

same relation to things, but was changed by (each man) as he thought fit. Reckless doing was held to be loyal courage; prudent delay was the excuse of the coward; moderation was the disguise of unmanly weakness; to know everything was to do nothing.'

*(The second part of this article will appear next month)*

## Faith and Imagination in the University

by Peter Dale

This article takes as its point of departure Roderick Strange's interesting article 'Faith and Theology in the University'<sup>1</sup> but it is not really intended as another contribution to the somewhat closed debate on the place of Theology in the University. That is a fairly specialized question which theologians tend to worry about when their public relations have grown particularly remote, but has little reference to anyone outside their context, and may reasonably be left to them to resolve.

The problems implied in it, though, are not confined to the University context for several reasons; first, the privilege of having sufficient time to give thought to the health of one's own religion is not the prerogative solely of dons and undergraduates; secondly, a lot of people read books which have been conceived and realized in the context of the University but are not themselves in a position to take account of what that genetic context has had to do with the making of the book; and, thirdly, the tensions between faith and reason do not confine themselves to professional theologians, but are part and parcel of every man's consciousness.

Roderick Strange's solution to the question, 'Should the academic theologian permit his own faith to be involved in his professional activity?' seems to me to be based on treacherous ground in the form of Dr Ian Ramsey's rather unsatisfactory contribution to the problems of religious language. This latter debate has not yet made any real progress I think, and will continue to be unsatisfactory so long as it remains an eclectic science taking only piecemeal ideas, now from linguistics, now from literary criticism, with the result that it does justice to neither and leaves its own problems unresolved. The point is surely that the mere act of giving a name and a set of linguistic credentials to a variety of language, however copiously

<sup>1</sup>*New Blackfriars*, July 1972.

the identification is performed, does little or nothing to resolve the problems implied in it. Even if it were only a matter of understanding the nature(s) of the sorts of language found in the New Testament, without extending the question to theological language as a whole, one could (and should, if Dr Ramsey's book is to be placed in its proper context) point to any number of men who have remarked upon different aspects of the language of Jesus—its schemes of imagery, the parable device, irony, speech rhythms (realized marvellously in Pasolini's *St Matthew*, by the way), even puns, etc.; and we know that ever-so-slight shifts of logical dislocation (what Dr Ramsey calls 'odd logical placing') occur in his language with sometimes astonishing effect (such as the trap into which Peter rushes head-long at Caesarea-Philippi) or with more modest and casual results such as the parables (poetic metaphor is always a *logical* absurdity, of course). Nonetheless, the problem of 'God-talk' won't be resolved in this way because 'God-talk' is not, finally, about lilies of the field, nor about mustard trees, puns or what have you—it is about *God*. For so long as theologians traffic with literary critics and linguists they deceive themselves in refusing to face up to the fact that (given the structures of literary criticism) the word 'God' is the sign for the fiction to which it refers. God, as idea, relates thus to God, as word, as language. The New Testament itself has forcefully inherited a good deal of the Word Theology of the Old. The author of the Fourth Gospel is using the 'word' in nothing short of this specialized sense—the Word is the fiction he employs to give his book the colossal dimensions it possesses.

The word 'fiction' is arresting, of course, because it suggests that in order for the fiction to be realized an act of faith is not only useful but vitally to the point, and that that act of faith has at least as much reference to the imagination as it does to all other forms of cognition. As any reader of the gospels (most obviously, but not exclusively, of St John) will know, a fact is immeasurably more secure and comfortable than a fiction.

My basic criticism of 'Faith and Theology in the University' is not one of disagreement with its insistence on the justice and, indeed, wisdom of an academic reference to faith as well as to other intellectual means, but rather that the generally (if tacitly) agreed function of faith within the context of the schools of theology is ambiguous—ambiguous in that it allows faith to behave as a rubber stamp, giving religious weight to any number of propositions, yet preventing effectively that faith from performing its *imaginative* functions as a mode of cognition. The principal example I shall cite of this is the way in which in any understanding of the Resurrection an important reference to faith is made, in order to illustrate that this event *is* accessible to at least *one* form of cognition, while at the same time the same faith is prevented from performing its real task of being free to reproduce the *form* of what it has understood. In

other words, faith is used to confirm that certainly *something* happened, but it is not allowed to identify what that something might have been. While the first visitors to the tomb went there when it was still dark, and had to use their imaginations to make sense of what happened there, students of theology take their direction thither in the bright light of the late morning sun.

Academic theology is harassed on two fronts. On the one hand, any honest observer will see it as under pressure to justify its activities in any intellectual community, and, on the other, its own special means of intellection and intuition—the imagination of faith—threatens to bring havoc to any respectable academic vindication of its work, because in certain circumstances that faith is just as likely to realize a very special sort of agnosticism as it is to produce conclusive results; yet the answer, ‘I don’t know’, is not likely to convince the University as a whole of theology’s academic prestige.

The case has been put succinctly by Professor Donald Mackinnon during an open lecture<sup>1</sup> at Cambridge in 1963:

‘For Christians there is no escape from the issues raised by the involvement of the author and finisher of their faith in history. It is at once their glory and their insecurity that he is so involved. The very precariousness of our grasp of his ways reflects the depth at which he penetrated the stuff of human life. We cannot have that depth of identification on his part with our circumstances unless we pay the price of the kind of precariousness, belonging even to the substance of our faith, from which we may seek to run away to a spurious certainty even at the price of a kind of dishonesty which infects our whole outlook. We must be as sure as we can that we have rightly estimated the sort of certainty which we can hope to have about Jesus and do not make the mistake of trying to make that certainty other than it is.’

For my part I am bound not only to agree with MacKinnon’s message but also to admire the courage of the words ‘insecurity’ and ‘precariousness’—I would go further though, not in emphasis, but in trying to ascertain just what the nature of that ‘right estimate of the sort of certainty . . . about Jesus’ involves—especially with regard to the academic theologian.

One of the means by which theology seeks to represent its respectable character to the rest of the University is implied in the fact that it holds examinations in its subject matter. Cambridge in the Easter Term seethes with (mostly) half-baked criticism of exams from the undergraduates, and with equally unconvincing liberal platitudes about how ‘we must and do make allowances for the imperfect notion of exams’ from the examiners. To my knowledge, not once did even these ritually enacted monotonous annual dialogues penetrate the school of theology—a fact which is significant in more ways than one, of course, yet suffice it to illustrate how uncritical under pressure

<sup>1</sup>*Objections to Christian Belief*, pp. 31-32.

from the rest of the University theologians were and are of the imposition of such an agreed consensus of opinion about the nature of knowledge as examinations (both sitting them and setting them) imply.

Faith, as far as we know, allows itself to be accommodated accurately to no scale of measurement—either of degree or of kind—even creeds however ingeniously and juridically devised for catechetical purposes are no reliable measure of faith. But the absurdity (and the strength of that word is not, I feel, unjustified) doesn't stop there. Examinations and, indeed, the whole academic enterprise in general, of whatever discipline, could not tolerate the answer, 'I don't know', even though that answer be most thoroughly considered and indeed 'correct', if any reference is to be made to the knowledge of faith with regard to what theology is really all about. I don't mean, of course, church history or New Testament Greek—though the academic history tripos is curiously light years ahead of the way church history is taught, at least at Cambridge, in that it acknowledges the frailty of its claim to be a science and the justice of its position as a discipline employing of necessity fictions in order to impose form on historical human activity.

There are several important qualifications to be made to this criticism of academic theology, and I hope to do brief but proper justice to them presently. Nonetheless, I think that MacKinnon's warning was wholly justified. The 'faith' admitted into academic theology takes the form of that agreed consensus I mentioned rather than of any peculiarly religious intellection—this faith is in reality a belief in the 'knowability' of the subject matter of theology, demonstrated in my illustration that this subject matter is *so* knowable that it is even examinable. But to be sure, it is not examinations that I am wishing either to attack or to defend, rather it is the evasion of a 'right estimation of the sort of certainty that we can hope to have about Jesus' demonstrated by the structure and mores of the academic community of theologians as a whole, dons and students alike.

The fact is, it seems to me, that giving in to pressure from the rest of the academic community also usefully affords a means of restricting the dimensions of knowledge till they exclude not only any real (rather than token) admission of faith into its terms of reference, but also till it castrates that faith into a mere formula to place a religious cast on propositions and structures of thought which in themselves make no allowances for the real stuff of their subject fictions.

Theologians as a whole are notoriously (and justly) described as entrenched Philistines, but that is only a fraction of my point. The fuller contention is that the preservation of the theological discipline in the forms that are recognizable as academically respectable occupies and formulates the manner of academic theology to the

extent that it distorts its character, and distorts in particular the character of faith. This is not to say that in any sense a theology which does allow the idea of God to be exposed to the imagination is bound therefore by necessity to be academically inadmissible. On the contrary, theology surely has a task to educate the other disciplines in this matter rather than be brow-beaten by them. Yet this is a risk that theology is not prepared to take.

For the most part the caution is justified; and it is evident in the composition of the syllabi for first degrees in theology. This composition varies a good deal from one University to another, but in this country at any rate it remains fairly cautious. The amount of 'pure' theology in these first degrees is kept to a minimum; it tends as far as it may towards the factual, the empirical and the demonstrable. And, of course, there is probably quite enough material of this kind to occupy three years without venturing further. (At Cambridge until Hebrew was very recently made optional, something between a quarter and a third of one's time would have been taken up by linguistic studies alone.) Even here though there are points of friction—an obvious example is of how one can understand miracles where 'your faith has made you whole' without referring to one's own faith to discover whether the event is similarly realized there. And the critical example already noted, is very properly the great event of mental furniture removing and redistribution that should and sometimes does occur every time one travels either metaphorically or in the final literal sense the journey between the Cross and the Resurrection. Briefly then, no matter how cautiously empirical the material for undergraduate courses may be, it can't altogether obviate the necessity of a reference to faith—faith to discover that something *did* happen on the third day, and imagination to be critically involved in realizing a form for that something, be it Resurrection, apotheosis, 'victory', vindication, poetic justice or whatever form(s) are theologically and imaginatively valid. If the tomb is empty, it is clearly out of the question to suffer an empirical blockade to preserve the vacuum indefinitely in all its integrity.

Clearly the critical point of this discussion is the relation between the 'real' and the 'fiction', because it implies that faith is not only a critical and cognitive faculty but also a creative one. Any overstatement of the case runs a singularly prickly gauntlet, and so, like any other over-statement, it should. Nonetheless, it is a signal fact that the evidence for it lies not so much in our received theology(ies), and only tangentially in poetry and literary criticism since Coleridge, but primarily in the kind of responses that are deliberately and confidently evoked by the source material itself—the gospels.

The New Testament is not really an especial invitation to the practice of theology in particular, but a challenge to involve the whole man in all his aspects, some of which, his sense of confidence, his moral security, his theory of knowledge, have been very calcu-

latedly disturbed by his reading of it. Theology in the University is generally willing to confess conviction, but by the very same token, it is bound to be equally willing to confess that its sources are not only seeking to promote the security of conviction, but also, in some areas, are designed to resist that very thing—designed to keep the whole man on the hook of insecurity, wherein he does justice to ‘the way things are’ when, as a student, he can write with conviction ‘I don’t know’ on an exam paper, and, as a don, he can resolutely insist ‘I don’t know’ to his companion, a neuro-physiologist, as they dine at high table.

Of course, he must also say, ‘Yes, I’m certain that that *is* the case’, when occasion and conviction demand it—but it should be noticed that both these responses are expressed in the first person, and that this is the tell-tale weakness of academic theology. A theology which confines itself to critical activity alone (and by far the greatest part of academic theology is carried out in this mode), for example, ‘Discuss so and so’s view of the atonement’, is carefully protecting itself from exposing the ‘I’ of the fellow answering the question. The problem is at one stage removed from him—a ‘third-person discussion’ ensues. Faith, however, is exclusively a *first-person* activity; this is faith by (an albeit negative) definition.

The question, evidently, of whether the theologian should allow any reference to his own faith (or lack of it possibly) needs must be academic in the worst sense of the word, since it is almost entirely a *redundant* hypothesis—the prevailing third-person mode of theology doesn’t demand it. My case rests, therefore, on the opinion that indulgence in the luxury of such discussion as the question of faith in academic theology is dishonestly beside the point, because the dilemma doesn’t in fact arise, save in the all too rare excursions out of the exclusively critical mode. Moreover, any direction taken out of that mode cannot but be in favour of not only the admittance of faith, but also of some measure of *creative* theology, which, in turn, brings me back to the total view of theology in the whole academic community I outlined earlier. For it is well known that Creative Theology is frequently erratic in quality where it is practised (mostly in America), generally confuses speculative thought with genuine insight, is almost impossible to estimate and mark qualitatively (thus making exams extremely difficult to set, sit and evaluate) and, in sum, is highly suspect in the context of a University where the character of expertise with knowledge is rated by and large according to the hypothesis that the theory of knowledge behaves scientifically.

The epistemological horns of the whole problem lie radically situated not just in the mind and conscience of the individual theologian, but more profoundly still in the presuppositions of the whole academic endeavour.