

TOWARDS AN ŒCUMENICAL THEOLOGY:

A CONSIDERATION OF THE RELATIONS BETWEEN AUGUSTINIANISM, THOMISM, NOMINALISM, AND LUTHERANISM¹

It is surely impossible to do justice to the four main schools of Christian theology within the compass of a short essay. Such is not our intention, despite the title. But a great deal of confusion exists as to the relations of these four great schools with one another, and it would seem not altogether inopportune to try and do something to ease this intellectual traffic jam which besets systematic theology. This is our *sole* intention in this essay.

An "œcumenical theology" is beginning to emerge. This must not be interpreted as a kind of "syncretistic" movement going on inside Christianity itself. Rather it is based on the concrete fact that in Christian theology we are getting nearer to where the Early Church stood. That is to say, our **theological divisions** no longer correspond to the divisions **between the Churches**, but cut right across them. In this **article therefore we shall treat the four theological systems in the title as "schools", or "types of thought" rather than as official theologies of the Churches.**

Anyone familiar with the history of dogma knows that of the two schools of theology in the early Church, Origen's and Augustine's, only the latter has become a permanent system of Christian thought. In later days, and indeed right down to this our twentieth century, it has been the special function of the Eastern Church (and here we must include the Alexandrian theology of Origen) to keep "dogmatic thought" alive in its original vitality. The Western Church, on the other hand, with its more rational and systematic character, deserves to be called the Mother of the "schools of theology".

The extent of the agreement between the theological schools in the Western Church has seldom been fully appreciated. Yet all of them are agreed about the centrality of the grace of God in the framework of theology. "Grace alone" was what Augustine taught, and in that all his successors have followed him.

¹ "Lutheranism" stands for the theology of the whole Reformation of the sixteenth century.

Yet what a difference there is between the Augustinianism of a Thomist, a Nominalist, a mystic and a Luther, to say nothing of Augustine himself!

In the course of the Church's history a new situation has generally produced a new theology, and in due time the new theology has crystallised into a new confession. This makes any agreement about the primacy of the grace of God quite insufficient as a guarantee of theological agreement, even on the subject of grace itself.

The doctrine of grace is an articulated system comprising three subordinate principles:

God's grace is always prevenient.

It is always unmerited.

It is always all-sufficient, whatever the part played by man's co-operation or merit.

Ambiguity arises from the various ways in which the relation between God and man is conceived. To use a modern idiom, but one which nevertheless gives expression to something men have been aware of all the time, we may call this relation the "point of contact". Here we come to the parting of the ways, and here the different schools of thought arise.

It will be seen that, roughly interpreted, our four schools of thought present all the prototypes for the understanding of this problem. In a short essay like this the intermediate and secondary schools of thought must be left out of account.

The "point of contact"—the point where God with His grace and man with his urgent quest for redemption encounter one another—may be found in man as a whole, in the totality of his being. Such was the procedure of the classical Schoolmen of the Middle Ages.

You may also isolate part of man's nature, e.g. the specifically spiritual or moral element, and make that the connecting link between God and man. Such was the choice of Augustine, the heir of the religious philosophy of antiquity.

If, however, you hold that there is no direct contact between God and man, and then after all contrive to discover it in the dramatic encounter between them, you have the Nominalism of the later Middle Ages, i.e. of Occam and his like. Nominalism, of course, was an internal controversy within

mediaeval Catholicism, but it is not so very different from "Barthianism", as distinct from Barth himself.

You may, however, be perfectly serious about the absence of contact between God and man. You may not even accept the irrational connection stated by the later Nominalists, and so maintain that man's capacity, endowments, stage of development, preparation, or even his situation as such (as the Nominalists asserted) have no value or relevance for theology. This leads you up a blind alley, and there is no way out except to follow Luther and find the point of contact in man's acknowledgment of his sin.

Augustine tried to find the connecting link between God and man in the soul, after it had been purged by philosophical training and was striving to attain the *summum bonum*, as in Plato it strove for the "Ideas". Thomas Aquinas sought the link in natural man preparing himself for supernatural grace by the practice of virtue (*gratia perficit naturam*). The Nominalists found it in their interpretation of man as a creature cut off from God and lying at the mercy of His sovereign will. But the actually connecting link is to be found in man as a sinner repenting of his sin. Others find the link somewhere *between* God and man. Luther finds it *in* the sinner himself. This discovery became the foundation of the doctrine of justification at the time of the Reformation. Whether or not we are right in claiming this doctrine to be the key to all theology, it is at any rate the common property of all the Churches of the Reformation.

Thus in the last analysis all four schools of thought are trying to say the same thing. For they all equally assert that God's gracious purpose for the salvation of man is really accomplished. But they arrive at this by routes fundamentally different and even contradictory.

Quite early in his career Luther expressed his fundamental principle in the concise formula "*Justitia in nobis, non nostra*". In other words, if we think about redemption in psychological or philosophical terms, we are completely shut out and cut off from God's righteousness. But if we follow Divine Revelation in our thinking, that is, if we think theologically, then God's righteousness is nevertheless vouchsafed to us. For God's grace prevails "nevertheless", i.e. in spite of all insuperable obstacles. All contemporary problems of interpretation debated

by the various schools of thought, as well as their internal controversies, originate from this lawless confusion between two quite different kinds of thinking, the psychological and the theological.

Let us suppose for a moment that we succeeded in mastering this confusion. The Catholic could then no longer complain that Luther had studied his Occam to the neglect of Thomas Aquinas, and he would stop censuring Luther for the Quietism of his ethics. Likewise Protestants would no longer want to get rid of the Platonic element in Augustine's spiritualised use of Eros. They might even be perfectly satisfied if St. Thomas's natural theology were dropped from the agenda in present-day discussions, all the more so as there seems to exist a tendency on the part of Neo-Thomists to relegate it to the background, though, of course, there is always the danger that it might be continually coming to the forefront again. It might also clear the air considerably if it were generally realised that Barthianism (not Barth himself) is closely related to the main ideas of the Nominalism of the later Middle Ages.

Where exactly does man stand when God reaches him with His saving grace? In the sublimest state of love for Him, says Augustine. With a nature needing the gift of Christ's grace for its perfection and fulfilment, says Thomas. In a situation "between the times", they said at the end of the Middle Ages. As a sinner in despair, yet to be consoled and comforted, says Luther.

Yet the Reformer is not concerned to deny the facts of psychology, the ideas of philosophy and the phenomena of man's natural relation to God. Psychology *can* demonstrate sinful man's natural desire for God. Ethics *can* set natural man on the road to God. Man *does* stand on the opposite side to God and, paradoxically, on the same level with Him as His partner. All this it would be foolish to deny. Judged by the criteria of psychology, philosophy and phenomenology, or by an amalgam of all three, man is—man, whether he be in heaven, earth or hell. But the factual knowledge established by these sciences loses its value the moment one enters the sphere of theology and of the Church. The last commentaries Luther wrote before the Reformation are already full of this.

Qua theologia all the observations and thought processes of religious psychology and philosophy are—nothing. They come

under Christ's own judgment: "When ye shall have done all the things that are commanded you say, 'We are unprofitable servants'." As far as man's salvation is concerned, all their affirmations, judgments and elucidations have absolutely nothing to say. They disappear the moment the justification of the sinner becomes the frame of reference.

This "nothing" is, of course, qualitative rather than quantitative. Ever since Parmenides, philosophers have busied themselves with the problem of "nothing". Later a distinction was drawn between a "nothing" which is purely negative, and a fictitious "nothing" which really has a positive content. The genuine "nothing" can only exist from the standpoint of eternity—i.e. of theology. Ordinary human thought unaided by divine revelation can only posit a "nothing" which is really "something". To "receive" God's grace is certainly a genuine experience full of meaning for the soul, but for theology, for faith, for the other world, for grace, the act of receiving as an act is of no additional account whatever. All human values, even the highest, count as nothing in the sight of Jesus Christ. When theology questions the reality of man's co-operation with God, it is not concerned to deny the fact of man's spiritual life, or to pretend that reason is but unreason. Still less is there any desire to depict human society as one huge Dartmoor or Bedlam. All theology seeks to do is to make an unconditional exposure of the utter *relativity* of all things human without exception. They are deprived of all *theological* value.

This is where our real conception of God comes in. There is no doubt that God *can* make use of all these relative factors which form the subject matter of philosophy and psychology. But it is equally true that these very factors *can* also become obstacles to God's purpose. He *can* use them. He *can* dispense with them, and He *can* even accomplish man's redemption *in spite* of them. Good works done *before* justification *can* be an advantage; they *can* also do serious harm. They have no claim to any special standing with Him. In short, God's righteousness is imputed to man by faith alone.

Theology takes grace and justification as the starting point of its thinking. It speaks of man *after* justification. Only one who has himself been redeemed can utter a genuine theological testimony to the fact of redemption. It is just this consideration which has been so much overlooked by the different schools

of thought, even the Lutheran itself. Hence the confusion in their methods and their contradictory assertions about experiences which are fundamentally identical.

If a redeemed man speaks to an unredeemed man about redemption, the very task he sets himself obliges him to refrain from exercising any undue considerateness towards him because of his unredeemed condition. That is to say he must start where the sinner is, and nowhere else. He must begin with him as a sinner, as one who is as yet unredeemed and without faith. If he seeks some other human point of contact, he will only plunge the sinner still deeper into despair. If he does that he becomes guilty of the death of the sinner.

So, when God becomes man for man's redemption, psychology and philosophy must be put down from their thrones with the "princes of this world", and the methods of theology must be purged from all taint of these sciences. There can, of course, be no finality about such a purge. It must be done over and over again. Only that will prevent the different schools of thought from indulging in mutual destruction. Their co-ordination can produce a unique effect of mutual attraction and repulsion.

Thomism looks at man *before* his justification, Augustine *in* the moment of justification, Luther *after* justification. From this point of vantage theology looks out upon the facts established by psychology and the explanations offered by philosophy, listens to them and learns from them, but all to one purpose; she has no desire to join their company nor to admit them to her own. A *Summa contra Gentiles* must never seek to be a *Summa Theologiae*. By being warned not to amalgamate her own thinking with ideas derived from psychology and philosophy, theology is stimulated to vigorous and repeated self-examination. Again, looking at man both in his adolescence and senility trains the theologian to pursue one single ideal—to make his thinking a theology of grace, something really worthy of the "Church of the Holy Ghost".

The first and last of the schools of thought determines their character as a whole, but a theology which does justice both to Augustine and Luther has not yet been evolved. Both of them, Augustine and Luther, are connected with the same three phases of theological evolution, though in the reverse order.

Augustine began with anti-Manichæanism: in this he was fighting for the true Creator. Then followed his struggle against the Donatists, when he was battling for the true Church. His life closed with the struggle against Pelagianism, and this time he was fighting for the true Christ. The anti-Manichæan struggle was between Christian and heathen, the anti-Donatist between Church and sect, the anti-Pelagian between Evangelicals and Catholics. With Luther all these phases recur, though this time the anti-Pelagian struggle comes first, and the anti-Donatist (i.e. against the Anabaptists, etc.) second. It is only in the history of the Churches of the Reformation that we reach the anti-Manichæan phase, the struggle for the true Father. This stage comes with the fight against extreme theories of predestination, and so on right down to the controversies between Orthodoxy on the one hand, and Rationalism, Unitarianism, and Socinianism on the other.

When theologians are fully alive to this connection between Augustine and Luther it will be easier for them to reduce the official theologies of the Churches to the status of "schools of thought", and the "strife of the theological systems" will issue in the formation of a united front embracing both Luther and St. Augustine.

Therefore it is true to say that an *œcumenical theology* is emerging. Different theologians have already expressed themselves in this direction, but now they are asked not to reply to these comparisons of ours with quotations from their own sources. Of course each school of thought can find plenty of proof-texts in its possession to show its supposed agreement with the others. There is no need to prove that the Thomist can be a Lutheran, the Lutheran a Nominalist, the Nominalist in his turn an Augustinian, and the Augustinian a Thomist as well as a Lutheran. God by His word is Lord of all the schools of thought in the science of theology. Faith is not concerned about the end of life but its fulfilment. "*Christus autem, quæ virtus est, ex Deo nobis est, non ex nobis*" (Augustine).

HANS P. EHRENBERG.

*German Confessional Institute,
London.*