

# Science of God and Sciences of Man

by Michael Hare Duke

Theology and the Social Sciences need to have a close relationship for they are both concerned to say things about the nature of man and the values which govern his decisions. But what kind of exchange is possible—will it be a happy marriage, a shot-gun wedding or a straight take-over bid? The purpose of this article is to suggest that both sides can be enriched by attending to what the other is saying. Since it is the work of one whose first training is in the theological field, it rather stresses the gains which are achieved by bringing human warmth of the behavioural sciences to the sometimes arid tracts of traditional dogmatics! It is vitally important that the connections should be made because it is the task of theologians always to seek to communicate the truths they hold within the context of the contemporary perceptions of truth. Not that they will always accept these uncritically. Sometimes upon examination the theologian will want to say, 'This way of describing things so conflicts with all that I hold true that I cannot accept it.' At other times he will be bound to say, 'My reason tells me that your findings are valid, therefore they must modify my theological assertions', or perhaps, 'I now see that what this theological assertion meant is different from the way in which I previously understood it.' Such a process of re-thinking and testing-out is bound to produce a considerable amount of anxiety while the period of ferment lasts.

The problem we face is a particularly difficult one since there is not only the question of accommodating new ways of perceiving the human experience to the language of theology; there is inherent in the situation a kind of struggle for power. Sometimes it has seemed that the behavioural sciences might study 'religion' as a human phenomenon and therefore reduce it to a department of anthropology or classify it as a form of neurosis. At other times there has been a fear that in the name of a revealed religion men might be manipulated through the techniques learned from psychology or sociology into a conformity that destroyed freedom. From the point of view of the Church it is the former half of the struggle of which we have been most aware. It has manifested itself in various ways. At the level of formal theology there has been a very cautious approach to the study of the behavioural sciences and until recently considerable reluctance to teach them as part of the pastoral training for the ministry. At a less rational level there remains evidence of an even deeper resistance in the steady flow of jokes about immoral advice given to

patients concerning the therapeutic effects of adultery. Most potent of all is the sense of failure and shame that a priest often feels if he has to consult a psychiatrist as a patient. In his own mind, and often too in the mind of his congregation, this is tantamount to saying that the prayers and the sacraments do not work, but that drugs and psychotherapy do, and that this is somehow a defeat for the angels!

In such a climate of opinion there is clearly a theological task to be performed in taking the new perceptions of man and seeing first whether they are adequate models with which to work, and, if they are, then finding how best they may be understood in the light of such truths as the love of God. In their turn also, fresh ways of understanding what men need will illuminate some of the old theological expressions. One may take, for instance, the case of a person who finds himself unable to bring any enthusiasm into his work and is slowly grinding to a halt. On enquiry it may appear that he has tried the folk-remedy of 'pulling his socks up'. He may come to a priest with the expectation that further authority will be added to the inner command to try harder. It may be that in a previous century the priest would have done just that, prescribing a more disciplined rule of life and encouraging perseverance. In some cases a person might, for a while at least, respond to this external stimulus but he will not know what it was that brought on this frame of mind. In the light of some modern psychological thinking it might be suggested that the man was in fact wrestling with an internal conflict. Perhaps, without recognizing it, he was resenting pressure at work or in his private life. He should be encouraged to relax rather than tense himself for further struggle. The first necessity will be to reassure him of his complete acceptance. He will learn this not from words but from the quality of the care offered to him and the attitudes adopted. With the security thus given, he may be able to face and resolve the struggle between a hidden resentment and his desire to please. As long as he imagines himself surrounded by disapproving people who will 'tell him off' on the highest moral principles, he is likely to remain unable to move towards any more productive way of living than his present depressed withdrawal.

Such a picture of a concrete situation may serve to illuminate the old theological insight that the Law kills while the Spirit makes alive. That is to say, a demanding ideal merely increases your sense of helplessness and guilt at being unable to match up to what is expected. Experience suggests that the law is an excellent schoolmaster to teach us the rules but it has little power to heal people or help them to change. This is what the spirit of love is about. The good news conveyed in the life and death of Jesus is of God's acceptance of man whatever his condition. Here is a ground of security, if we can accept it, which gives us room to live our lives with integrity and does not make the demand of living up to an ideal set of conditions. Once assured of the Grace of God, a man is no longer battering

his head against unyielding walls but is able to find some room for choice in his life and so he can begin to take responsible action.

In a similar way some of the findings of sociology concerning the involvement of human beings with each other give new life and meaning to the New Testament images such as that of the body of Christ. For instance, as one studies the background of a delinquent child one realizes how he is the product of both his parents' mistakes and also the pressures of society through its educational system or its social values. One begins to be less willing to load all the blame upon any single individual. It then becomes plain that no one lives for himself but that we are involved with each other. In the natural course of things much of our involvement seems to be damaging. Like the delinquent boy, although at a less anti-social level, we all pay for the sins of previous generations. We have to ask if there is any way in which forgiveness can be communicated so that our involvement may be with a wholesome spirit and not a destructive one. Here once again the language of theology becomes of vital concern to our contemporary understanding of society.

There is, however, more than an illuminating exchange between the languages of the two disciplines. What may be observed about human conduct may cause us to change some of our pastoral practice, as indeed the first example given above suggested. This may seem more dangerous ground to be treading. For what right have we to use secular insights to criticize the traditional patterns of the Church? Before we can answer that we have to look at the hidden premises behind such a question. It tends to forget that today's tradition was yesterday's innovation. It is only when we think of these patterns out of their historical context that we give them a metaphysical status which in fact they do not deserve. Almost all the ways in which the Church has behaved have arisen out of a social context. They have been the appropriate way for that time and that situation of embodying the Gospel. In changed circumstances, they may not remain so. For instance, the practice of auricular confession was not delivered from on high as an exactly appropriate Sacrament from the very inception of the Church. Rather it developed historically and in order to meet certain needs. In new circumstances, in a generation where new insights have been achieved, we may want to ask whether we need to modify a practice in order more effectively to achieve its real purpose. To take another example, the question also arises as to how far compulsive acts should be differentiated from conscious choices. One might take the true example of the young professional woman who was a compulsive shop-lifter. She knew the perils to her career of repeated arrest and prosecution. She also acknowledged that what she did was wrong, but this seemed to have no power to stop her continuing in this way. Moral advice would clearly not help wherever it was offered, in the study or in the confessional. With such a person one must ask what area of respon-

sible choice was left to her? It seemed that if she was serious in her desire to be rid of this thing, all she could do was to seek some help in curing it. Simply to resolve not to do it again was a meaningless phrase; it was an area in which she had no choice.

In such an example, the disturbance of the personality was doubtless so deep that it needed skilled professional help. There are other occasions, however, when a priest must wonder whether, since a person has brought their grief to him, he ought not to be competent in the field of counselling in order to help them unravel some of the knots which tie up their wills. So he will want not merely to use findings of psychological theory to enlighten his theology but to help him in doing his appropriate work as a priest.

There is a third area in which it seems there is a close link between the secular understanding of man and the service of God. Since the Church exists in time, as a human institution, it is bound to be subject to the laws which govern all collections of human beings. There is not some power of the Holy Spirit which removes all taint of human nature from its gatherings. If it is true that every group that comes together has in some sense to settle the problem of leadership through a struggle for power, and if it is also true that they have a concealed reservoir of aggression with which they have to deal in certain ways, then these things are likely to be just as true when members of the Church gather for their business as anyone else. We shall then need to examine many of the apparently theological issues and causes in which men engage and try to disentangle the personal, hidden agenda from the declared doctrinal or moral content. When this is done it will sometimes become apparent that the emotional energy has been dissipated and rational argument will settle the rest in a very short time. Equally the practices of religion can be used as a defence against reality just as much as becoming a high road into truth. So there will be neurotic expressions of devotion. People may hide from their responsibility to the world by becoming deeply involved in an esoteric practice of their religion. The man with an inadequate personality may seek to cover it up by the authority which he feels is given from an acceptance into the priesthood. Just because the name of God is invoked, it does not mean that his Spirit is truly present amongst a group of people or in the actions of an individual person. A clear analytical look at what we are up to may help us to come nearer to the honesty of God than many orthodox religious phrases ritually repeated.

To sum up this section of our argument, we have tried to give three reasons why it is important that the priest today should be trained in the contemporary understanding of human behaviour. First, because it will give new life to his theological language. Secondly, it will help him either to find new ways of pastoral practice or to see deeper meaning in some of the traditional things which he has done instinctively. Thirdly, it can help to keep alive and

fresh the ways in which the life of the Church is conducted.

How can these insights be made available at the present time to those who are engaged in or training for the work of the priesthood? This is a question which is at present exercising every denomination. Evidence of their concern is to be found in the newly issued report of the British Council of Churches on 'Pastoral Care and the Training of the Minister'. Before we can attempt to answer the questions which such a document raises, we need to look at the developing practice of the training which has been undertaken in the last few years.

It was not until the 1940s that much began to be written in an attempt to draw together the two subjects of psychology and theology. When Fr Victor White, O.P., published his book on *God and the Unconscious* in 1952 there was comparatively little literature in this field to which he could refer. Since then the flood-gates have opened. But in spite of the growing volume of literature, the real needs of training were not being met. For it is of the essence of the subject that anything more than a superficial acquaintance requires experience as well as the reading of text-books. A person who wishes to understand human behaviour must live through various situations both with individuals and in groups and relate these to the formal teaching given. Ideally, this requires a supervisor who helps the student to insight about events as they occur. Most importantly, this learning should be related to the student's own personality and he should be helped to see what part his unconscious needs as well as his conscious decisions play in the interaction.

While this sort of training has become the accepted norm in the casework field, there was almost nothing available in any systematic form for those who were to be ordained. Yet it is clear that such training has much to contribute to the effective pastoral ministry of a priest. It was, therefore, with a sense of entering into some sort of promised land that the clergy of the Anglican Church welcomed the offer from a psychiatrist, Dr Frank Lake, of a course in what he called 'Clinical Theology' when it was first offered in 1958.

Before this, various individual priests had sought some sort of training for themselves and in some cases had in fact moved into the practice of psychotherapy or actual psychoanalysis. But this was clearly a highly specialized field. What was needed was instruction which would be available to a wide variety of priests not to make them specialists but simply to help them bring their pastoral care into line with the current insights by which society works. There evolved through the pioneer work of Dr Frank Lake an association which has grown far wider than his original concept. He called his course 'Clinical Theology' because, from within the National Health Service, he had felt that the clergy had something specifically healing to offer to the mentally ill. It was on this basis that he set out to chart various conditions of sickness of the mind and endeavour

to relate these to aspects of New Testament teaching.<sup>1</sup> While the course proved enormously helpful to a great many of the clergy, he had to face criticism in so far as both the psychological teachings and the doctrinal emphases were those of one particular man and were therefore bound to reflect his own values.

Having begun with clergy of the Anglican Church alone the influence of the Clinical Theology seminars quickly spread. Within four years the number of current seminars had risen to a hundred scattered in various parts of the country and membership had extended to clergy of the free Churches, some Roman Catholic priests and a few professionally interested lay people. They joined wherever a seminar was started locally. The course lasted for two years and the group met twenty-four times for a three-hour session. The material they studied was originally a series of charts and pamphlets concerned with deviant patterns of personal growth which were related to New Testament concepts drawn from a consideration of Christ as 'the norm'.

Since Dr Lake began his scheme a great many other teachers have come into the field, perhaps redressing the balance both in psychological theory and in theological perspective. At the University of Birmingham a Diploma in Pastoral Studies has been set up under the directorship of Dr R. A. Lambourne. He has specifically stated that his emphases are more directed towards the social remedies and understandings of human conduct rather than the individual. He has wanted also to emphasize the doctrine of creation rather than that of original sin and so teach more about the formation of personality than the therapy of pathological states. Many other courses have been organized, mostly hospital-based, where chaplain and psychological staff have put themselves at the disposal of students to supervise their encounter with the patients.

Meanwhile the Clinical Theology Association itself was beginning to shift its ground. New members of staff had been brought in and with the vast expansion of the area of teaching a core of about fifty clergy were recruited and trained as voluntary tutors for the seminars. Being of a wide variety of theological complexions, they introduced a healthy variety into the underlying approach. Also the syllabus was revised and included in its second year not only the description of the individual person in his depressed, clinging, withdrawn or aggressive states but also endeavoured to look at the different levels of group experience which go to the making up of the individual and throughout his life continue to form his personality.

This ferment of training in the field of pastoral care naturally led back to some fundamental questions. The aim of psychiatry and case-work from which the new insights were being drawn tend to be stated in terms of 'social adjustment', 'normal personality'. What is

<sup>1</sup>For some account and appraisal of Dr. Lake's massive book *Clinical Theology*, see the article of that title by Fr. Austin Gaskell, O.P., in *New Blackfriars*, July, 1968.

the relation of this secular ideal to the concept of 'salvation'?<sup>1</sup> The psychotherapist rightly sets out to reduce anxiety, sometimes it might seem that it was the proper task of the priest to engender it!

There has further been the whole question of what the role of the priest is in our present society. On the one hand many of the functions which he fulfilled in earlier generations have been taken over by the State. Once the Church was the only form of social security; this role now no longer devolves on the priest unless he accepts it as the patient, possibly gullible, provider for the psychopathic characters who come to the vicarage or presbytery door. The State is further willing to provide 'guidance' in a great many crisis situations. It seems possible for the priest to refer almost every social and emotional problem to a secular agency. Ought he to be happy about the situation? Is there something which he, from the Christian standpoint, ought to be contributing and is there a loss to the Christian witness that a boy finds himself talking about his sexual worries to a probation officer rather than his parish priest?<sup>2</sup>

The answers we give to these questions will very much depend upon our theology. If we believe that God is at work in all the goodness of his world then we shall perhaps be contented to allow many others who do not claim allegiance to Christ to do his work anonymously in the world. To others, however, this may seem a scandal; they will feel that God is not honoured unless his name is explicitly invoked in the course of the work of healing or reconciliation. They will, therefore, see the case-worker and all the new helping professions as potential rivals to the traditional work of the ministry. My own sympathies would not be with this latter point of view, but it is undoubtedly there in the Church, sometimes vociferously expressed, sometimes tacitly, perhaps even unconsciously, held by many hard-working and devout parish priests. Here is room not only for rational, theological argument, but also for some painstaking analysis of the situation. It might be helpful to enquire why some priests felt threatened in their work by the effectiveness of secular case-workers. There might emerge some distinctively non-theological factors both in the personality of the ministers concerned and also in the social situation. One might find that their theology represented a bitter personal jealousy of the better training and the higher status accorded to other professions these days. It might also be related to falling figures of church attendance and the fear that this was one more nail in the faith which they so vociferously defended because inwardly they feared it was becoming redundant. Once again one has been pushed back to recognize that one cannot learn about the social sciences without allowing them to offer a

<sup>1</sup>For one attempt to relate certain theological to psychoanalytical conceptions, see 'Psycho-analysis and the Spiritual Life', by Dr J. Dominian, *New Blackfriars*, September 1968.

<sup>2</sup>Two articles on the priesthood in our present society are due to appear in later issues this year.—*Ed.*

critique of one's theological position. That is to say, it becomes relevant to ask how far a particular point of view when held tenaciously may be a mask for some emotional inadequacy.

Such questions may induce a fear that they do not represent an exchange between two disciplines but an attempt by one to reduce the other simply to part of its own domain. In so far as this attempt at reductionism does occur, it is an illegitimate enterprise. For the behavioural sciences can only bring their insights to bear upon the data of human reactions. They cannot decide metaphysical questions. For example, it is a legitimate comment by a psychiatrist that this particular person's religious practices seem to be motivated by a guilty feeling that he ought to placate an angry parent and therefore his god seems to have been formed by childhood attitudes. Such a comment can never prove or disprove the existence of God himself. If we are convinced that he exists, then he who is himself the Truth can only be honoured by a truthful analysis of the way that his Church behaves or by a critique of the distorted attitudes which we bring out of an unhappy past and which literally bedevil our relationships with him.

Yet if theology can learn from the insights of the social sciences, it is also true that those who practise them need a great deal of what theology can offer. Faced with the many intractable problems of society, it is sometimes only a theological answer about the value of human beings that makes it possible to persevere. When one sees the effects of actions based upon mistaken premises or the dire results of apparently good decisions, one needs some sense of forgiveness and divine mercy to make it bearable to go on. The techniques of understanding and the social skills seem to be tools best wielded in the hands of those who have found for themselves a meaning and a purpose in life. This, the Christian must claim, is uniquely given by the love of God in Christ.

Yet immediately one has said this, one becomes aware of the need to express these truths in language which is appropriate to the condition of the person. One requires the perceptive skills of the case-worker to listen and understand the situation long before one rushes in with what one imagines is a saving formula.

The behavioural sciences have undoubtedly modified the ways of thinking which obtain throughout our present culture. One way or another theology must reckon with these findings. A priesthood and a Church which is to minister in this situation must certainly understand the language. It has been my contention that we need to go further than that and to take into our whole system of training all the benefits of these new insights, not because in themselves they represent the good news, but because by means of them what we wish to say may both be cleared of some unhelpful accretions and also be made more directly applicable to concrete situations in proportion to the accuracy with which they are perceived.