

## BIBLICAL AND SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY: THE BASIC ISSUES

The aim of this paper will be to set forth the basic issues which I believe should be explored if the relations between Catholic biblical and systematic theology are to be understood and to be made to contribute to a productive development in contemporary theology.

Because of the limited time for this discussion, and because the problem in its full dimensions has not yet been resolved (as far as I see now), I will confine myself to raising some of the basic issues involved rather than attempt a complete answer to this complicated question.

It hardly needs repeating once more that the term "biblical theology" is not an unequivocal expression. While the propriety of the term has been called into question by many today, rightly understood it does have validity in view of the considerable development in theological studies. Needless to say, it cannot mean for the Catholic theologian now what it meant in the theology of Lutheran pietism, namely a type of systematic theology that accords with the Bible, that "has biblical character and is drawn from the Bible" (Wrede), that was called "biblical" as the antithesis of Lutheran "scholastic theology." However far a particular Catholic theologian may have overemphasized the role of philosophy, the mainstream of Catholic theology has always claimed to rest on Scripture and to be using other disciplines in an ancillary way. Nor does it seem that the term should be confined to a purely descriptive biblical theology, a non-normative, objective study of biblical data which refrains from using faith as the insight for its investigations, a study which, consequently, belongs to the history of religions rather than to theology. Furthermore, while it is legitimate to speak of the theology of Paul or John or other theologies in the Bible, settling for such an answer does not appear to come to grips with the problem we suspect is really there. For then the question arises: is such a position any real advance over a descriptive biblical theology? And does it not leave unanswered the further and more pertinent question, is there

an inherent unity in these theologies? Are they mutually related by reason of a common message of faith?

By the term "biblical theology" I understand something more than any of the three senses already mentioned. As I shall use the term, it will mean a normative theology that studies biblical material from the viewpoint of the theologian rather than that of the historian. In other words, with the insight of faith it reflects on the message of salvation as it is found within the scriptural context and, as much as possible, expresses this in the concepts and terms of the Bible itself. (It will be simpler to think of "New Testament theology," since the term "Old Testament theology" has its own problems, as does a unified theology of the Bible itself.) While a precise definition or description of New Testament theology may not at present find general agreement, there is, and has been, a reflection on its common message, since we do, after all, have some idea of its meaning as a whole whether we articulate it or not. The track along which the New Testament theologian seeks a basic insight into the whole is that of God revealing himself in the risen Jesus, the Messiah to whom the Old Testament witnessed, through whom salvation is now definitively given to all men. Definition also involves the problem of structure. Here, at least, structure cannot mean a systematic arrangement by logical connections, as Lombard, for example, organized his theology according to *res* and *signa*, or as Aquinas organized his into a consideration of God as he reveals himself, and himself as source, goal, and cause through Christ of redeemed creation. Moreover, New Testament theology will involve more than merely setting forth themes and ideas; more precisely, it will mean a reflection in faith on the salvation through Christ within the developing context of the whole New Testament.

We inevitably look for a structure and principle of systematization in any unified area of knowledge, and we do so in biblical theology, too. The danger, however, is that we will secretly attempt to construct another systematic theology alongside what was actually the product of later Christian thought. One way of avoiding this temptation is to recall that theology is not a generic term under which can be found different specific kinds, e.g., biblical and systematic, but an analogical term. In other words, theology is the

systematic discipline that we commonly recognize as theology, a rational discourse about God as he reveals himself to man in salvation. Related to this logically structured discourse is the *source* from which it springs, the word of God. New Testament theology will be found here in the source, the message of salvation through Christ, set forth in its historical development within the context of the New Testament.

The historical point at which the problem of the relations between biblical and dogmatic theologians may be said to have arisen was the modern Catholic biblical renewal dating from the encyclical *Divino Aflante Spiritu*. This document, which has been justly called the *Magna Carta* of modern biblical studies, released the pent-up energies that were there in Catholic biblical scholars waiting for expression, and resulted in an outpouring of solid production such as has not been known in the previous history of the Church. It was inevitable that this sudden forward leap in the understanding of the text of the Bible should have occurred first of all among the experts in the field, the Scripture scholars themselves. However, it was also unfortunate that the new advances in biblical scholarship in the beginning seemed to influence practically not at all the dogmatic theologians, and more unfortunate still, that as the biblical scholars became more acquainted with and confident of their tools, the gap between the Scripture scholars and the dogmatic theologians grew to dangerous proportions. We were aware of this fact, though usually in private or oblique ways. Now this serious situation has been publicly expressed in the recent book *Dogmatic vs. Biblical Theology* and the issue is out in the open. Though the English title is a flashy and unfortunate rendering that does not translate the title or the spirit of the original German work, *Exegese und Dogmatik*, it does reveal a situation that has in fact existed and perhaps did inspire the actual writing of the book. Karl Rahner's frank and honest essay especially has brought the issue before everyone. The hidden feelings of mutual opposition have existed for some time now, as he pointed out,

. . . in conversations, lectures and conferences, and in clerical gossip . . . representatives of these two fields of work in Catholic theology regard each other with a certain distrust,

even exasperation. The dogmatic theologian seems at times to have the feeling that exegetes pay scant attention to dogmatics to which the theologian is bound, and which pronounce upon matters which are the subject of exegesis (in the widest sense of the term). Some exegetes, on the other hand, seem convinced that the theologians want to tie the Scripture scholars' hands in a way for which there is no objective justification, but simply because the theologians have not taken sufficient account of the progress Catholic exegesis has made in recent decades.<sup>1</sup>

However we may elaborate the difficulties, the fact is that we shall not get rid of the problem by pretending that it does not exist. As theologians we feel a sense of shock at the complete novelty of this situation in the history of Catholic theology. The Fathers of the Church and the classical theologians of the Middle Ages saw no opposition between their work as exegetes and their other theological work. Many of the Mediaevalists actually were exegetes before going on to the work of systematic theology, according to the university practice of the times. Later theologians gave a generous amount of space and attention to the refutation of *adversarii*, but the opponents were fellow theologians; it was generally taken for granted that there was a common basis of understanding in Scripture. Only recently has the communication between biblical scholars and systematic theologians been carried on in an atmosphere of uneasiness and wariness.

Let us consider now some points that may clarify the respective areas of biblical and systematic theology.

All faith in God and all revelation by God are understandable only if the human pole of the relationship is carefully respected. Man is essentially material and his existence and activity take place under material conditions. The avenues through which he becomes conscious of the world are material; and the world he becomes conscious of is the world that exists in matter. And any being that is non-material in its essential structure will be contacted in dependence on matter. These conditions of materiality are no less true of the human reaching out to God, whether God is known by human

<sup>1</sup> K. Rahner, S.J., "Exegesis and Dogmatic Theology," *Dogmatic vs. Biblical Theology* (Baltimore: Helicon, 1964), p. 31.

reason through the world of creation or in that special relationship of revelation and salvation. While the knowledge of God through the world of created existence is not the point under discussion now, it is instructive for the theologian to see in this knowledge the limitations imposed on a consciousness of God by the essential material structure of man. What man knows by the exercise of his natural intelligence is the material object or event, seen profoundly, suspended in being over the abyss of nothingness, an existence inexplicable by the thing or any similar thing, and which, therefore, points beyond itself in order to account for its own being at all.

The cognitive aspect of faith, too, is conditioned by the same materiality. Faith is not a knowledge of "God as he is in himself," as if such cognition could by-pass the world of matter to contact God in some direct manner. Faith contacts the material world of things and events, but its distinctive character lies in the fact that through it man becomes conscious of things not merely as objects in themselves but as signs of divine activity. God has made use of things, persons, events to signify his activity toward man. These signs of divine intent and power reveal God, though God himself remains hidden behind his signs. While they are signs of God, they are also signs *to man* who, by the aid of God recognizes in the event the activity of God, and expresses that recognition in human fashion. God, then, not only calls to man through the sign event, i.e., he reveals, but enables man to recognize and respond to that call in faith.

Two complementary features may be noted about this consciousness of God in faith. First, the divine revelation is conditioned by the finitude of the human situation (and not merely by the finiteness of human nature as such). In revelation divine intent assumes the *logos* or measure of human conditions, since the divine call is grasped *by man* and in a *human* fashion. Secondly, revelation has been made in the concrete to men in a community, not merely to men in general or to mankind as such. Historically, God's revelation achieved its full significance in the context of his chosen people. Conscious of being elected by God in covenant, Israel recognized in the events of its own history the on-going saving activity of God toward them. These events were not merely signs about divine salvific activity but

were themselves the saving actions of God, i.e., they did not merely signify to Israel *that* God was at work, but themselves *conveyed* his salvation.

But this is not all, because human activity in its full sense does not come to an end with internal recognition and response. Just as the human recognition of the meaning of the world of matter finds expression first inwardly and then in a communicable vehicle, so the saving activity of God recognized in and through the events of Israel's history found communicable expression in words. These at first took the form of popular tradition, later of the prophetic word in which the people recognized their elected role, and issued finally in the written word which God guaranteed to be the faithful expression of his saving action. In view of all this, the inspired Scripture, then, cannot be thought of as a new element introduced to record and to validate the dialogue between God and man. Correctly seen, it is an essential element, one further step in the very on-going revelation of God and response of man.

The significance of the word as an on-going response should not be overlooked. Scripture is not only the faithful expression of God's message of salvation produced at its original writing by Israel or the Church in the person of some of its members, but it continues on to be the response of the community to the call of God. God continues to speak his word to his people in history and they continue to respond in faith through the words which, though written in the past, are now *their* response to him. Scripture, therefore, is a basic, essential, constitutive element of the Church at each moment of its existence. Because it is the indispensable and irreplaceable source and norm of the Church's faith and worship, any further reflection and expression of that response (e.g., as dogma), or any thinking out of it (i.e., theology) must rest on the scriptural word as the authentic expression of the event through which revelation is signified.

Wonderful as the dialogue of the hidden God with his creature is, we must not forget the limitations of the human pole of this relationship. Scripture is the word of God; but Scripture is also the word of man, that is, the reality of salvation from God is grasped and expressed in the *logos* or measure of the human situation, and this involves the limitations of the human situation—the finite power

of grasping, the limitations of human history, the level of culture, etc. All this means that the human grasp of that reality lies open to further development, deepening and realization within the Church.

With these reflections in mind, we can now make some points about the role of biblical and systematic theology and their mutual relationships.

The role of the biblical theologian is to explore the contemporary context of the word of God as it was first spoken, and to set forth as lucidly and accurately as he can how Israel or the Church understood and responded to the message of salvation as an expression of their faith. This right and duty to speak in the contemporary witness of the text must never be denied him, or qualified in the name of an orthodoxy which came about only in the course of the Church's history. We tend to think as Christian theologians and therefore apply this task first of all to the New Testament exegete. However, it concerns with equal validity the Old Testament exegete. He must be allowed by the demands of his subject to speak with the witness of the Old Testament; he is not required to qualify or interpret his findings by the developments of the New Testament or later doctrinal belief. If, for example, the Old Testament exegete asserts that he does not find the doctrine of a universal hereditary sin of man in the second and third chapters of Genesis, then he is only stating what his text allows him to say and his role must be carefully respected by the theologian. And what is said of this example is true of many others, e.g., monotheism in the Old Testament, the doctrine of the Divinity of Christ, the Trinity, the structure of the Church, angels, sacraments, etc. From this it follows that since the biblical theologian is concerned with the original witness of revelation and hence with the normative source of faith, he exercises a continuing controlling factor over systematic theology. Text and meaning obviously go together, therefore the systematic theologian must use the source as he gets it from the expert. There were simpler times when one man could be both exegete and theologian. But the danger always existed that the words and the ideas of the biblical text would be understood in the context of the language and times of the theologian rather than those of the biblical author, a danger not always avoided. Furthermore, biblical and theological studies have ex-

panded so enormously today that it has become imperative for the theologian to depend on the exegete who, after all, is the expert of the word. The theologian will, of course, use the biblical text as the source and norm of his work, never as a proof for a theological thesis, nor will he demand of the biblical theologian as such a more complete statement of a Christian dogma than an honest examination of the text allows him to make. The systematic theologian, let it be noted again, in consulting the exegete, is not listening to the voice of an antiquarian. The original revelatory message and its witness happened, it is true, at a moment in the past that was unique and will not be repeated. But the response in faith lives on in the Church through the word and the Spirit which moves us to embrace the salvation revealed in this event and expressed by these words. God speaks to the Church, i.e., to the members today in the normative source of Scripture. What was heard *then* is heard *now*, and must, therefore, be constantly renewed in meaning and brought into the situation of the Church now. In this way the theologian truly responds to the message God speaks to him.

However, while the systematic theologian looks primarily to the biblical text as the source and norm, his is more than a theology of the text of Scripture. What has intervened between the original witness along with its fixing in written form and the present is the history of the Church or rather the life of the Church in all its dimensions—faith, worship, and practice. The Church has been in the meantime not a mere repository of biblical statements, but a living community which has borne the word down through history in its mind and heart, reflecting, pondering, meditating on it, sometimes spurred by others' distortion of it to clarify and formulate its meaning. The word of God not only lives but grows in the understanding of the Church which then expresses its realization of the meaning in its doctrines and dogmas. From the beginning the Church has grasped the message of salvation, but has not exhausted the mystery, nor will it penetrate the whole truth in all its depth until the end of time. This dynamic grasp of the word, this ever deepening understanding of it in the consciousness of the Church, was something going on already as the New Testament was being formed. And this continuing grasp of the salvation revealed definitively in Christ did



not cease with the close of the New Testament, but carries on in the Church as it ponders and responds to the word it has received.

To say that the word of God *grows* in the understanding of the Church in no way implies that originally it was imperfect (as if God had spoken incompletely). How, then, can we account for this enlargement of revelation within the Church? The answer lies to some extent in the very structure of human intelligence which works discursively, but more pertinently for this question it comes about because of the conditions which accompany the fact that eternity has impinged on time. The word of God was spoken first in eternity which in one stroke measures creation in all its freedom and contingency, from the beginning to the end of temporal duration. This does not mean that the divine decree of salvation is some kind of a reserve store of power that will last no matter how long the world goes on. It says rather that the divine salvific action spans history, and that every punctilinear moment of created history *is present* to the eternal decree, is now being redeemed—not in the present tense of time but in the eternal “now” of divine duration. On the other hand, this divine word is grasped in its human response only at particular and successive situations in human history. God has spoken his effective word of salvation in the person and life of Christ but because of the very finitude of temporal existence, the full meaning and realization of this word unfolds in the consciousness of his people as the salvation mystery confronts creation throughout successive ages. The development of dogma, then, is not simply a post-factum explanation for what has happened in the history of the Church. Nor did it happen because of the limitation of human intelligence, but because of the character of temporal existence which unrolls in time to its consummation at which it will adequate the decree of salvation made in its regard. This unfolding response to the divine call in the consciousness of the Church is demanded by the mystery of eternal being coming into contact with the finitude of temporal existence.

To return to the function of the systematic theologian, we can understand, then, that in one respect the starting point of his work is the word in its realization till now, as the Church believed and presented it as of this morning. The systematic theologian, then, has

as his first task understanding the word of God in the totality of its history within the Church while preserving the intrinsic continuity between the scriptural data and the later dogma. He has, of course, a second task, namely, to mediate this same word of God to his contemporary situation. To do this he employs the prime activity of the human spirit, critical reason thinking out the faith through the vehicles of positive and philosophical disciplines. He confronts the men of his own age, the faithful first of all, with the word of God mediated through the knowledge and disciplines of the human spirit. However, the systematic theologian will clarify his relation to biblical theology principally in his first task, presenting the word and the totality of its history in the Church. The Catholic biblical theologian, on his part, must bring his faith into play to realize that salvation history did not cease but entered a new phase after the closing of the New Testament canon. The Holy Spirit works in the Church bringing forth in its members a response to the Father's call that is substantively always the same but often new and developed in formulation as the history of creation unfolds. It does not advance Christian knowledge to say, for example, that the concept of man as the image of God in the Greek fathers or Mediaeval theologians is not the same as the biblical concept. What is not the same need not be the opposite, but can well be a deeper penetration of the original concept. Of course, in this case one may dispute the fact that it is a genuine development, but then he will have to speak as a theologian not as an Old Testament exegete.

The question of the developing understanding of the word in the consciousness of the Church becomes crucial for all areas of theology in its widest sense, because it seems today that the Christian theologian must take his stand on one of three choices:

1. He may admit the historical distance between the biblical statement and its meaning for the present age, and resolve that tension by affirming a complete identity of subject matter, a revelation abstracted and unaffected by historical conditions. This, of course, is the classical Protestant position on revelation. It does not seem open, however, to the Catholic theologian in view of the fact of the development of dogma in the history of the Church. Furthermore, in the light of what has been established about the biblical

world and its distance from our own since the history-of-religions school, this position seems more and more difficult to defend.

2. He may deny that history has any theological meaning or that the Bible is normative for man today. According to this view, all biblical intention will be valuable to the extent either that it contributes to man's present analysis of being (Tillich), or that as an historical phenomenon it expresses human self understanding as it has been experienced throughout human history (Bultmann). It hardly needs emphasizing that such a position does not accord with traditional Catholic faith.

3. Finally, he may assert, as we have, that the effective word of God develops within the history of the Church, God's people.

The last word on revelation is not spoken by the Christian exegete. For revelation, though it comes through the channels of the process of salvation which took place in the Old and New Dispensations, and through the inspired testimony in its regard, is addressed to men of all ages. What believers, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit who works in the Church, have made their own out of this process may be, as regards express formulation, something different from what Sacred Scripture has made its own of the process of salvation. But the biblical expression remains the expression of the same faith as the Church now confesses. On the level of articulate expression, therefore, there is a growth, a progress, in the course of Church history with regard to Sacred Scripture. In this progress dogmatics play the role of servant, but this role it neither can nor will abandon, to be replaced entirely by the work of the exegete and biblical theologian.<sup>2</sup>

A statement of the relations between the biblical and systematic theologians would not be complete without at least a brief mention of that second task of the systematic theologian, the critical thinking out of the message of revelation through the disciplines of human reason. This is a function which the systematic theologian carries out by himself beyond his immediate relations with the biblical theologian; it is necessary for theology, and it asks of the biblical scholar the understanding and respect that a man of one field has for the work of another. In our times when biblical studies have made such

<sup>2</sup> E. Schillebeeckx, O. P., "Exegesis, Dogmatics and the Development of Dogma," *op. cit.*, p. 144.

impressive advances in discovery and comprehension of the biblical text and when the exact discipline to which the biblical scholar must subject himself is so evident, it seems to some that it is sufficient to know the biblical message itself and that the function of speculative theology is of no importance. This opinion, often uncritically assumed in writing and discussion, can only result in aberrations which would be disastrous for the whole of theology. As a reasoning being, man cannot help but use his reason, because he comes to know in a full and truly human fashion only by the discursive use of his intelligence. Applied to revelation, the conscious, technical use of reason, that is, the explication of revelation by philosophical thought, may not be required of every preacher of the gospel, but it is indispensable for theology itself. If the biblical scholar thinks that he is self sufficient in interpreting his text, he runs the danger of engaging in surreptitious philosophizing of his own, using the vocabulary of a philosophy currently in vogue without comprehending its thought. If the systematic theologian thinks he can ignore the long history of philosophical thought, he ends up by substituting himself for thinkers far superior to him in coherence and power of thought, and offers only a collection of fashionable clichés that are accepted because they are familiar rather than understood; thus, he fails in his true function of mediating the Christian message as a formative element of the thought of the men of his time.

*Ita philosophandum est in fide.* There is no avoiding the role of philosophy in theologizing. Most of the terms, ideas, judgments and questions that occupy the modern theologian have a long pedigree in the history of human thought, something which the theologian ignores at his own peril. Furthermore, he has to be constantly aware of the truth, once observed by Whitehead, that in the end it is thought which changes the outlook of humanity. To see the truth of this today, one need only look at the philosophy of Hegel which has been such a powerful force not only on scriptural studies and theology (including the theology which reacts to him), but also on political and economic thought. What is true of that human thought called philosophy is (or should be) equally valid for theology, the gospel thought out in terms of all that human reason presents to man. It might help, perhaps, if Christian theology were to become again for

us a "philosophy of life," not in the modern connotation of a few practical maxims for living, but in the ancient sense when Christian thought was called "*philosophia*" long before Christian writers overcame their hesitation about the word "*theologia*." Rejuvenated by a deeper understanding of the word of God, theology can become a reflection on the new life lived in the world of today, a radically different outlook on the world as man now knows it in the full possession of human discovery, a coherent set of values for living in the present situation. This is far from theology as it has often appeared in the past, a prolonged, sterile argument over issues of the past that never seemed to be settled. At this point the systematic theologian, without severing his connection with biblical theology, has gone on to the work that is properly his own.

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#### Digest of the Discussion:

The undersigned noted Fr. Dillon's insistence on the normative role of Sacred Scripture in dogmatic theology and also his sensitive understanding of the problems of Catholic biblical scholarship. He remarked that, in his opinion, the tension which is quite evident when dogmatic theologians engage in discussion with biblical scholars, and the suspicion with which the latter feel they are regarded by some dogmatic theologians, are the product of psychological rather than of theological factors. Progress in science is not always universally acclaimed by all scientists. Some find in the new developments an open door to further progress in their own field of learning; but others, who are confident that they have already found a satisfactory solution to the problems of their discipline, are annoyed with new developments which would force them to re-examine their position. Their initial reaction is to impugn the validity of the new discoveries and to dismiss them cavalierly as the product of a suspect and irresponsible scholarship.

The discussion that followed centered on the *sensus plenior* of

Sacred Scripture, the respective role of exegete and theologian and the normative role of Scripture in theology. Attention was directed by *Fr. Kenny* to the controversy current in Catholic biblical scholarship over the *sensus plenior*. Is it a literal sense or not? In view of this difference of opinion among the biblicalists the dogmatic theologian does not know where to begin in his use of Scripture. *Fr. Kugelman* pointed out that all Catholic biblical scholars recognize the fact that the New Testament usually employs the Old Testament not according to its literal meaning, in the meaning intended by the hagiographer, but according to a fuller, Christian understanding of the text. This is a fact. If this fuller, Christian meaning is assigned to the literal sense (i.e. intended by God in the words which he inspired even though not perceived by the hagiographer), or, if it is assigned to the spiritual or typical sense, is not of vital importance for the dogmatic theologian. He employs the Christian meaning given by the New Testament writer in his theologizing on the Christian mystery.

*Fr. Malone* (University of Illinois) asked *Fr. Dillon* to comment on *Rahner's* statement that, while the theologian must be critical, the exegete must, on his part, point up the relation of his findings to the teaching of the Church. *Fr. Dillon* answered that the exegete must keep to the text he is interpreting. He must interpret according to the analogy of faith, in this sense that he should never interpret contrary to the doctrinal teaching of the Church. But the exegete is not obliged to point out how his interpretation may be harmonized with later doctrinal developments and teaching. *Fr. Henkey* (Montreal) remarked that there is no such thing as a Catholic or Protestant exegesis. There is only an exegesis of a biblical text. Moreover, he continued, there is no biblical theology, only biblical theologies, i.e. theologies of the different biblical writers. *Fr. Kugelman* responded by making a distinction between the exegete and the biblical scholar as theologian. The proper object of exegesis is the literal meaning of a text. Any man, irrespective of his faith or lack of it, who possesses the scientific equipment for interpreting the ancient biblical writings (philology, history, literary criticism, etc.) can tell us what this ancient author was saying in this given context to his first readers. In pursuing this basic task of

biblical scholarship the exegete, who is a Catholic, proceeds in the same scientific and critical way as does his non-Catholic colleague. But this is not the end of the Catholic biblical scholar's work. He knows by his faith that this book he is interpreting belongs to a library which is the inspired record of God's saving plan. So he becomes a theologian, relating the teaching of the book he has interpreted to the record of God's progressive revelation. And finally he attempts to synthesize the biblical religious teaching.

*Fr. Curran* then observed that the dogmatic theologian should learn from the biblical scholar to be exacting and critical. He should exegete the conciliar decrees etc. with the same critical thoroughness with which biblical scholar interprets the sacred text. No one man is capable of this. So there is an urgent need of more specialists in the different branches of theology and the subsidiary sciences. *Fr. Dillon* agreed heartily with these observations and suggested that the problem should be presented to the Bishops and Religious Superiors.

*Fr. Hickey* asked how normative is Scripture in theology? *Fr. Dillon* answered that theology must begin on the foundation of Scripture. Not every statement of the New Testament is a take off point for theology, but the message of the New Testament, its teaching, is the norm for everything the dogmatic theologian says. In his concluding remarks *Fr. Dillon* observed that speculative theology will be rejuvenated only if it makes use of the findings of modern biblical scholarship and relates itself to the problems of today.

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