

THE UNITY OF THEOLOGY

An article in the current issue of *Theological Studies* by John Thornhill of the Society of Mary (sent, by the way, from a town with the fascinating name of Toongabbie in New South Wales) is entitled, "Towards an Integral Theology." His principal concern is the relationship between biblical studies and scholastic theology. He notes:

There is a tendency on the part of some to speak of "biblical categories" as if they were opposed to "Aristotelian categories," as if theology must ultimately settle upon the choice of one or the other; (p. 268)

And he states,

It is the conclusion of this paper that the presentation of the mystery of salvation to the world should be in terms of the sacred history of the inspired word of God, but that this presentation will only be safeguarded and balanced when an understanding of the terms of the mysteries proclaimed has been provided by the labors of a genuine systematic theology (p. 269).

One more quotation:

To speak of "Scholastic categories" as thought-forms which have a passing convenience, to treat them as an alternative to the biblical categories, is to open the door to a devastating relativism, to a "many-truth" outlook which is quite incompatible with the realism inseparable from the intellectual commitment required by divine faith (p. 271).

It is the opinion of Thornhill that a well-rounded theology must proceed from "positive theology" in which the terms of revelation are sought, through "systematic theology" in which the ultimate intelligibility of the terms is investigated, to "pastoral theology" in which the Christian mysteries are understood in their practical application.

We have the good fortune to be theologians in a period of tremendous theological vitality, a time which will probably figure in the history of theology as one of great productivity. Whenever there is a great breakthrough in the history of theology issues are seriously clouded for contemporaries by those who take a stand, intransigent and unrealistic, based on misunderstanding, prejudice and ignorance. The last people in the world to condemn, reject or down-grade the current magnificent florescence of Scriptural studies and of positive theology generally are truly competent scholastic theologians; and the last to write off scholastic theology as useless and out of date are the genuinely productive positive theologians and biblical scholars. Yet not a few so-called scholastics, shaken by the popularity, vitality and "intrusion" into an area they had smugly considered their exclusive preserve have longed for the stake and kerosene pot. They have rejected and condemned what they do not understand.

On the other hand, some "teachers of theology" (a famous European theologian recently remarked that the United States has no theologians, only teachers of theology), whose impression of scholasticism came from a manual (and often one of the worst of them) have become excited by the newer biblical approach, have discovered in it a freshness and interest-catching confrontation of reality which they never found in the decadent scholasticism wherein what was commonplace to the great scholastics is forgotten, namely that theology is deeply involved with reality; it is not a game of words. (Cf. St. Thomas: "The act of the believer does not terminate in a proposition, but in a thing." II-II, q.1, art. 2, ad 2.) In this excitement, in this thrill of discovery, some have spoken as if scholastic or systematic theology were no more than a medieval game which should be of interest only to antiquarians.

As Père Chenu notes, every adult Christian is a theologian. "The theologian is an adult Christian who, taking cognizance of what he possesses, reflects upon it, analyses the complex content of his faith, builds it up, unifies it." (*Is Theology a Science?*, p. 18.) Such reflection on the faith should, like any other matter of human cogitation, be subject to organization, to orderliness, to rules which flow

from the nature of the human mind and from the exigencies of the subject matter. Since, however, reflection on the faith leads the mind to its ultimate capacities and to the ultimate purposes for which man has a mind, such thought can be scientific only in a limited manner, but must perforce be far more than scientific. It must involve what the philosopher calls "wisdom," and indeed a wisdom far more profound than the philosopher could possibly muster, a wisdom which penetrates reality with all the power of the human mind enlightened by divine revelation. If there be no unity to such a wisdom (and even to such a science) there are only shots in the dark.

In principle then, only the most superficial theologian would deny the formal unity of theology. Père Daniélou says (*Catholic Mind*, June '62, pp. 27-8):

If on the cultural level, diversity enriches, it must be remembered that on the level of understanding, which is one, the mind tends to unity. Christian truth is not a totally inaccessible mystery of which the various systems can possess only equally inadequate views. It is revealed in Christ and defined in universal and lasting dogmas. Theology is concerned with this unified truth. At this level, unity is incomparably more important than diversity. . . .

Therefore, we must reject both a plurality that would be naive, and a unity that would be exclusive. This is always the case in the intellectual life. Knowledge is one. There are not really several systems of reality. But by surmounting differences of opinion, the human mind advances towards a better grasp of the universe. Philosophy is one. No philosopher worthy of the name seeks anything less than a doctrine which will explain all being. And if he abandons this quest, it is only because he no longer believes in the mind or truth.

Likewise, theology is primarily one. There is a unique theology which progresses in its understanding of revelation. But within this unity all the resources of the human spirit work together. Theology's progress is irreversible; its acquisitions are definitive. But at the same time, it is a living science that uses all that can further its task.

Obviously, this task surpasses the ability of any one mind and calls for a certain plurality inasmuch as each theologian is able to highlight only one dimension of the total truth. But this

plurality is the expression of a common effort. It is the growth of a unique tree whose foliage becomes ever richer, whose life springs from the same roots, whose nourishment flows through the same trunk, whose branches reach out toward the same sun. In theology there is diversity because of the limits of the human mind; there is unity because of the greatness of the human mind.

Here we should note the relationship of true and valid specialization within the confines of an integral science. The specialist must remain attached to the trunk, the roots of his discipline; or his thought, his insights, his labors lose formal value and take on the elements of distortion so evident in the writing of some theologians with "fixations." Congar says (*DTC*, xv, 494),

Theology in itself is one, it has a unique formal object *quod* and *quo*, to know the mystery of God revealed to the extent that this can be achieved by the activity of the human reason beginning with faith. This definition which expresses the essential unity of theology, at the same time intimates the complexity of the elements which make it up: a positive notion highly complex, a truly scientific knowledge of which relies on many disciplines, on the work of reason, every possibility of development and of application. Theology, being wisdom, normally subordinates to its purposes many differing methods and points of view, without however, destroying their own autonomy.

Thus, the history of dogmas is history, not theology, as is patrology. Likewise, other disciplines used by the theologian retain their proper nature. The case of philosophy is a special one which is peripheral to our problem here. The role of apologetics, however, is an example of our problem. Is apologetics an integral part of theology? According to Garrigou-Lagrange it is; the way he defines apologetics it could not be otherwise. Père Gardeil, given the same context, would surely agree. Yet in the context in which he places apologetics he considers it a potential part of theology, among, in other words, the auxiliary sciences.

The particular aspects of the problem of the unity of theology which must be squarely faced today seem to arise from excessive

specialization and from apostolic zeal. Toward the end of the 15th century a disintegrating specialization began to appear. It did not dominate theological writing nor was it entirely unfortunate, but as time went on compartmentalization—biblical theology, fundamental theology, moral theology, dogmatic theology, mystical theology, scholastic theology, etc. came more and more to characterize theological writing. Three divisions, especially, became solidified and have worked harm to Christian thought. The sharp division made by many between scholastic and mystical theology tended to tear the development of the spiritual life away from sound theology. The sharp division between dogma and moral has resulted in generations of priests being taught a pseudo-legislation (kind of a Christian Mishnah) under the name of moral theology. The late 16th and early 17th century Spanish Jesuits (Azor, Henriquez, Sanchez, etc.) who gave the powerful impetus to the development of the moral manual had no intention of being innovators nor were they conscious of departing from traditional theology. Yet, as Congar remarks,

There is a great difference between this independent moral theology and the moral part of the older theology. (*DTC*, xv, 425.)

The pseudo-problem of the moral systems is a by-product of this attempt to establish a separate science of moral theology.

The distinction between positive and scholastic theology is found in the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius where positive theology is so called in the sense of moving to the heart, an affective approach to sacred truth. On the other hand, scholastic theology is looked upon as the scientific definition, explanation and defense of Christian truth. In the text of St. Ignatius they appear as two kinds or forms of theology, rather than as two functions of a common science. Melchior Cano, however, considers positive theology as that part of theology or that function of theology whereby it establishes its principles (a function of wisdom). Great impetus was given in the late 16th century to the study of positive theology by the flourishing of humanistic scholarship and by the press of heresy. The distinction is an established one today, and perhaps the most pressing problem

of modern theology is to blend positive and scholastic theology to a common finality.

It seems to me that any mode of presenting theological truth, or any function of theology, or any area of theological investigation loses its vitality (and therefore its full validity) to the extent that it consciously or unconsciously seeks to set itself up as independent of the unified whole which is the science whereby the human mind seeks to penetrate revealed truth. There is surely room, for example, for difference of emphasis and in mode of presentation when theology is taught to the seminarian, to the religious woman, or to the lay student. But if these differences are not simply various manifestations of one science they render themselves meaningless effusions suspended in mid-air. The science and wisdom which is theology is indescribably rich, rich as the furthest limitations of the human mind enlightened by faith, but unless all its parts and functions and presentations are anchored to an objective reality which is one as God is one, as revelation is one, as valid human thought is one, they are the babblings of the idiots (in the classical Greek sense).

(*Note:* The possibility of exploring and explaining revelation in terms of a philosophy other than that which has its roots in Greek philosophy is neither affirmed nor denied by anything said here. That is another question. Were it possible it would in no sense render invalid or less valid the developments already achieved, nor would it be a new theology.)

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