

# What Theology Is

Aidan Nichols OP

*Trying to describe to newcomers what theology is can be an instructive exercise. This article sums up what was said in a series of introductory talks on Catholic theology given to first-year students at the Angelicum University, Rome.*

I will begin by mentioning three possible definitions of the theological task that I cannot accept, on the principle that many good definitions are arrived at by ruling out what things are not. Each of these 'negative definitions' will be to some extent a caricature, yet all caricatures have some relation to reality. Moreover, each of the rejected definitions will prove to have incorporated in it an element of value. This element is capable of being disengaged and used afresh in a positive definition of the theological task to be offered in the second part of the article.

### *Three negative definitions*

1. A first account of the theological task that one might meet has it that theology is the misguided attempt to turn into a science something which is strictly mysterious: the dogmas, or as we say (precisely) the *mysteria* of the Christian religion. Since these mysteries by definition transcend the scope of the human mind, what is the point of trying to work them out intellectually? As Lord Dacre of Granton has put it, theology is 'sophisticated ninnery'.<sup>1</sup> If we have accepted a revealed religion, we must take the consequences. The consequences are that we cannot theorise about a revelation. We can only reform our own attitudes and feelings on the basis of it. In other words, you have a spirituality but not a theology. You can claim that grace has changed your heart, but it doesn't make sense to claim that grace has changed your mind. This tendency to dismiss the rational claims of theology is not, of course, restricted to retired Oxford Regius Professors of Modern History. A conviction of the superfluity of theology often accompanies periods of spiritual revival as well as of agnostic debilitation: classically, in the *devotio moderna* of the Netherlands Middle Ages. More recently, Raïssa Maritain, despite her admiration for the Catholic poet-prophet Charles Péguy, wrote blisteringly of his deliberate espousal of a

discord between the soul's infused faith on the one hand and on the other the actions and the very thoughts of a man who has received this gift from God.... scorning, in the name of faith, the theological wisdom which he glories in not knowing.<sup>2</sup>

However, if faith contains, as Thomas Aquinas insists, an inbuilt tendency towards the vision of God, being the inchoate form of that vision, this first definition will not do. Though, to begin with, faith is less perspicuous, less clear, than are other kinds of knowledge, it is in fact moving towards a state of total clarity, intellectual union with Truth himself.<sup>3</sup> If this is so, then faith must permit continuous growth in understanding of what it believes, and the spiritual (or not so spiritual) anti-theologism of the first definition may be set aside. *En passant*, we can note that, in claiming for theology a continuity with the vision of God, on the grounds that it is an intellectual habit rooted in the act of faith, we are accepting that it *is* a science—in the special, and now archaic, sense of that word indicated by Thomas.<sup>4</sup> For Thomas, theology is a science insofar as it draws its own first principles from an utterly certain and transparent or self-evident kind of knowing, namely God's own knowing of himself. Theology cannot be reduced to spirituality because it is a way of knowing and understanding, and not just a way of feeling. While Christian affectivity is itself a valuable theological theme, this does not mean that the only sensible theology would be a description of Christian affectivity.<sup>5</sup>

The element of truth in the attempted transposition of theology into spirituality derives from the fact that the fire of spirituality should be burning in all theology. Faith, together with its necessary attendants, hope and charity, is the foundation of all spirituality, all lived relationship with God, while at the same time, by entering into union with studiousness, faith is also the foundation of the theologian's work. One cannot approach theology as though one were a humanist. The theological student needs the basic natural *desiderata* of all students of anything, which may be summed up as argumentativeness, retentiveness and imagination. But such qualities, taken by themselves, are insufficient equipment for a theological mind. The mind must be in some way in love with God or it will lose a certain fundamental sympathy, or tact, for Christian truth. There is indeed such a thing as theological sensibility, a kind of theological good sense which is not simply rational but which depends on our remaining within a spiritual culture.<sup>6</sup>

2. This appeal to the authority of God as providing theology, via revelation and faith, with its distinctive epistemological basis, may suggest a *second* definition of the theological task: that it is the transcribing in a more intelligible, or rationally acceptable, form of whatever the divinely guided voice of Church authority may determine. Certainly, theologians have a duty to defend the defined teaching of Holy Church, and to co-operate with the Pope and bishops in clarifying or refining such teaching as may have an inadequate articulated form. But such duties, on this view, circumscribe the task of theology itself: they constitute the borders of its home ground. Here the idea is that the starting point of all theology is the pronouncements of

Pope and bishops in both their 'extraordinary' and 'ordinary' magisterium, theology's job being to prove authorised ecclesiastical pronouncements by a 'regressive method' which seeks arguments for their truth in the sources, in Scripture and Tradition, as well as in reason. The support given by Pope Pius XII to this picture of theology in his encyclical *Humani Generis* was rightly criticised by Father (now Cardinal) Joseph Ratzinger in his essay on the Second Vatican Council's dogmatic constitution on revelation, *Dei Verbum*.<sup>7</sup> Theology is something wider than the direct assistance the theologian can afford the magisterium. The bishops, and especially the Pope, are the guardians of the *fides quae*, doctrine, the objective content of the Christian Creed. But the *fides quae* itself is the heritage of every believer who, on the basis of theological wonder, explores the riches of this shared faith by putting ever new questions to it and about it. There is no reason to think that episcopate and Papacy have ever thought of all these questions, much less of the answers to them. The role of Church authority is to say when a given theology has detached itself from the *fides quae*: it is not to prescribe in advance what the theologian's work shall be. Let us also note here that the *fides quae* does not come to us simply from learning what the ecumenical Councils or the Popes when teaching *ex cathedra* have defined, nor by listening to what the bishops and Pope are teaching today. It also comes to us, and in more ample fashion, from Scripture, and from Tradition—of which the past teachings of Church authority are only one element, one set of 'monuments'. From this point of view, we might even say that theology does not so much echo the present-day teachings of bishops and Pope as make it possible—by providing the Church's pastors with an informed and circumstantial grasp of what the sources of revelation contain.

And yet there is a nugget of truth in the assertion that the task of theology is the transcription of the teachings of the magisterium. Because of theology's dependence on the Church's life of faith, it cannot ignore what the pastors of the Church are saying at any given time. By the sacrament of Order, the bishops, and pre-eminently the Roman bishop, are set over the Church by the Church's Lord. Through their distinctive activities of preaching the Gospel to the unconverted, catechising the faithful, explaining the mysteries celebrated in the Church's liturgy, and caring for the lives of Christians from the cradle to the grave, the bishops, and those other ministers—notably, priests—whom they co-opt to assist them, are in a good position to see the Christian faith as a lived totality. They can help the theologian to see the *fides quae* in its complete outline, rather than to concentrate on some one aspect of it which may happen to be of particular interest in a given culture. Conversely, the Pope and bishops may also, through their reading of what the Second Vatican Council called the 'signs of the times', specifically encourage theologians, on behalf of the whole Church, to devote their attention to some aspect of theological research

deemed likely to be especially helpful at some given time.<sup>8</sup> Finally, in those unresolved ‘disputed questions’ which from time to time mar the unity of the Church’s life of faith, the theologian may, by and large, have confidence in the rightness of that side of a case to which Pope and bishops lean—since the ‘charism of truth’ bestowed on the apostolic ministry will naturally have its effect on the expression of that ministry in the local church as in the Church universal.<sup>9</sup>

3. The appeal to the *fides quae* as a common inheritance, embedded in the rich historical data of Scripture and Tradition, might suggest, however, a *third* definition of the task of the theologian. For some, theology consists in the acquisition of a very large number of facts about the Bible and the Church. Fundamentally, on this view, it is an exercise in the memorising of data. Theologians are ‘professional rememberers’. The trouble with this picture of theology is that just heaping up facts and references does not in itself give one a coherent account of the Christian faith. Christian curiosity about the revelation received, and the urge to connect its various facets, something which mirrors the ultimate unity of both God and the mind of man, cannot rest satisfied with this purely factual or, in the technical word, ‘positive’ view of theology. The emergence of historical theology in the sixteenth century as a mode of theological practice created the possibility of mistaking for the theological task the registering of what others have thought of God. It may be that Anglican theology has been particularly subject to this temptation, as such different voices in the Church of England as Dr E.L. Mascall and Professor S.W. Sykes have suggested.<sup>10</sup> In Catholicism, similar strictures have been levelled against Cornelius Jansen (1585—1638), who roundly declared that theology was an affair of the memory, and not of the reasoning faculty, and against his French disciple Antoine Arnauld (1617—1694).<sup>11</sup>

Nevertheless we can agree that without positive theology, without a knowledge of facts about the Bible and Church tradition, the content of systematic theology would be extremely thin gruel. In the opening question of his *Summa Theologiae*, Thomas gives the impression, at one point, that the only materials theology has to go on are the articles of the Creed.<sup>12</sup> Were this true, theology would be mightily diminished. In point of fact, Thomas had an impressive familiarity with Scripture, the Fathers and the early mediaeval divines, as well as with the teachings of councils and Popes, the texts of the Roman Liturgy, and the principles of canon law. The quality of his factual or positive resources concerning the *fides quae* is one major reason for the quality of his theology as a whole.<sup>13</sup> The same could be said of the work of more modern writers like Matthias Josef Scheeben (1835—1888) or Hans Urs von Balthasar, who has only just died.<sup>14</sup> Thus it is true that facts are important, though they are not all-important.

To sum up, then, what theology is not. It cannot be dissolved without

remainder into spirituality, though it cannot do without spirituality either. Nor can it simply be a commentary on papal or episcopal utterances, though papal and episcopal utterances are vital to it, as it to them. Nor, again, can it just consist of positive theology, facts and figures, though these give it much of its concrete substance.

### *A working definition*

What, then, is *the* task of theology? The working definition I propose to suggest is brief and unadventurous, yet would suffice to sustain the rest of a theological life. The task of theology is *the disciplined exploration of what is contained in revelation*. Each of the main component terms of this definition: 'disciplined', 'exploration', 'revelation', must now be unpacked.

Starting first with *revelation*. It is surely plain that we would not be interested in theology without an acceptance of revelation. If we regarded Catholic Christianity as one religion among many, a belief-system that happens to exist in some parts of the world just as do, say, Buddhism or Hinduism, we might be interested in studying it from outside, as spectators, but we would not wish to study it from inside, as participators. Theology presupposes the truth of the Christian faith. It assumes from the outset that what we are involved with in the life of the Church is a divine reality, and not just a figment of the corporate imagination of a group of people. Whereas, in pursuing Religious Studies, we are not committed to the view that a given religion is true, or even partly true, in learning to be theologians we are committed from the start to the position that, at the origins of the Church, an authentic revelation of the one true God took place, and that we are put into contact with this same God revealing himself through our share in the Church's common life. Theology is, therefore, essentially concerned with revelation.<sup>15</sup>

Theology may be termed, indeed, a ministry carried out in the service of revelation. A theologian has a high calling, and he or she must acquit themselves with a profound sense of responsibility. They are servants of the divine Word, of the Logos, just as much as are the bishops or the Pope, though in a different mode. The theologian consecrates himself to the meaning of revelation, and this suggests a more intimate relation with revelation than that possessed by the Church hierarchy, who are its guardians more than they are its interpreters. Unfortunately, the Holy Spirit has not been vouchsafed to theologians *qua* theologians, whereas the Spirit *has* been vouchsafed to the guardians of revelation, the Church hierarchy. The reason for this is simple. If the deposit of faith has not been successfully guarded, there will be nothing there to interpret. If the deposit of faith has not been successfully interpreted theologically, it will still be there for someone else to grapple with in another age.

How can our theological efforts be said to 'serve revelation'? The wonder, curiosity, and ever-deepening pursuit of truth implicit in the act of

faith generate a variety of questions, which may, very schematically, be analysed under five headings. These are: What is faith based on? This is 'fundamental theology'. How has it come down to us in history? This is historical theology. How is its content a unity? This is systematic theology. What does it imply for living? This is moral theology. What does it imply for the rest of what we know? This may be termed 'practical theology'. The attempt to answer these questions has applications of great utility to all actual or potential recipients of revelation. Thus, fundamental theology helps one to help other people keep the faith, by removing difficulties they may have about believing. It also helps one to convert others to the faith, by suggesting considerations relevant to the truth of Catholic Christianity. Historical theology helps one to discern the impression which Jesus Christ made upon those who first met him (the New Testament), the situation he lived in (the Old Testament) and the way his image and teaching have been preserved and presented in the Church (the history of doctrine). In these ways, historical theology enables one to put over the faith in a way that is concrete, circumstantial and historically correct. Systematic theology helps one to show people how the faith hangs together, how it all makes a satisfying design which is an inspiration to live by. Moral theology is useful in showing people how they might be growing personally in relation to God and their neighbour. Practical theology shows them the relevance of their religion to their professional work or private concerns, to their general knowledge or the social situation. In putting it so, I may be giving the impression that it's nearly always someone else who wants help and never, well, hardly ever, oneself. In fact, just as preaching is directed firstly towards (and even against) oneself, so is theology.

Theology, then, is bound up with revelation, and is a form of service by some individuals on behalf of the whole Church. From this, certain other things follow on immediately. Above all, it must follow that the primary sources of theology will not be found in the world around us, as with other disciplines, but in the revelation to which the Church is the witness. These primary sources, therefore, will be Scripture and Tradition. How Scripture and Tradition are related as the source of revealed understanding is a question of some moment in its own right, but the first thing to realise is that they *are* our primary materials. Whether they are seen as two separate but complementary sources or as two aspects of a single source is a relatively minor question compared with the basic point: Scripture and Tradition are the fount of theological knowledge. This means, in turn, that in order to be theologians we must have a good knowledge of, on the one hand, the Old and New Testaments, and, on the other, of the Tradition of the Church as expressed in ways other than Scripture. If one asks what are these 'other ways' of expressing Christian truth that make up revelation, the only possible answer is that, in effect, they are everything involved in the Church's life. They include the liturgy, the Fathers of the Church, the creeds

388

and other doctrinal definitions, the evidence of Christian art and archaeology, the witness of ordinary believers. When we talk about the Church's Tradition we are referring to all of these (and more) seen as an interconnected unity: the life of the Church.

As we come to study these primary sources, Scripture and Tradition, we find that we have two what may be termed 'aids to discernment' which will help us. In the first place, we have our own Christian experience. The gift of faith makes possible for each of us our own Christian sense of reality. Through the sensibility which faith gives, each of us can to some degree recognise what is an exaggeration in theology, what is a deviation in theology, and what, on the contrary, sounds right in theology. In the second place, we have the help, as already mentioned, of the contemporary day-to-day teaching of the Pope and bishops, what is termed technically the 'ordinary magisterium'. In all these ways—Scripture, Tradition, Christian experience and the teaching office of the bishops, theology is concerned with and dependent on revelation and the personal and corporate grace which accompany and enable our response to the self-revealing God.

But I also said, in my working definition, that theology was the *disciplined exploration* of revelation. First of all, then, theology is an *exploration*. It is not simply the re-assertion of something that is obvious to all believers. The statement that, for instance, God is our Creator, is a straightforward statement of a truth of faith, such as might be found in a catechism or a prayer-book. It is not in itself a theological statement, or perhaps a better way of putting this would be to say that the ability to make this statement does not yet prove that you are a theologian.

The exploratory role of theology takes many different forms. I have outlined the five great questions that theology asks, questions that lead to its primordial forms: fundamental, historical, systematic, moral and practical theology. But in order to answer these questions, theology finds itself moving out into a whole host of sub-disciplines. For example, in order to understand the context of the life of Jesus, central to historical theology (taking this to include the history of Christian origins), and vital also to fundamental theology, theologians have wanted to learn more about the geographical sites involved in the ministry of Jesus. Thus biblical archaeology has arisen as an offshoot of theological exploration. Or again, for the same basic reason, they have wanted to know more about the way the gospels were written and so a relatively new theological sub-discipline, historical-critical exegesis, has become an important part of theologians' apparatus. Questions which have begun in historical theology pure and simple, or even in fundamental theology, have been found unanswerable without further exploration which has generated whole new disciplines. It should be obvious that answers to questions about what exactly happened in the ministry of Jesus, in the concrete context of his time and place, are going to be quite complex and detailed answers. A catechism answer would hardly

suffice. So theology is not just *any* expression of revealed truth. It is different from the expression of revelation that we find in preaching, or in catechising or in devotion. It differs from these by being an exploration of what is not at first obvious even to someone who knows and accepts the faith of the Church.

Finally, in my working definition, I said that this exploration which is theology has to be *disciplined* exploration. Certain elements of order and structure should be present. The question as to what these elements of order and structure ought to be is the question of theological methodology, method in theology. It seems to me that the structural or ordering element in theology is two-fold. Firstly, there is a principle of order in all theologies which derives from outside of theology. In a broad sense, this pre-theological principle of order may be said to come from philosophy, assuming that we take the word 'philosophy' in a sufficiently general kind of way. Many people have what are in effect philosophical convictions or questions without realising that these are in fact philosophical. Every culture carries with it one or more basic ways of interpreting the world, of saying what is important in life, what questions are the most urgent, what values are paramount. From this pre-theological or, in a broad sense, philosophical background, we come to the exploration of revelation with a certain agenda, a certain list of priorities, a certain number of already formed convictions about the nature of reality. Because of the intrinsic richness of revelation, no matter what questions we bring to it, it is able to throw light on them.

The second structural element in theology derives not from outside revelation but from inside it. Once again, because of the intrinsic richness of revelation no one theology can hope simply to reproduce revelation in some kind of complete and unconditional way. We can say of no one Christian theology: 'There, that is the Christian truth'. Every theology takes as its central axis some facet of revelation, and tries to relate everything to that. It selects one item within revelation and arranges all the others around it, like planets circling a sun. So, for instance, Augustine's theology revolves around the theme of grace; Thomas' theology revolves around the coming forth of creatures from God and their return to him; Rahner's theology around a version of the doctrine that man is the image of God, and so on. Here we have a second ordering or structuring or disciplining principle in theology, and this time it is itself strictly theological, that is, it derives from within revelation and not from outside it.<sup>16</sup>

At the present time we have in the Church a great number of very diverse theologies existing side by side, working with different philosophical and theological principles of order, and so highlighting different aspects both of human experience and of divine revelation. This is, in principle, as it should be. Yet such pluralism can make it particularly hard for one theologian to draw into his own work even *some* of the materials and insights of others. And of course this is compounded by the difficulties of



language (in various senses of that word) and of cross-cultural communication, as well as by the sheer volume of theological output in modern Catholicism. As we move into the twenty-first century, it seems to me that we stand in need of a theologian who can synthesise the best elements from a number of theological traditions, thus producing a work which will be 'classical' in something of the same sense as is the work of St Thomas for the Latin tradition. Such a classic would itself remain bound by its particular perspective (freely drawn from the totality of revelation in its richness) and its self-adopted role (the unification of theological culture). Yet it would also tend to transcend particularity by throwing light on how the Church's various theologies are not sheer cacophony, but an orchestra of instruments playing in celebration of a single faith in a single spiritual city.<sup>17</sup> As the mediaeval hymn puts it:

In hac urbe lux solennis,  
Ver aeternum, pax perennis  
Et aeterna gaudia.

Granted, a *pax perennis* cannot be created by sentimental souls who cry 'Peace, peace!' where there is no peace. There are issues of meaning and truth at stake which must be confronted and resolved. Not all problems in the contemporary Church will yield to a generous dose of reconciliation all round. Nevertheless, the *intention* of a theologian may point to what is true even when his or her ideas and judgements are at sea.<sup>18</sup> Much unnecessary conflict is created when different yet complementary insights are turned into false opposites. Is it too much to hope that theologians, who are responsible for a share of the ugly cycle of contestation, dissatisfaction and recrimination in the Church today, will, in years to come, take the lead in the making of true and lasting peace?

- 1 Cited in H.A. Williams, *Some Day I'll Find You: An Autobiography* (London 1982; 1984), p. 90.
- 2 R. Maritain, *Les Grandes Amitiés* (Paris 1948), p. 272.
- 3 See Ila Ilae, qq. 1—4, *Compendium Theologiae* 1,1. For Thomas' account of faith and its intellectuality, see T.C. O'Brien (ed.), *St. Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologiae. Volume 31: Faith* (London 1974), *passim*.
- 4 Ia q.1, a.2, *corpus*.
- 5 For a splendid example of such spiritual theology, fully conscious of its task and limitations, see C.A. Bernard, *Théologie affective* (Paris 1984), and notably p. 10.
- 6 The value of a spiritual culture vis-à-vis theological activity is evoked in J. Leclercq O.S.B., *The Love of learning and the Desire for God. A study of monastic culture* (New York 1974<sup>2</sup>). Needless to say, monastic culture provides a paradigm for a Christian culture here, rather than being its exclusive content.
- 7 In H. Vorgrimler (ed.), *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II, III* (New York 1969), p. 197.
- 8 For the mutual aid which should mark the relations of episcopate and theologians, see the International Theological Commission's 'Theses on the interrelationship between the ecclesiastical magisterium and theology', which can be consulted, with a commentary, in F.A. Sullivan S.J., *Magisterium. Teaching Authority in the Catholic Church* (Dublin 1983), pp. 174—218. For the concept of the 'signs of the times', see M.-D. Chenu O.P., 'Les signes du temps', *Nouvelle Revue Théologique* 90 (1965), pp. 29—39.

- 9 F.A. Sullivan S.J., *Magisterium* op. cit. p. 172.
- 10 E.L. Mascall, *Theology and the Gospel of Christ. An essay in reorientation* (London 1984<sup>2</sup>), p. ivi. The difficulties such 'positivism' can create for an entire ecclesial tradition are charted in S.W. Sykes, *The Integrity of Anglicanism* (London 1978), pp. 79ff.
- 11 This must surely have had its effect in their reading of Augustine's achievement as 'Jansenism'.
- 12 la q.1, a.2, ad i.
- 13 Well brought out in M.-D. Chenu O.P., *Toward Understanding Saint Thomas* (Chicago 1964), pp. 150—155.
- 14 An introduction to the work of M.J. Scheeben can be found in G. Fritz, 'Scheeben, Matthias Josef', *Dictionnaire de Théologie Catholique* XIV/i (Paris 1939), cols. 1270—1274. A full study is E. Paul, *Denweg und Denkform der Theologie von Matthias Joseph Scheeben* (Munich 1970). A useful introduction to Von Balthasar is the prefatory essay by D. MacKinnon in H.U. von Balthasar, *Elucidations* (London 1972). A well-nigh exhaustive account is found in A. Moda, *Hans Urs von Balthasar* (Bari 1976). See also A. Nichols O.P., 'Balthasar and his Christology', *New Blackfriars* LXVI. 781—2 (1985), pp. 317—324.
- 15 See R. Latourelle S.J., 'From revelation to theology' in *Theology: science of salvation* (New York 1969), pp. 3—10. This section can be regarded as a bridge to the subject of theology from his earlier study of revelation, *Theology of Revelation* (New York 1966).
- 16 See for a fuller account of this idea, A. Nichols O.P., 'Unity and plurality in Theology. Lonergan's *Method* and the counter-claims of a theory of paradigms', *Angelicum* LXII (1985), pp. 30—52.
- 17 J. Ratzinger, 'Le pluralisme: problème posé à l'Eglise et à la théologie', *Studia Moralia* 24 (1986), pp. 298—318.
- 18 See Y. Congar O.P., 'St Thomas and the Spirit of Ecumenism', *New Blackfriars* LV. 644 (1974), pp. 206—207.

## The Homosexual and the Vatican: an American attempt at dialogue\*

C.R.A. Cunliffe

Four years ago the contributors to Robert Nugent's *A Challenge to Love*<sup>1</sup> discussed the position of gay and lesbian Catholics in the Church in the aftermath of the 1975 Vatican declaration on sexual ethics. Now Sister Jeannine Gramick, co-founder with Father Nugent of New Ways Ministry, has co-edited with Pat Furey (a pseudonym used 'for professional reasons') *The Vatican and Homosexuality*<sup>2</sup>. This is a collection of reactions to the *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons* which the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith issued in October 1986<sup>3</sup>. Of the nineteen participants in the earlier symposium, only Gramick and Nugent re-appear among the twenty-five leading Catholic educators, journalists, activists and officials who write in it.

Gramick cites *The Tablet* as having called the document 'violently