

REVOLUTION IN CATHOLIC THEOLOGY*

I may assume, no doubt, that everyone is aware of the profound changes that have occurred in the thought of Catholic theologians during the present century. But to enumerate in detail just what changes have occurred in the thought of individual theologians seemed to me to be just a long litany that presupposed a great deal of not very illuminating research. So I have been led to think it more profitable to inquire into the causes of such change and to estimate which changes have come to stay.

Now it is in the area of scholarship—of the linguist, the exegete, the historian—that the most startling changes have occurred in Catholic theology. More rapidly in the fields of patristic and medieval studies, more slowly in the field of Scripture, there gradually have been accepted and put into practice new techniques in investigating the course of history, new procedures in interpreting texts, new and more exacting requirements in the study of languages. The result of these innovations has been to eliminate the old style dogmatic theologian. For the old style dogmatic theologian was expected 1) to qualify his theses by appealing to papal and conciliar documents from any period in Church history and 2) to prove his theses by arguing from the Old Testament and the New, from the Greek, Latin, and Syriac fathers, from the Byzantine and medieval scholastics, and from all the subsequent generations of theologians. But the new techniques in history, the new procedures in interpretation, the new requirements in the study of languages reveal the performance of the old style dogmatic theologian to be simply out of date. For the new techniques, procedures, requirements demand specialization. They demand that opinions be based on full knowledge. They consider it self-evident that one man cannot know all there is to be known either on the Old Testament or the New, either on the Greek or on the Latin or on the Syriac fathers; and, as the same holds for the Byzantine and the medieval scholastics and for their later suc-

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cessors, the old style dogmatic theologian has simply become obsolete.

There are further and far more general consequences. Culture used to be conceived normatively. It was something that ought to be, and accordingly, *de iure* if not *de facto*, there was just one culture for all mankind. It was the fruit of being brought up in a good home, of studying Latin and Greek at school, of admiring the immortal works of literature and art of the classical period, of adhering to the perennial philosophy, and of finding in one's laws and institutions the deposit of the prudence and the wisdom of mankind. But exploration, anthropology, the proper interpretation of texts, and the composition of critical histories have given currency to an empirical notion of culture. A culture is simply the set of meanings and values that inform the way of life of a community. Cultures can decline rapidly, but they develop only slowly, for development is a matter of coming to understand new meanings and coming to accept higher values. Moreover, any notable culture has a long history: it has borrowed from other cultures; it has adapted what it borrowed into its new context; it has effected the development of its own patrimony. Cultures are many and varied; they all have their good points and their deficiencies; and the ideal culture is far far rarer than the ideal man.

To grasp the empirical notion of culture leads to a grasp of what is meant by a person's historicity. What counts in a person's life is what he does and says and thinks. But all human doing, saying, thinking occurs within the context of a culture and consists in the main in using the culture. But cultures change; they wax and wane; meanings become refined or blunted; value-judgements improve or deteriorate. In brief, cultures have histories. It is the culture as it is historically available that provides the matrix within which persons develop and that supplies the meanings and values that inform their lives. People cannot help being people of their age, and that mark of time upon them is their historicity.

What I have been saying has considerable importance in the Church's task of preaching the Gospel to all nations. A classicist could feel that he conferred a double benefit on those to whom he preached if he not only taught them the Gospel but also let them

partake in the riches of the one and only culture. But the empirical notion of culture puts an entirely different light on the matter. The preacher's task now becomes one of inserting the Gospel within a culture in which it has not been known. To make it known there, there must be found in the local language the potentialities for expressing the Gospel message, and it is by developing these potentialities and not by imposing an alien culture that the mission will succeed.

There are further implications to the shift from a normative to an empirical apprehension of culture. For the normative apprehension projects upon laws and institutions a permanence and rigidity that the study of history finds to be illusory. From the normative viewpoint one will think of the Church as a *societas perfecta*, a perfect society endowed with all the powers necessary for its autonomy. From the empirical viewpoint one will conceive the Church, as in the *Handbuch der Pastoraltheologie*, as a *Selbstvollzug*, as an ongoing process of self-realization, as an ongoing process in which the constitutive, the effective, and the cognitive meaning of Christianity is continuously realized in ever changing situations.

There are not a few writers who assert that the normative view of culture and the universal uniformity it implies derive from Greek thought and, specifically, from Greek philosophy. And while I believe it is true that the Greek philosophers did not know about the techniques developed by more recent exegetes and historians, it remains that a more exact understanding of the normative approach is to be had by turning from the Greek philosophers to the humanists, the orators, the school-teachers, to the men who simplified and watered down philosophic thought and then peddled it to give the slow-witted an exaggerated opinion of their wisdom and knowledge. After all, from a contemporary viewpoint it seems an incredible conceit to suppose that one's own culture is the one and only uniform and universal culture.

However that may be, we must go on to further sources of change in the thought of Catholic theologians. Not only is it true that the Greek philosophers did not foresee the implications of contemporary hermeneutics and history. It also is true that they did not grasp contemporary notions of science and of philosophy. Only in the nineteenth century was it recognized that Euclid's *Elements* was, not the

one and only geometry, but just one out of many possible geometries. Only more recently did mathematicians deduce their conclusions not from necessary truths but from suitable postulates. For years physicists proclaimed the necessary laws of nature, but less than fifty years ago they began to speak of the statistical probabilities of quantum theory. Even economists spoke of the iron laws of economics, only eventually to renounce them and turn their hand to advising bureaucrats on the probable results of this or that course of action. There has emerged a new notion of what a science is, and it in no way corresponds to the knowledge of the cause, knowledge that it is the cause, and knowledge that the effect cannot be other than it is, that is set forth in Aristotle's *Posterior Analytics*.

The content of modern scientific doctrine is not an intelligibility that is necessary but an intelligibility that is 1) possible and 2) probably verified. Moreover, to give an account of a modern science one cannot be content to list logical operations, that is, operations with respect to terms, propositions, and inferences. The modern scientist does perform logical operations: he defines, formulates, infers. But he also observes, discovers, experiments. Moreover, the two sets of operations are interdependent. Discoveries are expressed in definitions and formulations. Inferences from formulations are checked by observations and experiments. Checking by observation and experiment can give rise to new discoveries, and the new discoveries in turn generate new definitions and formulations to make science not an unchanging system but an ever ongoing process.

There is a further departure from Aristotle in modern science. Aristotle wanted the sciences to derive their basic terms from metaphysics. Potency and act, matter and form, substance and accident were key concepts. Such sciences as physics or psychology obtained further key concepts proper to their respective fields by adding appropriate further determinations to the metaphysical basic terms. In contrast, modern science sets up its own basic terms; it does so by deriving them from empirically established laws; and such are the concepts of mass, temperature, the electromagnetic field, the elements of the periodic table, the branching of the evolutionary tree.

Now when the modern procedure is adopted in cognitional psychology, then one's basic terms will refer to conscious operations and one's basic relations will refer to conscious relations between opera-

tions. Through such basic terms and relations one can tell just what one is doing when one is coming to know. From such cognitional theory one can go on to explain why doing that is knowing, and so arrive at an epistemology. From cognitional theory and epistemology one can go on to setting up a metaphysics, that is, to state in general what one knows when one does come to know. On this showing metaphysics ceases to be the first science on which all others depend. But ceasing to be the first science has its advantages, for now a metaphysics can be critically established; every statement it makes about reality can be validated by a corresponding cognitional operation that is verifiable.

We have been observing both in science and philosophy a shift from the intelligibility that is a necessity to the intelligibility that is a possibility and, as well, probably verified. Now this shift means the dethronement of speculative intellect or of pure reason. Neither the scientist nor the philosopher has at his disposal a set of necessary and self-evident truths. He has to observe external nature. He has to attend to his own internal operations and their relations to one another. Neither the observing nor the attending reveal necessity. They merely provide the data in which insight may discern possible relationships, and which further experience may confirm as *de facto* valid.

The dethronement of speculative intellect has been a general trend in modern philosophy. Empirical science led to empiricist philosophy. Empiricist philosophy awoke Kant from his dogmatic slumbers. The German absolute idealists, Fichte, Schelling, Hegel, attempted to restore speculative reason to her throne, but their success was limited. Kierkegaard took his stand on faith, Schopenhauer wrote on the world as will and representation, Newman toasted conscience, Dilthey wanted a *Lebensphilosophie*, Blondel wanted a philosophy of action, Ricoeur is busy with a philosophy of will, and in the same direction tend the pragmatists, the personalists, the existentialists.

I am far from thinking that this tendency is to be deplored. What once was named speculative reason today is simply the operations of the first three levels of consciousness—the operations of experiencing and inquiring, understanding and formulation, checking and judging. These operations occur under the rule and guidance of

the fourth level, the level of deliberating, evaluating, deciding. Philosophers and scientists recognize this fact when they deliberate about the proper method to be followed in their work.

I have said that contemporary hermeneutics and history have made the old style dogmatic theologian obsolete. I have gone on to argue that the contemporary notion of science and its consequences in forming the notion of philosophy are quite different from the notions entertained up to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It is not only the old style dogmatic theologian that is obsolete. It also is true that the old style dogmatic theologian cannot be replaced on the basis of old style notions of science and of philosophy.

What the new style is to be, I cannot prophesy. But perhaps I should mention what I tend to think. First, then, there is going to be a lot less metaphysics. It has ceased to be the basic and universal science, the *Grund- und Gesamt-wissenschaft*. General theological terms will find their roots in cognitional theory. Specific theological terms will find their roots in religious experience. There will be far less talk about proofs, and there will be far more about conversion, intellectual conversion, moral conversion, religious conversion. The emphasis will shift from the levels of experiencing, understanding, and judging, to the level of deliberating, evaluating, deciding, loving.

In the present century, then, theology is undergoing a profound change. It is comparable in magnitude to the change that occurred in the middle ages, that began with Anselm's speculative thrust, Abelard's hard-headed *Sic et non*, the Lombard's *Sentences*, the technique of the *Quaestio*, and the fusion of these elements in the ongoing process of commentaries on the *Sentences*, *Quaestiones disputatae*, and the various *Summae*. Then, without any explicit advertence to the fact, theology operated on the basis of a method. For over a century it brought forth precious fruits. To theology as governed by method and as an ongoing process the present situation points. If that pointing is accurate and effective, then the contemporary revolution in theology also will have the character of a restoration.

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