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The New Context of Theology

The general topic of this Congress is the renewal of theology and, I may add, it is renewal in a novel sense. Usually in Catholic circles 'renewal' has meant a return to the olden times of pristine virtue and deep wisdom. But good Pope John has made 'renewal' mean aggiornamento, bringing things up to date.

Obviously if Catholic theology is to be brought up to date, it must have fallen behind the times. Again, if we are to know what is to be done to bring Catholic theology up to date, we must ascertain when it began to fall behind the times, in what respects it got out of touch, in what ways it failed to meet the issues and effect the developments that long ago were due and now are long overdue.

The answer I wish to suggest takes us back almost three centuries — to the end of the seventeenth century and, more precisely, to the year 1680. For that, it seems, was the time of the great beginning. Then it was that Herbert Butterfield placed the origins of modern science, then that Paul Hazard placed the beginning of the Enlightenment, then that Yves Congar placed the beginning of dogmatic theology. When modern science began, when the Enlightenment began, then the theologians began to reassure one another about their certainties. Let me comment briefly on this threefold coincidence.

When Professor Butterfield placed the origins of modern science at the end of the seventeenth century, he by no means meant to deny that from the year 1300 on numerous discoveries were made that since have been included within modern science and integrated with it. But he did make the point that, at the time of their first appearance, these discoveries could not be expressed adequately. Then the dominant cultural context was Aristotelian. The discoverers themselves had an Aristotelian background. Regularly, then, there was a conflict between the new ideas and the old doctrines, and this conflict existed not merely between an old guard of Aristotelians and a new breed of scientists but, far more gravely, within the very minds of the new scientists.

For new ideas are far less than a whole mentality, a whole climate of thought and opinion, a whole mode of approach and procedure and judgement. Before these new ideas could be formulated accurately, coherently, cogently, they themselves had to multiply, cumulate, coalesce to bring forth a new system of concepts and a new body of doctrine that was somehow comparable in extent to the Aristotelian and so capable of replacing it.

In brief, Professor Butterfield distinguished between new ideas and the context or horizon within which they were expressed, developed, related. From about the beginning of the fourteenth century the new ideas multiplied. But only towards the close of the seventeenth century did there emerge the context appropriate to these ideas. The origin of this context is for Professor Butterfield the origin of modern science and, in his judgement, 'it outshines everything since the rise of Christianity and reduces the Renaissance and the Reformation to the rank of mere episodes, mere internal displacements, within the system of medieval Christendom.'[1]

Coincident with the origins of modern science was the beginning of the Enlightenment, of the movement Peter Gay recently named the rise of modern paganism.[2] Moreover, while this movement commonly is located in the eighteenth century, the French Academician, Paul Hazard, in La crise de conscience européenne,[3] has exhibited already in full swing between the years 1680 and 1715 a far-flung attack on Christianity from almost every quarter and in almost every style. It was a movement revolted by the spectacle of religious persecution and religious war. It was to replace the God of the Christians by the God of the philosophes and eventually, the God of the philosophes by agnosticism and atheism. It gloried in the achievements of Newton, criticized social structures, promoted political change, and moved towards a materialist, mechanist, determinist interpretation no less of man than of nature.[4]

atheism

1) Herbert Butterfield, The Origins of Modern Science, 1300-1800, New York, The Free Press, 1966, p. 7.

2) Peter Gay, The Enlightenment, An Interpretation, New York, Knopf, 1966.

3) Paul Hazard, La crise de conscience européenne, 1680 - 1715, 3 vols., Paris 1935. E. T., The European Mind, London 1953.

4) The lasting influence of such enlightenment right up to the present has been illustrated rather fully by F. W. Matson, The Broken Image, New York, Braziller 1964, Doubleday Anchor 1966.

It would be unfair to expect the theologians of the end of the seventeenth century to have discerned the good and the evil in the great movements of their time. But, at least, we may record what in fact they did. They introduced 'dogmatic' theology. It is true that the word, dogmatic, had been previously applied to theology. But then it was used to denote a distinction from moral or ethical or historical theology. Now it was employed in a new sense, in opposition to Scholastic theology. It replaced the inquiry of the quaestio by the paedagogy of the thesis. It demoted the quest of faith for understanding to a desirable but secondary and, indeed, optional goal. It gave basic and central significance to the certitudes of faith, their presuppositions, and their consequences. It owed its mode of proof to Melchior Cano and, as that theologian was also a bishop and an inquisitor, so the new dogmatic theology not only proved its theses but also was supported by the teaching authority and the sanctions of the church.[5]

Such a conception of theology survived right into the twentieth century and even today in some circles it is the only conception that is understood. Still, among theologians, its limitations and defects have been becoming more and more apparent especially since the 1890's. During the last seventy years efforts to find remedies and to implement them have been going forward steadily if unobtrusively. The measure of their success is the radically new situation brought to light by the Second Vatican Council.

There is, perhaps, no need for me here to insist that the novelty resides not in a new revelation or a new faith but in a new cultural context. For a theology is a product, not only of the religion it investigates and expounds, but also of the cultural ideals and norms that set its problems and direct its solutions. Just as theology in the thirteenth century followed its age by assimilating Aristotle, just as theology in the seventeenth century resisted its age by retiring into a dogmatic corner, so theology

5) See Yves Congar, art. Théologie, DTC 29, 432 f.

today is locked in an encounter with its age. Whether it will grow and triumph, or whether it will wither to insignificance, in no small measure depends on the clarity and the accuracy of its grasp of the external cultural factors that undermine its past achievements and challenge it to new endeavours.

The topics, then, that I am to raise are not directly theological. For that very reason they are all the more apt to be overlooked in an age characterized by specialization. For the same reason it is all the more important to draw attention to them on such an occasion as the present, for the cultural context sets up an undertow that accounts for tendencies and exigences that must be met yet, if not understood, too easily are neglected or thwarted because they seem superfluous, arbitrary, perplexing, disquieting, or dangerous.

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First, then, theology was a deductive and it has become largely an empirical science. It was a deductive science in the sense that its theses were conclusions to be proved from the premisses provided by scripture and tradition. It has become an empirical science in the sense that scripture and tradition now supply, not premisses, but data. The data have to be viewed in their historical perspective. They have to be interpreted in the light of contemporary techniques and procedures. Where before the step from premisses to conclusions was brief, simple, and certain, today the steps from data to interpretation are long, arduous and, at best, probable. An empirical science does not demonstrate. It accumulates information, develops understanding, masters ever more of its materials, but it does not preclude the uncovering of further relevant data, the emergence of new insights, the attainment of a more comprehensive view.

Secondly, this shift from a deductivist to an empirical approach has come to stay. One has only to glance at the bibliographies in Biblica, in Altaner's Patrologie, in the Bulletin de théologie ancienne et médiévale, and in Ephemerides theologicae Lovanienses to become aware of the

I am not saying it has become a natural science like biology or an experimental science like chemistry

massive commitment of contemporary Catholic thought to an empirical approach. But to understand this movement, to grasp the reasons for it, one must do more than glance at bibliographies; one has to get down to reading the books. Then one gradually discovers that the old dogmatic theology had misconceived history on a classicist model, that it thought not in terms of evolution and development but of universality and permanence. Vincent of Lerins had proclaimed God's truth to be quod semper, quod ubique, quod ab omnibus,[6] and such a view was still quite congenial in the grand siècle of French literature.[7] On such assumptions it was quite legitimate to expect the theologian, if only he knew the faith of today, to be equally at home in the Old and New Testaments, in the Greek and Latin Fathers, in the writings of mediaeval, Renaissance, and more recent theologians. But today such an assumption appears fantastic and preposterous. In almost endless studies the writings of age after age have been examined minutely and, all along the line, the notion of fixity has had to give way to the fact of development. Moreover, development is complex, intricate, manifold. Its precise character at any time can be ascertained only through detailed studies of the resources, the problems, the tendencies, and the accidents of the time. Where once the dogmatic theologian was supposed to range over centuries, now scripture, patristics, mediaeval and modern studies are divided and subdivided among classes of specialists. Where once the dogmatic theologian could lay down an overall view that echoed the conciliar semper tenuit atque tenet sancta mater Ecclesia, now an overall view tends to be either a tentative summary of the present state of research or a popular simplification of issues that really are not simple at all.

6) Vincent of Lerins, Commonitorium II, 3. Edidit R. S. Moxon, Cambridge 1915, p. 10.

7) See Owen Chadwick, The Idea of Doctrinal Development, From Bossuet to Newman. Cambridge 1957, pp. 17 ff.

Thirdly, while theology has become largely empirical in its method, it has invoked a new vocabulary, new imagery, new concepts to express its thought. The Aristotelian analyses, concepts, words, that in the Middle Ages became part of the Catholic patrimony to resist both Renaissance scoffing and Protestant condemnation, almost suddenly in the twentieth century have gone out of fashion. With equal rapidity the vacuum is being refilled with biblical words and images and with ideas worked out by historicist, personalist, phenomenological, and existential reflection. There is so much new in Catholic speculative theology that Karl Rahner felt the need to issue a Kleines theologisches Wörterbuch[8] and Heinrich Fries organised over one hundred experts to collaborate and produce a two-volume Handbuch theologischer Grundbegriffe.[9]

As the empirical approach, so too, I believe, the new conceptual apparatus has come to stay. Religion is concerned with man's relations to God and to his fellow man, so that any deepening or enriching of our apprehension of man possesses religious significance and relevance. But the new conceptual apparatus does make available such a deepening and enriching. Without denying human nature, it adds the quite distinctive categories of man as an historical being. Without repudiating the analysis of man into body and soul, it adds the richer and more concrete apprehension of man as incarnate subject.

It would be far more than can be attempted within the limits of the present paper to attempt to communicate what precisely is meant by the contrast between nature and history or what is added to the couple, body and soul, by the phrase, incarnate subject. Summarily, very summarily, I may

8) Karl Rahner and Herbert Vorgrimler, Kleines theologisches Wörterbuch, Freiburg (Herder) 1961.

9) Heinrich Fries, Handbuch theologischer Grundbegriffe, 2 vols., München (Kösel-Verlag) 1962 and 1963.

perhaps say that such terms refer to a dimension of human reality that has always existed, that always has been lived and experienced, that classicist thought standardized yet tended to overlook, that modern studies have brought to light, thematized, elaborated, illustrated, documented. That dimension is the constitutive role of meaning in human living. It is the fact that acts of meaning inform human living, that such acts proceed from a free and responsible subject incarnate, that meanings differ from nation to nation, from culture to culture, and that, over time, they develop and go astray. Besides the meanings by which man apprehends nature and the meanings by which he transforms it, there are the meanings by which man thinks out the possibilities of his own living and makes his choice among them. In this realm of freedom and creativity, of solidarity and responsibility, of dazzling achievement and pitiable madness, there ever occurs man's making of man.

The wealth, the complexity, the profundity of this modern apprehension of man might be illustrated by pointing to its implications for philosophy, for human science, for art and literature, for education and psychiatry. But what must be mentioned is its significance for the notion of divine revelation. God becomes known to us in two ways: as the ground and end of the material universe; and as the one that speaks to us through scripture and tradition. The first manner might found a natural religion. The second adds revealed religion. For the first, one might say: the heavens show forth the glory of God; what can mere words add? But for the second, one must answer that, however trifling the uses to which words may be put, still they are the vehicles of meaning, and meaning is the stuff of man's making of man. So it is that a divine revelation is God's entry and his taking part in man's making of man. It is God's claim to have a say in the aims and purposes, the direction and development, of human lives, human societies, human cultures, human history.

From this significance for revealed religion there follows a significance for theology. In the mediaeval period theology became the queen of the sciences. But in the practice of Aquinas it was also the principle

for the moulding and transformation of a culture. He was not content to write his systematic works, his commentaries on scripture and on such Christian writers as the pseudo-Dionysius and Boethius. At a time when Arabic and Greek thought were penetrating the whole of Western culture, he wrote extensive commentaries on numerous works of Aristotle to fit a pagan's science within a Christian context and to construct a world-view that underpinned Dante's Divina commedia. To this paradigm theology today must look if it is to achieve its aggiornamento. Its task is not limited to investigating, ordering, expounding, communicating divine revelation. All that is needed, but more must be done. For revelation is God's entry into man's making of man, and so theology not only has to reflect on revelation but also it has somehow to mediate God's meaning into the whole of human affairs. It is not a small task but, though very large, it is all the more urgent in a culture in which God is ignored and there are even theologians to proclaim that God is dead.

My reflections have come full circle. Not only does the cultural context influence theology to undo its past achievements and make new demands upon it. But also theology is called upon to influence the cultural context, to translate the word of God and so project it into new mentalities and new situations. So a contemporary Catholic theology has to be not only Catholic but also ecumenist. Its concern must reach not only Christians but also non-Christians and atheists. It has to learn to draw not only on the modern philosophies but also on the relatively new sciences of religion, psychology, sociology and the new techniques of the communication arts.

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I have been speaking of our renewed theology and now I must add that a renewed theology needs renewed foundations. The old foundations will no longer do. But we cannot get along with no foundations at all. So new foundations, and, I should say, a new type of foundations is needed to replace the old.

First, some foundations are needed. If change is to be improvement,

if new tasks are to be accomplished fruitfully, discernment is needed and discrimination. If we are to draw on contemporary psychology and sociology, if we are to profit from the modern science of religions, if we are to revise Scholastic categories and to make our own the concepts worked out in historicist, personalist, phenomenological, or existentialist circles, then we must be able to distinguish tinsel and silver, gilt and gold. No less important than a critique of notions and conclusions is a critique of methods. The new largely empirical approach to theology can too easily be made into a device for reducing doctrines to probable opinions. A hermeneutics can pretend to philosophic neutrality yet force the conclusion that the content of revelation is mostly myth. Scientific history can be so conceived that a study of the narrative of salvation will strip it of matters of fact. If our renewed theology is not to be the dupe of every fashion, it needs a firm basis and a critical stance.

Secondly, the old foundations will no longer do. In saying this I do not mean that they are no longer true, for they are as true now as they ever were. I mean that they are no longer appropriate. I am simply recalling that one must not patch an old cloak with new cloth or put new wine in old wineskins. One type of foundations suits a theology that aims at being deductivist, static, abstract, universal, equally applicable to all places and to all times. Quite different foundations are needed when theology turns from deductivism to an empirical approach, from the static to the dynamic, from the abstract to the concrete, from the universal to the historical totality of particulars, from invariable rules to intelligent adjustment and adaptation.

Thirdly, I shall be asked, no doubt, to give some indication of the nature or character of the new foundations. To this topic I have elsewhere given considerable attention, first, to assure historical continuity, in a study of cognitional theory in the writings of St. Thomas,[10] then in a

10) Originally published in Theological Studies, 1946-1949, and recently revised and reissued by David Burrell, C. S. C., under the title, Verbum, Word and Idea in Aquinas, Notre Dame University Press 1967.

contemporary development, entitled Insight,[11] to take into account the fact of modern science and the problems of modern philosophy. On the present occasion I may be permitted, perhaps, to offer no more than a few brief approximations.

As a first approximation, to be corrected and complemented shortly by further approximations, let us consider the foundations of a modern science. These do not consist in any part of the science itself, in any of its conclusions, in any of its laws, in any of its principles. All of these are open to revision, and it is in the light of the foundations that the revision would take place. What, then, are the foundations? They are the method of the science. It is the method that generates the conclusions, laws, principles, that are accepted today. It is the method that will generate the revision of conclusions, laws, principles, tomorrow. What the scientist relies on ultimately is his method.

Now one might be inclined to think of method as a set of verbal propositions enouncing rules to be followed in a scientific investigation and, of course, it is true that there are the hodmen of science that carry out the routines prescribed to them by those that understand the purpose of an investigation and the manner in which it might advance scientific knowledge. But I wish here to use the word, method, to denote not the prescriptions given the hodmen but the grounds that governed the prescribing. Such grounds, though perfectly familiar to the director, usually are not objectified or verbalized by him. Indeed, he cannot achieve such objectification with any accuracy, unless he is ready to devote as much time and effort to cognitional theory as he has already devoted to his physics or chemistry or biology. This does not happen. But, were it to do so, there would result the account of a normative pattern that related to one another the cognitional operations that recur in scientific investigations. There would be listed, described, illustrated, compared such operations as inquiring,

11) Insight, A Study of Human Understanding, London and New York 1957. Sixth printing 1965.

observing, describing, problem defining, discovering, forming hypotheses, working out presuppositions and implications, devising series of experiments, performing them, and verifying. The greatest stress would be placed on the importance of personal experience of the operations, of identifying them within one's experience, and of finding within that experience not only the operations but also the dynamic and normative relations that bind them to one another. In this fashion, you will agree, the subject as scientist would come to know himself as scientist. But the subject as scientist is the reality that is principle and foundation of science, of science as it has been, of science as it is, of science as it will be.

So much for our first approximation. It illustrates by an example what might be meant by foundations that lie, not in a set of verbal propositions named first principles, but in a particular, concrete, dynamic reality generating knowledge of particular, concrete, dynamic realities. It remains that we have to effect the transition from natural science to theology, and so we turn to our second approximation.

Fundamental to religious living is conversion. It is a topic little studied in traditional theology since there remains very little of it when one reaches the universal, the abstract, the static. For conversion occurs in the lives of individuals. It is not merely a change or even a development; rather it is a radical transformation on which follows on all levels of living an interlocked series of changes and developments. What hitherto was unnoticed becomes vivid and present. What had been of no concern becomes a matter of high import. So great a change in one's apprehensions and one's values accompanies no less a change in oneself, in one's relations to other persons, and in one's relations to God.

Not all conversion is as total as the one I have so summarily described. Conversion has many dimensions. A changed relation to God brings or follows changes that are personal, social, moral, and intellectual. But there is no fixed rule of antecedence and consequence, no necessity of simultaneity, no prescribed magnitudes of change. Conversion may be compacted into

the moment of a blinded Saul falling from his horse on the way to Damascus. It may be extended over the slow maturing process of a lifetime. It may satisfy any intermediate measure.

In a current expression conversion is ontic. The convert apprehends differently, values differently, relates differently, because he has become different. The new apprehension is, not so much a new statement or a new set of statements, but rather new meanings that attach to almost any statement. It is not new values so much as a transvaluation of values. In Pauline language, 'When anyone is united to Christ, there is a new world; the old order has gone, and a new order has begun' (2 Cor 5, 17).

Though conversion is intensely personal, utterly intimate, still it is not so private as to be solitary. It can happen to many and they can form a community to sustain one another in their self-transformation and to help one another in working out the implications and in fulfilling the promise of their new life. Finally, what can become communal, can become historical. It can pass from generation to generation. It can spread from one cultural milieu to another. It can adapt to changing circumstance, confront new situations, survive into a different age, flourish in another period or epoch.

When conversion is viewed as an on-going process, at once personal, communal, and historical, it coincides with living religion. For religion is conversion in its preparation, in its occurence, in its development, in its consequents, and also alas in its incompleteness, its failures, its breakdowns, its disintegration.

Now theology, and especially the empirical theology of today, is reflection on religion. It follows that theology will be reflection on conversion. But conversion is fundamental to religion. It follows that reflection on conversion can supply theology with its foundations and, indeed, with foundations that are concrete, dynamic, personal, communal, and historical. Just as reflection on the operations of the scientist brings to light the real foundations of the science, so too reflection on the on-going process of

conversion may bring to light the real foundations of a renewed theology.

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I must conclude.

I met the question of theological renewal, of its aggiornamento, by asking how far we are behind the times. I went back three centuries, for it was then that dogmatic theology had its beginnings, and it has been toward a total transformation of dogmatic theology that the developments of this century have worked. A normative structure that was deductivist has become empirical. A conceptual apparatus that at times clung pathetically to the past is yielding place to historicist, personalist, phenomenological, and existentialist notions.

I have urged that so great a transformation needs renewed foundations, and that the needed renewal is the introduction of a new type of foundation. It is to consist not in objective statement but in subjective reality. The objective statements of a de vera religione, de Christo legato, de ecclesia, de inspiratione scripturae, de locis theologicis, are as much in need of foundations as are those of other tracts. But behind all statements is the stating subject. What is normative and foundational for subjects stating theology is to be found, I have suggested, in reflection on conversion, where conversion is taken as an on-going process, concrete and dynamic, personal, communal, and historical.