

Philosophy and Theology

My title, "Philosophy and Theology," is far too abrupt. It suggests an endless affair listing all the different conceptions of philosophy, all the different conceptions of theology, and all the ways in which the two might be related. I have no intention of perpetrating such a monster. My aim is far more modest and, also, more concrete. It is to indicate a certain relevance and need of philosophy in contemporary Catholic Theology, and to this end I shall develop briefly three topics. First, what has happened in Catholic theology? Secondly, what seems to be the key task in current theology? Thirdly, what contribution might philosophy make in the performance of that task?

1. What has happened in Catholic theology?

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Very many things have happened, but the one I propose to single out, the one I consider to underpin most if not all the others, is the underlying implication of the transition from eternal truths to developing doctrines.

Aquinas (Sum. theol., I, q. 16, a. 7) was quite accurate on the matter of eternal truths. They exist, but only in the eternal and unchanging mind of God. There is, however, a certain speciousness to the contrary view that eternal truths may also be found in human minds. For, what once is true, never can be truthfully denied. If Caesar crossed the Rubicon at a certain time and place then it never will be true to deny that he did so at that time and place.

This certainly is plausible, but there is a slight, apparently very slight, flaw in the argument. Any statement presupposes a context within which the meaning and implications of the statement can be presented. The statement that is true at a given time and place, also will be true at other times and places, provided that the contexts are sufficiently similar. There exists, then, a further proviso and, it appears, there may be eternal truths in human minds only in the measure that this proviso is eternally fulfilled.

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Now the issue may be argued in two manner. One may argue in the abstract and a priori: say, that human nature is ever the same and, therefore, the contexts of human statements will ever be substantially the same. Or one may argue in the concrete and a posteriori, and it was this a posteriori type of argument that was more and more in favor as the natural sciences progressed and, what is more to our purpose, a parallel development took place in certain human sciences, in philology, hermeneutics, and critical history.

This occurred in Germany and, as I cannot sketch the movement, I must be content to name a few of the originators. There was Friedrich Wolf who conceived classical philology to be a philosophico-historical study of human nature as exhibited in antiquity, and who brought together in his courses at Halle literature, antiquities, geography, art, numismatics, and the critical spirit that produced his Prolegomena to Homer.¹ There was Friedrich Schleiermacher who transformed hermeneutics from sets of rules of thumb followed by biblical or classical exegetes to a general art of avoiding misunder-

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standing and misinterpretation.² There was August Boeckh, a pupil both of Wolf and of Schleiermacher, who conceived philology as the reconstruction of the constructions of the human spirit and wrote an Encyclopedia and Methodology of the Philological Sciences.³ There was Leopold von Ranke who by his seminar and his writing of history taught historians to keep the passions of the present out of the facts of the past, to base their facts on strictly contemporary sources, and to determine where the authors of the sources got their information and how they used it.⁴ There was Johann Gustav Droysen who lectured on the method of historical investigation and composed a text on the subject.⁵ There was Wilhelm Dilthey who endeavored to work out the philosophical foundations for the new hermeneutics and history.⁶

d / There resulted an avalanche both of interpretative commentaries on the literatures and of critical histories on the achievements of the past. Ancient languages were deciphered, ancient cities excavated, coins and artifacts collected, critical editions produced, handbooks, dictionaries, encyclopedias, repertories, bibliographies, collections composed. The movement spread to religious studies. The bible, patristic writers, medieval theologians, reformation and counter-reformation figures were studied in a quite new manner. Previously they had been invoked as witnesses to divine revelation, and from that witness were sought knowledge of God and knowledge of other things in their relation to God. But now aims were more pedestrian, and procedures more exigent. Nothing was to be affirmed without corroborative evidence; no evidence was to be offered without being rigorously

scrutinized; and the scrutiny was allowed to overlook none of the myriad little oddities which the preconceptions of a later day are, in conservative circles, apt to dismiss as unimportant. At first, the new methods were impugned. Next, they were adopted but used in an apologetic struggle against the new conclusions. Finally, methods and conclusions were to a great extent accepted in medieval and patristic and eventually, among Catholics, in biblical studies.

τ | The new methods and conclusions do not imply a new revelation or a new faith, but certainly they are not compatible with previous conceptions of theology. In the high medieval period theology alternated between lectio and quaestio. One read the bible and the Fathers; one noticed incoherences and contradictions; one asked for reconciliations. There emerged glossaries and commentaries to facilitate the reading, books of sentences that collected passages relevant to distinct topics, books of questions that attempted a theoretical unification of collected doctrines, and an adaptation of Aristotelian thought in an effort to construct a Christian world-view. There was an empirical basis in the bible and the Fathers; there was a search for coherence and intelligibility; but there was not entertained the possibility that the relevant intelligibility was mediated by an on-going historical process.

By the end of the thirteenth century the constructive impulse was stifled by the mutual denunciations of Augustinians and Aristotelians. Everyone, however, accepted Aristotle's logical works with their heavy accent on necessity and immutability. Theologians turned their

attention to demonstration and, as necessary premisses for necessary conclusions are hard to come by, there was a wave of scepticism followed by decadence.

Later in the Renaissance period Cajetan and Spanish theologians produced commentaries on the Summa theologiae of Aquinas -- a step that separated theology from its historical sources. This was only partially reversed by Melchior Cano whose De locis theologicis has the theologian proving medieval doctrines by arguing from scripture, the Fathers, the councils, the theologians, the sensus fidelium, and so on. It was this scheme that governed much of the theological literature of the last and the present century, until the acceptance of the new, highly specialized methods made it evidently ridiculous to suppose that a single mind could master not only all the scriptures but also all the Fathers, councils, and theologians, not to mention the sensus fidelium. Such an undertaking was possible only for those that held no doubts about the accuracy of Cardinal Ottaviani's motto, semper idem, ever the same.

2. What seems the key task in current Catholic theology?

The shift from eternal truths to developing doctrines not only made theology the collaborative work of many specialists but also revealed the unreconciled antithesis of older procedures. For that older theology knew from its religious sources that faith was not a conclusion from premisses but a gift of God, that the mysteries of faith could not be demonstrated but, at best, could be met

with some analogous and imperfect understanding. At the same time it proposed to establish Scholastic theses from an appeal to the bible, the Fathers, the popes and councils, the consensus of theologians, and so on. But what precisely was the nature of that appeal? Was it just rhetoric and, if so, was theology even analogously a science? Was it more than rhetoric and, if so, wherein lay the difference?

The common position (apart from the gradual acceptance of the new methods) was that theology occupied some indeterminate position between rhetoric and the science described in Aristotle's Posterior Analytics. Indeed, while the actual achievement tended to be rhetorical, the guiding ideal tended to be polarized by the clarity, coherence, and rigor of logic. Clarity demanded sharply defined terms, and these were abstract and so outside the realm where change occurs. Coherence demanded the absence of contradictions. Rigor demanded that conclusions follow necessarily from their premisses. All three together provided the appropriate home for eternal truths and defined the ideal that human imperfection in this life might aim at but not attain.

Now it is this outlook, this assumption, this viewpoint that is incompatible with the new methods in hermeneutics and history and with the conclusions they reach. For the new methods are on-going. They solve problems tentatively rather than definitively, and definitive solutions, even when reached, only uncover a further range of problems as yet unsolved. Not only are the methods on-going but so too are the realities they progressively reveal whether they are

doctrines of faith or theological views.

Thus, the New Testament records the faith of the early church. The proper meaning of that record lies within the various contexts of the several writers. The aim of contemporary exegesis is to propound that proper meaning within its own proper context. But the labors down the ages of popes and councils, of Fathers and theologians, have a quite different function. They regard the New Testament as normative for all ages. The New Testament is read in the very different contexts of the early church, of the patristic period, of the medieval period, of the Renaissance and Reformation, and of the contemporary church. Not only is it read but also it gives rise to questions, and these questions are vital questions. They belong to the context of their own day. They are couched in its concepts and language, arise from its perspectives, stand on the level of later times, are relevant to new problems or issues. What is to be done about these questions?

A first solution is archaism. It denies the fact of historical change, or it claims that men should not have changed. It insists that the Gospel be preached in every age as it was preached in Antioch and Ephesus, in Corinth and Rome. It refuses to answer the questions that arise, not within the context of the New Testament, but on the later soil of Greco-Roman culture, or in medieval Paris, or at Trent, or at Vatican I or II.

A second solution is anachronism. It answers the questions, but it does not know about history. It assures everyone that these

answers are already in the doctrines of the New Testament, that if they are not there explicitly, they are there implicitly. It is against such anachronism that biblical studies have had to contend.

Besides archaism and anachronism, there are development and aberration. Both development and aberration answer the questions of the day within their proper context. But development answers them in the light of revelation and under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Aberration fails to do so in one or more respects.

Besides developments in the doctrines of faith, there also are theological developments. Now a discipline that is developing is advancing into the unknown. The clarity, coherence, and rigor of the logical ideal are aimed at but only with reservations. Clarity is wanted and terms are becoming clearer, but it is not supposed that all haziness and indetermination have been removed. Coherence is desired but it is not purchased at any price; if two incompatible statements each have something in their favor, both are retained as possible facets of some truth not yet known. Rigor, finally, is welcome when it can be had but, when it is unavailable, the merely postulated, hypothetical, probable are enough.

Let me illustrate these points from theology as in fact it has ever been. Since the Cappadocian settlement in the fourth century, the church has acknowledged three persons in God. What, then, is meant by a person? For Augustine the meaning was merely heuristic. The term, person, denoted what there are three of in the Trinity. There are three: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. What are there three of?

Well, there are not three Gods or three Fathers or three Sons or three Spirits. So the name, person, is employed when one desires to have an answer to the question, Three what?⁷

During the next nine centuries theology advanced beyond the person as heuristic notion to definitions of the person. Three definitions emerged, one by Boethius, one by Richard of St. Victor, and one by Thomas Aquinas. All three were couched in metaphysical terms, and so to compare them and make a reasonable choice, the metaphysics of the person had to be investigated. This was done with varying results by Scotus, Capreolus, Cajetan, Tiphanius, and Suarez. Next, Cartesian and subsequent attention to the psychological subject led to conceiving the person, less in metaphysical, and more in terms of the psychological subject and this, of course, was in harmony with the psychological theory of the trinitarian processions initiated by Augustine and, in my opinion, very highly developed by Aquinas. Recently, the phenomenologists have been scrutinizing the mutual communion of "I" and "thou" and thereby opening up the possibility of another dimension to trinitarian thought. In Catholic thought, then, the term, person, in a trinitarian context basically is a heuristic notion, a question, to which a series of different answers have been given. Finally, what is true of the term, person, in general, also is true of other theological terms. Their meaning is to be known not by a definition but by a history of questions asked and answers given.

Our next illustration concerns the logical ideal of coherence. In the high middle ages that ideal was pursued method-

ically. Evidence was collected on one side of an issue, Videtur quod non, and contrary evidence was placed on the other, Sed contra est. Incoherence proved the existence of a quaestio, and this proof was the preliminary to offering both the general lines of a solution and its application to the adduced evidence. Next, the multiplication of quaestiones -- there were hordes of them -- gave rise to a second-level problem of coherence, namely, how is one to assure the coherence of the many solutions. It was at this point that the adoption and adaptation of some system of thought, such as Aristotle's, became not only relevant but well nigh imperative and, inasmuch as this step was taken, there emerged still further realms of quaestiones in a theology that had become comprehensive and systematic. Medieval theology was an on-going process. One has only to compare the topics discussed by Aquinas in his Scriptum super Sententias with the supposedly corresponding topics in the work of Peter Lombard to witness the advances theology made between the middle of the twelfth and the middle of the thirteenth centuries.

The logical ideal demands rigor. Indeed, Aristotle's Posterior Analytics wants not only conclusions that follow necessarily from premisses but also premisses that are necessary truths.⁸ Now this cult of necessity is a thing of the past. While contemporary mathematicians want conclusions that follow necessarily from premisses, they do not suppose that their premisses are necessary truths; so far from being necessary, they are freely postulated, and the problem is whether the many postulates are coherent. Again, while

the nineteenth century spoke of the necessary laws of physics and even of the iron laws of economics, contemporary science does not. The laws of nature are not intelligibilities in the fashion that what is necessary is intelligible; they are intelligibilities in the fashion that the possible is intelligible. The necessary could not be other than it is; but the laws of nature could be other than they are; they are intrinsically hypothetical, essentially in need of verification, and to be rejected as soon as verification fails and an alternative view is presented. In fact, the intelligibility of modern science is, in the main, the intelligibility that in traditional theology went by the name of convenientia.

When theology is seen as an on-going process, its contextual structure accords not with the rules of deductive logic but with the continuous and cumulative process ruled by a method. It is a context in which similar questions are assigned successively different answers. It is a context in which incoherence is removed, not at a stroke, but only gradually, while this gradual removal only tends to bring to light broader and deeper problems. It is a context in which the intelligibility attained is, in general, that of the possible and not that of the necessary. Finally, it is a context in which developments no less than aberrations are not historically necessitated but only historically conditioned; they are the steps that de facto were taken in given situations and either legitimated or not by the situations and their antecedents.

Let me conclude. This second section was concerned with the

question, What seems the key task in current Catholic theology? My answer has been a contrast between a rigid logical ideal alone fit to house eternal truths in a permanent synthesis and, on the other hand, the concrete, on-going, cumulative process guided by a method. Only a theology structured by method can assimilate the somewhat recently accepted hermeneutic and historical methods and it alone has room for developing doctrines and developing theologies. The key task, then, in contemporary Catholic theology is to replace the shattered thought-forms associated with eternal truths and logical ideals with new thought-forms that accord with the dynamics of development and the concrete style of method.

3. What contribution might philosophy make in the performance of the key task of current theology?

One can turn on the television set and adjust it without ever having attempted to penetrate the mysteries of electronics. But if one wishes to design a new and better type of television set, the more one knows of electronics and the more fertile one is in invention, the greater the likelihood one will succeed. Similarly, one can learn the techniques of this or that branch or division of theology by repeating the performance of others revealed in their lectures, their seminars, their articles, and their books. But it is one thing to juxtapose the various techniques of the many branches. It is quite another to see how each set can be rearranged, expanded, curtailed, transformed, so that all will look together in a single,

on-going, cumulative process. Most of all, it is in preparing that transforming and unifying view that philosophy can make a contribution to contemporary theology.

For a method guides cognitional performance. Because the performance is cognitional, there are needed full and precise answers to three basic questions. There is the question of cognitional theory, What precisely is one doing when one is knowing? There is the question of epistemology. Why is doing that knowing? There is the question of metaphysics, What does one know when one does it? When the foregoing questions are answered with philosophic generality, one is already in possession of a transcendental method, that is, of a method that is as yet not specified by any particular field or subject but, by suitable additions and adaptations, can be specified to any field or subject of human inquiry.

The foregoing is, in my opinion, the core contribution a philosophy can make to contemporary theological need. But it also can make further contributions that help theology explicate its proper adaptations of transcendental method. Let me briefly indicate the nature of such further contributions.

d/ First, in terms of cognitional theory, epistemology, and metaphysics, there has to be worked out a foundational account both of hermeneutics and of critical history. The techniques exist and are practised. But there is needed an adequate analysis followed by an epistemological critique of the different interpretations given the techniques by naive realists, by empiricists, by positivists, by

idealists, by phenomenologists, by critical realists. Without the analysis and the epistemological critique, any attempt to get beyond the Jesus of history to the Christ of faith risks being blocked by usually unacknowledged philosophic assumptions.

Secondly, let me note that the metaphysics I would envisage would not be a philosophic first. It would be a conclusion derived from epistemology and cognitional theory, and these in turn would be formulations of one's personal experience of one's own cognitional operations. In this fashion philosophy and the root of theological method would come out of the personal experience of the thinker and it would evoke the personal experience of those to whom he speaks or for whom he writes.

Thirdly, cognitional theory, epistemology, and metaphysics are needed but they are not enough. They have to be subsumed under the higher operations that integrate knowing with feeling and consist in deliberating, evaluating, deciding, acting. It is on this level that people move from unauthenticity to authenticity; it is on this level that they decide to believe; it is at the root of this level that God's love floods their hearts through the gift of the Holy Spirit (Rom 5, 5). As before, so here too the account is not to presuppose a metaphysical framework of potencies, habits, acts, objects but basically it is to proceed from personal experience and move towards an analysis of the structures of our conscious and intentional operations. More than anywhere it is essential here to be able to speak from the heart to the heart without introducing elements that, however true in themselves, have the disadvantage of not being given in

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Fourthly, there exist religious studies. There are the history of religions, the phenomenology of religion, the psychology of religion, the sociology of religion, and underpinning them all and, as well, overarching them there is the philosophy of religion. Philosophy of religion reveals how basic thinking relates itself to the various branches of religious studies. Thereby it offers theology an analogous model of the way it can relate itself to religious studies, how it can profit from them, and how it can teach its own students what they will need to understand if the new secretariats, established by Vatican II, for ecumenism, for non-Christian religions, and for unbelievers, are to have competent staffs and to be properly understood, supported, and promoted by the church and the hierarchy.

Fifthly, there is the history of philosophy. If one is to read Tertullian, one had best know Stoicism. If one is to read Origen, one has to be acquainted with Middle Platonism. If one is to read Augustine, one has to know his Platonici. Similarly, down the ages, theology has drawn upon the philosophers, because it has to speak both of the man that grace converts and of the world in which he lives. The historical theologian, then, has to know the philosophers relevant to his field of study; he has to be able to discern how much of the philosophers' thought the Christian writer really grasped and how much was only loosely assimilated. Finally, he must also be a critical philosopher, both capable of spotting what

is misleading or inadequate in this or that philosophy, and able to reveal how philosophic defect led to theological defect. By such criticism historical theology can yield a dialectic. By revealing the philosophic sources of aberrations, it can account for differences in patristic and in theological thought. By discerning the manner in which aberrations have been overcome, it can sketch the genesis of a distinctive Catholic philosophy. For neither Plato nor Aristotle, neither Stoics nor Gnostics, anticipated the notions implied by Nicaea, by Ephesus, by Chalcedon.

Sixthly, just as transcendental method can be adapted and extended into theology, into religious studies, into historical theology, so too it can be adapted and extended into socio-cultural studies. Meanings, values, modes of group action have developed and diversified down the ages. There is no lack of detailed studies. There is no lack of the expertise that, through the self-correcting process of commonsense learning, comes to understand alien cultures. Besides detailed studies there exist such overall views as Bruno Snell's The Discovery of Mind and Ernst Cassirer's Philosophy of Symbolic Forms.

But something more is wanted. It is not supplied either by Aquinas's interpretation of scripture in Aristotelian terms or by Bultmann's interpretation of the New Testament in terms of the early Heidegger. Rather what is wanted is a coming together of the fruits of historical expertise and, on the other hand, of models derived from the data of consciousness, from the different types of its

differentiation and specialization, from the various structures that result from differentiation and specialization. From the interaction of detailed research, overall views, and the construction of models there would gradually emerge a phylogenetic set of schemata that would provide socio-cultural expertise with a first approximation to the notions it has to express and, on the other hand, would provide students both with an initial access to alien cultures and with an overall view of the stages and variations of human meanings, values, structures.

To this academic utility there must be added its practical utility. The gospel is to be preached to all nations, to every class of men in every culture. As long as classicist culture was accepted, it could be thought that there existed but a single culture and that the gospel could be preached, substantially through that culture, even though accidentally certain adaptations had to be made to reach the uncultured. Now that classicist culture is a thing of the past, we can no longer suppose that classicist assumptions could succeed in preaching the gospel to all nations. We have to learn to express the gospel message so that it can be grasped by the members of every class within each of the cultures of the world. A philosophy of culture can make a great contribution towards the fulfilment of that task.

There is, then, a certain type of philosophy that in many ways is very relevant to Catholic theology in its current crisis. For the current crisis is a shift in horizon. The earlier horizon

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was a basic outlook in terms of logic and eternal truths, with the consequence that serious change of context was assumed to be impossible and so its possibility was not investigated. The current horizon is a basic outlook in terms of method and developing doctrines. The application of hermeneutics and critical history have brought to light notable changes of context and, with them, those continuities and contrasts that we refer to as doctrinal developments. In place of eternal truths, we now have differing apprehensions of the object of faith, where the differences arise from the changing contexts within which the apprehensions occur.

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A philosophy very relevant to this shift of horizon, of basic outlook, is one that centers on three questions (1) what am I doing when I am knowing; (2) why is doing that knowing; and (3) what do I know when I do it. With answers to those questions ascertained, one reaches the method of theology by asking and answering the specific question, What are we doing when we do theology?

The same type of philosophy also makes possible an analysis and a much needed critique both of hermeneutics and of critical history. It underpins a philosophy of action -- a philosophy of deliberation, evaluation, decision, deed. It opens out upon a philosophy of religion, a dialectical history of theology, a philosophy of culture and of communications. In all these areas it blazes trails for theology to follow, enlarge, enrich.

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- 1) On Wolf, see G. P. Gooch, History and Historian in the Nineteenth Century, London (Longmans) ²1952, pp. 25 - 28.
For a philosophic view of the movement: E. Cassirer, The Problem of Knowledge, Philosophy, Science, and History since Hegel, New Haven (Yale) 1950, pp. 217-325; H. G. Gadamer, Wahrheit und Methode, Tübingen (Mohr) 1960.
- 2) F. D. E. Schleiermacher, Hermeneutik, Nach den Handschriften neu herausgegeben und eingeleitet von Heinz Kimmerle, Heidelberg (Carl Winter) 1959. Cf. Gadamer, op. cit., pp. 172 - 185;
R. Palmer, Hermeneutics, Evanston (Northwestern) 1969, pp. 84 - 97.
- 3) August Boeckh, Enzyklopädie und Methodologie der philologischen Wissenschaften, hrsg. v. Ernst Bratuscheck, Leipzig 1877. Cf. Gooch, op. cit., pp. 28 - 32; also P. Hunermann, Der Durchbruch geschichtlichen Denkens im 19. Jahrhundert, Freiburg (Herder) 1967, pp. 63 - 68.
- 4) On v. Ranke, Gooch, op. cit., pp. 72 - 97, esp. 97; Gadamer, op. cit., pp. 191 - 199; Cassirer, op. cit., pp. 230 - 242.
- 5) J. G. Droysen, Historik. Vorlesungen über Enzyklopädie und Methodologie der Geschichte, hrsg. v. R. Hübner, München ⁴1960.
Cf. Hübnermann, op. cit., pp. 49 - 132; Gadamer, op. cit., pp. 199 - 205; Cassirer, op. cit., 257 f.

- 6) Cf. Hünermann, op. cit., pp. 133 - 291; Gadamer, op. cit., pp. 205 - 228; Palmer, op. cit., pp. 98 - 123.
- 7) Augustine, De trinitate, VII, iv, 7; PL 42, 939.
- 8) Aristotle, Post. Anal., I, 2, 71b 16 ff. See the Introduction in W. D. Ross, Aristotle's Prior and Posterior Analytics, Oxford (Clarendon) 1949, pp. 51 - 75.

Further notes

l/ 1) Transcendental method is transcendental both in the Scholastic sense (it is not confined to any particular genus or category of inquiry) and in the Kantian sense (it is the condition of the possibility (necessary but not sufficient condition) of any categorical method).

2) Those that still cling to eternal truths may object that my position is relativist. They may argue a posteriori: hermeneutics and critical history did lead to the historicism of Ernst Troeltsch, which was just a thorough-going relativism. They may argue a priori: a truth that is not eternal is relative to some particular place and time.

To the a posteriori argument: recall that I accept hermeneutics and critical method but not without a soundly based analysis and an epistemological critique. Troeltsch's relativism springs from a philosophic inadequacy.

To the a priori argument: note that truths that are not eternal are relative, not to a place and time, but to the context of a place and time; but such contexts are related to one another; history includes the study of such relations; in the light of history it becomes possible to transpose from one context to another; by such transpositions one reaches a truth that extends over places and times.

3) While the paper sets forth problems in contemporary theology, it can make no attempt to solve them on the theological level. That is a task for a separate book. Our concern is limited to the contribution that philosophy might make to the solution of theological problems.