God was breaking his side of the bargain, and Violet did not understand why. It was arbitrary. It

was confusing. It was God doing the dirty. The chaplain, in this case, seeking to help Violet reinterpret the nature of God as he had done with Ted, was so clearly aligned with God as to be seen as his agent, and, therefore, tainted with God's side of the broken contract. There was no healing for Violet, and no peace of mind in her dying.

What did she believe? That God would keep her alive for ever? That she would never experience any suffering or pain? That life would be trouble-free? Surely not! And yet, that was what was fundamentally at the root of her torment, and, ultimately, her bad death. In some fashion at least everything had to be fine – complete, if you will – all of the time. She could not, and did not, find God in the incomplete, in the messy, confused, broken, mortal world and daily living which is our reality.

In my recent book, *New Journeys Now Begin*,⁴ considering the case of a member of the Plymouth Brethren who believed he had lost his faith because he was fearful of death, I conclude, 'Fear is not the antithesis of faith; the two walk hand in hand. Doubt and anger are not the opposites of belief; they are integral to it. Human emotions and not a diminution of a commitment to your God; they are part of what we are as God's people.' If Violet had grasped this truth, I suspect she might have had a more peaceful death.



Towards a conclusion

If Roland Walls was correct in suggesting that dogma kills our understanding of God, then we have no choice but to find God and know him in the incompleteness. And far from this being a theoretical exercise, worthy of debate and endless theological critiques, it is, I have found, an essentially pragmatic position. For it is true in the reality of people's lives, as they live with dying and find peace of mind and spiritual healing in the face of death. Simply put, if God is not in the incomplete, then God is nowhere. If we do not work with incomplete theology, we have no theology to work with at all.

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- ¹ See Ron Ferguson, *Mole Under the Fence: Conversations with Roland Walls* (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 2006).
- ² Tom Gordon and David Mitchell, “A competency model for the assessment and delivery of spiritual care,” *Palliative Medicine* 18 (2004): 646-651.
- ³ Tom Gordon, *A Need For Living* (Glasgow: Wild Goose Publications, 2001).
- ⁴ Tom Gordon, *New Journeys Now Begin* (Glasgow: Wild Goose Publications, 2006).