

COMMENT

By the kind of whim that nobody can stop editors from indulging, this issue of *New Blackfriars* is written entirely by members of the Dominican community in Oxford. This makes it, I think, unique in the nearly sixty years of our life, for we have never been a Dominican house-journal and have never meant our contributors to be mainly from the Order; moreover this house has not always been productive enough to fill a whole issue of the magazine. Apart from its curiosity value this month's issue gives the editor an excuse for reflecting on the primary work of this house, the work, that is to say, of theology.

In political slang, 'theology' has come to mean a fruitless niggling over points of doctrine that have no relevance to practical affairs, a playing with ideas for their own sake. As such, it is supposed to be particularly unpopular in England—where not long ago a royal child, inheriting apparently the saloon-bar ethos of his father, told us how unimportant he found doctrinal differences; except, no doubt, when they affected the succession to the throne.

There is a more solid basis for this suspicion of theology than mere philistine wrongheadedness. There really is a tendency for theology to become simply a playing with words and ideas for their own sake; this is because of the way words are used in this discipline and the special way in which theological language relates to the reality of which it speaks. If, as Hobbes said, words are wise men's counters but the money of fools, the problem with theology is finding out how to count.

As St Thomas Aquinas pointed out, we derive the meanings of the words we use for speaking of God from their use in the everyday world. In this sense there is no specialised theological jargon; all its words are borrowed words. This may come as news to readers innured to coming across 'eschatological', 'hermeneutic' or 'prevenient grace' and recognising in these the warning signals that they are in the presence of a learned or quasi-learned theological book or article. Nonetheless it is the case that if you wish to explain such terms you must do so first of all in a non-theological context.

When you are dealing with a language used to speak of the everyday world, even in the case of complicated technical terms like 'valency' or 'cloning', it is not too difficult to recognise when the language has begun to lose touch with the real world. There can be fairly general agreement about what should and what should not be included in Pseud's Corner. The theologian or his critic has no such ready recourse to an experienced reality; there is to hand no convenient touchstone by which to check whether he

has taken off into nonsense. It was, of course, just this that led the Logical Positivists of the 'thirties to claim that theology, being subject to no clear experiential control, speaks of nothing at all.

The theologian poaches words from other disciplines or from everyday speech and stretches them for his own purposes, using them to point towards a mystery beyond their original meaning. To speak of 'creating' is to speak of a making beyond the meaning of 'making'; to speak of 'eternity' is to speak of a life beyond the meaning of 'life'. The theologian, like any other honest man, will strive to be coherent, he will try not to say and unsay something at the same time, he will submit himself to the principle of non-contradiction. This is relatively simple; it is the relation of his words to the reality of which they claim to speak that is elusive, the relation of 'God' to God. For this reason the theologian can sometimes seem to be (and can sometimes be) solely concerned with coherence, with creating logically consistent patterns of language, oblivious of the life of which this language should be the form.

A theological utterance does not bear its relevance, its reality-reference, upon its face; it may be a real exploration into mystery or it may be simply vacuous. It is not in the statement itself but in the doing of theology, in the coming to make the statement, that the truth is discerned. Theology like philosophy, is a continuous intellectual activity; its end product, if left alone, like fairy gold turns to very dry leaves.

To say this is to say that the study of theology is a continuous process of criticism, trying again and again to earn the statements we make. The fact that we hold, as any Catholic must, that there are definitive deliveries of tradition does not mean that these function as the unquestioned axioms of a system. The work of theology is to ask the questions once more, not merely to be aware of but to relive the history behind them, in order to explore the life that gave rise to these definitions, in order perhaps to find new expressions of that life.

In theology the question unasked festers beneath the surface and infects the entire value of what is being said. Questions like: Can any of this be true? Does it mean anything? Is it all just a game, a phantasy? are not the occasional doubts that might descend on a scholar in moments of depression, nor are they 'temptations against the faith', they are the very lifeblood of theology.

It is part of the meaning of a Dominican theological house that it is a religious community specifically devoted to providing the love and mutual support and mutual criticism required by people more or less continuously engaged in this kind of radical questioning; for it is a kind of living dangerously and it makes quite heavy emotional demands on the brethren. It is because theology, for us,

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Conclusion

The quest for the “undivided Church” thus leads to St Luke’s picture of the difference of practice and belief between the Hellenists and the Hebrews in the first two or three years of the Church’s existence in Jerusalem. While the message of Peter and the message of Stephen could not be described as being mutually exclusive, the difference between them should not be underestimated. To proclaim the resurrection from the dead in Jesus, while continuing to worship in the Temple and to abide by the Law, is a very different emphasis from proclaiming the coming of the Righteous One, while violently denouncing the Temple and reinterpreting the Law. These seem to be “positions” that are all but incompatible with each other. While it does not yet seem possible to answer Cardinal Hume’s question, as to what diversity of doctrinal emphasis or difference of practice is permissible and even desirable, precisely because this will have to be worked out, we may surely allow that the divergence that is endurable and even essential must be much greater than most of us are accustomed to suppose. This does not mean that anything and everything may be contained within the Catholic communion. For one thing, there are many Christians who see no reason to belong to a church at all, and whom it would thus be futile to gather into communion with the Catholic Church. But the proposal that Metropolitan Paul Gregorios has made, that (in effect) the catalyst in the return of Rome into full churchly communion with the ancient patriarchal Churches may be the participation of the non-Chalcedonian Churches, includes a summons to *renewal* as the concomitant of union. That was, of course, the emphasis at Vatican II. It will take prophetic and paradigmatic gestures, such as Pope Paul’s, as well as much more theological labour and increase of mutual confidence, to continue the process. How many Catholics even know that the pope has kissed a Greek bishop’s feet? And how many even begin to grasp the implications, for our understanding of the papacy and thus for our understanding of the Church, embodied in that simple but historic act?

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can never be mere scholarship or the mere translation of a tradition, but a continual new start, a continual confrontation of the gospel with experience, that we need and have a community devoted to theology as other communities are devoted to healing or schooling or the pastoral ministry. Whether in fact we provide that support and whether it results in much theology being done is, of course, another question, but anyway this issue is offered as a fairly random sample of the process.

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