

THE WISDOM OF THEOLOGY

At the inauguration of a new society the question naturally arises, why another society? This is especially the case when a society comes into being that is dedicated exclusively to the study of theology. Is there enough interest in the practical world of today, even among the clergy, for a society whose objectives seem so remote from the spirit of the times? Theology was a subject of burning interest in the past, but there is reason to fear that that flame has died down considerably, with no one particularly anxious to revive it. After all, time does not stand still. The interests of yesterday are not the interests of today, and these in turn will yield to the newer interests of tomorrow. Theology, especially in its more speculative aspects, has had its day on the stage of human history, but that day has gone. While it is still a matter of importance in the formation of clerical students, the study of theology cannot compete in interest with subjects of more immediate concern to the life of man in contemporary society.

Even within the field of theology itself there has been a shift of emphasis. At one time the purely speculative questions held the center of the stage in a theological course, as they did in the philosophical disciplines. The nature of a subsisting relation, the determination of the number of *esse* in Christ, the reconciliation of the efficacy of grace with human freedom—these were the matters that consumed hour after hour in the class-room and made heavy inroads on the supply of the proverbial midnight oil. At the present time, however, the cry is for less emphasis on questions that seem so remote from reality and more upon matters of practical importance to the concrete world in which we live. There has been a decided shift from the speculative to the practical in theological studies as in every other field of intellectual activity. Who knows how long even this practical interest in theology will last in the brave new world of tomorrow?

These are some of the reasons why the founding of a new

theological society in America at the present time may give the appearance of a venture of faith. This need not be denied, for theology is always a venture in faith. At the same time we wish to point out that perhaps there may be much more interest in theology, even in purely speculative theology, in the world today than is apparent at first sight. Things are not always what they seem in any field of reality. Just when the outlook seems darkest for the cause of the spiritual and supernatural in the midst of an unbelieving and skeptical generation, we are surprised to find evidences of an awakening interest in a subject like theology. Materialism in all its shapes and forms has not proved to be a satisfactory intellectual diet. Men are becoming more and more disillusioned with what man has made of man since the dawn of the enlightenment, especially now when they see the working out in stark reality of principles whose full implications were not grasped before. A turning to theology is part of the providential response to this state of affairs. Evidences of this renewed interest are to be found not only in the ranks of the clergy but also among the laity, and they are by no means confined to the members of the Church. These stirrings and signs of a revival in what was thought to be moribund if not altogether dead would alone justify the founding of a theological society at the present time. In fact, a society of this kind in America is not only opportune, it is long overdue.

I

As an indication of the growing interest in theology in the world of today, let me recall to your attention one of the most important discussions carried on in contemporary American educational circles. The discussion was doubly important for us, for it involved not only the subject of education in which we are all interested, but also theology, which is the bond that links us here today. I refer to the indictment of the higher learning in America made by Mr. Hutchins of Chicago University on the ground that the secular university of today has no unifying principle to give definiteness and consistency to its educational policy. The result is chaos in the education it professes to impart. There was a time when the uni-

versity had such a principle, and that was theology. Because it is no longer possible to accept this principle today, the university Mr. Hutchins has in mind must either give up all hope of having any unifying principle at all, or else put up with the best substitute for theology that can be found, which is metaphysics.

When Mr. Hutchins diagnoses the ills of the modern secular university, he is on sure ground and he goes at once to the root of the trouble. The lack of a unifying principle does not mean that the university in question is not engaged in many good and useful and important activities, for it is. Its main source of weakness, however, lies in the fact that it does not know exactly why it is doing these things. Once the control of a single, consistent principle of education was abandoned, the educational system itself broke up into a number of competing specialties. Specialization, departmentalization, became the order of the day. In the field of pure science this results in the gathering and classifying of facts on all sorts of subjects. Research for the sake of research becomes the end of education. In the field of applied science specialization results in greater emphasis on vocational training. Here the end of education is to turn out practitioners in the various skills and professions. In both these fields, the field of pure science and the field of applied science, science is advanced at the expense of wisdom. The function of wisdom is to order knowledge in view of a common end and purpose. There can be no such ordering where there is no ordering principle, and where a synthetic view of the whole is lost sight of in the analytical maze of the parts.

To balance this over-specialization and emphasis on the practical there is need of a principle in education that will serve to unify the various departments of intellectual activity by giving them a common aim and objective. The all-important question arises: what will this principle be? There was no difficulty about finding the answer to this question in the Middle Ages. Theology was the principle, since theology is the queen of the sciences precisely because she is also the wisdom that can order all other sciences and all human knowledge in a graded hierarchy in reference to God as the first beginning and ultimate end of man and the universe. Mr. Hutchins looks back with a certain nostalgia to this wisdom-function

of theology in the medieval university when he contrasts with it the chaos that has set in as a result of its absence today.

It may be regrettable but it is a fact for Mr. Hutchins that dogmatic theology can no longer play this unifying role in the university. Theology in this sense is based on revealed truths and articles of faith. It implies orthodoxy and an orthodox church. Since we (that is, the secular world) have neither, theology in the sense of dogmatic theology cannot serve as a unifying principle in the modern university. The only theology that can be of any service at all is natural theology, which Mr. Hutchins includes in metaphysics. In this way he comes to the conclusion that metaphysics is needed today as the principle of unification in modern higher education. Theology is the ideal principle. Since we cannot have the ideal, we must take the next best substitute. Metaphysics is a wisdom of the natural order, as theology is of the supernatural order. By supplying a natural principle of unity and order it will serve to check the trend to excessive specialization in education, and restore the balance between the speculative and the practical that has been lost since theology was displaced from her unifying role in the curriculum.

There can be no doubt about the justness of Mr. Hutchins' main criticism—the lack of a principle in secular education today and the need of metaphysics to supply it. He has grasped the function of the wisdom that is philosophy, or metaphysics, for he has seen the consequences of trying to get along without it. He knows at first hand what happens when the various special sciences compete unrestrictedly for the mind of man without the control that comes from a view of reality in terms of its highest causes. Philosophy, however, does not tell the whole story. Supernatural elevation is a fact and revelation has taken place. The wisdom that is philosophy must then of necessity yield to the wisdom that is theology if the ordering of man's knowledge and activities is to take into consideration all the factors involved in human life as it actually exists in the present dispensation. Mr. Hutchins is aware of this but in the circumstances he is helpless. Because the secular world of today will have nothing to do with revelation or the supernatural, it is hopeless to expect it to accept the wisdom that is theology, and

only a little short of hopeless to get it to accept the wisdom that is philosophy in its stead. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why an increasing number of people are not altogether satisfied with the secular world of today.

II

A voice indeed was raised in protest over this substitution of metaphysics for theology as the unifying principle in the university. Williams Adams Brown in *The Case for Theology in the University* (from which I freely quote in this paper) made out a strong case for theology rather than metaphysics in this unifying role in higher education. Theology played this part as queen of the sciences in the past and it should play the same part today. It is necessary, however, to make certain distinctions. Dr. Brown sees three major uses of the word theology, only one of which will yield the unifying principle we are seeking.

In the first place, theology may mean the science of revealed religion, a science that is based on truths which are held by faith. Dr. Brown agrees with Mr. Hutchins that theology in this sense cannot serve as the unifying principle of modern higher education. The reason is the same: faith in the sense of acceptance of propositions on the word of authority, or the unquestioning adherence to a creed, has no place in the program of the modern university. This, however, is not the only sense of the term theology. It can also mean the scientific study of religion as a particular object of research. In this sense it would fit into the departments of philosophy, of history, and of comparative religion. Obviously, theology in this sense is equally incapable of acting as the unifying principle of a university. It is just another specialty. This leaves us with a third sense in which the term theology may be understood. It can mean the philosophy of the Christian religion, or the sum of the attempts to use the clue which Christian faith provides to bring unity and consistency into man's thought of the universe. Theology in this sense can give us today, as it did in the Middle Ages, a unifying principle for thought, a unifying principle for conduct, and a synthesis of thought and conduct in a satisfying philosophy of life.

Before attempting any criticism of these views, let us pause for a moment and see where we stand. We are faced with a symptom. Both Mr. Hutchins and Dr. Brown are acutely aware of the chaotic condition of modern secular education resulting from over-specialization and emphasis on the practical without the presence of a principle of unification. The education they are criticizing is long on science but short on wisdom. They both feel that theology is the ideal remedy for this state of affairs. As queen of the sciences it performs admirably this wisdom-function of bringing unity into disorder. The only difference between the two is that one of them, despairing of seeing theology restored to its rightful place in the modern university, turns to a substitute, metaphysics, and the natural theology that metaphysics includes. The other does not yield so readily to despair but gives a meaning to theology which he believes will enable it to fulfill its unifying function today as it did in the past. The theology that he would use for this purpose is not based on any articles of faith but solely on the common assumptions which any intelligent approach to the problems raised by religious faith must presuppose—such presuppositions as the existence of God, His activity in the universe, and man's capacity to recognize this when he sees it.

The question arises at once: is theology in this sense any different from the natural theology which Mr. Hutchins includes in metaphysics? Mr. Hutchins says it is not: "Everything that Mr. Brown puts in the category of theology I should call natural theology." If this is the case, then there does not seem to be any valid reason for criticizing Mr. Hutchins' view that metaphysics should be the unifying principle in a secular university. If the theology just mentioned does differ from a purely natural theology to the extent that it means "the philosophy of the Christian religion or the sum of the attempts to use the clue which the Christian faith provides to bring unity and consistency into man's thought of the universe," then it is hard to see how a theology that is equivalent to the philosophy of the Christian religion, a theology that utilizes the clues which the Christian faith provides, can serve as a principle of unification when the basis of the unity of such a theology, the articles of the Christian faith, are not accepted.

We must not overlook the fact that there are two unifications at issue here, and not only one. There is first of all the unification of faith, the unification that the acceptance of divinely revealed truths brings into a man's thought and conduct. This unification is something altogether prior to theology and it is far more important to possess it than it is to have the unification that comes from theology. After all, there is no necessity for being a theologian, but it is necessary for salvation to be a believer. To talk, then, of a university or of an educational system using a theology that owes anything to the Christian religion or to the Christian faith as a principle of unification without the prior unification of faith and the articles of faith is very difficult to follow. It was a common faith that brought a unification into the medieval university even before any unification came into it from theology, just as it is a common faith today that serves as a principle of unification not only in the personal lives of Catholics but in all educational institutions that are based on the Catholic faith.

Faith and theology are not the same. Faith is an infused habit. The articles of faith serve as principles or points of departure for the science of theology. Theology is an acquired habit, based however upon divinely revealed truths that are accepted by faith. The unification that comes from the possession of a common faith is one thing. This will indeed bring consistency and unity into man's thought of the universe and serve as a unifying principle for conduct and a synthesis of thought and conduct in a satisfying philosophy of life. Countless Christians all over the world and in every age since the coming of Christ have had this unification in their lives, the vast majority of whom never had and never will have the unification that comes from theology.

When we speak of theology as a unifying principle we are on other ground. We mean first of all not natural theology but dogmatic or revealed theology. The unification that comes from philosophy alone—the unification of metaphysics even when it is made to include natural theology—is not enough. Since God has spoken, man cannot afford to ignore His voice if he is not to jeopardize his salvation. Secondly, we must bear in mind that theology, like metaphysics, is both a science and a wisdom. A science examines

and proves in the light of its own principles. Wisdom adds to this the vantage point of the highest attainable principles or causes, a vantage point that enables its possessor to survey the whole field of knowledge and reality and thus be able to pass judgment on other subordinate sciences. This function of ordering and judging from a higher vantage point belongs in the natural order of knowledge to metaphysics. Metaphysics is a wisdom as well as a science, for the metaphysician has a perspective of all reality in the light of the highest principles and causes that are naturally known. This unified view of all reality is the function of wisdom, and the unification it brings into the various human sciences transcends any grasp of a special field of knowledge by a special science. Theology is likewise a wisdom as well as a science, since in the light of revelation it orders and judges all reality from the standpoint of God, first in the order of being and highest cause of all. Here we have another unification, higher than the former, which only theology can give; theology functioning now not as a special science but as a wisdom based on divine revelation. Yet the wisdom that is theology, like the wisdom that is metaphysics, is a human wisdom. It presupposes indeed a principle that comes from divine infusion, the habit of faith; but the habit of theology itself is acquired by study and human effort.

There is a third wisdom that is not acquired by study but which comes supernaturally as a gift of the Holy Spirit. Even in the natural order we find something analogous to this. A virtuous man possesses a wisdom that does not come from study or instruction. He may be untutored and illiterate, yet he has a wisdom that comes from his virtuous inclinations alone. These inclinations enable him to order his life rightly and pass a correct judgment on all his acts. The Holy Spirit gives such a gift to those who love Him, a gift that enables them to judge of divine things connaturally and instinctively rather than as a result of scientific equipment and training. This is the wisdom of the saints, a supernatural wisdom that brings about a supernatural unification in the life and judgments of a man who is always ready to obey the instincts of the Spirit of God dwelling within him. This is not a human wisdom and it must not be confused with the wisdom that is theology.

Theology as a science is also a wisdom precisely because, like metaphysics, it deals with the first principle and highest cause of all. Because it is a wisdom, theology must always be the science of God, as its etymology tells us, rather than of creatures. If it treats of creatures at all, it is only because of their relation to God, either as their beginning or as their end. This is why there is room for many other matters in theology besides God; for instance, the angels, corporeal creatures, and human acts. They can be discussed by the theologian either because they fall under the light of divine revelation or, as in the case of human acts, because they directly lead to God. Creatures, nevertheless, and human acts can never be on a par with God as the object of this science. *Sacra doctrina non determinat de Deo et de creaturis ex aequo, sed de Deo principaliter, et de creaturis secundum quod referuntur ad Deum, ut ad principium vel ad finem.*¹

Because of this main preoccupation of theology with God, it necessarily follows that as a science it must be dominantly speculative rather than practical. It cannot be asserted too often that the chief concern of theology is simply God. Keeping this end in view, it makes use of all the knowledge it can get, both from reason and from revelation. It recognizes great value to the human intellect in learning more and more just about God. As a sacred science it has its revealed principles, which are the articles of faith. From these as points of departure it proceeds by way of reasoning to draw out and demonstrate conclusions that were virtually contained in the premises. Theology in the primary sense rests content with these conclusions as a great achievement of the intellect, apart from any question of further activity or operation. In this primary sense theology is and must remain the speculative science called dogmatic theology.

This does not mean that dogmatic theology is altogether cut off from activity. It is not sterile contemplation in a vacuum, without any relation to the real world in which we live. On the contrary, dogmatic theology furnishes the motives for the good Christian life—moral, devotional, and ascetical. At the same time

¹ *Sum. theol.*, I, q. 1, a. 3, ad 1.

dogmatic theology sees great value in the study of the doctrines of the faith for their own sake, leaving it to other sciences and disciplines to apply the principles and conclusions of dogma in their own fields.

Human conduct presents another object of legitimate study to the intellect. There is a science of human morality on the natural plane called ethics. This is a practical science since its main concern is the acquirement of knowledge not so much for its own sake as for the sake of properly directing human conduct. Human acts, however, lead to God and divine revelation has thrown considerable light upon the conduct of human life in view of the supernatural end of man. To the extent that human acts lead to God and benefit by divine revelation they enter the field of theology. There is a theological consideration of human acts as well as a philosophical, and a theological ethics as well as a natural ethics. When the practical science that studies human acts utilizes the aid of revelation and measures them by a supernatural standard, it becomes a theological morality rather than a moral theology. Theology in the highest and unqualified sense deals directly with God, making Him the object of study for his own sake and not for any ulterior purpose. The practical science that directly deals with human conduct, even when it benefits by the light of divine revelation, can never be an equal and coordinate branch of theology with the speculative science that treats directly of God. *Magis tamen est [sacra doctrina] speculativa quam practica, quia principaliter agit de rebus divinis quam de actibus humanis.*²

When we stop to consider it, every science that is also a wisdom must be dominantly speculative rather than practical. It must first regard the end, the first and highest cause, before it can order any subordinate sciences with reference to this end. This is true with the wisdom that is metaphysics, and it is true with the wisdom that is theology. It is the wisdom of theology that makes it even as a science look first and directly to God, and only in the light of God cast its regard upon creatures and creaturely activities. Theology first studies God for His own sake; then it is in a position

² *Sum. theol.*, I, q. 1, a. 4.

to say what the order will be among other things that are related to Him as their beginning and their end.

III

We are the inheritors of the theologians of the past, when theology reigned supreme as the principle of unification in the curriculum of higher studies in the university and in monastic schools. Chaos in education set in when this wisdom was cast aside and specialization began to run riot without any principle of unification to steady it. No one has seen this more clearly than Mr. Hutchins, or pointed it out more insistently. We for whom theology is still the queen of the sciences listen to him sympathetically as he diagnoses the principal evils in the world of education today. In the circumstances it is more or less natural for us to feel that we are immune to the forces that have wrought such havoc elsewhere. Have we not always retained theology as the principle of unification in our higher studies?

Let us not be too sure, however. Because we have the fundamental unification of a common faith, the danger can arise that we may lack, without our being aware of it, the further unification that comes from the wisdom of theology. The unification of faith affects our lives; the unification of theology affects our studies. While retaining the faith firm and strong, departmentalization and specialization can go on within the field of theology itself, and we too can lose the synthetic view of the whole in the analytical maze of the parts. This is especially the case where departmentalization is accompanied by greater and greater emphasis on the practical to the detriment of the speculative in theological studies. We can be lulled into a sense of false security by the prior unification of the faith that is there, until gradually the same evils that have ruined secular education will be found full blown in the field of sacred theology. We can be so intent upon turning out theological practitioners that we may forget the principal end of a theological education, which is to make a man a theologian.

Specialization and departmentalization are not bad in themselves. Neither is it necessarily wrong to aim at turning out theo-

logical practitioners instead of expert theologians. The special courses and the practical courses are here, apparently to stay. These things are all good and even necessary in the circumstances in which we live. As Mr. Hutchins did not criticize specialization in itself but specialization without a corresponding principle of unification, so with theology. Specialization and emphasis on the practical to the belittlement and detriment of the speculative can ruin a theological education as they have ruined a secular education.

What is needed in theology is the unification that comes from a genuinely theological wisdom to counter-balance the excessive spirit of specialization and emphasis on the practical that characterize every department of life in our day. When the primacy is given to God in theological studies and not to any creature or creaturely activity, then theology begins to function as a wisdom and the theologian, no matter how deeply he may be immersed in practical questions, as the moralist and the canonist must be, is not just a specialist or an expert in theological practice but a theologian who is guided by the wisdom of theology in his studies and in their application to the special problems of every-day life.

The science of theology is fortunate in possessing a work whose chief characteristic is precisely this theological wisdom. The *Summa theologica* of St. Thomas Aquinas is not merely a scientific treatise on theology; it is a wisdom and it possesses the unification that wisdom gives to all branches of human learning, no matter how specialized or practical they may be. The great theologians of the past read him for this wisdom, and pope after pope send us back to him for the acquirement of the same habit. When John XXII in the consistory held at Avignon in 1318 declared that St. Thomas gave more illumination to the Church than all other doctors, so that one can make more progress in a year devoted to reading him than by a life-time spent with other authors, what did he mean? Surely we can get more information from some of his commentators, and even from certain text-books, than from the *Summa theologica* or other works of St. Thomas Aquinas. He may also be excelled as a specialist in a particular branch of scientific theology. His reasoning may have been faulty at times, as in the celebrated instance of his teaching on the Immaculate Conception. Yet there is one

field in which he stands unexcelled, and that is the field of theological wisdom. He is always conscious of the primacy of God in theological studies, and this serves as a principle of order in the arrangement and treatment of everything he touches. Not without reason is St. Thomas called the Common Doctor when his works are replete with this theological wisdom for all to draw upon who are seeking a principle of unification in their studies, linking them together and ordering them all under a common aim and purpose. If room were made in a theological course for a continuous reading of his greatest work of theological wisdom, the *Summa theologica*, there would be little danger of specialization running riot or of the practical dispensing with the need of the speculative. The balance would be there, and theological wisdom, with its synthetic grasp of the whole, would maintain due order among the various parts and branches of the theological sciences in view of their relation to the end of all, which is God.

A new theological society has just been launched. Under God it could have no more suitable patron than the theologian *par excellence* of the Church, St. Thomas Aquinas. When the term society today is so often synonymous with a pressure-group, it is refreshing to witness the coming together of those whose only motive is to increase not merely in the science but above all in the wisdom of theology. So lofty a purpose cannot fail to draw down God's blessing on the new society and cause it to be a source of much good to the members themselves and to the world at large.

*William R. O'Connor, S.T.L., Ph.D.,
Professor of Dogmatic Theology,
St. Joseph's Seminary, Dunwoodie,
Yonkers, N. Y.*