

A FUTURE FOR THEOLOGY?

By ROBERT BUTTERWORTH

IT WOULD BE pleasing to be able to announce that God is still in his heaven and that all will be well with catholic theology. Writing about theology's future would then be an easy matter of briefly and positively reviewing its glorious past, of interpreting everything in its past and present as progress, and then of concluding with some sort of encouragement that it should carry on developing along the lines it has been taking. However, I do not happen to think that the question of the future of theology can be seen in such a simple light. I find it impossible to pretend that I think that theology as a human 'scientific' enterprise — as a human way of *knowing* — is in a healthy state. From the human point of view (and I should confess from the start that I do not presume to see the matter from any other point of view), so much of what passes for theology nowadays strikes me as being like an inflated and dropsical corpus of supposed knowledge which is unable, in the face of reasonable challenges, to argue or sustain its own huge claims to be real knowledge — knowledge, that is, which is humanly recognizable as such, or what ordinary people would ordinarily call knowledge.

Theology cannot stand on its own feet among the other forms of human knowledge. To the intelligent listener the deliverances of theologians have the sound of a kind of sacred druidical gnosis tradable between initiates. There may be those who feel that human living benefits in some undefinable way from a cognitively uncontrollable gnosis. From these I must obviously part company. I would align myself with those reasonable people, not by any means ill-disposed, who feel almost like giving up hope for the future survival of what passes for theology. But I also think that the sickness of theology should evoke serious christian concern; for theology's present state and faith's future cannot be wholly disconnected. What the theologian may be thinking today is what his fellow-christian may well be faced with having to try to believe in a very different tomorrow. And it is important that tomorrow's believer should be faced with what is reasonably credible and perhaps even also worth believing.

I feel fairly sure that most readers will dismiss this attitude of mine as

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either nonsense or at least as expressing some degree of cranky exaggeration. It is, after all, possible to discern so many obvious signs of theological life. It would be no exaggeration to say that in the Church theology has been bursting out all over for at least a quarter of a century. Have we ever seen such a flood of new books, periodicals, courses, conferences, controversies, colleges? Not to mention the Council. True, the Council itself was not very expressly theological; but its work was made possible only by the valuable insights won by the theologians of the fifties. And surely it contributed more than any other factor to the increased output of the theologians of the sixties. Is not the Council itself the refutation of my dismal diagnosis? Theology has in fact flourished over the past twenty-five years, and is still flourishing in the Church. What is more, there is really no reason to doubt that it can go on flourishing in the future. It is not at all sick, still less moribund.

The trouble is that I find myself not at all convinced by the kinds of theological activity that are adduced as evidence of signs of theological life. The question that must be allowed is this: are they signs of *healthy* theological life? I think we must admit that very few Catholics are practised in the type of theological reflection that might enable them to distinguish healthy from unhealthy theological activity. We have never really had to ask ourselves questions of this order. Catholic theology has just gone on its unquestioned and unquestionable way. Deeper considerations about the very possibility, or at any rate about the possible scope of theologizing as such, have never needed to arise. Nor were questions about, let us say, the actual cognitive value of theology called for. We have built up no stock of critical reflection on the activity of theologizing which might now enable us to evaluate the theological activity we see going on in the Church. Precisely as theological activity, has it been good or bad, healthy or sick? Without the necessary criteria, developed by long critical reflection on the whole business of theologizing, whereby we can tell what is theology and what is not, it is quite possible — indeed it is dangerously likely — that we could mistake the feverishly sustained death-throes of a redundant gnosis for the lively movements of a properly human science. Anyone who claims to be a theologian must face up to this possibility or likelihood: otherwise he is in danger of hoodwinking himself, and others, with a flurry of pseudo-activity in which his mental life-blood may be just running into the very sands on which he is vainly trying to build his house.

I find myself highly suspicious of those who seem to find it easy to be a theologian in the Church today. What to my mind is a remarkable

number of those who call themselves theologians seem, on the whole, unaware of the kind of doubt that is cast upon their work. I do not mean the doubt cast by people outside the christian circle, where 'theology' has become a synonym for irrelevance. It was a cruel moment when Mr Geoffrey Rippon, returning flushed with success from Common Market negotiations in Brussels, dismissed the remaining resolution of differences of opinion over some sugar treaty or other as so much 'theology'. Still less is it possible to examine here the much more serious doubts cast by those whose philosophy leads them to see theology as sheer intellectual chicanery.

These sources of doubt apart, I would have thought that enough doubt was cast on modern theological activity from sources within our polarized Church to make theologians pause and ask themselves important questions about what in fact they think they are actually up to. Do they imagine they are satisfying many, apart from those who happen for one reason or another — or for no reason in particular — to share their possibly mistaken confidence in what they have decided to count as theology? Certainly conservative elements in the Church, both clerical and lay, reared on a theology which had, in its day, its own kind of philosophical self-respectability, and which could — and perhaps too frequently did — render an adequate account of its own activity in its own carefully chosen terms: these elements find much of modern theological activity a very dubious affair indeed. And in many ways rightly. Without condoning the sort of hysterical rhetoric that the mindless right are all too fond of using against theologians who do not align themselves with their own clique, I sometimes think that a case for conservatism in theology might be made out as long as the would-be innovators remain so naïvely uncritical about the activity of theologizing. Better the devil you know. . . . I think there should be much more room in the Church than there is for quite different ways of expressing the christian revelation; and certainly much more room for theologically experimental thinking: but only if those who engage in these pursuits can give a reasonable account of why, precisely, their own approach should be different from past approaches, and of how their thinking may be seen to be a rationally defensible and needed improvement on what went before. Otherwise the conservatives may continue to think themselves right: at least in so far as there is no one to show them that they are now wrong.

Progressive elements in the Church, on the other hand, to whom modern theological activity says nothing informative or helpful about what they claim to be the real problems of the real world, can be equally

dismissive. They find it impossible to cash the supposed insights of theologians in terms which might have any bearing on what they see as the real life situation. Theology is written off as of no human value; and potential students of theology are re-directed to earthier pursuits like sociology or, if they obtusely retain some regard for the importance of God, to 'religious studies'. And again, it is only fair to say that unless and until theologians can give a better account of their own activity, no one is to know whether such radical reaction may or may not be right. Within the Church alone there are to be found sufficient grounds for re-considering the validity of what passes, without apparently worrying so many of its practitioners, as theology.

But all this amounts to saying that the real enemy of theology's future is at present within the gates of the stronghold of theologians themselves. Unless theologians develop within themselves and display in their activity the right kind of consciousness of what they are doing and what sort of thing they are saying when they theologize, then they remain the most vulnerable of professional thinkers. In fairly recent times there has taken place, in the world of thinking in general, great progress in the direction of critical self-awareness. Professionals must be critically aware of what they are up to: of their presuppositions, of their method, of their method's applicability to their chosen subject-matter. Put in a slightly different way, knowledge has become a self-consciously moral as well as an intellectual issue. Its justification — is it really knowledge? in what sense is it knowledge? how do you know it is the sort of knowledge it claims to be? — has become part of the necessary process of claiming really to know anything at all. Claims to know must be suitably validated. It must be made clear what kind of knowledge is in question, for there is more than one way of knowing. And the kind of knowledge claimed must be shown to be worthy of the name 'knowledge'. Professional critical standards are now very high.

Then again, modern philosophical enquiry has led to a notably enhanced consciousness of the problem of meaning, of how and in what conditions words mean what they say, of the use to which words are put in the act of meaning, of the connection between thinking and words, of how words are meant when they are used to express meaning, of how much of the act of meaning is in the actual use of the words. The use of words has become a matter of responsible action which must be self-critically controlled and thus morally as well as intellectually justified. You may not claim to know or mean anything at all with all your words unless you can validate your claim with a coherent theory of knowledge and language. This is not to say, of course, that claims to

knowledge and to meaningful speech have to be submitted to one and the same criterion or one and the same set of criteria. There are, for example, more ways of knowing and meaning than are dreamt of, say, in the kind of positivism that would permit only tautologies or empirically verifiable propositions into the privileged class of meaningful statements. But all the same, each kind of knowledge or each way of meaning must be prepared to furnish itself with its own justifiable criteria by which it may be judged to be worthy of the claims it makes to be knowledge or meaningful utterance.

Now theologians, as a class, measure up badly against the increasingly critical standards of thinking in general. Their particular vulnerability lies in the fact that they, well beyond other thinkers, make massive claims to know about what is most important and most relevant for the rest of their fellow-men, about God and his activity in the world. And yet, on the whole, they seem not to be aware that if they are to carry conviction among their fellow-thinkers, they need to be able to justify the claims they make to know what they say they know. There are, of course, a number of adducible reasons for this lack of critical self-awareness. For one thing, the Church's theologians have usually worked in institutions which have been both physically isolated and mentally insulated from the dominant currents in contemporary thinking. Again, they have been engaged, for the most part, not so much in the intellectual pursuit of their studies as in the necessary labour of training priests. The intellectual capacity of many of their students may not have offered their theological teachers the sort of challenge which would have evoked an increased self-critical stance. Again, it may have been the case that many theologians have imagined they had discharged their theological duties in simply expounding the traditional doctrines of the Church in the same terms as those in which they themselves received them. They may never have felt free enough to offer any interpretation of the possible meaning of those doctrines in other, more meaningful terms. They may never have had the mental elbow-room in which they could have theologized in any other way than they did. They may never have experienced the need to criticize their own use of language — which was for them simply the given language of Church theology — or to examine their own claim actually to know what they were talking about, or to ask what, if anything, they thought they were actually telling people. They could, if ever challenged, always take refuge behind unquestionable defence-works like 'faith', or, more commonly perhaps, 'the faith'. If really pressed they could admit that, of course, all talk about God was

'analogical'; it could not actually mean what it said, but it meant only something like what it said. So why should the average theologian worry about the way in which he meant what he said? He did not feel called upon to explain or justify his actual use of analogical language; or to make precise the reasons for, or to measure the extent of, the shift in meaning that he admitted took place in his God-talk. In a vulgar phrase, he did not have 'to put his money where his mouth is'.

In other ways, too, I think a case can be made out for saying that during the last quarter of a century much of catholic theology has failed remarkably to respond to the real challenge of the progress made in the science of human thinking. Such progress as theology may seem to some to have made has been very often along lines of least resistance. It was an easy way out to expand theological production in such quantity that no questions were posed about the quality of what was being produced. Expansion was understandable, of course. For a long time theology had been the sacred preserve of the clergy. The laity, however sophisticated they had had to become in their secular ways, were theologically more or less illiterate. There was suddenly seen to be a gaping market, and theologians rushed in to fill the gap. Vulgarization, high or otherwise, became the thing for theologians to do. Cheap books proliferated. Without more ado than 'translation' from their mother latin, the hitherto concealed treasures of the deposit of faith were put on sale like gaudy trinkets at some religious shrine, to be picked up cheap and taken home and worn as trophies of a quick visit to a distant and alien land. The faithful learned to use unusual words: salvation history, revelation, community. A hastily translated liturgy encouraged the spread of a theological veneer, and also exposed the faithful to bible readings they were not really equipped to understand. Does a modern man readily think in terms, let us say, of the typology required to grasp the link made in the bible between the manna in the desert and Jesus feeding the multitudes? And even when he is forced (in 'the homily') to think that way, how exactly is he helped? Surely the desired effect could be brought about in much less roundabout ways.

The mistakes made with adult catholics in trying to deepen their grasp of the faith were then compounded by exposing their children to bible-based catechetics. Why should it be supposed that children somehow have a readier understanding of the bible and its peculiar thought-patterns than of more straightforward exposition of the meaning of their faith accommodated to children? It is not as if we believe that the bible is largely fairy-tale. But the meaning of the faith was what was being neglected by theologians. The done thing was to

go back to the bible in everything to do with the doctrines of the faith. Put it in biblical terms and light would dawn from the east. Somehow the teaching of the Church would suddenly make more sense. But the result was that violence was done not only to the bible but to people's western minds. Looking for the bread of understanding they were force-fed with the indigestible half-baked stones of shallow exegesis.

I would contend that church theologians have been far too occupied with spreading their critically unexamined popularizations over the uncritical faithful. They have avoided facing the challenge of critical thinking with regard to their hitherto unquestioned claims to know what they are saying, or to say what they mean and how they mean it. Little or nothing has been done to deepen the older understanding of the christian message or to produce any new one. But theologians had their gallery to play to. Without so much as a thought they were called on to air their inflated claims to superior knowledge, cosmic know-how and hot-line insight into God's will for everyone and everything. No concerned committee or working-group could be without its theologian. Not that they needed to have studied the particular matters about which they were called on to pontificate. They were supposed to be exercising some kind of 'prophetic role' which exempted them from the normal learning process through study and long experience. But what a piece of convenient self-flattery this was! It was forgotten that the main-line prophets had known what they chose to talk about in their day; and that they had spoken in terms that their people could understand only too well — disloyalty, impiety, injustice. What our theologians were doing was tinkering: tinkering with the Church's doctrines which they ought to have been re-thinking, trying to adjust the solemn formulations to the popular mind, adapting them, incongruously, to cope with entirely new problems and conditions and forms of consciousness. What they were not doing was working at the whole problem of the interpretation of the meaning of the Church's traditional doctrines. No wonder that while theologians fiddled, Rome sometimes burned.

Before theology can be said to have any future at all, it seems to me that it has to put its own house severely in order. Forays into the public arena have led to an over-exposure of theology as a discipline which has not yet learned to measure up to the sort of critical standards adopted nowadays by intelligent people. If theologians persist in remaining untouched by reasonable critical standards, they stand to be laughed off the stage altogether. Only a new grasp of what theology is can ensure a future for theology: a new self-grasp by theologians of their essentially

interpretative role with regard to the Church's doctrines. Theology works at understanding the meaning of the doctrinal formulations in which the Church's faith has, in the orthodox past, found its most authentic expression. In understanding the meaning of doctrinal formulations, of the language used in the past by the Church, theology also learns to re-express its understanding in terms which convey the meaning, originally expressed in the formulations, to the minds of contemporary people: minds which work differently from those of fifth or fifteenth-century men, which in fact live in a different world, which have a different form of basic self-consciousness and different critical values, and so which require different modes of expression, different formulations, if they are to inherit the real meaning of the christian revelation.

Indeed, one might say that if God's revelation is to continue taking place at all in this changing world, it must be constantly re-expressed — and who else has the job of working at this re-expression than the theologian? — in contemporary human terms in face of contemporary human standards. Whatever is received, we used to say in latin, is received according to the measure of the recipient. What the recipient makes of what is given to him necessarily conditions the fact of there being a gift given at all. God's truth and the meaning of his self-revelation must be made *known*. Divine truth must be made humanly intelligible and humanly known. It must take its place among all the forms of human knowing that men today are prepared to call knowledge. Otherwise it will simply not be known. The theologian's task is not the dissemination of popularized doctrines, but the expressing of God's own truth in Christ in terms of actual, relevant, meaningful knowledge. He should make his own the pauline preference: 'in Church I would rather speak five words with my mind, in order to instruct others, than ten thousand words in a tongue'.¹ He is neither popularizer nor preacher nor glossolaliac: he is the Church's re-thinker and re-visionary.

The conditions under which I think that theology has a future have emerged in the course of pointing out what I consider to be near-fatal defects in its past performance and present state. Theology must go self-critical. It must come to terms with its own nature as a human science, terms which accord with the critical standards of the day. It must be prepared to let us know what it thinks it is telling us, and in intelligible and meaningful language. It must, above all, realize its inherent limitations and cease speaking from on high in a technical

¹ 1 Cor 14, 19.

tongue drawn from the linguistic deposits of the faith of past ages. It must realize, too, its own historical relativity, and make its relativity the basis for its relevance to contemporary people. It must learn to speak a new and human language in its interpretation of the doctrines of the faith, a language that will bring home to men that essential self-meaning which it has always been the purpose of the Church's doctrines, for all their dated ways, to define. For the core of the christian faith is that man has no self-meaning without God. The christian doctrines — of creation, of incarnation, of redemption, of final consummation — are so many ways of spelling out this truth, and of preserving it against error or forgetfulness. Theology's task is to interpret this truth, not by the sheer windy repetition or mere vulgarization of it, but by thinking it out in whatever ways it may become presentable, credible, graspable, knowable in the hard currency of the critically acceptable language of the day.

All this makes great and new demands on the future theologian. Obviously, he must have greater freedom for the creative interpretation of his faith and its doctrines. But he will also need to be equipped in ways strikingly different from theologians of the past. Most especially, he will need to be better trained in a philosophy which does more than just enable him to use the traditional language of theology with greater — and therefore more uncritical — familiarity than was the case in the past. His philosophy will have to give proper support to the whole human enterprise of theologizing. It must deal with the business of meaning, with general language theory and with special problems regarding the theological use of words. Serious historical study of the Church's doctrines and of the underlying philosophical positions, based on a knowledge of the original languages, must build up, in the theologian of the future, an acute sense both of his own historicity and of his responsibility towards his own contemporaries, both believers and non-believers. His biblical studies must enable him fully to appreciate the uniquely basic witness of both Testaments with regard to the meaning of the church doctrines which he seeks to interpret; and to appreciate also the inevitable limitations of the scriptural witness with respect to the later development of those doctrines. The future theologian will be no ecclesiastical *repetitore*. He will be more a man of the Church at large, academically open, ecumenically conscious, probably not a cleric. And not necessarily a 'he' at all, of course.

But more importantly still, the future theologian will be a man who takes the incarnation of God's own self-meaning in Jesus the *man* completely seriously. Hence he will address himself as a man to his

fellow-men; since what he really has to say to them, what he must constantly be trying to tell them, because he sees that this is what the Church's doctrinal teaching is really all about, is God's own truth about how to be human. His theology will have an unfamiliar ring about it. It will be aimed at men, focused on men, centred round men and their actual problems. And this because the theologian will have taken the point of the doctrine of the incarnation: that, paradoxically, the theologian talks more, and more meaningfully and reliably, about his christian God to the precise extent that he is better prepared, by his studies and his experience, to talk knowledgeably about the glory of man to men. The theologian will have come down at last from the heady heights of the transfiguring mountain. Henceforth, he will be keeping before his mind's eye 'Jesus only'.² Then theology may have a future.

² Cf Mk 9, 8.