

# Criticism or Construction? The Task of the Theologian

Nicholas Lash

When I settled down to prepare this lecture,<sup>1</sup> I looked at the title I had offered to the Regent of Studies and began to have doubts: was it really appropriate, on so prestigious an occasion, to discuss what seemed, the more I looked at it, a rather naive or *childish* question?

Not that I have anything against childish questions. Small children are neither experts nor are they wise. They are not experts, because they lack the opportunity to amass specialist stocks of information and skill. And they have neither experienced enough nor suffered enough to be wise.

Nevertheless, small children do often ask fundamental questions as a matter of personal concern.

Theologians are usually elderly, or at least middle-aged. The theologian's audience therefore have a right to expect of him a measure of scholarly expertise: they are entitled to assume that he knows a number of things that other people either do not know or have forgotten. Moreover, the theologian's audience also have a right to expect of him a measure of that wisdom which is the fruit of experience and suffering. (The fact that, on both counts, the audience will often be disappointed does not render their expectations the less legitimate.)

It is, I believe, part of the theologian's responsibility, a function of his expertise and his measure of wisdom, to try to ask, and to help other people to ask, fundamental questions as a matter of personal concern. There is a sense in which the theologian who is not in his second childhood is not doing his job properly. (And I consoled myself with the thought that many of the questions to which Thomas Aquinas, whose memory we are celebrating, most profoundly addressed himself were, quite properly, childish questions.)

As I continued to rationalise my original decision, I was further reassured by the thought that the question I had chosen to discuss does at least seem to be one which is raised by many intelligent and responsible people when they complain that too many academic theologians, instead of building up the faith and strength-

ening the hope of the ordinary Christian, spend their time, at best, wrapped in cocoons of academic abstraction and technicality and, at worst, 'knocking' or undermining the beliefs of the person in the pew.

In other words, because of all the talk that goes on about the 'gap' between academic theology and the life, language and experience of ordinary Christians, my childish questions seemed worth considering.

Moreover, much of the talk about the 'gap' between theology and Christian living seems to presuppose that 'doing theology' is the exclusive responsibility of those on one side of the 'gap': those whom we usually describe as 'theologians'. And yet this seems to me to be, from a Christian standpoint, a rather odd presupposition. I would therefore like to begin by considering the question: who *counts* as 'a theologian'?

\* \* \*

### *Who counts as a theologian?*

According to Professor Johann-Baptist Metz, 'The important questions to be asked by theology are ... Who should do theology and where, in whose interest and for whom?'.<sup>2</sup>

Who should do theology? Or, as I put it just now, who counts as a theologian? Why should a young, sickly, self-important, snobbish Freemason who composed innumerable pieces of music to entertain wealthy Austrians, count as a theologian? Why indeed? And yet Karl Barth would not be wrong to protest indignantly from his grave at any suggestion that Mozart was *not* a theologian.

Why should someone who read a few books, and who could perhaps hardly read at all; someone who spent his life clambering up and down scaffolding giving instructions to a gang of stonemasons and wood-carvers, count as a theologian? Why indeed? And yet I, for one, would protest indignantly at any suggestion that the master-builder of Chartres was *not* a theologian.

Would not someone count as a theologian who, throughout his life, struggled accurately to depict the complexity and tragedy of human experience as a tale most truthfully told in the light of the mystery of Christ? It would seem so, and yet, most textbooks of theology contain few references to Dostoevsky.

Would not someone count as a theologian who regularly sought to express in suitable words his trust in God's love and care? Again, it would seem so, and yet, when people talk about 'theologians', they are not usually talking about children at prayer.

Human beings, like other animals, struggle to meet their needs: the need for food and shelter, for companionship and survival. Unlike the other animals, human beings are never satisfied: they seek ever to transcend present boundaries of knowledge, freedom and

fragile identity. Patterns of human action embody particular conceptions, not only of what it *is*, but of what it *might be*, to be human: they simultaneously express both fact and possibility, actuality and hope. Patterns of human action – whether individual, domestic, social or political – thus symbolically express both what is and what might be meant by ‘humanity’.

If, however, the meanings that our actions express and embody are to be consciously appropriated and responsibly assessed, they demand – over and above the ‘language’ of action – *explicit* formulation in the languages of music and story, art and ritual, politics and philosophy. The function of these symbolic constructs is to contribute to the construction of humanity.

Let me make the same point, and draw the same distinction, from the standpoint of Christian belief. If human existence, as it is and as it might be made to be, is the contingent expression of the creative and transformative action of God, then patterns of human action are not merely symbolic but are, in principle, sacramental – expressive of the mystery of grace. If, however, the sacramentality of human action is to be consciously appropriated and responsibly assessed, it demands explicit expression in the structure and consciousness of a community which declares human existence to have *this* significance and *this* destiny: to be, in fact, the history of grace.

Thus it is that the Second Vatican Council described the Church as ‘the sacrament of intimate union with God and of unity for the whole human race’.<sup>3</sup> The function of this sacrament – or, if you prefer – the mission of the Church, is to contribute, by its declaration – in word and deed – of the mystery of grace, to the construction of a redeemed humanity, to the realisation of that imperishable human fulfilment and freedom which will be the kingdom of God. The theological responsibility of the Church, as sacrament of the kingdom, is – indubitably – constructive.

The works of Mozart and Dostoevsky, of the master-builder of Chartres and the child at prayer, are random examples of the sacramentality of Christian action, a sacramentality which is brought into sharpest focus, given its most explicit ‘definition’, in the ‘*opus Dei*’ – the public confession or proclamation of the Creed and the celebration of the sacraments of faith. Indeed, to describe the ‘human work’ of Christian worship as the ‘*opus Dei*’, the work of God, is to declare one’s trust in its sacramentality.

I began by asking: Who counts as ‘a theologian’? If, by ‘doing theology’, we mean giving symbolic expression to that meaning of ‘man’, that account of his identity, significance and destiny, which Christian faith declares, then *all* Christian existence is, in varying degrees of explicitness, ‘theological’ in character. It follows that

theological *responsibility* is ineluctably borne by every Christian individual and by all Christian groups and institutions. (And non-Christians, whether they are attracted or repelled by Christianity, often grasp this elementary truth more clearly than do those Christians who seek to 'pass the buck' by supposing that 'doing theology' is always *somebody else's* business.)

We have already gone some way to answering Metz's second question, concerning where theology is to be done. Without prejudice to the particular responsibilities of teachers, parents, Church leaders and academics, it seems necessary to say that if theological responsibility is borne by every Christian individual, and by every Christian institution, then theology is to be done *wherever* Christians live, work, speak, act and suffer.

I should perhaps point out that it is not my intention ingeniously to understate the particular responsibilities of the *academic* theologian. In the first place, the academic is a scholar, and it is no *easier* to be a good New Testament exegete, Church historian or philosopher of religion than it is to be a good interpreter of Shakespeare, historian of the Napoleonic wars, or philosopher of mathematics. In the second place, if the Christian community is really concerned with truth, rather than with reassurance, then it should demand of its academics that they be fearless in enquiry and quite uncompromisingly rigorous in their standards of exploration and argument. (It should also, I might add, be therefore tolerant of the technicality that is frequently inseparable from such rigour.) In the third place, I believe that the academic theologian, if he is also a Christian believer, must accept a share of responsibility for the primary task of *articulating* Christian faith in our culture. The academic theologian is a technician, a 'boffin', but he is not merely a technician. He shares the responsibility, common to *all* Christians, for continually attempting to see the wood for the trees, to grasp 'the heart of the matter', and thus to be brought himself, and to bring his hearers or readers, into ever closer contact with the single mystery of God and his grace.

My purpose, in laying the emphasis so far on the fact that *every* Christian, and not only the academic, 'counts' as a theologian, bears theological responsibility, and hence on the fact that theology is to be done, and responsibly done, *wherever* Christians are, and not only in universities or seminaries, has been two-fold.

On the one hand, I wanted to suggest that if there is, as there seems to be, considerable confusion and uncertainty, as to what Christianity might *mean*, this crisis of meaning is both misdescribed and trivialised when it is presented as a failure on the part of academic theologians constructively to expound a system of beliefs which can then, as it were, be simply 'adopted' or appropriated,

without effort, by other Christians.

If Christian action and Christian confession is to exhibit the 'sacramentality' that I have ascribed to it; if the Church is, in *fact*, to be 'the sacrament of intimate union with God and of unity for the whole human race'; then there is no field of human endeavour and human enquiry – be it domestic, artistic, literary, social, scientific, economic or political – which lies *outside* the scope of the Christian project. The contribution of the academic theologian to the common task may, indeed, be irreplaceable, but it is far more modest than many theologians (and others!) seem to suppose.

On the other hand, I wanted to undermine the widespread assumption that the academic theologian is the 'expert', the 'professional', in comparison with whom other Christians are mere 'amateurs'. I am not denying that the academic theologian has responsibility for particular areas of expertise – in New Testament studies, in church history, in the philosophy of religion, or whatever. I only want to insist, as strongly as possible, not only that, in a situation such as ours, in which problems and perspectives, data and discoveries, languages and criteria, multiply exponentially in irreducible diversity, even the 'expert' is necessarily an 'amateur', but also – and this is the really important point – that there are not, nor can there ever be, 'experts' in the knowledge of God: not even the saints, let alone the scholars.

If someone were to react: 'what a splendid liberal Protestant this Roman Catholic is! He is saying that each of us is our own expert', they would have missed the point. And the point is not that all of us are equally expert, but that *nobody* is or can be an 'expert' in the knowledge of God, because the knowledge of God is not like the knowledge of sub-atomic particles, Egyptian hieroglyphs, cost-benefit analysis or the mating habits of the great white whale.

The knowledge of God is knowledge of incomprehensible mystery, of that which is not *less* unknown the more deeply it is understood; it is a knowledge which thus bears all the hallmarks of ignorance; it is knowledge of him whose presence is felt as absence; whose touch is perceived as torture; whose approach is experienced less as the rising of light than as the gathering darkness of our dying. And if this seems a curious description of our knowledge of God, then I would refer you to the gospel accounts of Gethsemane and Calvary.

I suggested earlier that the theological task is *constructive* inasmuch as the theologian shares responsibility for the mission of the Church, which I described as contributing to the construction of a redeemed humanity. My remarks in the last few minutes were intended to suggest that the *critical* dimension of the theological task is to be sought in the direction of the critique of idolatry –

the stripping away of the veils of self-assurance by which we seek to protect our faces from exposure to the mystery of God.

In order to develop this suggestion a little, I now want briefly to consider the question: Is the quest for *truth* a 'critical' or a 'constructive' enterprise?

### *The quest for truth*

There are many things which, as human beings, we build. We build relationships and cities, economic systems and dishwashers, laws and aeroplanes, patterns of meaning in ritual and narrative. And the strength of our constructions is a function of their truth. The relationships that founder, the cities that malfunction and degenerate, the economic systems that produce not wealth but poverty, the aeroplanes that crash, the narratives that don't ring true, the dreams that turn to ashes, are failures in the quest for truth. The fragility of our constructions is a function of their *untruth* or *irreality*.

Our often bitter experience of this fragility – our experience, in other words, of the contingency and mortality of the human world and all its constituents – generates at least three strategies for coping with this circumstance.

In the first place, there is the strategy of nihilism. For the nihilist, the crumbling of our constructions holds no surprises because he knows that 'truth' is a fiction, and that all our projects are laden with illusion – are temporary windbreaks against the onrush of chaos. The nihilist correctly appreciates that all our constructions are, indeed, but card-houses if their 'truth' resides *only* in our attempts to make them true; if the goal of our quest is only 'internal' to our striving. And he is convinced that there is no *other* 'truth' than that which we illusorily create; and that the object of our striving exists only in imagination.

In the second place, there is the strategy of absolutism. The absolutist seeks to ensure the permanence of our constructions by ascribing *absolute* status to whatever patterns of relationship, language and self-interpreting narrative, of economic, legal or political order, we have so far succeeded in fashioning. The absolutist correctly appreciates that, if there is truth, it reside in how things are, not in how we would have them be; that the ultimate ground of truth lies not in human judgements, but in that which makes it possible for true judgements to occur. But the absolutist *incorrectly* supposes that the ways in which we have succeeded in making things to be *is* how they ultimately and appropriately are. The absolutist construes truth as reality *grasped*, as possession to be preserved against the ravages of time and change. The absolutist is an idolater.



Both nihilism and absolutism are strategies of fear. If there is a third strategy, a strategy of trustfulness and not of terror, it will insist, against the nihilist, that truth is not reducible to illusion; that there *is* imperishable truth in our constructions, truth that has its ground beyond all human endeavour in immunity from human folly and self-deception; in reality that infinitely transcends our projects and imaginings. This strategy recognizes the legitimacy of the nihilist's question concerning the reality of truth, or the truthfulness of reality, but answers 'Yes', whereas the nihilist answers 'No'. And that 'Yes' is the fundamental form of faith in the mystery of God. Faith is the practical acknowledgement that we have *only illusion* to fear.

But we *do* have to be permanently fearful of illusion. This third strategy acknowledges the legitimacy of the absolutist's conviction that the stability of our constructions – of patterns of language, relationship and organisation – is indispensable for human life and freedom; it agrees with the absolutist that truth is grounded, not in human judgement, but in that which makes it possible for true judgements to occur; it agrees with the absolutist that our constructions are not lacking in truth. *But*, this third strategy refuses to *identify* 'truth' with its particular expressions and achievements. Fearful of illusion, and perceiving any such identification, any such absolutisation of particular constructions, to be idolatrous, it pursues the quest for truth along the path of dispossession. Faith in God, and in God *alone*, is inherently iconoclastic.

Before summarising the argument so far, I would like briefly to consider one objection to the account that I am offering. Surely my emphasis on faith as *quest* is misplaced? Do we not suppose, as Christians, that we have no need to *seek* God, having already found him?

Christians do, indeed, often talk this way, but they are – I believe – ill-advised to do so. It is of course true that our quest never *starts from scratch*. Except we had some experience of truth, or freedom, we would not know what it meant to characterise our human existence as *quest* for truth and freedom. But it would be odd to say that, *because* we have experience of truth, *therefore* our existence ceases to consist in exploration. Similarly, except we have experience of God, we would not know what it might mean to characterise our existence as quest for God. But it would be odd to say that, *because* we have experience of God, *therefore* our quest is at an end.

It seems better to say, not that we have found God, but that we acknowledge him to have found us. In the strength of this acknowledgement, we are enabled to continue the quest – to

move in the dark without terror of the dark. To put the point technically, to speak of God finding us has the merit of respecting the primacy of grace, whereas to speak as if we had found God is not only Pelagian but, by encouraging us to suppose that, having 'found' him, we now have only to 'hang on to' him, it reduces the 'God' whom we have found to a 'possession' that we have acquired – and this is just another form of idolatry.

I began by suggesting that if the life of the Church is to exhibit that sacramentality which constitutes its specific identity and mission, then each and every aspect of Christian existence will be 'theological' in the sense that it will, in varying degrees of explicitness, give symbolic expression to that account of the identity, significance and destiny of man which is the Gospel message.

Theological responsibility, therefore, is borne by every Christian individual and by all Christian groups and institutions. This is a constructive responsibility inasmuch as its task is to contribute to the building-up of a redeemed humanity. It is a responsibility exercised in personal relations, in art and literature, in science and politics.

That all these bewilderingly diverse and demanding enterprises, each of which has its own absorbing urgency and irreducible autonomy, are nevertheless aspects of a common quest, a single project, is dramatically expressed and declared in the celebration of the liturgy, in which the sacramentality of human existence receives explicit, concentrated, symbolic expression. And one of the tasks of academic theology is to seek, at the level of reflection, for that *connectedness* which the liturgy enacts and exhibits dramatically. Or so at least Thomas Aquinas believed when he affirmed that the 'subject-matter' of 'holy teaching' is *all things* in their relationship to God their origin and end.<sup>4</sup>

However, in all human affairs, policies of what we might call 'uncritical constructivism' result only in disaster. Except our projects are tested and purified, they atrophy – in the collapse of marriages and skyscrapers, in the failure of economic policies and the fading of dreams. Thus it is that, with an eye to the critical dimension of theological responsibility, I described 'faith' as the practical acknowledgement that we have only illusion to fear; as that trust in the reality of truth, or the truthfulness of reality, which is inherently iconoclastic in its steadfast refusal to *identify* 'truth' with its particular expressions and achievements – whether in language, art, religion or social order.

It may not have escaped your notice that the account which, in this lecture, I am offering of the relationship between construction and criticism is really no more than an attempt to give contemporary expression to that dialectic of celebration and silence,



endorsement and protest, affirmation and negation, which has – for two thousand years – been one of the hallmarks of serious Christian theology.

It is as easy to say ‘I believe in God’ as it is to say that ‘all we need is love’. But if we attend, calmly and fearlessly, to the actual complexity, obscurity and intractability of our circumstances, it is not easy to give specific, appropriate, intelligible, practical *content* to either assertion. If the ‘ordinary Christian’ has a complaint against academic theology, it should – I suggest – be not that theologians make it too *difficult*, but that they frequently appear to find it too *easy*, appropriately to speak of the mystery of God and his grace.

You may feel, however, that my apparently casual equation of the quest for truth with the quest for God has unnecessarily confused things. Surely the specifically *religious* quest, the quest for *God*, is not to be identified with the execution of domestic, literary, scientific and political projects?

If this objection is intended as a reminder that the quest for God is not reducible to the sum total of our particular human projects, then it is legitimate. Any such reduction implicitly identifies ‘God’ with the aggregate of actual or possible particular realities and aspects of reality. It identifies ‘God’ with the world. And this is pantheism.

We are, nevertheless, gravely mistaken if, in our attempts to sustain our awareness of the *difference* between ‘God’ and ‘the world’, we construe the quest for God as one particular quest upon which we may (if we have the taste or inclination for it) be sometimes engaged ‘alongside’ the quest for domestic happiness, unified field theory, social justice, a cure for cancer, or whatever.

All attempts thus to construe the difference between God and the world fall into the trap of supposing ‘God’ to be one of a number of actual or possible objects of experience, expectation and discourse. But *such* a ‘God’ would be merely a ‘feature’ of reality, a part of the world, not the incomprehensible mystery of its origin, significance and destiny.

If God were one of a number of actual or possible objects of experience and discourse, then the concept of God would have immeasurably more restricted range than the concept of ‘truth’. And such a God, such a *tiny* God, could be no more than a figment of our imagination, a child’s comforter clung to against terror of the dark.

If, however, the God whom we seek, the God whose truth sustains and infinitely transcends all projects and all imaginings, is in fact, the incomprehensible ground and goal of all reality and all significance, the creator and redeemer of nature and history, then

each and every aspect of the human quest – in all its bewildering, uncontrollable and often conflictual diversity – is an aspect of the quest for God, even when it is not so named or characterised. There is no truth, no reality, ‘outside’ the truth and reality of God and his grace.

Therefore, whatever the particular project upon which we are engaged, we are – in fact – in quest of God, or in flight from his presence. Correlatively, there is no one particular area of human experience and human endeavour that can be fenced off and labelled: Here, and not elsewhere, is God to be sought and found.

Not being one of a number of particular objects of action and enquiry, God has no proper name. ‘Naming’ is always ‘the naming of parts’, the classification of items and categories. Hence the insistence, in the Jewish and Christian traditions, that God, who eludes our imaginative and classificatory grasp, can only be described in negative terms.

This is not, it is true, the end of the story. Theological language also carries a positive freight: it declares God to be he who creates, he who saves, he who sets his people free. And the nuclear form of this positive expression of our faith, our trust, is – in the Christian tradition – the declaration that the mystery of which we seek to speak, the mystery that has become part of the truth and texture of our history, in the form of a servant, is least inappropriately addressed as ‘Father’. However, before we take this name and use it to weave comforting patterns of speculation concerning the ‘domestic’ character of the relationship between man and the mystery of God, we need to remind ourselves of the context which is paradigmatic for all description of ourselves as ‘sons’ of him whom we call ‘Father’. That context, once again, is Gethsemane and Calvary. That is where we learn what it is truthfully to stand in filial relation to the mystery of God.

I suggested earlier that the academic theologian shares the responsibility, common to all Christians, for continually attempting to grasp the ‘heart of the matter’, to concentrate attention on the single mystery of God and his grace. And the heart of the matter is that all theological construction, all positive expression of faith in God, which cannot stand the strain of exposure to negativity, is suspect of illusion.

‘Negativity’ is an ugly word: I intend it to embrace, at one and the same time, experience of mortality, of loneliness and the loss of meaning; of all forms of physical and mental suffering; and of the recognition of the sheer finitude, impermanence and ambiguity of all particular human achievement.

This is, I think, a terrifying suggestion. But it does at least seem consonant with the claim that the transformative power of

the *creator spiritus* is at work – not ‘even’ here, but *above all* here, in particularity and tragedy. I do not see what belief in the incarnation of the Word, in the divinity of the crucified, can mean if it does *not* mean this.

If we have nothing to fear but illusion and if, nevertheless, we *do* – in all contexts and circumstances – have illusion to fear, then it seems clear that the appropriate exercise of the task of the theologian will, in all times and places, be critical in character, and will *thus* – and only thus – be truthfully constructive, contributive to the work of our redemption.

I would, however, like to make it clear that, in thus describing the relationship between ‘construction’ and ‘criticism’, I am not – for example – endorsing the views of one of Rudolf Bultmann’s teachers who saw the task of theology as being that of imperilling souls, leading men into doubt, shattering all naive credulity.<sup>5</sup> That account seems to me as arrogant as it is sadistic. But I *am* saying that it is part of our theological responsibility prophetically to expose the peril of those who imperil the livelihood, well-being and self-respect of others; to provoke doubt in those whose certainties are, in fact, oppressive of the dignity and freedom of others; to shatter the credulity of those who naively suppose that they can better attend to God by failing to attend to anything else.

Theological criticism will, moreover, only be constructive if it is, and is seen to be, from start to finish, *self-criticism* in the light of the Gospel of Christ crucified and risen; self-criticism of our conception of the theological task, and of the language, art, ritual and organisation in which that conception, and its relationship to each and every aspect of the human quest for truth, is embodied and enacted. Without such self-criticism, undertaken in the conviction, which only God can give us, that we have only illusion to fear, our constructive efforts will be illusory and our critical activity destructive.

In the last few minutes I have, in fact, been commenting indirectly on the third and fourth of the questions singled out by Metz as important for theology: namely, in whose interests and for whom should theology be done? In the light of my remarks about self-criticism, these questions demand sharper expression: in whose interest and for whom is our theology in *fact* being done, and in whose interest is it perceived *by others* to be being done?

If we do theology in *our own* interest, then, whoever ‘we’ are, we risk putting God to human use. And that is ideological idolatry, not Christian theology. And the risk is even greater when the ‘we’ in question are, not the ‘wretched of the earth’, but the secure and the powerful, the educated and the prosperous. I am not, I think, just scoring an easy rhetorical point when I say that it is dif-

difficult to imagine the Magnificat being sung with sincerity at a Conservative Party conference.

It is the task of those who bear the burden of theological responsibility to show, quite concretely, in particular situations and circumstances, *how* it is that the question of man – of his identity, significance and destiny – may be construed as the question of God; to show how it is that the *coincidence* of these questions, as the content of specifically Christian hope, is clarified, defined and illuminated by the life, teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus the Christ.

That is the scope and character of the constructive dimension of theological responsibility. And the critical dimension arises from our need continually to purify our perception of that single mystery of grace aspects of which are symbolically expressed, sacramentally enacted, in the music of Mozart, the stonework of Chartres, the novels of Dostoevsky and the prayer of a child. Such things as these only exhibit their sacramentality when perceived, from the depth of human need and the heart of human pain, to celebrate – without illusion – our hope and responsibility for the meeting of the need and the healing of the pain.

- 1 Aquinas Lecture, Oxford, 27 January 1982.
- 2 J. -B. Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, (London, 1980), pp 58-9.
- 3 *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, art. 1.
- 4 Cf. *S. T. Ia*, q. 1, art. 7.
- 5 Cf. R. Bultmann, *Faith and Understanding, I* (London, 1969), p 30. Bultmann here acknowledges his 'debt of gratitude' to G. Kruger for this view of the matter.