

WHATEVER HAPPENED TO THEOLOGY?



There is no doubt that theology is in some kind of trouble today

RICHARD P. McBRIEN

A professor in the divinity school of one of the nation's most prestigious universities was complaining one evening about the low state to which theological publishing seems to have fallen. Although he has already produced at least three books, he is having trouble finding a publisher for his latest excursion into the area of philosophical theology.

One of his colleagues is having similar difficulties, the advantages of a distinguished surname notwithstanding. According to the complaint, the only theology regarded as worth publishing these days is of the "pop" variety, which usually caters to fads and sensationalism.

The problem is particularly acute because in the field of theology, unlike some of the other academic disciplines (such as the social sciences or even the humanities), most of the important communication occurs through books rather than through articles in the professional journals. (A notable exception to the rule was Bultmann's essay on demythologization, published thirty years ago.) When theologians cannot get their ideas distributed in book form, their range of influence is proportionately reduced, and, more significantly, they no longer benefit from the sustained criticism which book-length argument can elicit from one's colleagues. How much better, for example, would Teilhard de Chardin's theological work have been if he had been allowed to publish freely while he was alive? His attempt to reconcile Christian faith and scientific thought would undoubtedly have provoked a vigorous

scholarly exchange, of value not only to Teilhard himself but also to the whole church.

In a recent book review in the *Andover Newton Quarterly* (January, 1971), Dean George Peck suggests, on the other hand, that professional theologians are at least as much to blame for their present problems as any outside forces. He writes that "it does not take a very sophisticated mind to discern that theology is currently in serious trouble. . . . The giants in the field have departed, and their disciples or anti-disciples seem to have little better to do than to try to one-up each other with slogans or catch-cries. It is as if we imagined that new directions could be found simply in the proliferation of encapsulated 'theologies of this or that,' provided only that they are announced with fanfare proper to a 'dramatic new breakthrough.'

" . . . re serious scholarship is being carried on in the discipline," Peck continues, "it often does not rise above the level of the increasingly intricate rehashing of the thought of our forebears . . . , especially as this is allegedly illuminated by the discovery of some previously hidden connection between them and their supposed cultural and intellectual mentors ('You cannot *really* understand so-and-so unless you see that he was ultimately dependent at this point upon Hegel, or better still, upon some obscure German whose work has never been translated!'). Meanwhile, as Milton has it, 'The hungry sheep look up and are not fed.' "

Is contemporary Christian theology really in such terrible shape? Have publishers, editors and authors alike been so greedy for short-term gains that they have now effectively eaten themselves out of house and home? Are we left only with the choice between superficiality and obscurantism? Was the momentum generated during

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the 1960s artificially contrived, after all? Is there no residual thrust that can get theology moving again in the 1970s? Is this the time, in fact, for hand-wringing, post-mortem analyses (“Where have we failed? What shall we do now?”)?

Trouble

Theology is in some kind of trouble today; there seems to be no doubt about that. Religious books departments have either suspended or sharply reduced their output. Theologians don't seem to be writing the books that once excited the church of the 1960s. The shock of recognition hits especially hard when one is asked to nominate a few theological works for annual awards. There is no question at all of paring down such a list to manageable proportions, but of building one up, almost of artificially inflating, if not creating it.

Two or three years ago an article of this kind on the state of contemporary Christian theology could have been written in a spirit of positive ebullience. Theology seemed to be in robust condition and, like the stock market of the same period, it could only continue to go up and up and up. But in the world of the market too much bull begot the bear, and some people think that the same thing may have happened in religious publishing.

The 1960s at least brought an end to the idea and practice of theology as an exclusively ecclesiastical discipline, serving only the needs of the church and especially of its future priests and ministers. For decades theologians in the Roman Catholic tradition assumed that the doing of theology meant the interpretation, explanation and defense of the doctrinal formulations of the church. The first task of the Catholic professor of theology was the faithful presentation of Catholic doctrine (this is exactly how it is described in a recent essay, “Obedience to the Ordinary Magisterium,” by Cardinal Carlo Colombo, in the collection *Obedience in the Church*, Corpus Books, 1968). Karl Rahner once called this “Denzinger theology.” The tag stuck, and so, too, the opprobrious connotation.

Similarly, theologians in the evangelical and neo-Reformation Protestant tradition assumed that the doing of theology meant the interpretation, explanation and defense of the biblical formulations of God. The first task of the Protestant professor of theology is the faithful exposition of God's holy Word (see, for example, Karl Barth's reflections on the task of theology in such popular works of his as *Dogmatics in Outline* and *Evangelical Theology*). There was a brief moment in the early 1960s when the Roman Catholic tradition came abreast of Reformation thought. We can see evidence of it in some of the catechetical writing of that time (Catholics spoke excitedly of the “good news of salvation,” of “Christocentric proclamation,” and of “the

wonderful works of God in history”), and we can see its mark in the documents of the Second Vatican Council, especially the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (*Dei Verbum*). But catechists and theologians discovered almost immediately that kerygmatic-biblical language could be as formalistic and as disconnected from life as the doctrinal-scholastic language it had earlier replaced. It was just about that time that Catholics began reading Bonhoeffer, Cox, Bishop Robinson, and others. There were more than two ways of doing theology, after all.

It is understood more widely today that theology is not exclusively a matter of doctrinal and biblical exposition. On the contrary, doctrinal and biblical formulations are themselves products of theological reflection. To define theology by one or two of its principal products begs the question. We have to get inside the product and analyze the process itself.

The term “theology” is applicable to any and every attempt to express in language man's presumed perception of transcendence in his experience and in his history. *Christian* theology is a qualification of the theological process. Christians presume that they have perceived transcendent reality, in a definitive and climactic way, breaking into human history and human experience through the person of Jesus of Nazareth

The Bible is one of the principal products of theological reflection. It represents the attempt of both the Israelite and primitive Christian communities to express in language the perception of God which they presumably experienced in certain historical events and personal



encounters and particularly in the life and ministry, the death and resurrection, of Jesus. Doctrines, too, are products of theological reflection. They are official formulations of faith, constructed by the leadership of the community, as representative of the thinking of the whole community. Doctrine serves the unity as well as the clarity of faith.

Although post-biblical and post-doctrinal theology must take these earlier products into account if Christian theology is not to fall victim to historical amnesia and thereby lose touch with its own tradition, such theology can no longer define itself exclusively by reference to these prior sources.

How and why did Christian theology lose its ecclesiastical preoccupations, adopting instead a more secular, world-oriented outlook? Why did this change take place?

Behind the Change

1. *The call and convening of the Second Vatican Council.* When Pope John XXIII first announced the Council on January 25, 1959, he seems to have caught everyone off guard. Some seminary professors of ecclesiology had been telling their students, for example, that the infallibility and primacy decisions of Vatican I had rendered another ecumenical council completely superfluous. The Pope is supreme. All else, including church councils, is secondary and subordinate. (Some day someone may be able to collate all of the pre-conciliar agenda suggestions sent into Rome from the various dioceses of North America. The collated material would provide, I think, a sobering reminder of the parochial and ecclesio-centric thinking of much of the Catholic church of America, even of its putative *periti*.)

The call and convening of Vatican II placed new and heavy pressures on mainstream Roman Catholic theology. If the Council was not going to provide simply a paraphrase or an italicizing of traditional doctrine, then some of the progressive—and heretofore peripheral—theology of Germany, France, Belgium and the Netherlands would have to be brought into service. The doctrinal-scholastic tradition really had little to contribute beyond reaffirmation and exhortation. At least the Rahners, the Congars, the Künigs, and others, had been thinking and writing about some of the things Pope John wanted the Council to discuss, and, as happens in almost every similar situation, the people who do their homework rise quickly, or at least eventually, to the top—if only by default.

The Council created an enormous market for theology. The Catholic church in particular was changing at a rapid pace and people wanted and needed a fuller explanation. During much of the last decade, theologians responded to the call, through lectures, articles, books, symposia, encyclopedias, journals and so forth. If there is, in fact, less widespread interest in theology today, it may mean that there is also less interest not only in the Second Vatican Council but, more radically, in the institutional church itself. Are we in the midst of a period when concern for religious questions and concern for religious institutions are rising and falling in inverse proportion to one another? (The popularity of Eastern mysticism is a case in point.) If this is true, it should not be surprising that theological writings which retain a preoccupation with ecclesiastical issues have less chance of surviving in the publishing market (obviously, I do not refer here to those small conserva-

tive houses where business is thriving) than those which are prepared to enter into fuller, genuine dialogue with the situation outside the theological circle. The Council itself, in its celebrated “signs of the times” section of the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, tried to do its own theology according to this method of correlation (between “message” and “situation”) rather than the more traditional doctrinal or biblical methods, which it did, in fact, employ elsewhere (e.g., chapters II and III of the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church).

2. *The (delayed) influence of Teilhard de Chardin.* This second factor is closely related to the first. Teilhard himself had significant influence on the Council, especially in the aforementioned Pastoral Constitution, *Gaudium et Spes*. He opened Christian theology to the positive values of the world and reminded the church that it is itself a part of the process of historical and cultural evolution. Such ideas would have been condemned as “modernist” in the early decades of the twentieth century and were, in fact, questioned by the Holy Office in its 1962 *monitum* on Teilhard’s writings.

3. *The publication of Bishop John Robinson’s Honest to God in the spring of 1963.* This work, more than any other published in the last decade, brought serious theological issues (God, Christ, church) and serious theological practitioners (Tillich, Bultmann, Bonhoeffer) to the attention of an exceedingly large, nonspecialist reading public. It is not unimportant that *Honest to God* appeared in the midst of Vatican II. The book came at the right time for Catholics as well as for Protestants.

4. *The (delayed) influence of Dietrich Bonhoeffer.* In his famous prison letter of April 30, 1944, Bonhoeffer had asked how Christ could be Lord even of those without religion and how the church could serve in a world come of age. The questions and the answers he sketched marked the beginning of “secular theology” which is, despite some premature death notices, still with us and still influencing many people in the church. The new social and political activism of Christians during the past several years is traceable, at least in part, to the orientation given the church by this martyred Lutheran pastor-theologian and by the many writers influenced by him. (This fourth factor is clearly related to the third, for it was Robinson’s *Honest to God* which really brought Bonhoeffer to the attention of the church.)

The preceding decade had begun portentously with Pope Pius XII’s condemnation of the “new theology” in *Humani Generis*. It was a decade where religious publishing was dominated by the Sheens, the Peales, and the Grahams—not to mention missals and prayer books—and politics by Eisenhower and, for a time, by Joseph McCarthy. It was the era of the so-called silent generation on campus. The Catholic church tried

its best to keep in step: the Rahners, the John Courtney Murrays, the Congars, the deLubacs, *et al.*, were experiencing intermittent periods of enforced silence and sometimes even exile. But the papal and presidential elections of 1958 and 1960 changed much of that, and the call and convening of Vatican II put on most of the finishing touches. Theology was on the way.

Somewhere along the line, however, it went off the track. It should have entered the 1970s in a position of strength; instead the situation looks so depressed and depleted that even distinguished university professors are having trouble getting publishers interested in their material because publishers are now having trouble getting very many potential readers interested in this material.

Some people want to blame the publishers; some want to blame the theologians; some may want to blame them both. I think the problem is much more complex than that. We have come, in these last ten years, to a profoundly new understanding of ourselves—psychologically, sociologically, politically, culturally and historically. Some of the more widely read books (such as Toffler's *Future Shock* and Charles Reich's *The Greening of America*) describe ours as a time of major, even revolutionary, change. Religious writers like Robert Adolfs have spoken of the new phenomenon of "rapidation" (*The Grave of God*) and Gregory Baum has written of this period as a time when cultural change is so pronounced that the church must now thoroughly refocus its understanding of the Gospel (*The Credibility of the Church Today*).

Whatever the source(s) of the trouble, good theology is still being done today, even if its product is less visible and less accessible than before. And oftentimes people whom we normally don't refer to as "theologians" are among those doing the best theology. Such theology is operating on at least two levels: the secular-dialogic and the ecclesio-political.

Secular-dialogic theology (also called correlative, juxtapositional, and prospective by Tillich, Cox, and Baum) treats traditional theological problems in the light of whatever serious scientific and humanistic material happens to be available. It is the antithesis of the ecclesiastically-oriented biblical and doctrinal theologies discussed above. Thus, Eugene Fontinell and Eulalio Baltazar treat the problem of God in the light of pragmatic and processive philosophy (*Toward a Reconstruction of Religion and God Within Process*). Gregory Baum examines both the God and the church questions in the light of psychology and the sociology of religion (*Man Becoming*). Secular-dialogic theology is what Johannes Metz calls "political theology" and what Karl Rahner was engaged in from the beginning—in his *Hearers of the Word*, for example.

Sometimes, of course, when our theology seems most dialogic, it is really most ecclesiastical (as, for example,

much of the theological discussion at the recent Brussels Congress seems to have been). On the other hand, there are some theologians today who may be tempted to do secular-dialogic theology without any meaningful reference to the church. Theology *can* be done without reference to the Christian community and its traditions, but when it is done that way, it is no longer *Christian* theology. Eventually, such theologians must resolve their sense of ambivalence and decide, for their own clarity as well as for their readers', about the merits of the tradition or traditions that are operative in their thinking.

Ecclesio-political theology treats of traditional theological questions in the light of the concrete needs of the church. It, too, uses whatever relevant data is available from other sources (e.g., sociology, political science, law, etc.), but its primary and immediate concern is not dialogue with the world at large (although this is its long-range concern) but dialogue within the Christian community itself, for the sake of its eventual renewal and reform. This is the kind of theology which some American theologians are doing in collaboration with the Canon Law Society of America, e.g., its symposia and special projects on constitutionalism in the church, freedom, due process, subsidiaries, coresponsibility, collegiality and the selection of bishops. It is the kind of theology that Hans Küng continues to do so provocatively.

There are undoubtedly many in the churches today who believe that the only kind of serious theology is secular-dialogic (or whatever name they might give it). It seems, however, that one cannot continue to do *Christian* theology without reference to the tradition and mission of the Christian community. How that community continues to understand itself, how it institutionalizes its faith, how it organizes itself for mission—these are some of the questions that are of abiding concern for ecclesio-political theology. Some of the most practical theology today is being done at this level. If the reform of the church continues in any meaningful way, it will owe its progress to the contributions of this kind of collaborative theological-canonical work.

We may be beyond the time now when theological progress can be charted like the ages of man: from neo-orthodox, to existentialist, to secular, to death-of-God, to the theology of hope, to the theology of revolution, to the theology of celebration, to black theology, to feminist theology, and so forth.

Perhaps theology has been played too much like a game, becoming too much imbued with the values of a world whose judgment and redemption it presumes to announce and explore. As theology loses some of that game-like quality, we should be under much less pressure to greet the publication of two or three books on the same general theme as the dawn of a new era, nor should we have to excommunicate into a kind of limbo

those writings which do not happen to catch the mood or the jargon of the moment. We will come to realize, after all, that men who talk together and who think alike will often produce similar kinds of books and will even promote one another's work in the process. There is nothing wrong or harmful in that unless we begin to identify all theology with that one group and thereafter accept their interests as the only legitimate agenda for religious reflection and publication. There are other dialogues in process, and other theologians in touch with other levels of experience both in the church and in the world at large. These other dialogues may be

potentially as important as those that happen to catch the attention of the *New York Times*, the weekly news-magazines, Andrew Greeley, Harvey Cox, or Martin Marty.

There are today serious theological questions under review, and there are serious men studying them—no longer in seminaries and divinity schools alone, but in the universities and in the field. If theology in the 1970s may have less journalistic appeal, perhaps in the long run it may have more to say to both the human community and to the church about the issues that do, or should, trouble them most.

THE POLITICS OF DAY CARE



New possibilities or appalling impossibilities

MARION MEADE

At this moment there's little doubt that a vastly expanded system of day care is going to become a reality. Maybe not quite what feminists talk about when they envision free, 24-hour nurseries on every block in the land. But at least chances look good for child care centers eventually to become as familiar a part of many children's lives as today's nursery schools and kindergartens.

Skipping the sticky question of who's going to foot the bill, there's a far more serious issue now being debated with considerable passion. That is, who should sponsor child care centers? This means a lot more than the mere achievement of establishing physical facilities. It's what kind of day care and, ultimately, what kind of kids these day care centers will produce. To look at the problem from another angle, should day care amount to babysitting? Or should it be used to rear children who are (take your choice):

- a) non-conformists
- b) cooperation (as opposed to competition)-oriented
- c) social revolutionaries
- d) superchildren. And so on.

This, then, is suddenly where the politics of day care is at.

Meanwhile, at least four prototypes for child care centers already have emerged. Depending on your day care politics, they are either possibilities or appalling impossibilities. To begin with, some people feel it's the government's business to provide this service just

like public schools and libraries. (They admit, however, that neither are much to brag about right now.) Then there's private business which is eager to prove that child care can be merchandised like any other commercial product. Still another alternative is for companies to offer child care as a fringe benefit for their employees. And, finally, a mixed bag of day care advocates hold the philosophy that day care must be a community facility. Each nursery should be directly controlled by the parents involved, its policies reflecting the social, political and educational values of the group. (This last faction might be categorized as the day care radicals, including as it does the feminists, black and third world activists and educational liberals. But, as one of them told me: "What we who call ourselves 'radicals' want for our children is just a healthy environment. Unfortunately, in this day and age, that's radical.")

Just about the only point upon which these various factions agree is the desperate need for day care. While currently five million children under the age of 6 have mothers who work, the highest estimate of day care places now available to those kids in existing facilities is 640,000. And the trend toward greater numbers of working mothers seems unmistakable. The problem is, what to do about it. Unfortunately the day care movement is in no way remotely close in its approaches.

That a titanic struggle lies just over the horizon seems fairly certain. In fact, during the past year, there have already taken place minor rows and a few major confrontations.

The first tip-off about which way the wind was blowing happened last June when several hundred businessmen and educators gathered for an "Early Learning/Day

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