

Theology in a Godforsaken Epoch by Fergus Kerr, o.p.

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The presupposition of the argument of this paper is that all Catholic theology occurs in the first place within the context of some Church-mediated experience of God. This does not mean reducing theology to spirituality or to the conceptual elaboration of personal piety. It is simply saying that theology requires a starting-point, a source of intelligibility, which is encounter with God himself: for without some prior relationship to its 'object' theology can never be anything more fundamental than the philological investigation of more or less ancient documents. What we are therefore taking to be theological understanding (hermeneutic), even of classical texts in theological tradition, depends radically on some personal or anyway epochal (in a sense to be explained) experience of what theology is about in the first place: that is, on somehow being addressed by God himself. Doing theology at all depends on hearing the word of God: God must be allowed to speak to us before we can begin to speak about him. It was on the basis of this presupposition, and in the context of collective reflexion on the challenge to theological renewal facing one of the older religious orders at the present time, that the following observations were originally adumbrated.

'The Church must enter into dialogue with the modern world': this is a phrase and a programme with which we are familiar today. It is not always noticed, however, that all the terms of it are very obscure. We are not at present very clear about the nature of the Church nor about the nature of the modern world, and any dialogue between the two is consequently very difficult to visualize. It may be said that we are at least aware that we are not very clear about the nature of the Church; the real difficulty is that we tend to suppose there is no problem about the nature of the modern world.

It is not necessary to labour the fact that we are not at present very clear about the nature of the Church. Everybody knows that the idea we had of the Church, the ecclesiology we had, even two or three years ago, has been severely shaken by recent developments in the history of the Church. The living Church as we are experiencing it in faith here and now is proving that the ecclesiology we were brought up on is altogether too one-sided, too limited and thus too limiting, to cope; and we can see that we are still a long way from being able to express what is happening in adequate theological language. One thinks, for example, of the

de-facto recognition of the existence of other churches and not just of the separated brethren as individuals; of the public acknowledgment of the Catholic share of the responsibility for the division of Christianity; of the admission that the Latin Church is not the whole Church but that the Eastern Churches too, including the ones not in communion with Rome, are also 'true Church'; and so on. The hitherto standard ecclesiology simply has no way of placing such data; there is plenty of exciting work for the theologian who wants to make some sense of it all. But unless the Church is also seen in relation to the *world* any such enlargement of our ecclesiology would inevitably remain very unsatisfactory because it would be so introverted and so purely churchy. It is not very evident, however, that theologians have yet devoted much serious attention to discussing the nature of the world, particularly of the modern world: it tends to be taken for granted that we know all about this already.

Theologians, too, tend to suppose that truth can occur and meaning emerge only where scientific (or scientific) criteria and procedures of perception and verification may operate. For that matter we are all strongly tempted to act as if statements which cannot be verified by research or experiment or which do not justify themselves by some practical result are strictly meaningless. We tend to seize on literature, for instance, and force it to be of some practical use to us, as propaganda or as pastime. We tend to reduce every form of culture to no more than an instrument or technique at our disposal, something which gives us pleasure or soothes our nerves or takes our minds off reality; but these are at best all very secondary, peripheral and accidental effects of art. Fundamentally it is just that we find it hard to credit that a poem (for example) could be a communication of meaning, that truth could be occurring in a work of art, if only we were open and receptive enough to perceive it. We have a strong desire to dominate and manipulate everything; the primary standard we have for what is real and true is that it can be used, it is effective. The forms in which truth was encountered by the ancient Greeks, by the Anglo-Saxons, by the medievals, have become for us largely only branches of the entertainment industry. It is not difficult to see how the Christian faith can be reduced to part of organization man's cultural equipment.

It would of course be monstrous to say that we always reduce art to propaganda and pastime or that religion is nothing but culture. We can see what we are in danger of doing only because we are still able to do a lot of other things. But the standards and methods entirely appropriate in the realm of science and technology, indeed of business administration and advertisement too, are certainly being operated within culture at large, in religion, in personal life, and in theology. Our preliminary understanding of what is real and true, our ontology, can surely be focused in a few terms such as 'power', 'technique', 'efficacy', 'control',

'experiment', 'verification': these are surely the decisive terms that tend to recur in our dealings with our world and even with one another. But they only *tend* to do so, and they issue after all from what is the most characteristic achievement and strength of the modern epoch: the whole development of science and technology in the service of mankind.

For our characteristic achievement and strength is also and even primarily a characteristic set of standards and values. We have a distinctive ontology. We have an understanding of reality, truth, beauty, Nature, history, love, God, etc., which is *ours* – which is not, for instance, *medieval*. There are in fact epochs in history, in the history of the human mind. The ancient Greeks, for instance, had simply no idea of chivalry or courtly love, experiences which belong quite distinctively to the medieval European world, experiences interwoven in and modifying a whole religious, moral and social form of life. The medievals could have had no conception of Nature in the sense in which it is celebrated in Wordsworth's poetry: Wordsworth again belongs to a whole world, to the epoch of Romanticism, the discovery of the beauty of landscape, of the pleasures of walking, etc. For all the walking St Thomas did we may be sure he never felt any of this. And these are not trivial examples: the ideals of love, the experience of Nature, these come close to the centre of human life, and to say that they in fact differ vastly from one epoch to another is to say that human life itself understands itself differently.

An epoch occurs when the role of some of our most basic activities is transformed, when the very sense of some of our keywords changes. It is no use having an abstract conception of human nature which is supposed to define what is essential about man in *any* epoch; we need at least some sense of the *analogia essentiae* here. If we were to speak of man in terms of 'rational animal' we should have to allow for the enormous differences between what we mean by reason now and what *ratio* meant for the medievals; while *logos* meant something related, yet something very different again, for the Greeks, and none of these notions had any meaning for Jeremiah and Amos (though one does not want for this reason to say that they had no understanding of the nature of man). One might consider, for instance, how theology itself has changed: patristic theology, monastic theology, scholastic theology. . . . In each period it was the very nature of theology that was transformed. Of course there is manifest continuity and you might formulate a 'definition' that would include them all, but what is actually happening in any particular period, the needs, ideals, standards and procedures typical of it, are all so different, not better nor worse but so obviously different, that any such 'definition' would be useless. One may be permitted to suggest that the distinctiveness and no doubt the distinction of the theology of the epoch we have now entered will come primarily from *laymen*.

It is of course evident that an epoch is not something arbitrary. Our

'style' does not change at our behest. We don't simply *choose* to paint in some particular style, for instance: of course we could paint like the ancient Egyptians if we wanted to, but this would only be imitation and reproduction, it would not be 'our' sort of painting because we simply don't 'see' the world any longer in the way they apparently did – we don't see it any better or any worse, only very differently. Think too of how the novel emerged: we are more inclined to say that it 'emerged' than that it was 'invented'. Certainly somebody's decisions mattered here, somebody's imagination and effort; but one's imagination, one's 'vision', is also and even primarily a matter of local contingency, of circumstances, of *luck*: somebody rises to the occasion, somebody takes his chances, somebody makes a virtue of necessity. In fact one might say that an epoch is a whole generation rising to the occasion and showing the requisite energy in responding to what has befallen it, recognizing the appropriateness of doing one thing or another or nothing at all, availing itself of its opportunity.

An epoch has its genius, its particular creative and inventive capacities, its prevalent feeling, taste, ideology, its character and spirit – its vocation even; because the genius of an epoch, in the end, is not just the product of the epoch, it is what generates the epoch in the first place, it is what evokes its spirit, what sways its imagination. This is ultimately something *given*, something wholly unique, original and unrepeatable. It is (at one level anyway) the consensus about ideals and standards in human experience which is registered and communicated in the anonymity of the common language of a generation. It is a consensus about what is meaningful at all, about what counts as sense in the first place: a consensus which is plainly no mere convention, no mere construct, but rather something received, a kind of fate. The language of an epoch is its fate (*fatum* = that which is spoken). It is a consensus about what is *selbstverständlich*, about what is obvious and simply beyond argument; it is a consensus manifested in one's sense of priorities, in one's sense of what counts as relevant, worthwhile and significant, or pointless and ridiculous. It is one's perception in community of the totality of meaning which constitutes the context in which words like 'real', 'true', 'beautiful', 'Nature', 'history', 'love', 'God', etc., can have any sense in the first place (sense = direction).

It is this original and origivative sense of meaningfulness at all which generates an epoch – and it is this which changes. It is only in this total context that we can have any experience at all, that we can talk and think and make love and make bombs and do theology. It is this instinct for what matters, this preliminary sense of direction, which changes from one epoch to another. One might think, for instance, of a tree standing in a sacred grove in the ancient world: for the people of that epoch the tree would be the abode of a dryad, the tree could therefore matter for

one's happiness or misfortune in this world and in the next, the dryad is a being one might honour with sacrifices, whose wrath one might try to appease, etc. The word 'tree' would thus be woven into the language of an epoch, its religion, its sense of truth and reality and relevance. Think then of a tree in a medieval garden: here there is no dryad, here nobody would be writing a Wordsworthian poem either, here the tree would simply be occupying one of the lower rungs in the great hierarchy of being. Even the way you look at a tree can matter for what you mean by reality, truth and religion; it can help to express and control what you mean by such notions. It is clear that what *we* mean by religion has very little to do with trees at all, either with Nature-worship or with any chain of being. In other words, things themselves, the beings we also are, are experienced differently in different epochs; they are encountered in the first place, if at all, in different overall contexts of sense.

It has been necessary to say all this in order to make it possible to understand the situation of the young religious confronted with the task of doing theology at the present time. For theology too must be conducted within the total context of meaningfulness which characterizes an epoch. The difficulty being felt increasingly by young religious engaged in theological work is that the context of meaning, the 'world', which once sustained the way of life which they have chosen has in fact disappeared for ever: that is to say, their form of life, in so far as it can be particularized in various institutions (of which a theological tradition itself is one), no longer affords the experience it once did. The problem of the future of theological studies, at least within a religious order, is the problem of the form, or rather the substance, of its style of Christian life at all. The institutions as a whole tend to be reduced to occasions of pseudo-event while what they were once supposed to reveal and embody occurs elsewhere, if it does at all. It is no secret that there is a great deal of sickness, mental and therefore physical, among religious at the present time. It is no doubt partly that immature and unstable people are attracted to religious life in the first place; but it is also and surely above all (for immature and unstable people are attracted to marriage too!) because of the tension created by the increasing gap between the pretensions of the institutions and the real sources and occasions of personal asceticism and growth in faith and maturity (when this occurs at all). One thinks, for example, of the traditional monastic institution of the chapter, once an instrument for community discussion and self-criticism but now ordinarily mere ceremony: the discussion of major decisions, the self-criticism, the fraternal correction, if they take place at all, take place elsewhere, in some other form. It has long been recognized that there is a great gap between the liturgy as publicly performed by the community and the prayer-life of most of the individual members: it is perhaps true to say that the latter does not

run counter to the former as it probably tended to do in a previous generation, but if the public liturgy is personally formative it is because the habits of personal prayer are first of all, and not the other way round, which is nevertheless still held to be the ideal. It is also evident that young religious look for guidance, when they do so at all, not to the men who tend to occupy positions in the community which would once have carried some sort of qualification to guide, but to men who have achieved some kind of personal maturity, within the life of the community certainly, though mostly out of resources not available in the existing traditions and customs of the institution as a whole. The examples of this gap between the official structures and the personal life of the individuals supposed to be formed by them might be multiplied almost indefinitely. It will be enough to add only one further case: the gap between what is still ordinarily offered in the classrooms as the official theology and what is actually held by the students as their personal theology.

One might say in fact, being a little melodramatic, that God seems to have withdrawn, to have ceased to make himself accessible in many of the ways that have hitherto been viable. The way of life as a whole is not affording the experience of God it would seem to be the structure for. In theology, for instance, God has ceased to be intelligible, available, 'visible' even, in the traditional *de Deo uno*: it has in fact become a way of making it even more difficult to find him. The mystery of the eucharist, to take another example, no longer reveals itself primarily in terms of matter and form and transubstantiation: it is not that such language is 'wrong', it is simply that it will not 'speak' until some other language has first been established within which it may then be interpreted. But to take examples from the field of theology is not to get at the heart of the problem. For theology issues from Christian life, it is only within a generation's unique and unrepeatable experience of the whole context of meaning, of the totality of the possibilities of truth, given to it in its epoch, that it is possible to talk sense, to talk relevantly, about man, God, history, love, etc., *at all*; and for many young religious a great deal of the language of the theology and pious literature ordinarily in circulation has no sense, or rather has not yet found a sense, within the only experience in which they are at home: that is to say, in the case of religious, in the experience of the Godforsakenness of their institutions. A Godforsaken form of life is a form of life from which God has withdrawn, in which God gives himself now only in ways which either run counter to the traditions and customs of the particular form of life in question or anyway in ways which are more or less unrelated to them. There can, then, be no renewal of theology in such forms of life, indeed there can be no understanding of the theology of the past (indispensable for any renewal), except out of this experience: the experience, that is, of the present Godforsakenness of the milieu itself.

If we are eventually going to see everything in terms of technology then there can be no question of our ever finding God at all. Even if it is true that the modernity of the modern world (its epoch-making feature) resides in this resolve to make everything manipulable, we are still capable of opening ourselves to vastly different experiences and of following other ideals. But for believers at large, and particularly for religious, encounter with God seems to occur now primarily in experiencing his absence. This is of course all the more palpable in institutions which have never possessed any real continuity with their medieval origins because they were merely *restored* in the nineteenth century (hence the alienating gothicism of their habitations, the enervating rhetoric of romantic claustrophilia, the baneful pathos of reprimatory ideology, the syndrome of self-anachronization). But this experience, if it certainly requires to be described and analysed with what pungency and incisiveness one can muster, is nevertheless not something to be resented and deplored. It is primarily something to be *accepted*. That is to say, it is the fate of our epoch that the encounter we have with God, the encounter which must precede and sustain all theological exploration and understanding, takes the form mostly of failing to find him in the system of institutions and structures which constitutes our tradition. Of course a good deal can be done, in the spirit of *aggiornamento*, by cutting away the more manifestly irretrievable institutions and by flexible and experimental attempts to revitalize some of the others; but the problem of Godforsakenness cannot be dealt with ultimately by mere organization and planning, by inventing new institutions, even by trying to enforce primitive observance by decree.

The total context of meaning which should be sustaining our way of life simply isn't there. We share the fate of our epoch, and the consensus about meaning and relevance which this affords us makes it impossible for us to take seriously many of the institutions and structures which constitute religious life. We are conscious of living in a situation in which ceremonial has broken adrift from reality, in which the outward forms have become peculiarly impotent to communicate the substance. It is awareness of this on the part of some or many members of the religious community (for that matter of the Church at large, because the present crisis in religious life is only a model of the crisis in the Church) which makes any fraternity in depth so difficult: living in common may well mean living in the same house, it certainly does not mean living in the same world. The tension this is bound to create needs no description here: it takes an endless multitude of forms. The mutual forbearance required does not have to be insisted upon: perhaps the most eloquent sign of 'understanding' is the recognition that we do not understand one another at all. The best we can do is surely to live quietly, to be as relaxed and open and untense as we can manage, waiting in the débris of our

past, because ruins are still inhabitable, at least if they are big enough. There can be no question of clearing them away, there is nobody around who can be trusted to draw up the plans for any reconstruction in any case (he would be sure to be a perfect technologist). The vocation to religious life (for that matter to believing in God at all) is being lived out at present in a particularly unfavourable time (though perhaps no worse than it must have been at the end of the Middle Ages, a very similar period to our own in some ways). We have just to be patient, to wait, to practise a very provisional sort of theology (pro-visional=forward-looking, not 'progressive' but eschatological), to create meanwhile whatever real personal relations, whatever fraternity in depth, it may be given to us to experience. St Augustine once said that *veritas est in caritate*: perhaps one might translate that as meaning that the truth which is theology will occur only in the context of personal relationships, only in and from the community experience which Christian love is surely still capable of originating and sustaining even in a milieu which seems formally 'Godforsaken'.

But it is perhaps rather to Newman that we should turn. He is the man who understood better than anyone how the practice of theology depends on one's experience of Christian life. His letters (as John Coulson has suggested) offer a most remarkable guide to how religious life may grow in difficult circumstances and in unsatisfactory institutions. That would be to take the analysis beyond the scope of this paper, it would certainly be to make it far more profound. Perhaps it will not be too hermetic to end with two quotations from Newman's important and moving sermon on 'Christian Sympathy':

'Persons think themselves isolated in the world; they think no one ever felt as they feel. They do not dare to expose their feelings, lest they should find that no one understands them. And thus they suffer to wither and decay what was destined in God's purpose to adorn the Church's paradise with beauty and sweetness.'

'Perhaps the reason why the standard of holiness among us is so low why our attainments are so poor, our view of the truth so dim, our belief so unreal, our general notions so artificial and external is this, that we dare not trust each other with the secret of our hearts. We have each the same secret, and we keep it to ourselves, and we fear that, as a cause of estrangement, which really would be a bond of union. We do not probe the wounds of our nature thoroughly; we do not lay the foundation of our religious profession in the ground of our inner man; we make clean the outside of things; we are amiable and friendly to each other in words and deeds, but our love is not enlarged, our bowels of affection are straitened, and we fear to let the intercourse begin at the root; and, in consequence, our religion, viewed as a social system, is hollow.'