

## The Problem

The problem of method in contemporary Catholic theology is manifested in the conflict between positive and dogmatic theology, but it has its roots in such external factors as the modern notion of science, modern man's apprehension of himself, and consequent developments in philosophy.

A few brief indications on each of these points will, of course, prove nothing. But they can be useful as signs <sup>of</sup> ~~that~~ ~~which~~ ~~that~~ ~~may help the reader to discern~~ our estimate of the situation ~~of~~ contemporary ~~Catholic~~ ~~theology~~ and, as well, ~~of~~ the direction in which, we believe, solutions are to be sought. ~~W~~ With this extremely limited purpose in mind the following paragraphs have been written.

### 1. Positive and Dogmatic Theology

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The name, positive theology, became current towards the end of the sixteenth century. <sup>Its immediate concern was</sup> ~~It was concerned immediately~~ with theological sources, principally with scriptural and patristic texts, but also with councils, papal documents, and other monuments to Christian tradition. It left to the traditional Scholastic theology all elaborateness and subtlety of argumentation, cultivated humanist elegance in diction and style, and sought to explain the meaning of texts

especially in controversial matters.<sup>1</sup>

About a century later, around the year 1680, there began a dogmatic theology that has survived into our own time. It developed the type of exposition that ~~sets~~ sets forth in turn the thesis, the state of the question, the opinions of adversaries, ~~profoundly~~ the theological note or quality ~~of~~ derived from conciliar decrees or papal documents, proofs from scripture, from the Fathers, from the common doctrine of theologians, from theological reason, solutions <sup>to</sup> of objections, and corollaries. Its main concern was to present the positions on which all Catholics were agreed; its main technique was to appeal to the dogmas of the Church and their implications; and, while it might exclude all Scholastic disputes and all doubtful erudition, it commonly tended to present some bland combination of positive learning and reflective elaboration.<sup>2</sup>

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1) M.-J. Congar, art. Théologie, DTC XV<sup>1</sup>(1946), 426-30.

2) Ibid., col. 432 f.

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The rise of historical criticism and its application to theological sources in the nineteenth century did not ~~have~~ have at once any notable effect. The apologetic labours of positive theologians <sup>slowly</sup> shifted from the old controversies with Protestants to refutations of the new scientific rationalism. Dogmatic treatises lengthened their lists of adversaries. But the censorship of books <sup>and articles</sup> prior to publication, along with the subsequent condemnation of any novelties that got into print, made ~~it~~ extremely difficult any change in the consensus of Catholic opinion and so any change in the dogmatic theology engaged in formulating that consensus.

The immediate cause, then, of the present crisis would seem to lie in some new factor within positive theology. Nor is it difficult to identify this factor. Positive theology has ceased to be simply a tool of dogmatic theology. It has found some degree of independence, some measure of autonomy, some proper basis of its own. In an age of empirical science it has become an empirical science, concerned to find its own questions in its proper data, concerned to answer them by an understanding that rises from the data themselves. This procedure, of course, if followed rigorously, would exclude all influence not only from dogmatic theology but also from Church authority. But rigour has not been the ~~win~~ rule. Positive theology does not appeal, at least directly, to some systematically <sup>elaborated</sup> ideal of science. It would abhor any philosophic a priori. Its assumptions are those of the age; ~~at~~ its tendencies are loyally Catholic; its ~~policy~~ unconscious policy ~~would~~ would seem to have been to take all the liberty it could get and to keep pressing for more.

The pressure has been upon ~~dogma~~ dogmatic theology. If its bastion has been the dogmas, its argument has been from scripture, from patristic literature, from the theological tradition. Nor has the argument always been sound. A theological school or, more accurately, group of schools that for centuries operated ~~as~~ without any adequate notion or sufficient recognition of doctrinal development, could not be expected to have read its sources in their proper context and perspective. So it has been that piecemeal first and later in an ever more massive fashion the arguments of dogmatic theology have been questioned, corrected, brushed aside.

~~It might be thought that this process must now be approaching a limit, that soon the dogmatic theologians will have learned all~~

But behind this unpleasant, if necessary, polemic there lurk far graver issues. Once the development of doctrine is acknowledged, not only the interpretation of a number of texts but also the very approach and method of the old dogmatic theology are challenged. If the Catholic consensus really <sup>a monolithic and immutable</sup> regarded quod ubique, quod semper, quod ab omnibus, one could study it at any place and time, and securely transfer one's results to any other place or time. On that basis the dogmatic theologian could be competent single-handedly to interpret ~~scripture~~ the Old and New Testaments, the Greek and Latin Fathers, conciliar decrees and papal documents, the works of orthodox and heretical theologians. But once ~~the~~ Catholic tradition has to be discerned in a manifold of social, cultural, and historical differences, then the task has to be split up into a host of specialities, the questions to be asked have to arise from the data themselves and not from the theses of dogmatic treatises, the answers to be accepted have to be determined by <sup>an</sup> understanding that emerges from the data, and it is only in the series of such answers that the ~~high~~ nature and legitimacy of developments can be recognized.

~~On this showing the dogmatist's formulation of the Catholic consensus becomes an enormously complicated and even a paradoxical task. For between the dogmatist and his sources in scripture and tradition there have to be admitted a host of specialists in positive theology. If the host is to serve some common end, it must be guided at last least by the directives of a commonly ~~xxx~~ acknowledged method. Finally, since the results of positive theology, like those of all empirical science, are subject to revision, there has to be discovered some method of locating and discerning the invariants~~

On this showing the single name, positive theology, covers a host of specialities: areas in the Old and the New Testaments are divided and subdivided, the ~~patristic~~ patristic period is cut up into sections and subsections, mediaeval ~~sch~~ leaders and schools become objects of ever more specialized research, and ~~the~~ subsequent centuries <sup>are each to</sup> ~~be~~ be given no less attention. But one cannot conceive such endless labour as directly relevant to the survival of the old dogmatic theology. Its mere massiveness is an obstacle that only <sup>automated</sup> an information-retrieval system could <sup>perhaps</sup> overcome. The questions that are asked are historical rather than dogmatic. The answers that are given, like all the results of ~~a~~ modern science, are subject to revision and so seem to offer dogmatic theses no surer a foundation than shifting sand.

The simple fact would seem to be that, through the gradually opening door of positive theology, there has entered the shape and power of modern science. A single theology can function coherently only if it functions in the light of a single notion of science. Not a little, perhaps, of the contemporary confusion in theology might be explained by the unconscious allegiance of positive theology to a modern notion of science, by the somewhat repressed memories of the Aristotelian notion in dogmatic theology, and by the necessity, under which theology lies, of working out the notion, approach, method appropriate to <sup>the</sup> contemporary ~~theological~~ theological task.

## 2. Two Notions of Science

While modern science is a continuation and development of its ancient and mediaeval antecedents, it would be a serious mistake to suppose that the later differs from the earlier only in procedures, content, extent, and efficacy. These differences are of course enormous; but behind them are less palpable but more fundamental differences in the anticipations and ~~with~~ criteria that ~~it~~ explicitly or implicitly direct investigations to render them fruitful or sterile. It is with these underlying, directive, and dynamic factors that we are here concerned, and we may begin our brief summary by noting Aristotle's contrast of episteme and doxa, of science and opinion.

For Aristotle, then, science was a matter of knowing the cause, knowing that it was the cause, and knowing that the effect could not be other than it was.<sup>3</sup> In brief, the object of science was ~~infinite, eternal, and necessary~~ causal, necessary, immutable. Opinion, in contrast, was true knowledge of matters of fact, where, however, the fact was not necessary or, if it were, then its necessity was not apprehended.<sup>4</sup>

The foregoing distinction supposed or entailed another that divided the universe into two sections, one necessary, the other contingent. Further, it entailed a distinction between theory, which dealt with the necessary, and practice, which dealt with the contingent. In turn there were distinguished wisdom, which guided theory, and prudence, which guided practice.

So necessity, science, theory, wisdom went together; and so too did contingency, opinion, practice, and prudence.

The Aristotelian realm of objective necessity had two parts, one concrete and actual, the other abstract and virtual. In their concreteness only the First Mover and the Heavens were necessary, for all terrestrial objects and events were held to be contingent. However, by abstraction, even ~~the~~ ~~terrestrial~~ the things and processes on this earth became objects of science, for the abstract universal neither moved nor changed, yet it could be derived from and applied to changeable things.<sup>5</sup>

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- 3) Aristotle, Posterior Analytics, I, 2, 71b 10 ff.
  - 4) Ibid., I, 33, 88b 32 ff.
  - 5) For a compact statement, see Aquinas, In Boethium de Trinitate, q. 5, a. 2 ad 4m: Rationes autem universales rerum omnes sunt immobiles, et ideo quantum ad hoc omnis scientia de necessariis est. Sed rerum, quarum sunt illae ↓ rationes, quaedam sunt necessariae et immobiles, quaedam contingentes et mobiles, et quantum ad hoc de rebus contingentibus et mobilibus dicuntur esse scientiae.
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Still further emphasis was placed on abstract universals because Aristotelian theory of science was a special case of Aristotelian syllogistic theory. So the first book of the Posterior Analytics is concerned with demonstrations, and the first half of the second <sup>with</sup> the definitions on which demonstrations rest. ~~The four causes (end, agent, matter, form) make their appearance as middle terms in scientific syllogisms. Necessary connections are conceived as per se propositions. Predications in which essential attributes are assigned to~~

rest. The demonstrations are not merely logically valid but also scientifically significant inasmuch as the middle term denotes one of the four causes (end, agent, matter, form).<sup>6</sup> Again, necessity and contingency are given a linguistic dress. Necessary connections are conceived as per se predications in which essential attributes are assigned to commensurate subjects.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, chance connections cannot be demonstrated,<sup>8</sup> and the existence of a science of the accidental is denied.<sup>9</sup> Still this involvement in a linguistically orientated logic has its price. The necessary and essential must be eternal. So the attributes of perishable things either cannot be demonstrated or else the relevant syllogism will be 'mixed' with one premiss necessary and the other contingent.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, the fate of scientific prediction is extremely complex for, if premisses were true today and the conclusion true only tomorrow, in the interval the syllogism would be mistaken.<sup>11</sup>

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- 6) Aristotle, Post. Anal., II, 11, 94a 20 ff.
  - 7) Ibid., I, 6, 74b 5 ff.
  - 8) Ibid., I, 30, 87b 25 f.
  - 9) Aristotle, Metaphysics, VI (E), 2, 1027a 19 f.
  - 10) Aristotle, Post. Anal., I, 8, 75b 21 ff.
  - 11) Ibid., II, 12, 95a 34 and 95 b 1. On the whole matter see W. D. Ross, Aristotle's Prior and Posterior Analytics, Oxford 1949, pp. 649-652.

In modern science the emphasis, at least, is so differently placed that an entirely different outlook results. Where Aristotle stressed necessity, modern science stresses its ~~empirical character, and if the 'ne' 'necessary' and~~ empirical character; and under the cover of this insistence on fact, the notion of necessity has ~~fallen~~ fallen to no more than a peripheral significance. In the nineteenth century it was still common to speak of the immutable laws of nature and even of the iron laws of economics. But this trend has been reversed by the refutation of the uniqueness of Euclidean geometry, <sup>by</sup> the successful use of non-Euclidean geometry in physics, <sup>by</sup> the alternative probabilities predicted by quantum theory, <sup>by</sup> and the limitations placed on deductive systems by theorems of the Gödelian type. ~~12~~ 12

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See J. Ladrière, Les limitations internes des formalismes, Louvain 1957.

In fact, empirical science discovers ~~and~~ and verifies not necessities but intelligible possibilities. A free fall, ~~for~~ for instance, is a constant acceleration. The matter has stood the test of centuries. ~~But~~ But it has done so, not because it necessarily is so, not because it cannot be otherwise, but simply because out of many hypothetical possibilities it is the one that happens in fact to be found true. Moreover, what holds for the free fall, holds for all other natural laws and, no less, for the theories and systems that relate them to ~~the~~ one another. For all laws, theories, systems are subject to revision; they have a claim on our assent only because they happen to be verified; and the moment further data begin to tell against them, they become questionable.

As necessity has become a marginal notion, there tend specifically to vanish the Aristotelian contrasts between science and opinion, theory and practice, wisdom and prudence. Today science is a species of opinion, and so on each issue we seek the best available scientific opinion. Theory and practice no longer regard the opposed realms of the necessary and the contingent. ~~But they regard the~~ Rather they denote different stages in modern man's dealing with the same objects. Modern theory is, of course, far more abstruse and difficult than anything even fancied by ancient or mediaeval thinkers. In countless ways modern practice achieves what earlier practice deemed impossible. But the results are so astounding because they rest on the power of theory, and the theory has to be so abstruse because it aims at dominating the complexity of the concrete. ~~Finally, this penetration of the concrete and contingent by science and theory lies behind the development of the empirical sciences of man and of history as a science~~ Finally, with science a species of opinion and with practice continuous with theory, there has to be brought about a reinterpretation of wisdom and prudence. For there is still needed a wisdom to guide theory and a prudence to guide practice. But the wisdom has to penetrate into the contingencies of ~~the~~ terrestrial process and of human history, while the prudence has to have the depth and breadth demanded by decisions regarding nuclear power, population trends, the distribution of wealth among peoples, the maintenance and development of cultures.

From such larger differences in outlook we must turn to slightly more technical matters. No less than necessity, the immutable, the eternal, the abstract, the universal assume a merely peripheral significance; and the same is true of the theories of definition and demonstration that enshrine them. So the object of the modern sciences is ~~the concrete universe~~ ~~not some logical class or classes but~~ the concrete universe. Their objective is the complete explanation of all phenomena. Their explanations are not restricted to Aristotle's four causes but include every intelligibility that may be grasped by human understanding in the data of experience. Though sense-perception cannot demonstrate,<sup>13</sup> still the ~~principles~~ ~~principles~~ effective principle of empirical science is not the universal proposition but the palpable datum. Though the ultimate results of science will be conceptually defined and logically arranged, still such ultimate results are as yet unknown; so modern sciences are distinguished and separated, <sup>so much</sup> not <sup>as</sup> by defining formal objects, ~~but~~ by dividing up the total field of data. Where the Aristotelian scientist was unshakable in his convictions,<sup>14</sup> the modern scientist is convinced that his results and conclusions are only probable. Where Aristotelian science was <sup>an acquired</sup> ~~a~~ habit existing in the individual mind, modern science is ever in process; each of its departments is far too vast to be encompassed by a single mind; and so it resides only in the conjunction of minds effected by the scientific community. Finally, instead of abstracting from the contingent, the product of chance, the indeterminacy of the continuum, the temporal, modern science concentrates on intelligible possibilities contingently verified; it is statistical to include the products of chance; it seeks to dominate the

continuum by the infinitesimal calculus; it seeks order and intelligibility in temporal series and sequences, in processes of growth, ~~and~~ development, evolution, and in the complexity, the uniqueness, the contradictions of human history.

13) Aristotle, Post. Anal., I, 31, 87b 28 ff.

14) Ibid., I, 2, 72b 3.

There are, then, two distinct notions of science. If the later is affiliated to the earlier, it remains that many of their respective properties are contradictory. Hence, there is a ~~pe~~ radical ambiguity to discussions of the relations between science and theology, to the question whether theology is a science, to the interpretation ~~and~~ of statements presumed to be scientific, and to the judgement passed upon them. So far from being removed, this ambiguity is augmented almost endlessly when theologians have never <sup>bothered</sup> ~~attempted~~ to grasp the notion, as distinct from the practice, of modern science, <sup>or to</sup> ~~when they have never studied~~ <sup>compared this notion with</sup> Aristotle's Posterior Analytics <sup>but</sup> ~~yet~~, unawares, have imbibed from their theological reading some ill-defined adaptation of Aristotelian assumptions, criteria, and objectives.