

scattered through it, quite often in subordinate clauses. Like the jittery governments of Eastern Europe, we must not for one moment underestimate the power of ideas. The politicians may be on top at the moment, but, by the nature of things, it will always be the theologians who—if there is truth in their ideas—have the last word.

The world too is very complex—much more than is obvious from inside any ancient European capital, as this document shows. But this truth is slowly penetrating even the walls of the Vatican, and in these dark days we should be thankful for small mercies like that. One of the relevant papal texts mentioned in the document (V, 2) is the apostolic letter which Paul VI wrote to Cardinal Roy in 1971, *Octogesima adveniens*. In that letter Pope Paul said: “In the face of such widely varying situations it is difficult for us to utter a unified message and to put forward a solution which has universal validity. Such is not our ambition, nor is it our mission. It is up to the Christian communities to analyse with objectivity the situation which is proper to their own country” (n.4).

J.O.M.

Doing Theology in English

Nicholas Lash

The text of a brief report presented to the Upholland Theological Consultation of April 1984, at which Fergus Kerr OP gave the paper which we published in June.

Introduction

Nine years ago, the editor of *The Month* invited me to reflect on the state of English Catholic theology. In preparation for this Consultation, therefore, I turned back to the article I produced on that occasion¹ and asked myself: how much has changed?

By and large, I think, very little. Others of you are better placed than I am to comment on the state of theology in seminaries, colleges of education, and houses of study of religious orders. In the universities,

the Catholic contribution has continued to grow quite impressively (at least so far as numbers of both staff and students are concerned). But these resources of largely lay theological competence continue, I think, to be insufficiently appreciated by the Church in this country. (I have the impression that the theological preparation for the Liverpool Pastoral Congress illustrates this neglect.)

Where the publication of original, scholarly, creative work is concerned, we are still nowhere near making a contribution proportionate to our resources. To be blunt, I have especially in mind here a problem which I call 'the reticence of the religious'—who have not, for the most part, even the excuse of vows of silence! On the other hand, in the very important area of high level popularisation, we owe a great debt of gratitude to Michael Richards for his series *Introducing Catholic Theology*.

In his major work on *The Analogical Imagination*, David Tracy suggested that 'Each theologian addresses three distinct and related social realities, the wider society, the academy and the Church'.² We are, I think, addressing the Church a little more effectively than we did a decade or two ago. There are still considerable problems in this area but (as I have hinted) they are by no means to be laid entirely at the door of the theologians. But we have hardly *begun* to address either the 'academy' or the 'wider society'.

The fundamental reason for this, I believe, is to be sought in the extent to which we still tend to live our religion, and to think our theology, in a social, cultural and linguistic vacuum. This is the issue on which I would therefore like to offer one or two remarks.

On Not Doing Systematics

It is widely agreed that English theology (unlike Scottish, French or German) is extremely weak in dogmatic or systematic theology. Many English theologians look to Catholics, with our rich tradition of systematics, to help remedy this deficiency. I am not convinced, however, that the usual descriptions of the deficiency are either adequate or accurate.

'Maps' or 'catalogues' of theological disciplines come into existence in response to particular historical and cultural circumstances. The circumstances which, in the seventeenth century, produced 'systematic' or 'dogmatic' theology, as full-blown more or less autonomous disciplines, no longer obtain today.³ Those circumstances were such as to produce a theology which was rationalist in temper and defensive in mood. Systematic theology as 'the ideology of the citadel', perhaps?

During the past hundred years, British (especially Anglican) theology has developed impressive strengths in 'indirect speech', but has remained notoriously weak in 'direct speech'.⁴ It is this weakness

which we are being invited to help remedy, but it is imperative that we do not do so with the methods, preconceptions and techniques appropriate to other times and circumstances.

Nor should we forget that the 'staying-power' of particular disciplines and 'maps' of disciplines usually owes more to the exigencies of the curriculum than to considerations of intelligibility or truth.

And so, I have a thesis to propose: We should be highly suspicious of the suggestion that, in order to help overcome the undoubted impoverishment of British theology *in oratione recta*, what is required is 'more systematics'.

Mediating Memory

Let me come at the matter from another angle and try some five-finger exercises in 'hermeneutics'.

The fundamental form of the Christian interpretation of Scripture is the life, worship, activity and organisation of the Christian community.⁵ The 'poles' of Christian interpretation are not 'meanings' but 'enactments'; not patterns of ideas but forms of discipleship; not what was once meant and what might be meant today, but what was once said, done, achieved, suffered, 'shown', and what might be said, done, achieved, suffered and 'shown' today.⁶

And there is no 'citadel', no walled garden, no private 'spiritual' or 'religious' place, in which Christian interpretation can occur. It occurs, in so far as it occurs at all, wherever it is that human beings speak, act, achieve and suffer: in Toxteth or Wigan, Surbiton or Strathclyde.

Of course, no sketch of Christian discipleship as interpretative practice would be complete which did not make mention of that reflective component of Christian living which we call 'theology'.

I once heard Gerald O'Collins, in a seminar in which he and I were taking part, describe the theologian as someone who 'watches his language in the presence of God'. A good description, and one according to which responsible discipleship is not *possible* without a measure of theological activity.

In a word, Christian discipleship executes, directly and practically, that mediation of memory and hope, that 'traditioning' of the Gospel, which Christian theology executes indirectly and reflectively. This *alone* is the context in which appropriate consideration can be given to questions concerning how the transposition from 'indirect' to 'direct' speech might properly be effected.

I happen to believe that, at present, our theology, our preaching and our catechetics are impoverished and distorted by an alternative view of these matters.

On this alternative view, the 'poles' of Christian interpretation are not 'enactments' but 'meanings'; not forms of discipleship but patterns of ideas. Responsibility for interpretation devolves not upon the community of disciples but, primarily, upon church leaders and, secondarily, upon a small group of people (known as 'theologians') who are commissioned to explicate the utterances of authority. And Christian living is a matter, not of primary interpretative performance, but of 'putting into practice' the ideas thus uttered and explicated. I call this view 'Christianity as the technology of theology'.

I would especially draw your attention to the fact that, if we are working with this alternative account (with or without the particular overtones characteristic of eighteenth and nineteenth-century Catholic ecclesiology), then we are likely—sooner or later—to succumb to the illusion that the transition from theology in 'indirect' speech to theology in 'direct' speech can be effected *before* consideration has been given to the specific facts and features—cultural, political, emotional, linguistic, psychological, literary and scientific—of the context in which the act of interpretation occurs.

My earlier mention of 'the ideology of the citidal' was intended as a reference to the modern form of the phenomenon described by Bernard Lonergan as the 'classicist world-view'.⁷ Now it is a striking fact that, for all the power and brilliance of Lonergan's critique of 'classicism', the coherence of his own account, in *Method in Theology*, is threatened by just that illusion to which I have referred.

In *Method in Theology*, you remember, the work of theology, all the way (in his own phrase) 'from data to results',⁸ *terminates* in 'communications'—which is concerned, we are told (in a revealing phrase) 'with theology in its *external relations*'⁹—although the transition from 'indirect' to 'direct' speech has already been effected at a *previous* stage in the process, between 'dialectics' and 'foundations'.

In other words, Lonergan does seem to suppose that it is possible to effect that transition *prior* to specific engagement with the particular constituent features of the actual human context in which and for which theology is done.

To put the point polemically, for the sake of clarity: the only people who could *thus* effect the transition would be people who lived in no particular time and place, and who spoke no particular language—because the question of how to articulate Christian doctrine in today's England in today's English (for example) has been allocated to the *subsequent* enterprise of 'communications'.

Let me indulge in a little science fiction. Imagine, if you will, a situation in which a group of erudite, dedicated and intelligent people, occupying no particular place or time and speaking no particular language, performed the tasks of dogmatic theology, effecting the transition from 'indirect' to 'direct' speech. What would be the result?

The result, I suggest, would be a state of affairs in which theologians appeared to be talking about nothing in particular to nobody in particular. In such circumstances, other members of the Church might well suppose that theology was none of their business.

The clergy, of course, would have a problem. Although they, too, would find theology incomprehensible and uninteresting, they would feel obliged to have some recourse to it as they sought to communicate its products in the pulpit. And they would not be too surprised if most people slept through their sermons.

I therefore have a second, and quite revolutionary, thesis to propose: We must try to help bring about a state of affairs in which English Catholic theology is done by Catholics, in England, speaking English.

There is, of course, no possibility that so radical a transformation could be swiftly or painlessly achieved. But we can make a start. In my 1975 *Month* article I suggested that what was needed was 'the establishment of an annual conference, working to some specific theme, the purpose of which would be to provide a vehicle for the scattered thinkers', in seminaries and universities, 'first of all Catholics, but also in other Christian traditions, who would have a common interest in relating the gospel truth to the intellectual and social needs of our society'.¹⁰ Isn't it splendid: we seem to be assembled to do just that!

- 1 Nicholas Lash, 'English Catholic Theology', in *The Month*, October 1975, pp. 286—289
- 2 David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination*, London 1981, p. 5.
- 3 On the historical question, cf. Congar's still informative article 'Théologie' in *DTC*, and W. Pannenberg, *Theology and the Philosophy of Science*, London, 1976.
- 4 On this distinction, cf. B.J.F. Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, London 1972, p.133
- 5 Cf. Nicholas Lash, 'Performing the Scriptures', in *The New Testament as Personal Reading*, ed. Ronan Drury, Springfield, Illinois 1983, pp.7—18
- 6 Cf. Nicholas Lash, 'What Might Martyrdom Mean?' in *Suffering and Martyrdom in the New Testament*, ed. William Horbury and Brian McNeil, Cambridge 1981, pp. 183—198.
- 7 Cf. e.g. B.J.F. Lonergan, 'The Transition from a Classicist World-view to Historical-mindedness', in *A Second Collection*, ed. W.J.F. Ryan and B.J. Tyrrell, London 1974, pp.1—9.
- 8 'Functional specialities' are said to be 'distinct and separable stages in a single process from data to ultimate results' (*Method in Theology*, p.136; cf. p.126).
- 9 *Method in Theology*, p.132, my stress. I have tried to substantiate this criticism in 'Method and Cultural Discontinuity', in *Looking at Lonergan's Method*, ed. Patrick Corcoran, Dublin 1975, pp. 127—143.
- 10 'English Catholic Theology', p. 288.