THE PLACE OF THEOLOGY IN THE MODERN UNIVERSITY*

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Introduction : Theological Science

Theology is the discipline which seeks to express the content of a religious faith in the clearest and most coherent language available. It has sometimes been described as faith subjected to thought. Even if it limits its ambitions to the reasoned and reasonable statement of what people think and have thought about God, it has a valuable role to play in intellectual inquiry. For religious faith calls for examination and for intelligible and consistent statement. However, it is in the nature of theology to seek to go further in its inquiry. For it is not the science of faith, but the science of God. It is not **piste**-ology but **theo**-logy. While its basic data are found in the faith of an historic community the proper object of inquiry is not the faith itself, but the divine reality beyond disclosed to that faith. The ultimate concern is not with the experience of receiving the revelation but with the revelation itself. A basic theological task is to distinguish what is primordially given from our experience of it. Religious Studies addresses itself to the analysis of religious phenomenality but theology must reach out further to address directly the ultimate and all-determining reality of God. In the succinct definition of John Baillie, "theology is the **logos** of **theos**."1

It is on this basis that theology understands itself to be an objective science. It is concerned not with subjective experience but with the factual reality which is both the object and the subject of that experience. It is, in fact, the cognitive apprehension of the objective reality of God as he discloses himself to us. The scientific character of theology becomes apparent in that its methods and results are governed by the nature of its object. It uses its apprehension of its object continually to test and reform its own structures and conclusions so as to become ever more accurate in its representation of the divine. The use of the term 'science' has changed since the 13th century when Thomas Aquinas claimed the title for theology. Some would claim that theology is a science even in the modern sense. Just as physics concerns the matter and energy of the universe, chemistry its elements and compounds, and biology its morphology and physiology, so theology concerns the divinity of the universe. Others, perhaps more pragmatically, would regard theology as one of the humanities since in practice its data

is the faith and thought of man. It does have affinities with both natural sciences and humanities but its unique object of inquiry ensures that it has a character distinct from either. What they have in common, as the **sine qua non** of the scientific method, is that each is true to the object of its inquiry.

When method is seriously considered a further question arises. How do the diverse individual areas of study relate to the intensive concept of theological science with God as the single primary object? The curriculum of a Theology Faculty includes courses in history, philology, ethics and philosophy, each with its own proper method. Can the coherence of theology as a unitary discipline be maintained in view of the diversity of methods employed within it? The first consideration here is that the theological disciplines are related by unity of centre rather than by unity of system. Their primary inter-relations are radial, not lateral. The second consideration is that the disciplines involved vary in their immediacy of connection with the centre. Exegetical and historical studies are necessary preliminaries to the proper work of theology and provide it with its materials but they are only mediately connected to the true object of inquiry. The immediate connection is found in what is usually called systematic theology. For it is there that the attempt is made to speak coherently, rationally and accurately about God. Because of its strong unifying centre, theology can embrace a wide variety of disciplines and methods and benefit from their service. While there is diversity within theological science, it is not without coherence. It is this concern for coherence which causes theology to confine itself to the Christian tradition, though today it is in continuous dialogue with other faiths. For positive and progressive conclusions to be reached, there is need for a concentration on the mature and sophisticated frame of reference developed within a unified tradition. Comparative religion has a valuable service to offer, but proper Christian theology is addressed to the one stream of revelation. Indeed it is by stating the content of this as clearly as possible that it may best serve its partners in dialogue.

The argument of this paper is that the theological enterprise which has been described may best be undertaken in the context of the University. Part A outlines the benefits which the University may derive from theology; Part B the benefits which theology may derive from the University.

Part A : The Benefits of Theology to the University

1. The Integrity of the University

The final responsibility of the University is not to any pragmatic objectives, but rather to the truth itself. The authority and sovereignty under which we work in the

University is that of truth, whenever and wherever it becomes disclosed to us through our inquiries. This is where a University differs fundamentally from a school or a technical college. The task of the student is not simply to attain to a prescribed standard level of knowledge and competence in certain subjects. Rather his primary task is to engage in inquiry under the ultimate authority not of his teachers but of the truth itself. The field of inquiry of the **University** can be nothing less than the **universe** and the position of man within it. In view of these basic considerations we are entitled to ask : Can the University function without theology? As T.F. Torrance has written :

> Since a University is concerned with human beings in their relation to the universe and not with the universe cut off from human understanding, concerned with what human beings do in space and time and with how they fulfil their role in the universe, the whole realm of human, social and historical and, not least, **theological** studies, belongs to the University as of essential right.[2]

In the course of the work of the University, there are bound to arise questions which reach out to the all-determining reality which is the ground of being. Is there unity to life? Can we know it? Is there a purpose in history? What is the meaning of humanity? What may I hope? Is it not greatly to be lamented if these most serious questions are to be excluded from the academic inquiry of the University? As D.W.D. Shaw has recently written : "Any institution which claims to be dedicated to learning in all its aspects and yet puts a veto on asking those questions of truth and so of theology must seriously be questioned itself as to whether or not it deserves the name of 'university'."3 Furthermore, if these questions are to be discussed in a suitably sophisticated manner they require a mature frame of reference. This is why, even in the modern age of religious pluralism, in a society where Christianity is the prevailing religious force, it is christian theology which offers the best framework within which our inquiry may be pursued. It offers to us a tradition in which those big questions are directly addressed and supplies us with a language and a vocabulary in which they may be rationally and coherently discussed.

2. The Unity of Knowledge

As has frequently been pointed out, one of the distinctive features of modern Western culture, and perhaps its weakest point, is that it has been subject to a disintegrating separation between the 'empirical world' and the 'world of human experience', generally to the devaluation of the latter. This involves the deep division between empirical and theoretical knowledge, between form and being, between the natural sciences and the humanities. The challenge this presents to an institution

responsible for **universitas** within its culture is that of seeking to rebuild creative cultural unity. To that end it must pursue research in all branches of human knowledge with a view to developing their natural connections towards a creative synthesis. It may be that theology can be of particular service here. Wolfhart Pannenberg has suggested, in his major work **Theology and the Philosophy of Science**, that, "Without the critical collaboration of theology and philosophy the unity of knowledge, which prevents the sciences from disintegrating into a set of completely separate disciplines and ossifying, would no longer be appreciated."4 It can be argued, e.g., that theology is the only discipline with the capacity to build a bridge between the natural and human sciences which have become so damagingly separated at the present time. It is suggested that developments within the natural sciences since Einstein have brought ever more clearly into focus the unity of matter and indeed the inherent rationality and contingence of the universe in such a way as to force open the question of the transcendent ground of material reality. Here there opens an interface between physics and theology which could act as a bridge between the natural and human sciences. This may prove to be the source of an integration of knowledge which would lay the foundation for a new cultural synthesis.5 This may be no more than an hypothesis but it indicates the kind of contribution which theology might make in the University's pursuit of unity of knowledge. Certainly, if theology has any contribution to make in overcoming the current fragmentation of life and culture, then the University neglects it to its own very serious loss.

3. Inter-disciplinary Cooperation

An important part of the purpose of a University is that it should promote interchange and interpenetration between its various departments of study so that the whole should be something greater than the sum of its constituent parts. The achievement of this objective is threatened by an extreme specialization which tends towards a sterile academic abstraction which is detached and divorced from any comprehensive vision. The discipline of being exposed to the influence and correction of other spheres of knowledge may well make research more comprehensive and serviceable in its results. In so far as theology has been one of the major academic disciplines, every other department is impoverished if theology is omitted from the University curriculum. On the other hand, it is not difficult to observe areas of research where it may have something to contribute. In current biological science, e.g., advances are being made which raise ethical questions which cannot be competently answered by biology itself, but where a creative partnership with theology may be productive of fruitful results. In historical studies there continually arise theological influences which the historian cannot fully analyse with the tools of his own discipline and where the definitive work of a theologian may be the key to understanding.

Philosophy and theology have been so intertwined in their history that no scholar can pretend to have a comprehensive grasp of either field without some substantial engagement with the other. As modern physics opens up questions of the radical contingence and infinite rationality of nature, an ongoing dialogue with theology may produce remarkable mutual benefits. In linguistic studies there will be occasions when a theological reference will be illuminating. Art and literature are replete with ideas which demand some theological definition. Theology has, indeed, a contribution to make in advancing the work of other disciplines and in the process will gain reciprocal illumination - a matter to be considered more fully in Part B.

4. National Responsibility

As many studies have demonstrated, theology has the capacity to have profound social and even economic effects. For the University to exclude theological study from its curriculum would be to turn its back on one of the major creative forces at work in society. We need look no further than the history of modern Malawi to see how Christian theology may contribute directly to national life and development.6 In order to bring its entire social and environmental context under academic scrutiny and analysis, the University requires , among many other disciplines, the theological perspective. Furthermore, just as the University has a responsibility to supply skilled practitioners to serve in other realms of national life, so it cannot evade a responsibility to train theological leaders. As Gerhard Ebeling has written :

> Under the conditions of democratic freedom and religious tolerance in countries with traditionally strong ecclesiastical majorities, the maintenance of state theological faculties is justifiable as long as the society places value on furthering Christianity, at least in the form of seeing to it that, in view of the public influence of the churches, the spiritually responsible office-bearers receive a fundamental education that is appropriately related to the present status of scholarship and education.7

In a society where the churches are large and influential they can make a considerable contribution to national life and development. By training a theologically articulate and responsible ecclesiastical leadership, the University is able to assist them in the fulfilment of their task. To maintain that the State receives no benefit in return for the provision of theological training is inexcusably narrow-minded. For over the centuries there has been ample demonstration of the highly significant contribution which theologically-trained churchmen have made to the life of both universities and nations.

Part B : The Benefits of the University to Theology

1. Relevance

A serious danger to which theology has time and again been exposed is that of becoming closed to the wider progress of scholarly knowledge, even to the point of becoming anarchronistic and irrelevant. While the relative detachment of the seminary may have some advantages for theological study, it always runs the risk of becoming cut off from the mainstream of the intellectual life of the nation. This is a serious matter because if theology becomes so compartmentalised and esoteric as to be out of touch with the rest of the intellectual enterprise of mankind it cannot fulfil its proper function. As Ebeling has written :

> Because Christian faith knows itself finally to be decisively concerned with truth and bound to the truth, confrontation and agreement with the total awareness of truth belongs unalterably to its living character. The inner necessity of theology as a responsible accounting for the truth of the Christian faith is based on this, so that theology as such already implies openness to a comprehensive concern for the truth. Meeting and communicating with all scholarly fields must be affirmed by theology as things that fundamentally belong to its own constitution.8

Theology cannot perform its appointed task properly if it is not open to all questions. The great advantage of the University context is that theological research is immediately exposed to questions from other disciplines. It is made aware of the manner in which language and concepts are developing so that it can renew and reformulate its own language and structures in such a way as to be contemporarily relevant. A theology which lacks relevance is a theology which has failed. Therefore the success of theological study depends on its openness to current discussions in art, philosophy, history, social science and natural science. Where can this better be achieved than in the University?

2. Catholicity

A further area of openness that can be of great benefit to theology is that of being open to differing ecclesiastical and hermeneutical traditions. The great strength of theological study in the University is that it is open to students of all denominations and of none. There is no requirement to accept a particular confession of faith for entrance. The only qualification is a genuine interest in the questions which theology asks and seeks to answer. This does not mean that teachers and students are necessarily lacking

in their own distinctive convictions, but it does mean that they are open to receive insights and accept questions and comments from traditions different from their own. In this way theology breaks out of the sterility of simply absorbing an inherited tradition and becomes a living and dynamic discussion that is catholic in its scope. This is a considerable advantage at a time when it is recognised that one of the greatest problems facing the Church is its divisions. The need of the hour is for theological leaders who are broad and catholic in their understanding and sympathy, rather than narrow and sectarian. From the wider social perspective, it may be observed that there is a fine line between religious convictions, which is productive, and fanaticism, which is dangerous. As a training ground for theological leaders, the open context of the University can serve to eliminate fanaticism and bigotry and to promote genuine conviction which has been challenged, reformed, enriched and enlarged.

3. Excellence

It is apparent that very few seminaries can match the facilities of a University and therefore it will not be surprising if the University proves to be the context in which theological excellence can best be achieved. It is interesting that, in a report published by the Rockefeller Foundation on the University Divinity Schools in the U.S.A., it is pointed out that although training in denominational seminaries is the norm, most of the teachers in these seminaries had received their theological education in universities or at least ecclesiastically independent institutions.9 In other words, most of the best theologians in the U.S.A. have been trained at University, despite the fact that most theological study is done in seminaries. This may well account for the fact that in the modern period far more creative theology has been produced in Europe where theology is studied in University than in America where it is studied in seminaries. It is also notable that in the African Christian Theology which has been developing in the last 20 years or so, it is the University Departments of Theology and Religious Studies which have led the field. The evidence strongly suggest that if theological study is to achieve authentic academic excellence then it is an immeasurable advantage that it should be pursued within the University. In order to achieve satisfactory results each region requires at least one centre of theological teaching and research of a sort which only the University can provide.

Conclusion

On the basis of the above considerations we venture to affirm that there are major mutual benefits to be gained by giving theology a place in the modern University. Of course, she cannot come imperiously to demand the place of the "queen of the Sciences." She knows that the Middle Ages have passed. But if she comes humbly to

subject herself to the discipline of scientific and critical method on the same terms as the other departments of study, then she has a valuable contribution to make. Theology in the University will not be confessional, i.e., it will not regard the divine authority of its doctrines as a question settled in advance. Rather the question of authority will itself be regarded as a problem and theology will welcome all critical challenge to its premises. All triumphalism and dogmatism will be eschewed. This theology will be acutely aware of the provisional nature of its results and of the incompleteness of its task but, nevertheless, will be deeply satisfied as it fulfils its own proper role in the advance of human knowledge. As Pannenberg has written :

> Because of the incompleteness of human experience, statements about the totality of reality are open to suspicion as being unwarranted dogmatism. Nevertheless they prove indispensable to a critical consciousness. Assumptions about reality are always inevitably presupposed in all actual experience, and it is necessary to bring them into the light of critical consciousness.10

That modest achievement may suffice to justify the place of theology in the modern University. Or, if utilitarian benefits are demanded, the services offered to Church, State and University will not be found inadequate for the purpose of justification.

FOOTNOTES

* An earlier version of this paper was presented at a Staff Seminar in Chancellor College, University of Malawi, on 23rd February 1989. I am grateful to those who attended the Seminar and raised stimulating questions.

1. Cit. J. McIntyre, 'Theology and Method', **Creation Christ and Culture**, ed. R.W.A. McKinney, (Edinburgh: T and T. Clark), 1976, p. 205. The thought found in the Introduction to this paper owes some of its origins to the teaching of Professor McIntyre.

2. T.F. Torrance, **The Christian Frame of Mind**, (Edinburgh: Handsel Press), 1985, p. 53.

3. D.W.D. Shaw, 'Theology in the University - A Contemporary Scottish Perspective', **Scottish Journal of Theology**, Vol. 41, No. 2 (1988), p. 222.

4. W. Pannenberg, **Theology and the Philosophy of Science**, (London: Darton, Longman and Todd), 1976, p. 13.

5. A full elaboration of this hypothesis may be found, e.g., in T.F. Torrance, **Transformation and Convergence in the Frame of Knowledge : Explorations in the Interrelations of Scientific and Theological Enterprise**, (Belfast: Christian Journals), 1984.

6. See, e.g., J. McCracken, **Politics and Christianity in Malawi 1875-1940**, (London: Cambridge University Press), 1977.

7. G. Ebeling, **The Study of Theology**, (London: Collins), 1979, p. 86.

8. **Ibid**, p. 83.

9. G. Lindbeck, **University Divinity Schools : A Report on Ecclesiastically Independent Theological Education**, The Rockefeller Foundation, U.S.A., 1976; cit. D.W.D. Shaw, **op. cit.**, pp. 221-2.

10. W. Pannenberg, **op. cit.**, p. 339