INTO THE MARKET PLACE AND BEYOND

By PETER HEBBLETHWAITE

MY PURPOSE in this article is to give some account of how the role of theologians in the Church has changed in the last twenty years. It seems that the same word no longer describes the same activity. Their changed role is partly an effect, partly an index of the general and accelerated process of change in the world and in the Church. The Church's fresh self-understanding has led to a fresh self-understanding of the task of theologians. Expectations differ, and theologians have responded to these expectations, or sometimes shrewdly anticipated them and thus been led to closer involvement with the 'world', symbolized, most inadequately, by 'the market place'.

To open up this question one can essay a comparison between 1953, 1963 and 1973 and ask the simple question: what was the theologian's self-understanding? What did he think he was doing? At the risk of caricature, one can simplify thus. In 1953, he was a man who 'handed on what he had received'. His problem was to know what to hand on. He did not expect the theological landscape to change in a sudden or startling manner, or to be convulsed in some remarkable way. He expected it to look much the same as he reached the end of his long and laborious career as at the start. He taught from handbooks or manuals, which distinguished with great clarity what was *fides catholica* from what was *de fide definita* and so on. Looming figures called 'adversaries' appeared early on in his theses, were sketchily presented and summarily dismissed. Scripture and the fathers were used, without much critical sense, to 'prove' the theses which were advanced. The theologian might differ from the manual on minor points, and indeed he had to if he were to appear as a serious fellow, and not just a conformist nonentity; but the area of possible disagreement was extremely restricted.

Here is how Piet Fransen recalls those years:

> Remembering my own professors of some twenty years ago, I recall their quiet scholarly life, aloof from the worries of men, only repaid by an

> even greater indifference from the outside world. Once in a while they went out to meet their equals for a learned discussion at international meetings. Most of their problems were all set. Once a treatise was written, their duplicated codex could last for a lifetime but for a few additions to the bibliography and technical refinements here and there.[1]

Though this refers in fact to an earlier period, it is a not unfair picture of 1953.

By 1963 the situation had changed utterly. A set of dominant trends had emerged in theology which suddenly flowered at the Council. It is true that, in 1963, the Council had only just begun and its outcome was still uncertain; yet it was evident from the start of the Council that it needed theologians and needed them in a new role.

A number of observations can be made about this period. The first is that the activity of theologians, in the main french, who had been burrowing away at the sources of theology ever since the 1930s, moved from the underground to the centre of the stage. Theologians who had been under a darkening cloud emerged blinking into the light of the conciliar day. The work of Congar on ecclesiology and ecumenism, the work of de Lubac on ecclesiology and the supernatural, that of Chenu on 'the world' and work, suddenly became respectable and, more than that, urgently needed. For the Council, as Pope John had indicated, needed to learn from history, and the three theologians mentioned were all formed in rigorous historical methods. There was nothing facile about them. They made few concessions. They did not spare footnotes, even if they frequently got them wrong. 'You need fifteen years', Congar used to tell his students at le Saulchoir, 'to get to know St Thomas Aquinas properly'. One of his pupils, le Guillou, reports that this was not a vain expectation.[2]

The two volumes which make up the *Bilan* also bring out another feature of the theology of 1963. It is predominantly european. This fact was noted, in a hostile manner, by Fr Ralph Wiltgen, in his engaging book, *The Rhine Flows into the Tiber,* which purported to show that the Council was the result of a plot of rhineland theologians. The *Bilan* confirms not exactly that there was a plot, but certainly that their influence was vast. The three theologians already mentioned receive full-length treatment. To them must be added Karl Rahner, who is

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[1] 'Hans Küng, a Note on Recent work', in *The Month* (November 1965), p 320.

[2] *Bilan de la Théologie du XXe Siècle,* 2 (Paris, 1970), simultaneously published with the german edition *Bilanz der Theologie im 20 Jahrhundert* (Freiburg/Breisgau).

mentioned 134 times in the index, not counting his own contributions; this compares most favourably with Bernard Lonergan, who is mentioned only six times. Josef Schmitz writes forty pages on fundamental theology and adds a postscript in which he confesses his ignorance of developments outside german-speaking countries. It begins: 'the mentality of anglo-saxon countries is completely different'. So he leaves them aside. Theology at the Council was a largely european and continental european activity, concentrated in the common market countries with the addition of Austria and Switzerland. John Courtney Murray constituted an honourable exception.[3] It is also true to say that anglo-saxons on the whole accepted this state of affairs, and that by 1973 they no longer do so.

But in 1963 the hegemony of continental theologians was not in dispute. Its roots reached back into the 1930s. A series of 'movements' had taken place which supplemented and called for each other. Sometimes, one might be tempted to feel, they existed by a kind of metaphysical proclamation, so slender was their popular base. Yet they indubitably existed. First came the liturgical movement, often seen as a response to the false collectivism of nazism. This called forth the renewal of biblical studies, which in its early stages did not take Bultmann seriously; and the biblical movement was sustained and supported by the patristic revival. *Sources chrétiennes* began. These various and overlapping 'movements' necessarily had their effect on ecclesiology. Moreover, these movements began to ease their way into the teaching of the magisterium, notably in *Mystici Corporis* and *Mediator Dei*. Anyone who wishes to assert the thesis of continuity before and after the Council should begin here. However, *Humani Generis*[4] acted as a brake, but since few of the incriminated theologians recognized themselves in its pages, it may be said in the long run to have cleared the air by sorting out the pseudo-quarrel on immanence. But the immediate practical effect was that Congar was exiled to Cambridge,

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[3] Whether Gus Weigel should be regarded as an american is doubtful: his german accent used to thicken as difficulties increased.

[4] Was *Humani Generis* a theological accident? According to Giovanni Caprile, Pope Pius XII had the project of a council as early as 1947. Its purpose was to proclaim the dogma of the Assumption by acclamation and to condemn contemporary errors. A commission was formed to collect errors. However, it soon appeared that bishops had other ideas for the projected council and the idea was abandoned. But, remarks Caprile drily, the work of the commission on contemporary errors was not wasted, since most of the errors reappeared in *Humani Generis*. 'Pio XII e un nuovo progetto di concilio ecumenico', in *Civiltà Cattolica* (20th August 1966), pp 209-27.

and that Chenu and de Lubac were forbidden to teach. The Council involved a reversal of roles, almost a reversal of values, in which the heroes became the villains and the villains heroes. I speak metaphorically.

But it involves no metaphor to say that those who were in bad odour in 1953 were urgently required in 1963. There was a 'climate' in theology, and the early beginnings of polarization. A thousand works proclaimed the new trends. They can be put in a series of shorthand formulae: from the essentialist to the existentialist; from the juridical to the personalist; from the a-historical to the historical; from the exclusive to the inclusive; from deductive theology to inductive anthropology; from defensiveness to dialogue. None of these slogans provided a precise criterion: but all indicated a direction.

But there was an even more decisive change at the Council. The expectations of the world changed, but so did the expectations of the theologians. The Council had over four hundred *periti,* most of whom merited their title; and they became aware, perhaps for the first time in their theological existence, that they could effect change in the Church. No longer was their task simply to bolster up acquired convictions. They could actually shift the Church: that is to say that, finding the Church at point *a*, they could expect to bring it to point *c* or *d*. Naturally this was done in the name of renewal and of going back in order to go forward; but the point is that it ushered in a new, constructive, and sometimes combative role for theologians in the life of the Church. Sometimes this was referred to as their prophetic role. No longer were they to be the conveyor-belt system of the magisterium; they were to be the heralds of the new and dynamic element in the Church. Moreover, whereas previously their combativeness had been reserved for heretics or unbelievers, now that the rule was dialogue with these categories, the combativeness was introjected. They began to argue within the Church for change in the Church.

We are still living in the post-conciliar period, the *dopo-concilio*. The Council used theologians, commended them and released them. But there was a flaw in its work, the consequences of which have been with us ever since. It is worth taking seriously the remark of Hans Urs von Balthasar on the implications of Pope John's insistence, reiterated by his successor, that the Council's work should be essentially *pastoral*. This self-imposed limitation had dangers, since pastoral conclusions cannot be drawn except from theologico-dogmatic premises. What were they? Were they ever spelt out? Could they just be assumed? Many theologians have implicitly agreed with von Balthasar when they have noted, and sometimes complained, that 'there is very little

theology in the Council documents, with the exception of the Decree on Revelation'. I think that puts it too pessimistically, and that von Balthasar's view cannot be asserted without considerable qualification. What is certain is that the Council, when faced by a difficulty, frequently compromised. It produced reconciling texts in which the opposing positions are simply juxtaposed. This was partly due to Pope Paul's laudable desire that there should be as far as possible a consensus, that in the end there should be *des convaincus, pas de vaincus*.

The consequences can be seen in the theology which flourished in the immediate aftermath of the Council. Many theologians busied themselves in commenting upon and exploiting the riches of, or, as they often put it, 'the new openings' offered to them by the Council. It was the era of the great commentaries and congresses on 'the theology of Vatican II'. The harvest of Vatican II began to be gathered home. But already some of the cracks were beginning to appear. What theologians stressed in their reading of Vatican II was not always what pastors stressed in theirs. Here is one representative witness from 1968:

> The Pope is constantly warning us that all sorts of things are being said in the name of Vatican II which are not to be found in that Council's Acta. This is perfectly true. Nevertheless Vatican II made — and made dramatically — a generic decision which opened the door to all the forces now disturbing the peace of the Church. For Vatican II decided to accord full and decisive weight to the existential principle in theology.[5]

What the 'existential principle' means is not altogether clear, but it might well induce alarm in pastors, who thought of the Council as a point of arrival. The majority of theologians took it as a point of departure.

It is highly significant, for example, that Karl Rahner, master to so many, should have thought that the most significant teachings of the Council were those which had not appeared central at the time of drafting: for example the assertion that the Church was truly present in the local church, from which he deduced confirmation for his theory of the diasporic Church of the future: 'everywhere will be diaspora and the diaspora will be everywhere'.[6] The point here is not whether his diagnostic was correct or not but that it was a surprise for some that he placed so much emphasis upon it. Similar remarks could be made on the

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[5] Sebastian Moore O.S.B., in *Authority in a Changing Church*, ed. Dalrymple (London, 1968), p 1.

[6] *The Christian of the Future*, *Quaestiones Disputatae*, no 18 (London, 1967), p 79.

emphasis which Johann Baptist Metz places on the idea of the Church as the 'sacrament of hope', which appeared to imply that numbers were of little consequence and thus to undermine missionary endeavour. Others pounced on the phrase *ecclesia semper purificanda,* often confusing it with Luther's *semper cotrigenda,* and forgetting that the full text says *ecclesia . . . sancta simul et semper purificanda.*[7]

The text has prompted much hand-wringing, breast-beating and rabble-rousing.

Another welcome text to theologians — it is indeed directed to them — was that which spoke about 'an order' or hierarchy of truths, since they vary in their relationship to the foundation of christian faith.[8] This was a boon, for the work of theology consists, at least on one level, precisely in the articulation of faith and therefore in its ordering. It was commonly conceded that catholics particularly had become confused in their ordering of faith, in what they thought was important, and the resultant sorting out might and did give a low place to specifically 'catholic' features. All the more since theologians were being urged to engage in ecumenical discussion. They did, and they found the experience bracing and salutary. Not that for most of them it was a matter of watering down, though they were often accused of this.

After the heady days of the Council and the prospect of influence, a certain disenchantment seems to have set in from the year 1968. Even though the International Theological Commission had been founded, and despite its competence and bulky reports, one cannot say that either the Commission or its reports have had much effect. Its work on ministry was largely ignored by the 1971 Synod — the last one to meet — and in the year 1972 they devoted themselves to the theme of 'pluralism', which is more one of the conditions of the practice of theology than a matter of its content. Their wordy document on the subject was published a year later, and the world did not exactly enthuse. It was in a sense an *Apologia pro scientia sua.*

However, the word pluralism certainly characterizes theology as we move towards the year 1973. There is indubitably a great diversity of theologies, and the diversity is greater than that of previous theological 'schools' which managed to disagree, but within a large and stated framework of agreement. In the first instance the diversity was due to the different philosophical backgrounds of the theologians. Whereas the great french theologians of the forties and fifties had a chiefly historical

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[7] *Lumen Gentium,* 8.

[8] *Unitatis Redintegratio,* 11.

background, Rahner, from *Hörer des Wortes,* had been engaged in implicit discussion with Heidegger. Heidegger's 'man' seemed to him to be the prototype of 'modern man', the being-for-death. Another post-Heidegger strand was followed up by those german theologians who devoted themselves to hermeneutics and, with Heidegger, believed that 'language is the house of being'. This is one of the grounds for the diversity of modern theology. The theologian attempts to address modern man and find a language with which to communicate to him. But his portrait of modern man is by no means indentical. Many american theologians, for example, have had to 'work through' Rahner before discovering a voice of their own and addressing the contemporary american, who seems less death-haunted and more technologically aware. Likewise, the 'modern man' to whom the latin american theologian addresses himself is someone different again. In other words, the more the theologian discovers his cultural roots in his own situation, the more diverse he is likely to be.

All of which brings us within hailing distance of the market-place. The Council had spoken of the need to 'discern the signs of the times', a phrase which referred to the attempt to detect the holy Spirit at work in the trends, tendencies and aspirations found among the men of our time. But before any discerning can be done, the trends must be known and analysed with some respect for their complexity; thus some theologians were led to new fields of endeavour, and out on to new frontiers. And since one of the trends mentioned by the Council itself was 'the demand for human dignity', inevitably there followed a desire first for social and then, as the logic of experience worked itself out, for political commitment.

There were various other strategies for justifying political commitment. Johann Baptist Metz elaborated what he called 'a new political theology'. It was based first on the conviction that christians had to restore the *social* dimensions of hope, which they had erroneously turned into a matter of private consolation. One hopes not just for oneself, but for the world. Next, in Jesus is proclaimed the dominion of God as 'the liberating power of love unreserved'. Jesus sets aside the 'dominion of men' and embraces the insignificant, the poor, the oppressed. The role of the Church is to be an 'institution for the creative criticism of society', and its message is therefore 'dangerous', subversive, disrupting, disturbing. This further means that the Church, or christians, can never identify with any given form of society, since to do so would be to declare that the kingdom had already arrived in its fulness; but that offends against the 'eschatological proviso', and every

form of society can be subjected to criticism in the cause of greater justice and closer brotherhood.[9]

But it has to be admitted that the 'radicalism' of Metz remains rather notional. He gestures towards the market-place without appearing to spend much time there. The same can be said of Jürgen Moltmann, whose *Theology of Hope* provided a protestant complement to the work of Metz. The contribution of christian faith to society is to be a source of eschatological unrest in a society which dreams the mistaken dream of technological perfection, and, once again, hope is seen not as an individual affair, but rather as 'the expectation of the *shalom* of the Kingdom of God . . . of the new heaven and the new earth'.[10] But one can read the complete works of Moltmann without ever discovering a precise political option on a controverted question.

For precise political options one has to leave Germany and reflect on the trauma that the war in Vietnam was for the United States. Metz and Moltmann are cashed. Instead of declaring in the abstract that christians, armed with their 'eschatological proviso', should criticize all societies, the anti-war protestors drew conclusions from it. The Berrigan case was not that the war was a monstrous injustice into which America had accidentally strayed, but rather that it was the result of the american ethos. The war, it was suggested, was possible, indeed 'normal', because a society had been created in which power, competition, violence, death and pre-emptive strikes were the normal though unexamined categories of thought and action. Here is Dan Berrigan:

> Suddenly for all of us, the american scene was no longer a good scene. It was, in fact, an immoral scene, corrupted by a useless and wasting war abroad, and a growing putrifying racism at home. Ours was a scene that moral men could not continue to approve of if they were to deserve the name of men.[11]

Are we still in the realm of theology? Most certainly, would say those who agree with Jean-Pierre Jossua O.P., professor at Le Saulchoir, who maintains that 'theology' is not a specialist activity confined to those who possess some scientific competence, 'but simply the activity of any true

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[9] The quotations in this paragraph come from Metz's *Theology of the World* and from the lecture given to the Concilium Congress at Brussels in October 1970. It is not easy to do justice to Metz. Karl Rahner has set down his difficulties with the concept of 'political theology' and noted: 'I am not completely sure that I myself understand what is meant by it'. He adds that he agrees with 'political theology' understood 'simply as the explicit bringing out of the social implications of all theological propositions' (L'avenir de la théologie', in *Nouvelle Revue Théologique* (January 1971), p 24).

[10] *Hope and Planning* (London, 1971), p 124.

[11] *No Bars to Manhood* (New York, 1970), p 40.

christian who reflects on his faith and is qualified by the fact that through baptism he belongs to the people of God'. The idea of a professional theologian, of a specialist in God, is strictly blasphemous, adds Jossua. And what the new theologians are about is the articulation of contemporary experience, especially in its political dimensions.[12]

But far and away the most serious and substantial attempt to turn the theologian into an activist is to be found in the work of Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*.[13] Without denying the traditional functions of theology such as wisdom and rational articulation, Gutierrez claims that he offers 'not so much a new theme for reflection as a *new way* to do theology'. It becomes a critical reflection on what is happening, in his case in the latin american situation, but a critical reflection which 'tries to be part of the process through which the world is transformed'.[14] The debt to Marx is frankly and fully acknowledged. Hitherto, Gutierrez is in effect saying, theologians have contemplated the world; the point is, to change it. Many familiar themes are brought in to reinforce this project: the stress on the *anawim* in the bible, the function of Jesus as liberator, the notion of 'operative charity' in the New Testament, the idea of the Church as the sacrament of human history, and all are brought into relation with the sociological data. At this point the theologian is not so much down in the market-place as away in the hills with the guerrillas.

Thus the factors for diversity are built into the theological enterprise itself. Tell me what you read, and I'll tell you what you are. In the case of the contemporary theologian, the maxim needs to be rephrased slightly: tell me with whom he is in dialogue, and I'll tell you who he is. And he can be in dialogue with a different philosophical tradition, with a different projection of 'modern man', with an intractable local situation, or with all three at once in various combinations. Further, any serious attempt to work in these new areas involves an inter-disciplinary study. Thus theology reveals itself not so much as a single discipline, but as a cluster of sub-disciplines. It has always been recognized that professional theology needed to work through history, linguistics, semantics and philosophy; but now the claims of psychology and particularly sociology have also been recognized. This accounts for the increasing diversity of theologians.

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[12] These assertions were made at the Concilium Congress already mentioned. For an account, cf Hebblethwaite P.: 'Guidelines at Brussels', in *The Month* (November and December 1970).

[13] *A Theology of Liberation* (New York, 1973).

[14] *Ibid.*, p 15.

One example of the effects of the study of sociology can be found in the recent work of Gregory Baum.[15] He holds that the task of theologians is to exercise a critical role in the Church, and that their purpose is to stop faith declining into ideology. For example, he attempts to explain why the christian Church, despite proclaiming love as the highest value, could nevertheless treat the jewish people with bias and prejudice throughout so many centuries. The key to understanding this puzzle is, he suggests, the fact that the Church was unwittingly subject to ideology:

> Ideology, in the sense in which the term is used in the sociology of knowledge, refers to the set of teachings or symbols unconsciously generated by a society *to protect itself against others, legitimate its power, and defend its privileges.* . . . We have come to realize that woven into the language we use, the teachings we propose, and the institutions in which we live, may well be trends that aim at protecting and promoting the power we hold as a group and keeping those under our power in their position of subjugation.[16]

Here the theologian becomes a sort of therapist, constantly alert to the 'hidden story' and the 'hidden agenda' which may be operative. There is implied the view that theologians of the past have often indulged in rationalizations; that is, they found reasons for what they wanted to believe on other grounds. But once the theologian, in the post-freudian and post-Marx era, has woken up to the possibility of ideological influences, one of his functions will be to unmask them, and let the faith stand out clear and cleansed of ideological interferences. 'It is God's word', adds Baum, 'which redeems us from ideology'.[17]

Naturally so explosive a theme is usually treated with some diffidence, but it is certainly not just a personal quirk of Gregory Baum. Magnus Löhrer, for example, suggests that the function of theology is not so much to propound doctrines as to reflect critically on the doctrine of the Church.[18] Behind Löhrer, and explicitly, can be seen the looming figure of G. Ebeling, who holds that theology has a critical task *vis-à-vis* the corruptions of christianity. This position is quoted with approval by Stephan Pfurtner, the ex-Freiburg moralist, and applied by him to the field of sexual morality. It leads to many unresolved questions, the most immediate of which is: why should it be so difficult for the Church ever

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[15] The point is made, for example, in 'Sociologists look at Religion', in *The Ecumenist,* (May-June 1973), p 61.

[16] The Cardinal Bea Memorial Lecture, 1972, in *The Month* (June 1972), p 177 (my italics).

[17] *Ibid.*, p 178.

[18] Cf 'Die Funktion der Theologie in der Kirche', in *Wort und Wahrheit,* 2 (1973), pp 112-23.

to admit that it was mistaken? It is difficult to avoid agreeing with Hans Küng at least in this: that 'creeping infallibility' illegitimately extends over the whole of catholic teaching, and casts its shadow, even when it is not specifically invoked. Such thoughts distress pastors, accustomed to thinking of theologians as the tame creatures described by Piet Fransen above. It is often at this point that they begin to speak of 'pop theologians', contrasted with 'sound thinkers' not usually named.[19]

Here, a distinction needs to be made. In the electronic age, theologians are often solicited by the media for their comments. Theological controversy is not allowed to go on in the decent obscurity of the schools. The journalist is there to tell the world. Whatever its motives, *Der Spiegel* reported fully the highly complex discussion between Hans Küng and Karl Rahner on infallibility. It possessed news interest because Küng appeared to be saying something on the face of it shocking, and because Rahner, who is a mighty thinker, disagreed with him. So there was a double confrontation. Ideal for circulation, less than ideal for making the argument progress. But the fact that the two theologians were dragged into the light of the media does not make them pop theologians.

Pop theology undoubtedly exists, and the sales requirements of publishers are not without their influence in its flourishing. It is sometimes harmless, being an attempt to calm the fears of worried catholics or to explain positively the nature of the Church's crisis. But the 'new' or the 'shocking' or the 'surprising' is sometimes made the basis of the book's alleged appeal. Thus Adolf Holl's *Jesus the Outsider,* a work of irritating superficiality, went out under the banner 'Banned by the Cardinal Archbishop of Vienna'. This procedure is all the more damaging in that it discredits the attempts of other theologians to deal with the really fundamental problems of faith, christology, God. It leads to a situation accurately hit off by Mark Schoof who remarked that 'a catholic theologian spends many years discovering a new insight and then just as many years in proving that it is not really new'.[20] We are a long way from 1953.

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[19] Here is a *locus classicus* of these attitudes: 'Theological fashions change like social habits. It is a form of pastoral sadism to disturb simple faith. Those close to God are untroubled by the winds of academic controversy. As priests or scholars we are free to accept the latest interpretation of St Luke's account of the Incarnation, birth and infancy of our Lord. We need not pass on our private views in sermons. . . . A man with the soul of a pastor never indulges in the pastime of shocking the pious.' John Cardinal Heenan, *Council and Clergy* (London, 1966), p 85.

[20] 'Dutch Catholic Theology: a New Approach to Christology', in *Cross Currents,* 4 (Winter 1973), p 426.