

Theology Today

I have been asked to address you, and the subject that seemed to me most appropriate for the occasion was the present state of theology. I shall make no effort to exhaust the topic. My aim will be to say briefly what I think theology is and, then, what has been happening particularly within Catholic theology.

Let me suggest that it may be well to conceive theology in terms of its function, and to specify this function let me recall that Georg Simmel, the German sociologist, coined the phrase, die Wendung zur Idee, the turn to the idea, the shift to system, to denote the tendency and even the necessity of every large social, cultural, or religious movement to reflect on itself, to define its goals, to scrutinize the means it employs or might employ, to keep in mind its origins, its commitments, its past achievements, and its failures. No matter how spontaneous the movement initially was, no matter how creative has been its development, it can keep on its true course, it can resist enticements off in one direction and menaces from another, it can evade capture by other movements, only if it gives heed to the Delphic precept, Know thyself.

turn
Now this ~~turn~~ to the idea, this shift to reflection, is performed differently in different ~~of~~ cultural settings. While a historical tradition can retain its identity though it passes from one culture to another, still it can live and function in those several cultures only if it thinks of itself, only if it effects its shift to reflection, in harmony with the style, the mode of forming concepts, the mentality, the horizon proper to each culture and subculture.

Now what is true of any large social, cultural, or religious movement, also is true of Christianity. It expressed itself in the New Testament writings. But it kept adding further expressions in the Apostolic Fathers, in the Apologists of the second century, in the Greek and the Latin Fathers from the third century to the sixth. An entirely new mode made its appearance with Byzantine Scholasticism, and this recurred on a universal scale with the medieval canonists and theologians. Humanism, the Renaissance, the Counter-Reformation brought in another style, a new mode of concept formation, a different mentality. From that style, that mode, that mentality Catholics have been breaking away, and they have been endeavoring to effect a new shift to the idea in the style and mode and mentality of modern culture. Efforts in that direction have been going forward for over a century, but the massive break-through took place at the Second Vatican Council.

Without using the word, theology, I have been ~~amazing~~ trying to say what theology is. It is not the same as religion but it is not without religion. Religion is seeking the Kingdom of God; it is love of God and of one's neighbor.

Theology is reflection on religion. It is the moment of self-investigation, self-understanding, self-knowledge, self-evaluation, self-criticism in religion. The further a religion is extended in space, the longer it has endured over time, the larger the number of its adherents, the more necessary and the more elaborate will be the task of self-investigation, self-understanding, self-knowledge, self-evaluation, self-criticism. Finally, while this function of theology is a constant, an invariant, still the manner in which this function is fulfilled is, of course, historically conditioned. Needs and concerns, interests and tastes, methods

and techniques, schools and libraries, problems and ideas, are not ^uimm~~u~~table forms in some Platonic heaven but concrete, shifting variables in historical process. The theologian is always a product of his day. He cannot but use the resources available in his day to met, as best he can, the needs of his day.

While this might be illustrated from any period, perhaps the most relevant would be the contrast between classicist and modern culture. By classicist culture I understand the culture that sprang from Humanism, the Renaissance, the Reformation and Counter-reformation. It was a ~~cu~~ culture that conceived itself not empirically but normatively, not as one culture among many, but as the one and only culture that any cultivated person could conceive. It was culture as opposed to barbarism. It was to be attained by acquiring and assimilating the tastes and skills, the ideals, virtues, and ideas, that were pressed upon one in a good home and through a curriculum in the liberal arts. This notion, of course, had a very ancient ~~2n~~ lineage. It stemmed out of Greek paideia and Roman doctrinae ~~aut~~ studium atque humanitatis, out of the exuberance of the Renaissance and its pruning in the counter-reformation schools of the Jesuits. But this relation to antiquity only reinforced its fundamental character of immobility. Precisely because it was conceived normatively, as what ought to be, it had to be always and everywhere the same. So it considered its classics immortal works of art; its philosophy was the philosophia perennis; its laws and structures were the fruit of the prudence and wisdom of mankind. As its classics, its philosophy, its laws, so too was its theology. The Scriptures, the Fathers, the Scholastics, the later theologians might employ different

vocabularies, but the substance of what was proclaimed was always and everywhere the same. The notion of a development of doctrine was not entertained.

While classicist culture conceived itself normatively and abstractly, modern culture conceives itself empirically and concretely. It is the culture that recognizes cultural variation, difference, development, breakdown, that investigates each of the many cultures of mankind, that studies their histories, that seeks to understand sympathetically what the classicist would tend to write off as strange or uncultivated or barbaric. Instead of thinking of men in terms of a nature common to all men whether awake or asleep, geniuses or morons, saints or sinners, it attends to men in their concrete living. If it can discern common and invariant structures in human operations, it refuses to take flight from the particular to the universal, and it endeavors to meet the challenge of knowing people in all their diversity and mobility. It is an endlessly resourceful and novel culture with its modern languages and literatures, modern art and media, modern mathematics and ~~natural science, modern philosophy and human studies,~~ modern finance and commerce and industry, ~~modern wars and revolutions, modern medicine~~

natural science, modern finance and commerce and industry, modern education and medicine, modern philosophy and human studies, modern abundance and poverty, modern wars and revolutions.

It is within that modern culture that contemporary Christians and Catholics live and think, work and love. It is within the terms of that culture that a contemporary theology has to carry out its reflection on Christianity, on the Church.

~~So much for my first, basic preliminary topic: the action of theology. There remain my two basic topics: the action of other disciplines on theology and, finally, the action of the~~ on them.

1 in any age
2 in each age

Theology
in any age
is religion
within or beside
but also as spiritual



So much for my first topic: the notion of theology. My second topic was the changes going forward within Catholic theology. Here five areas seem to me to merit special attention; they are (1) history, (2) philosophy, (3) religious studies, (4) method, and (5) communications.

One of the profoundest changes in Catholic theology has been brought about by modern methods of historical study. It is true, of course, that Christianity has always been an historical religion. The Fathers appealed to the scriptures, the medieval theologians to both, to the scriptures and to the Fathers, later theologians to all their predecessors. But they did not have at their disposal the resources and the collaboration of modern scholarship with its critical editions of texts, its indices and handbooks, its specialized institutes and congresses, its ever mounting accumulation of monographs and articles. The ideal that focused their interest and guided their attention was not the historical ideal of critically evaluating all available evidence with the aim of bringing back to life the societies and cultures of the past;³ it was the theological ideal of knowing God and knowing all things in their relation to God. So they assumed not only an unbroken tradition of faith but also unchanging modes of apprehension and conception.⁴ A great revolution was needed -- and it is not yet completed -- to make the development of doctrine an acceptable notion, to have it apprehended not merely in some abstract and notional fashion but concretely and really through exact study of relevant texts, to admit historical methods not only in the patristic and medieval and later fields but also in the scriptures, and finally -- to come to the as yet unfinished task -- to effect the synthesis of historical and theological aims so that we have

neither history without theology nor theology without history but both.

A second major influence has been philosophic. Catholic theology has been wedded to Aristotle. The beginnings of that wedding were auspicious enough. For medieval theology was doing two things when partly it accepted and partly it reinterpreted the Aristotelian corpus. On the one hand, it was providing itself with a conceptual system that would make it possible for it to work out coherent answers to its endless quaestiones. At the same time, it was christianizing the Greek and Arabic culture that was pouring into Western Europe and threatening to engulf its faith. But what once was achievement, at a later date proved to be an obstacle to vitality and development. Aristotelian thought is unacquainted not merely with the content but also with the nature of modern science. It is not equipped to distinguish and to relate to one another the natural sciences, the human sciences, philosophy, and theology. It is unable to provide the foundations for their proper functioning and collaboration. Its conceptual system in part is to be revised and in part to be replaced by notions drawn from modern philosophy and science. So it is that contemporary theologians are drawing upon personalist, phenomenological, existential, historical, and transcendental types of philosophic thought to find the conceptual tools needed for their own thinking and writing. The results often are eclectic rather than systematic and deeply based, and here I feel there is a real danger in an age when modernist subjectivism and relativism are becoming increasingly common.

Contemporary Catholic theology, then, not only is open to philosophic influence but profoundly is in need of philosophy. Here I must distinguish between primary and secondary aspects of that need. The theologian will want

to be acquainted with Stoicism in reading Tertullian, with middle Platonism in reading Origen, with Neoplatonism in reading Augustine, with Aristotle, Avicenna, and Averroes in reading Aquinas, with Aquinas in reading subsequent theologians. But this need is secondary. It is a matter of acquiring the necessary background for particular tasks of interpretation. Again, it is through a study of the philosophers that the theologian will be introduced to philosophic questions, that he will reach answers relevant to his primary need, that he will learn to think and speak on the level of his age and culture. But again this is secondary. It is concerned with the pedagogy of meeting the primary need. It does not define the primary need itself. The primary need is for the theologian to know what he is doing when he is doing theology. To reach such knowledge three prior questions must be answered. There is the question of cognitional theory: What am I doing when I am knowing? There is the question of epistemology: Why is doing that knowing? There is the question of metaphysics: What do I know when I do it? To these three questions the theologian needs full and precise and well-grounded answers. If he has those answers, his essential needs are met. If he does not reach those answers, then he will not know what he is doing, not merely when he reads the philosophers but also when he does theology, when he is interpreting a text, when he is ascertaining a historical fact, when he is reconstructing a situation or mentality, when he moves beyond reason to faith, when he determines what is and what is not a matter of faith, when he seeks an understanding of the mysteries of faith, when he concerns himself with the problem of communicating the faith to all men of all classes and of all cultures. Briefly, theologians have minds and use them, and they had best know what they are doing when they use them. Again, to put the matter historically,

to follow Aquinas today is, not to repeat Aquinas today, but to do for the twentieth century what Aquinas did for the thirteenth. As Aquinas baptized key elements in Greek and Arabic culture, so the contemporary Catholic philosopher and/or theologian has to effect a baptism of key elements in modern culture.

A third major influence is the field of religious studies: the phenomenology of religion, the psychology of religion, the sociology of religion, the history of religions, and the philosophy of religion. I call this a major influence, not because the influence has been conspicuous, but because of very significant and powerful contemporary trends. The first stems from Vatican II, and it consists in the Church's concern with ecumenism, with non-Christian religions, and with the atheist negation of religion. This fact requires the theologian to reflect on his religion, not in isolation from all others, but in conjunction with others. It requires him to attend, not only to the differences separating his religion from others, but also to the similarities that connect them with one another. To meet such requirements theology will be led into the field of religious studies and, indeed, while retaining its identity, to conceive itself as a particular type of religious studies. There is a second factor leading to the same conclusion. I have already spoken of the relations of theology with history and with philosophy. But if it is to take its place in contemporary culture, it has also to be related to all the human sciences; and it is in the field of religious studies, in the phenomenology and psychology and sociology of religion, that it will find models exhibiting what can be done and accounts of what has been tried and found unsatisfactory. Finally, there is the theological doctrine that

God grants all men sufficient grace for their salvation. This doctrine is relevant to religious studies; it makes them studies of the manifold ways God's grace comes to man and operates as the seed that falls on rocks or amidst thorns or by the wayside or on good ground to bring forth fruit thirty or sixty or a hundred fold.

Fourthly, there is the area of methodology. The Aristotelian notion of science is one thing, the modern notion is quite another. Contemporary Catholic theology has already in actual practice taken on the features of a modern science. But in a neurosis-like conflict with this practice there lurk in the minds of many theologians assumptions and implications that stem from Aristotle's Posterior Analytics. No doubt, theologians always have recognized that their subject was not a science in the Aristotelian sense, that in that sense it could be named science only by analogy. But the modern fact is that no science whatever satisfies Aristotle's requirements. To keep on thinking of theology as analogously a science is just to perpetuate a long list of misleading notions and principles.

For Aristotle science is of the necessary: we think we understand when we know the cause, know that it is the cause, and know that the effect cannot be other than it is.⁵ In the modern sciences necessity is a marginal notion. Their substantive concern is, not with necessity, but with verifiable possibility. The intelligibility they seek is, not the intelligibility that cannot be other than it is, but the intelligibility that very well could be other than it is and so is intrinsically hypothetical and in need of verification.

Again, for Aristotle, there was a sharp distinction between theory and practice.⁶ Theory regarded the necessary; but the necessary is unchangeable; and the unchangeable cannot be changed. It lies utterly outside the whole field of practical activity. All one can do about it is contemplate it. But in the modern sciences theory and practice regard exactly the same objects; they represent successive stages in our dealings with these objects. Good theory is the possibility of efficacious practice, and practice is the application of theory.

Again, for Aristotle, science is true and certain.⁷ But modern science is not true and certain. It is an ongoing process in which the range and the probability of human knowing keep increasing, but truth and certainty are just limiting concepts. This fact, of course, marks a major problem in the method of contemporary theology, for theology is the offspring not only of science but also of faith, and faith claims truth and certainty.

Finally, an Aristotelian science was a compact affair; it could be tucked into a habit in the mind of a scientist. But no modern science in its entirety is known by any individual. Modern sciences are parcelled out among the many minds of the scientific community. As they are produced by a far-flung collaboration, so they reside distributively in the minds of researchers, professors, students. And what is true of modern physics, chemistry, biology, also is true of contemporary theology. There are today no omniscient theologians.

Finally, there is the area of communications. The church has always felt called to herald the gospel to all men of all cultures and all classes. But the full implications of this mission were hidden by the classicist notion of culture. For that notion was not empirical but

normative. It did not study the different cultures of mankind but simply set up its own as the ideal and generously offered to instruct others in its own ways. Its classics were immortal works of art, its philosophy was perennial philosophy, its assumptions were eternal truths, its laws were the depository of the wisdom and the prudence of mankind. But modern culture is the culture that knows many cultures, that studies and compares them, that knows they are all man-made and subject to development and to decay. Just as theology has to enter into the context of modern philosophy and science, so religion has to retain its identity yet penetrate into the cultures of mankind, into the manifold fabric of everyday meaning and feeling that directs and propels the lives of men. It has to know the uses of symbol and story, the resources of the arts and of literature, the potentialities of the old and the new media of communication, the various motivations on which in any given area it can rely, the themes that in a given culture and class provide a carrying wave for the message.

I have been indicating five areas in which theology has been or is about to be profoundly influenced by other disciplines. The list, of course, is not exclusive. The changes affect the whole conception and structure of theology. The theology of thirty or forty years ago is becoming a memory for the elderly and unknown to the young. But the changes I have listed have their root, not in a change of faith or religion, but in a change of human culture. Classicist culture has disappeared, and a modern culture has taken its place.