

THE GRANDEUR AND MISERY OF THEOLOGY

At the beginning of his penetrating study on the degrees of knowledge M. Maritain speaks at some length on the grandeur and misery of metaphysics. Its grandeur lies in the fact that it is a wisdom; its misery, in that it is human. Metaphysics suffers not only from the common necessity of abstraction and discourse, but from an infirmity proper to itself. As a natural theology its object *par excellence* is God, the cause of all causes. Once it discovers His existence, a natural desire arises spontaneously in the human mind to see this cause in itself. In this lies the grandeur of metaphysics. Its misery follows apace, however, for this natural desire can never be satisfied, it can never reach its goal, so long as the metaphysician remains merely a philosopher.

During the past ten years we have witnessed a remarkable flowering of theological activity in the Church. It has made its influence felt not only in the restricted area where reason alone holds sway, but above all in the field where divine revelation is the illuminating principle. This activity reached its climax with the definition of the Assumption on November 1, 1950. Before and after the definition numerous encyclicals and addresses emanated from the Holy See, giving us new theological insights and directives. In one sense the work of the theologian has become easier as, in the words of *Humani generis*, "matters that formerly were open to discussion, now, as a result of judgments passed by the supreme teaching authority, no longer admit of discussion." In another sense the theologian's task has become more difficult. The restrictions imposed by the Holy See do not relieve him of the responsible task of "returning always to the source of divine revelation . . . and pointing out how the doctrine of the living teaching authority is to be found either explicitly or implicitly in the Scriptures or in tradition." On the other hand it would be easier to construct a private theology, free from the restraints imposed by the living *magisterium* whose paramount concern is to preserve the sacred deposit committed to her

care. Those who recognize no authority above their own private judgment find these restrictions hard to understand. The theologian, however, whose starting point is the faith, knows the importance of safeguarding the divinely revealed principle without which his theology would have no meaning.

The recent directives of the Holy See have brought into prominence the sapiential character of theology which the theologian as a scientist may at times be tempted to forget. He can become so accustomed to stressing the scientific character of his study, with its syllogistic procedures and deductive method, that he can lose sight of the fact that theology is much more than a science. It is a science; in fact, it is the queen of sciences; this is not disputed. It is not, however, a science in the same way that other disciplines bear this name. Theology as a science differs not only in degree but also in kind from purely human disciplines. St. Thomas Aquinas does not hesitate to point out the imperfections theology has as a science, as well as its perfections. Its grandeur lies more in the fact that it is a wisdom; as a science it shares much of the misery that metaphysics, a purely human science, has to bear.

The science of theology, like every other science considered formally as a science, argues from principles to its own conclusions. Its method is demonstration but the principles of the science of theology are the revealed articles of faith. Here at once we see its analogy with other sciences, whose principles are not revealed; but this does not deprive theology of the right to the proper use of the term science. An investigation of divine truth is always the proper work of man, especially since his perfection consists in union with God. St. Thomas tells us that we should use all means in our power to reach divine truth, and our intellect will delight in the contemplation and our reason in the investigation of the things of God. Yet he warns us to be careful: we can sin in three ways in such a pursuit.

First, we can sin by presumption. We sin in this way if we ever imagine that an investigation of this kind can lead to a perfect comprehension of God or of divine truth on our part.

Second, we can sin by inverting the right order and giving the primacy to reason in matters of faith, instead of the other way round.

For St. Thomas, human reason in this connection is twofold. First, it is demonstrative, compelling the assent of the intellect because of evidence. This type of reasoning is impossible in matters of faith, even though it is possible to demonstrate the falsity of positions directly opposed to the faith. This means that while matters of faith cannot themselves be demonstrated by human reason, still they cannot be demonstratively disproved. Sometimes, however, human reason is only persuasive and not demonstrative. It is persuasive when it argues from analogies to the faith discoverable in nature or in human relationships, even though the argument stops short of evidence. Where the faith is concerned there can be no resolution of conclusions into first principles that are evident to the intellect. Faith, and not reason is the guiding principle of every theological activity whose starting point is a voluntary act of assent and not a self-evident principle.

Third, we can sin by forgetting our limitations and attempting to go beyond our capacity in our investigation of divine things. Besides the absolute limitations of a creature, St. Thomas recognizes the relative limitations of every one who would undertake this high pursuit. In an age of democracy it takes courage, as well as humility, to admit that all men are not created equal in mental endowments, so that all, including the theologian, have need of the warning given by St. Paul: "Not to be more wise than it behoveth to be wise, but to be wise unto sobriety and according as God hath divided to everyone the measure of faith."¹ At the end of the first century St. Clement of Rome echoes this warning in his epistle to the Corinthians: "The greater the knowledge that has been vouchsafed us, the greater also the danger to which we are exposed."

Granted that we have successfully escaped falling into these three sins in our pursuit of divine truth, we must be prepared for a disappointment in our study of scientific theology that is greater than the disappointment felt by the metaphysician. Every created intellect has a natural craving for knowledge that cannot be satisfied short of a vision of the first truth, which is God. The science of theology may follow the outward pattern of other sciences in

¹ *Romans*, 12:3. St. Thomas treats of this matter in *In Boet. de Trin.*, q. II, a. 1, and ad 5.

proceeding correctly from principles to conclusions by way of reasoning and inference, but it starts with a handicap from the standpoint of knowledge that cannot be overcome so long as it remains true to itself as a science built on faith. From the standpoint of its object faith is nobler than natural science, just as it ranks higher from the standpoint of certitude. From the standpoint of its subject, however, St. Thomas does not scruple to give a lower ranking to faith than to natural knowledge or science. By definition it is an imperfect kind of knowledge, since it lacks vision and evidence.² Faith postulates an obscure content; if this obscurity were to disappear, faith would disappear with it. A lack of evidence does not characterize the principles of other sciences which are either evident in themselves or can be reduced to self-evident principles.

If we may speak of the misery of metaphysics or natural theology because it tends toward an object it cannot attain, how much greater will be the misery of one who even lacks the vision of the first principles of his science that the metaphysician possesses? No matter how firm the assent or strong the certitude, because of the transcendent authority of the one who is revealing, a tendency, a longing for understanding always remains at the heart of faith that cannot be satisfied until faith yields to vision.³ If natural theology points to an object which it cannot reach, sacred theology proceeds from a starting point which it does not see, much less understand. The natural desire to know is impatient under this restraint, but the misery it causes in the mind and heart of the believer and theologian is part of the price he must pay for being only human.

The Aristotelian concept of science imposes further restrictions upon sacred theology which make it difficult to classify much that goes on under the name of theology. A science as such is not concerned with establishing its principles; it accepts them and by discursive reasoning draws conclusions from them which were virtually contained in these principles. What then shall we do with theological activities whose method is not discursive reasoning or whose aim is not the drawing out of conclusions from the articles of faith? Positive theology, including biblical and patristic theology, with its

² *Summa theologiae*, I-II, q. 67, a. 3.

³ *In III Sent.*, d. 23, q. 2, a. 2, q. 1, 1, ad 2. Cf. sol. 3, ad 2.

critico-historical method, has grown in importance over the years; yet it is concerned far more with establishing the witness of Scripture and tradition to the articles of faith than with drawing out the virtualities of revelation. When the theologian is showing that a truth is contained explicitly or implicitly in Scripture, or manifesting the testimony of the Fathers to it, or proving that it has been solemnly defined by the Church in a Council or by an *ex cathedra* definition, he is certainly doing a theological work; yet he is not drawing conclusions from revealed principles. Even when the theologian deduces conclusions from their principles he does not always act in strict conformity with the methods of his science. The argument from convenience plays a large part in speculative and practical theology, a part whose importance is becoming more and more evident as times goes on. In explaining the mysteries of the faith we are certainly engaged in an activity that is properly theological, even though we must fall back on analogies and remote similarities when a strict demonstration is impossible.

The theologian does not even hesitate to enter fields which seem altogether foreign to his science. He takes issue with the philosopher, with the anthropologist, with physical scientists of almost every description, with the historian, with social and economic theorists. In doing this he is not necessarily or always drawing out the virtualities of his principles but challenging principles and conclusions of sciences other than his own. Does not this indicate that theology is something more than a science in the Aristotelian sense of the term? As a science it is limited by its principles and by its method. What it cannot do as a science, however, it can do as a wisdom.

Wisdom has something in common with every science: it can demonstrate conclusions drawn from principles. Besides this, wisdom has a work that is distinctive and proper to itself. It can pass judgment on all the sciences, not only on their conclusions but also on their principles, including its own. To consider principles alone, apart from conclusions, is the work of understanding. To take into consideration principles together with the conclusions that may be drawn from them is the function of science. Wisdom is higher than understanding and science because it can pass judgment both on

the conclusions of science and on its principles. Theology as a wisdom passes judgment on any science that questions or denies its own principles, which are the articles of faith. This important work the science of theology cannot do, since no science establishes its own principles but accepts them from a higher science. The proper method of theology as a wisdom is not demonstration but judgment. It is a judgment that comes from *studium* rather than as a gift of the Holy Spirit, although there is nothing to prevent the simultaneous presence of both these wisdoms as they were in St. Thomas the theologian and saint. To explain, prove, and defend the principles of theology is clearly the task of theological wisdom and not of the science of theology as such.

Only the recognition of theology as a wisdom can explain its invasion of other fields beyond the limited area occupied by the science of theology. The Encyclical *Humani generis* of August 12, 1950, continues to give offense to many who fail to recognize the "wisdom function" of theology and who regard it at best as only another special science. As a science it should mind its own business and not presume to dictate in the field of philosophy, of the natural sciences, of history, of anthropology, of Scriptural exegesis, of sociology of politics, and of political economy. The complaint would be just if theology were coterminous with a scientific reasoning process that is solely concerned with deducing conclusions from revealed premises. Theology, however, is much wider than the science of theology. It is above all a wisdom acquired by study, and as such it can pass judgment on every affirmation or denial that bears in any way upon revealed truth or upon the conclusions that the science of theology is able to infer from these revealed principles. It is the grandeur of theology as a wisdom to be free from the limitations imposed by the strictly scientific method, so that it is able to pass judgment on all other sciences in the light of divine revelation.

St. Thomas Aquinas is without question the outstanding example of the scientific theologian; yet who has taken more pains to make clear that theology is more than a science, it is a wisdom as well? As a wisdom it can judge, order, direct, and use all the philosophical sciences in accordance with its end. In this he was simply reflecting the attitude of the Church in her handling of theological questions.

The theology that is exercised by the Holy See is an exercise of wisdom, not of science. The Church does not argue with heresy or error; she judges it. The Encyclical *Humani generis* itself is an excellent illustration of theological wisdom. The Supreme Pontiff expressly states that he is passing judgment on many matters pertaining to a variety of special sciences, even apart from the exercise of his supreme teaching authority. In an address delivered in Rome on November 2, 1954, the Holy Father again stresses the sapiential function of the doctrinal authority of the Church for the benefit of those who would measure this authority by the yardstick of strictly scientific demonstration:

The power of the Church is not bound by the limits of matters strictly religious, as they say, but the whole matter of the natural law, its foundation, its interpretation, its application, so far as their moral aspects extend, are within the Church's power. For the keeping of the natural law, by God's appointment, has reference to the road by which man has to approach his supernatural end. But, on this road, the Church is man's guide and guardian in what concerns his supreme end. . . . Therefore, when it is a question of instructions which the properly constituted shepherds publish on matters within the natural law, the faithful must not invoke that saying which is won't to be employed with respect to opinions of individuals: 'The strength of the authority is no more than the strength of the arguments.' Hence, even though to someone certain declarations of the Church may not seem proved by the arguments put forward, his obligation to obey still remains. This was the mind, and these are the words of St. Pius X in his Encyclical Letter *Singulari quadam* of September 24, 1912: 'Whatever a Christian man may do, even in affairs of this world, he may not ignore the supernatural; nay, he must direct all to the highest good as to his last end, in accordance with the dictates of Christian wisdom; but all his actions, in so far as they are morally good or evil, that is, agree with, or are in opposition to, divine and natural law, are subject to the judgment and authority of the Church.' And he immediately transfers this principle to the social sphere: 'The social question and the controversies underlying that question . . . are not merely of an economic nature, and consequently such as can be settled while the Church's authority is ignored, since, on the contrary, it is most certain that this question is primarily a moral and religious one, and on that account must be settled chiefly in accordance with the moral law and judgment based on religion.'

Many and serious are the problems in the social field—whether

they may be merely social or socio-political, they pertain to the moral order and are of concern to conscience and the salvation of men; thus they cannot be declared outside the authority and care of the Church. Indeed, there are problems outside the social field, not strictly religious, political problems, of concern either to individual nations or to all nations, which belong to the moral order and weigh on the conscience, and can, and very often do, hinder the attainment of man's last end. Such are: the purpose and limits of temporal authority; the relations between the individual and society; the so-called totalitarian state, whatever be the principle it is based on; the complete laicization of the State and of public life; the complete laicization of schools; war, its morality, liceity or non-liceity when engaged as it is today, and whether a conscientious person may give or withhold his cooperation in it; the moral relationships which bind and rule the various nations.

Common sense, and truth as well, are contradicted by whoever asserts that these and like problems are outside the field of morals, and hence are, or at least can be, beyond the influence of that authority established by God to see to a just order and to direct the consciences and actions of men along the path to their true and final destiny.⁴

The wisdom required to pass equitable judgments in these various fields is more than the wisdom of faith or the gift of wisdom which the Christian man possesses as a result of his guidance by the Holy Spirit of God. The Church, especially her visible head, in addition makes use of the wisdom of theology to help her in facing these complex problems of the speculative and practical order and judging them in the light of man's nature as a moral being and in view of his supernatural destiny.

The exercise of wisdom in these judgments gives us a clue to the attitude of the theologian to the world in which he lives. Sometimes the charge is made that theology as it has been known and taught up to the present is too essentialist; the theologian is too preoccupied with abstract concepts and deductive reasoning, all of which has little to do with the real world in which we live. The theology of the future must be more existential if it is to be a living force in the intellectual and moral lives of men.

⁴ English translation from *The authority of the Church in temporal matters*, N.C.W.C., pp. 12-13.

Many things could be said about this attitude, but for the present this must suffice. If theology were only a science in the Aristotelian sense of the term and nothing more, we could see some foundation for the charge that it is overly essentialist. After all, science must deal with the universal and not with the individual as such; it is more preoccupied with discovering the nature or essence of a thing than the fact that it exists. Theology too as a science must make use of discursive reasoning if it is to progress in its intelligible grasp of revealed truth and develop its implicit content. This, however, is not the whole story of theology. It comes to grips with the concrete, existing situation in which men are living and thinking and acting by the judgments it passes on these activities when they come into actual contact with divine truth. Not all judgments analyse an essence; many are existential and deal with what is actually present or taking place in the world around us. Theology as a wisdom is existential, but not in the impossible sense of some modern existentialists for whom existence means that action and natures and essences have no meaning or reality except as a consequence of existence in this activist sense. The existential wisdom of theology does not attempt to deprive science of its natural priority over the applications that are made of it in the order of individual existing reality. Theological wisdom, unlike the higher infused spiritual wisdom, is based on *studium*, and *studium* implies a thorough grasp of the science of theology, its revealed principles as well as the conclusions that can be drawn from them. It is no more possible to have a theology that is purely existential than it is to have an existence separated from its correlative essence.

In the practical order the application of principles to contingent existing cases is the function of prudence, which is a practical wisdom. In the speculative order wisdom performs the same function in the judgments it passes on the principles and conclusions of the various subordinate sciences. Theology as a wisdom is in constant contact with the never-ending stream of opinions, views, theories, policies, commitments, or undertakings that impinge in any way upon man's moral or divine truth. The science of theology enables the theologian to be more than a scientist, for it gives him the understanding of revealed truth that is possible and necessary to have if he is to exercise

the sapiential function of judging the passing scene from the highest standpoint from which it can be viewed by an intelligence that is illumined by divine revelation.

Theology may have its misery as a science, but it is a misery that flows inevitably from our condition as exiles who must live by faith and not by sight. Yet even in exile theology has its grandeur. As a wisdom it can apply to itself the words of St. Paul which he spoke of spiritual wisdom: "The spiritual man judges all things, and he himself is judged of no man."⁵ The only difference lies in the source of these two wisdoms; for in the spiritual man it comes as a gift of the Holy Spirit, while in the theologian it results from his study of divine things. Theology cannot abandon its science without losing the source from which its wisdom flows. Its wisdom keeps it in close contact with the actual problems of human existence and points the way to their solution in the light of divine truth.

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⁵ 1 Cor. 2:15.