

# Theology in Europe today

*Peter Hünermann*

**T**HEOLOGY IS A MANY-FACETED EVENT. It is concerned with faith in God, reflection on that faith and giving accountable explanations of faith. It is concerned with the witness of revelation, with the Church and its history, its institutions and its praxis. Involved in the activity of theology are any number of individuals and groups, from lecturers and bishops to publishers and editorial boards. These are only some of the external aspects. But to do theology in Europe today? The question can only be answered in terms of the convergence of a number of factors. Five observations will serve to give a rough impression.

## *Variety and concentration – a testing point for theology today*

When Bernard Lonergan published his *Method in theology* thirty years ago, the attentive reader was suddenly made aware of the whole complexity of modern theology, its different questions, its amalgam of methods and means of explanation.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, it was shown how difficult it was to trace all the linking and interconnecting structural lines. Both moments, the increase in the complexity of the questions and of the available methods, have multiplied. The different aims and forms of explanation have become increasingly divergent. One only has to think of doctoral dissertations in a theological faculty and the different themes that have been worked on in the various disciplines.

This increase in complexity has a double edge to it. Where theology is alive, it stands in mutual relation to the world of the sciences which is expanding exponentially. The change in social relations, the transformations in the economy and the market, the phenomenon of globalization, the impetus to innovation brought about by communications and information technologies, the rapid process of other technological changes: all these have had no less deep-rooted an effect on theology. One need only think of the vast number of ethical questions which have arisen out of the new biotechnologies.

Through the impact they have on traditional ways of understanding humankind and nature, scientific and social developments have an even deeper impact on church institutions. The Catholic Church – and the same would seem to be true for the Evangelical and Anglican Churches

– finds itself in Europe in a veritable process of corrosion. The vocations crisis amongst the diocesan clergy and in the religious orders is alarming. Crises lead to new problems. The traditional solutions are no longer satisfactory. At the same time these crises still demand convincing and fundamental answers.

To do theology in Europe today, therefore, is a matter of being confronted by an apparently paradoxical challenge. On the one hand, theology must busy itself with an immense number of new questions and problems. On the other, it is confronted by the challenge to concentrate more and more on the essential, so that, faced by the clear symptoms of crisis, it is able to give a convincing and uplifting account of faith.

European theology has sought, over the course of the last couple of decades, to be equal to these two challenges – on the one hand, by getting to grips with individual new questions setting out from a whole range of different starting points, and on the other by beginning the process of publishing textbooks again. It is a remarkable phenomenon that for almost twenty years after Vatican II practically no theological textbooks were published in the Roman Catholic Church. The reason was that the neo-scholastic books widely used up to that time had become obsolete. New, properly considered syntheses need time. Karl Rahner's work consists basically of a series of essays on individual questions and his *Foundations of Christian faith* has never become a textbook.<sup>2</sup> As a general rule, textbooks in the area of systematic theology today include more wide-ranging exegetical chapters in which something is illuminated by the different theologies which the Old and New Testaments offer. The parts concentrating on dogmatics and the history of theology often incorporate brief sketches of the social and historical context, in order to clarify the contemporary horizons of understanding. Only then do the more narrowly defined systematic contributions to the particular theme follow, incorporating today's scientific and social horizons of understanding. It is self-evident that ecumenical questions and aspects of interreligious dialogue will find their echo in such presentations. This is an arduous task, demanding time and reflection.

There are obviously differences in the approach to this task in the various European language areas. In Central and Eastern Europe – with the exception of Poland – the greatest effort is still focused on the laborious task of overcoming the ghetto situation into which theological institutes and faculties were forced up to the fall of the Berlin Wall. It is true that in Poland the Church and theologians enjoyed

noticeably more freedom and possibilities of communicating with the West than theologians in the other countries of the former Eastern Bloc. However, the fierce debate with communist ideology led to Polish theology being unable to enter into debate with more general scholarly developments to the extent that would have been desirable.

### *A new conception of the theological disciplines*

Until the end of Vatican II the theological concept which had been followed in most European centres of formation and theological faculties was that which had found its expression in the Apostolic Constitution *Deus scientiarum dominus*.<sup>3</sup> It saw theology as dogma with some connected theses from fundamental theology. The other theological disciplines, especially the historical ones, were aids which the dogmatic declarations were expected to confirm and enrich. Moral theology represented the application of theology to praxis. Although this description is somewhat rough, it does provide some indication of that older way of conceiving theology. Beginning in the nineteenth century another conception of the disciplines had been formed in the German-speaking faculties. Here the individual disciplines, such as exegesis, church history, practical theology, moral theology, etc., were considered as independent *theological* disciplines. This view only prevailed definitively in the 1980's. This process is inextricably linked to the change in understanding of theological method which found its most important expression in the previously cited work of Bernard Lonergan.

The fact that in the various disciplines different forms of theology were worked out, by means of historical or philological methods, by means of a communications theory approach, etc., obliged the different disciplines to listen very closely to one another. Overall it has led to a transformation of the leading concepts in the different theological disciplines. What follows are a few pointers and examples.

In Old Testament exegesis, at least as far as the continental European Old Testament scholars were concerned, into the seventies and eighties the dominant view belonged to Gerhard von Rad. This view, which encompassed a certain temporal ordering of the different text groups of the Old Testament, has been fundamentally revised in the past two decades by the work of Catholic and Protestant exegetes. Historical and archaeological investigations, more thorough research into the social history of Israel, etc., have contributed to this shift. The first fruits of the new interpretation are manifest in works of Old Testament commen-

tary, which, after a time of research on individual points, are now beginning to appear.

A similar paradigm shift has been seen in the New Testament with the loosening of the reins held by Bultmann and Käsemann. The christologies of the individual New Testament writings have gained new attention. The effects on systematic theology in the area of teaching about God, christology, but also ecclesiology, are considerable. In the area of church history whole new fields of work are being tackled: the history of piety and church social history have contributed to an essential enrichment and deepening of the history of theology and dogma. The changes in judgements about the councils are notable and their effects are felt in the area of systematic theology.

The work of fundamental theologians and dogmatists has changed to the extent that they are concerned with the different ways of understanding faith which are presented in the Old and New Testaments and the different stages of tradition. They are faced with the task of working out the essential elements of faith from this historical richness of forms, and of giving this understanding a form which corresponds to contemporary life. Dogmatics calls for great creativity on the part of the theologian, as well as a good knowledge of the tradition and of contemporary life.

A serious impediment to this work is presented by the widespread failure of dialogue between fundamental and dogmatic theologians and the Roman Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith. This would point to the urgent need for structural reform.

In the area of moral theology, of ethics and social ethics, there are not only innumerable new questions which have surfaced. In the past two decades important debates have also been carried on regarding the most basic of questions. At the centre of this debate are many questions about the place of historicity in the formation of norms, questions about the anthropological and cultural transmission of these norms, and more exact determination of the relationship between biblical injunctions and people's practical reason.

Pastoral theology has largely moved away from being concerned with teaching pastoral abilities and skills to include a basic reflection on the praxis of the Church in its different fields of operation. New theoretical principles have been set down here, and at the same time some quite differentiated as well as critical reflections on ecclesial praxis have been elaborated.

Since the introduction of the new Code the practice of Canon Law has faced problems. The translation of the fruits of Vatican II into the

existing legal order required wide-ranging clarifications and an extrapolation from the existing church law. To that must be added the fact that the Roman and universal church administration and government practice stand in a certain tension to existing systems of law. Ongoing questions have to do especially with the development of independent local church law and its relation to the universal law of the church.

### *Some themes – focal points for theology*

After this brief look at the disciplines of theology, let me turn to some observations on contemporary thematic fields in theology. If, in what follows, certain themes of contemporary theology are presented in a very selective way, this is because I see them as focal points of interest which concern theologians of the various disciplines. They are themes which result from the overall situation of the Church in modern society, from the questions of people in today's world. Individual disciplines contribute to the elaboration of these themes in different ways. As a witness to this new type of theological work one may point to the numerous collections in which exegetes, dogmatists, philosophers, moral theologians, etc., take a position on a given theme from the viewpoint of their different disciplines.

Firstly, there is the question of God. At the centre of Vatican II stood the question about the Church. The central question in theology today concerns God. Faced with the rupture in transmission in the passing on of the faith, something which is clearly demonstrable in contemporary European society, questions about God, his presence and his absence, are raised in a quite new way in our history. The Old Testament texts, theological reflection on the great catastrophes of European history, such as the Holocaust, play a decisive role.

There are investigations into how social relations and the domination of economic thought determine modern lifestyles and thus evoke ideological displays of belief in God which more closely resemble idol-worship. Closely tied in with the question about God and the rootless religiosity which leads people in Europe to grasp hold of the esoteric and similar practices, is the question about the spirituality of individuals and groups and the mode of its transmission. Clearly some wholly new requirements for the credibility of faith are displayed here. The challenges of modern life, the difficulty of maintaining one's personal bearings, the practice and formation of a believing lifestyle, all are questions which confront theology in manifold new ways.

A second question concerns Jesus Christ. A significant selection of themes is formed by questions which face christology and soteriology. They too are raised today in wider contexts. The significance and relationship of Israel and the Christian, the question of the relationship between the old and new covenants, questions about dialogue with different religions and the way in which the Councils and patristic christology can be reconciled with modern thought, all come into play. They and other wide-ranging questions can only be alluded to here. Together this group of questions likewise encompasses the different theological disciplines. It leads directly into quite fundamental discussions about the contemporary orientation of human beings. On what grounds should people be educated in public school and education systems? What is the most inspiring image of human existence? How should Jesus Christ – the reflection and image of God – be witnessed to and proclaimed today?

A third thematic group concerns questions about ecclesiology. Since Vatican II a huge number of innovations have arisen. The question about the relationship of the universal and local churches, the need for greater independence of the local churches against a centralizing tendency, this is indeed a huge question. The ecclesial offices must be reorganized. All of this touches on the understanding of the office of the Pope, and of the sacraments, and is inextricably linked with a whole series of ecumenical questions. The present Pope himself has spoken about the necessity of a new formulation for the Petrine office in his encyclical *Ut unum sint*. Clearly what is not being commended here is a 'return' ecumenism. But just how is church unity in diversity to be conceived and structured? The multi-faceted 'landscape' of the eastern churches must also be taken into consideration here, alongside new developments amongst the major churches stemming from the Reformation and the countless new, small ecclesial communities which are rapidly gaining ground everywhere. Here completely new theological and practical challenges are faced in working for unity.

Finally we can name at least two themes which belong to the realms of moral theology and social ethics respectively, but which extend to the whole of theology: bio-science and social, ethical questions. First the development in the so-called new 'bio-sciences'. Here we are dealing not just with huge problems in relation to the way in which humankind deals with the now decoded genomes of plants, animals and human beings. There are also new questions to do with understanding the significance of this revolution for the theological theme of creation. Theological anthropology finds itself facing new challenges. Equally

far-reaching questions arise in the face of the mass phenomenon of poverty and marginalization of whole groups of peoples, especially in the southern hemisphere and the transformation of the modern labour process in the northern hemisphere. Not only do these serious social issues raise ethical questions, they also force us to consider the place and mission of the church in the world today. These problems, already addressed by *Gaudium et spes*, have in the present situation become more sharply defined and more insoluble.

### *People and institutions*

The practice of theology includes theologians, teachers and students, faculties and institutions. Only a few decades ago theological institutes served simply for the formation of future priests. Today the picture is very different. The number of seminaries falls year by year. Even the large seminary in Dublin has had to close. Today candidates for the priesthood and lay people, men and women, young religious sisters and pensioners increasingly study theology together. The vocational perspectives of those who study are equally varied. Different tasks are performed in parishes and dioceses, but also in the print media, in the area of radio and television, culture, management and education. Theologians are not only employed in schools, but also nowadays in the direction of professional further education courses and even in the personnel departments of firms.

The community of college and university lecturers is today as colourful a mixture as the student body: thankfully there is a growing number of women among professors of theology who through their new focal points have fundamentally enriched and built up theology.

As the mix of theologians and theology students has changed, so also have the places of formation. After Vatican II, in individual European countries, theological faculties under church ownership were founded within Catholic universities or even in the context of state universities. Italy, Spain and the Netherlands can be mentioned by way of example. Hard work has seen to it that these faculties have in the meantime earned a good reputation. It is notable how strongly co-operation between ecclesial faculties and state university institutions has occurred. The ecclesial theology faculty in Milan, for example, co-operates closely with the Brera, the State Academy of Art in Milan. In such co-operative relationships is seen not only the openness of theologians and of theological questioning to the wider area of knowledge and culture, but also the recognition of theology and its hermeneutic,

disclosing the theological potential of other disciplines. The setting-up of graduate boards across faculties, the European 'Erasmus' and 'Socrates' programmes and building networks, have all accelerated this process of interaction and exchange.

In Central and Eastern Europe different paths have been followed. So, for example, in the University of Vilnius there is an Institute for Religious Studies, whilst in Kaunas, also in Lithuania, a theology faculty has been founded. In Poland it was initially only ecclesial faculties which were given official backing. Over the course of the past few years the ecclesial faculties in Posen and in Opeln have been integrated into the state university. There is a parallel development in Slovenia and Croatia. It comes as no surprise that with all this institutionalized co-operation and building up of networks there is now very close collaboration between the Evangelical, Reformed and Anglican theologians and faculties on the one hand, and the Catholic theologians and faculties on the other. Over against this, there is a more urgent need to strengthen links with the Orthodox theological institutes. The spread eastwards of the European Union will clearly accelerate the processes outlined above.

### *Theology and church – a new rapprochement?*

At the beginning of Romans Paul sums up his message, the Gospel, thus: 'It is the power of God who saves the one who believes, first the Jews, but then also the Greeks. For in the Gospel the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith, as it says in the Scriptures: "The one who believes from faith will live"' (Rom 1.16f).

The above sketch and overview of contemporary theology shows one thing clearly: theology today is a vast spiritual endeavour on the part of believers to see the modern world in the light and from the perspective of 'the righteousness of God', 'from faith to faith'. In this endeavour both theology and church have been transformed. In modern society theology and church come together in a new dialogue. Theology and the other sciences do indeed remain clearly separated and yet they are also inextricably linked to each other. They move in the same spiritual space. Something analogous is true for the dialogue between Church and society. The danger that theology will be absorbed in this process must undoubtedly be admitted. But theology cannot protect itself against this danger by standing aside and forming a ghetto. It displays its own particular contribution much more if in the world of the sciences it becomes a leaven for the orientation of the modern world. Is

this way not also the way of the Church? This way represents a fascinating mission.

**Peter Hünermann** is Emeritus Professor of Dogmatic Theology at the University of Tübingen and a past president of the European Society for Catholic Theology.

#### NOTES

1 Bernard Lonergan, *Method in theology* (London: DLT, 1972).

2 Rahner's *Grundkurs des Glaubens* was first published in 1976 (Freiberg in Breisgau: Herder) and in English translation as *Foundations of Christian Faith* in 1978 (NY: Crossroad; London: DLT).

3 *Acta apostolicae sedis* 23 (1931) 241–262.