

Heidegger among the Theologians

by Fergus Kerr, O.P.

396

There was a time, not so long ago, when the Catholic theologian could still happily regard himself as the exponent of the most polished set of clear and distinct ideas on earth. This is no longer possible. Catholic theology seems at present in chaos: glorious chaos in the opinion of some, dire catastrophe in that of others. But, however it is to be evaluated, there is no disputing the fact of the present great upheaval in the practice of Catholic theology. Ideas that have been fixed for centuries are in process of revision, positions that have been taken for granted for as long are now under scrutiny for reconstruction. The purpose of this article is to indicate how the situation is shaping inside the German theological arena, and it should be stressed from the outset that this is simply a report, not a hallelujah or a jeremiad.

Perhaps the only surprising feature of the present situation is that it has been staved off for so long. Every form of research undergoes periods of growth-crisis. The very mass of his data forces the investigator to reconsider the presuppositions of his study and the adequacy of the interpretation of his results. There has to be periodical revision of the basic categories with which any science operates. This is how a science 'advances', not so much by piling up more and more information (erudition) as by revaluing its fundamental interpretative concepts (genius). The maturity of a science is not measured by its immunity from such internal upheavals but by its capacity to produce them. There is no reason why this should not apply also to systematic theology, notwithstanding its peculiar epistemological status as the study of the self-revealed mystery of God, conducted within the Church and under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. It happened at least once before, on a most spectacular scale, in the emergence of scholastic theology in the course of the thirteenth century. One knows what chaos that involved! Anybody who believes in the destiny of theology in the nuclear epoch must appreciate that the present breakdown holds the promise of a comparable breakthrough.

It is still no more than a promise, and the catastrophists may yet be proved right. There is a great deal of ferment, not to say froth, in theological circles everywhere, but no sign of any 'new theology'. That phrase (*nouvelle théologie*) has passed into the history-books to describe some tendencies in French Catholicism from about 1940 until

the publication of the encyclical *Humani Generis* in 1950. But, if the solutions proposed at that time turned out to be abortive, it is nevertheless clear that the problems themselves remained very much alive. The rejuvenation of systematic theology by biblical and patristic studies, the use of modern philosophy in the presentation of the faith, the debate with the new ideology of Marxism, the relation between Christianity and the non-Christian religions – these themes have been taken up again, only now in the perspective of the *aggiornamento* of the Church, a deepening of context and an enlargement of responsibility which (one may surely suppose) justify more optimism for valid solutions.

It is not yet possible to forecast what the coming 'new theology' is going to be like. It is certainly not what people regard as 'modern theology'. The catchphrases of friendly blurbwriters have done even more than the denunciations of hidebound clerics to link in the public ear the names of a number of present-day theologians so as to suggest that they constitute some kind of bloc of avant-garde theological thinking. But 'modern theology' is as useful a phrase as 'modern art' or 'modern literature', no more and no less so. Only an idiot could be either 'for' or 'against' such an entity. It is a blanket-term. An informed and fair-minded observer would have to record immense differences among these 'modern' theologians – differences not just of calibre and achievement but also of background and outlook. Küng, Rahner, Schillebeeckx, Congar, de Lubac . . . it is a portentous litany but purely mythopoeic. Hans Küng and Karl Rahner, for example, have nothing at all in common (they are not even both Germans!) except that they detest the inbred psittacism that often passes for Catholic theology. Rahner's work, for instance, is inconceivable without his very considerable powers as a metaphysician whereas Küng might never have done any philosophy in his life for all the difference it makes to what he writes.

In any case, the figure who dominates German theology at the present time, and who will doubtless do so increasingly, is not a theologian at all but what the Germans call a 'thinker': Martin Heidegger. The rest of this article will be devoted to outlining the kind of importance Heidegger's work has for Protestant and Catholic theology at the present time.

But first of all a word should be said about Heidegger himself. His work has always been very hard for British intellectuals to take. This is not so much because it is mostly untranslated and written in a style which educated Germans themselves find extremely obscure. We are, for a start, disconcerted by his involvement with Nazism in 1933. He disengaged himself relatively soon, but it is a curious fact that most of us find it much easier to accept ex-communists than ex-fascists – curious because there is no basic reason why intellectuals should not have been as easily hoodwinked by fascism as by communism. That

hatred of bourgeois capitalism which one finds, for example, in the work of Ezra Pound has never made much sense in this country, but it was (and doubtless still is) fairly deep-seated in many continental intellectuals. Some of Heidegger's pronouncements in 1933 have been republished (not by himself), and they don't make pleasant reading; but it would not be at all difficult to find much more deplorable statements by other intellectuals at the same time, not to speak of progressive liturgists and eminent ecclesiastics. Though some preliminary work has now been done, we are still waiting for a thorough study of this whole phenomenon: fascism as the revolution against agnostic-rationalist liberal capitalism, with the connected proneness of Catholics to identify themselves with such aims and the peculiar alienation of German intellectuals from responsible political thinking (the gulf between *Geist* and *Politik* which Carlo Schmid has tried so hard to bridge).

On top of that, however, such accounts as have so far appeared in English of what Heidegger is doing have generally always presented him in the context of existentialism. We tend to see Heidegger as a kind of German Sartre (the pre-1950 Sartre at that). His first major book, *Being and Time*, published in 1927, came out in English only in 1962. Little of what introductory literature there is makes the effort to seek points of contact between Heidegger's thought and our own culture. Somebody once said something about our getting to the unknown by way of the known. Let us therefore hope that the next book on Heidegger will connect him with thinkers and problems the English reader knows something about. If we were more familiar with Hegel, of course, we should not be so flummoxed by Heidegger. But other points of contact exist. For one thing, Heidegger has almost stopped talking about Being (always paralysing for an English mind) and talks now mostly of Truth and Language. Indeed, German philosophers at large have just discovered the fascination of language (it is the theme of their annual jamboree this autumn). Some of what Heidegger proposes on this subject could be put in terms of the relation of ordinary language to the technical languages of science. Then the long-overdue Whitehead revival, so far mostly in the United States (though Ivor Leclerc of Glasgow has written the most useful introduction to Whitehead's metaphysics), undoubtedly offers another contact-point. His critique of the substance-accident account of things and of post-Cartesian philosophy as subject-object dualism, this and much more bears independent witness to the relevance of some of Heidegger's central concerns. Some young American theologians (Calvin O. Schrag and Schubert M. Ogden) have already written about the parallel between Heidegger and Whitehead.

It is in fact by way of theology that Heidegger is most likely to be acclimatized in Anglo-American culture. The most exciting recent

development in American Protestant theology is the inauguration of a series of symposia to be called 'New Frontiers in Theology'. The first volume is *The Later Heidegger and Theology*, and the editors, who are also the instigators of the whole project, are James M. Robinson and John B. Cobb, Jr. The plan is to translate some trend-setting programmatic essay by a young German theologian, for Professor Robinson to set it in context by a long informative survey, for several American critics then to intervene, and finally for Professor Cobb and the German author to sum up. That this kind of thing has become possible not only shows how familiar the Americans are with the German situation; it shows also how open and mature American theology is (neither English nor French theology, for different reasons, could at present sustain such a creative exchange). Among volumes to come we are promised a symposium round Ernst Fuchs and Gerhard Ebeling on hermeneutics, and another round Wolfhart Pannenberg on historicity.

The demythologization controversies had of course familiarized us with some of the language Bultmann borrowed from the Heidegger of *Being and Time*. The two men were colleagues at Marburg from 1922 until 1928 (when Heidegger went to Freiburg). It is beginning to become clear that Heidegger gained as much from the theologian as Bultmann did from the philosopher – perhaps more, for Heidegger shows exact appreciation of the exigencies of Lutheran theology whereas it may be doubted if Bultmann has always understood Heidegger's quest for ontology.

The crux of the matter is that Heidegger is not an existentialist but an ontologist. To put it briefly, the reason he repudiates existentialism is that it remains completely within the categories of the kind of thinking which proceeds on the assumption that man is the inventor of the intelligibility of the world. For the existentialist, according to Heidegger, man is regarded as projecting the meaning he has created upon a radically senseless world. It is the spell of this picture of our position in the world that Heidegger's work is devoted to breaking. This he sees as the latent model that prevails in the entire history of metaphysics: the model of human existence as man's transcending himself in projecting his world. The point Heidegger tries to bring out is that, on the contrary, man must be receptively open to the world's communication of its intelligibility before he can begin to put his constructions upon it. The idea is tricky to get hold of and trickier still to hold on to. If we are to bring out the meaning of things we must first let them show it. There is an obvious analogy here with the basic idea that structures the theology of St Thomas Aquinas: his understanding of God in terms of the first cause by whose generosity alone do we, the second causes, have the power to realize our personal destinies. It is a sort of dialectic in which our acting always presupposes our receiving. Self-affirmation is possible at

all only on the basis of self-renunciation. As Heidegger would put it – we are because there is. It is typical that one of his basic insights should be a kind of secularized theology.

It was in 1946 that Heidegger finally made clear that the aim (or drift) of his thinking is to *reverse* the sort of thinking that existentialism represents. It was not until 1955 that Heinrich Ott brought out his doctorate thesis on the concept of history in the theology of Bultmann, at the end of which he spoke in a programmatic way of the possibilities in Heidegger for systematic theology. Ott is in fact Swiss, and the thesis was supervised by Karl Barth, to whose chair at Basel Ott succeeded in 1962, at the age of 33. Then, in 1959, he published a course of lectures on Heidegger under the title of *Denken und Sein* (now out of print). This was, in Professor Robinson's words, 'an empathetic and non-critical interpretation of Heidegger's thought'. In the same year, the annual meeting of the Bultmann circle chose the relation of Heidegger to theology as its topic of discussion (it may be noted in passing that the Bultmann circle represents by far the most creative and influential theological movement in present-day German Protestantism, and that the shape of ecumenism to come is going to be determined by our capacity to understand this trend: Bultmann is by no means so easy to dispose of as some English theologians would have us think). Heidegger himself conducted a day-long seminar and proposed that the 1960 meeting should occupy itself with the relation between exegesis and systematic theology. It is this debate which is still going on – in effect it is the issue of the possibility of doing theology at all – and it is Heinrich Ott's contribution to the 1960 meeting which is offered now as the focal essay in *The Later Heidegger and Theology*.

The problem that Ott has taken up is that of the relation between theology and this basic receptive thinking that Heidegger is on about (it certainly has some resemblance to the 'wondering' which Aristotle made the starting-point of philosophy). Ott tries to show that theology should be regarded as an instance of such passive openness to experience, and not be classed along with subsequent and secondary forms of thinking such as metaphysics and science (thinking in the normal sense). He wants to remove theology from the subject-object situation altogether: 'Theology should not understand itself, its thinking, as freely carried on by a subject who subjectivistically observes an object and talks about it. Rather theology should understand itself as an element of encounter, as encounter with what is to be thought, which shows itself, "unveils" itself to thought and thus determines thought'. Theology would be the explication of the experience of prayer: prayer being understood as the experience in which God can be encountered, not of course subjectivistically as some psychic phenomenon, but as a response in which God's word finds language.

Here we can do no more than refer the reader to the excellent account of the whole discussion provided by Professor Robinson, and to the useful and stimulating essays by his team of critics. It may be noted, however, that Bultmann himself is very sceptical about Ott's proposal. He maintains that theology is indeed the self-explication of the encounter with God in faith, but that the theologian has nevertheless shifted from the believer's stance of obedient listening to the stance of reflective thinking – and that this inevitably (and not at all deplorably) involves a certain objectification of God. Bultmann's position here thus seems essentially that of St Thomas Aquinas (e.g. *S.T.* I, q.13, a.2).

It is sometimes suggested that Catholic theology does not require great theologians to the same extent as Protestant theology does. We are certainly not dependent on theologians for the formulation of our belief in anything like the same *sense*; but one may well wonder if the theologians of the thirteenth and the sixteenth centuries would have been at all content with a theological landscape almost bare of major figures. For no Catholic theologian since Möhler and Newman has shown signs of theological genius comparable with that of Karl Barth or Rudolf Bultmann. We have had nobody capable of a work of synthesis which would present the organic unity of Catholic belief in the light of post-medieval interpretation of Scripture and the Fathers and of modern categories of experience in general. We have had nobody capable of asking any genuinely radical questions which might lead to genuinely new theological insight. Genius is a gift, but the situation must be partly due to the necessity under which theologians have suffered for the last sixty or seventy years of maintaining some show of all being Thomists. The result of this has been the proliferation of interpretations of St Thomas often so different as to be quite incompatible with one another (it is time somebody undertook a hermeneutic of these interpretations: comparative Thomology, as we might call it, or higher Aquinatics), while there has been little or no honestly original thinking.

We have had nobody, that is, until Karl Rahner. He is twenty years younger than Barth and Bultmann, and his work did not begin to appear in sufficient quantity for the quality of his originality to emerge until some fifteen years ago. Even so, two of his students have themselves become professors (Joseph Ratzinger and J. B. Metz), and the influence of his extraordinarily questioning and penetrating mind is gradually reaching out into Catholic theology everywhere. His importance lies not in the 'solutions' he proposes but in the fact that he asks *questions*. He has re-discovered the sense of theological study as primarily a *quest: fides QUAERENS intellectum*. He has made it possible once again for systematic theology to become a pursuit that normally educated people might respect. His great theme is that the heritage of traditional theology has become irrelevant and unintelligible to most intelligent people even

inside the Catholic community not because it is too technical or too scholarly (he believes it can never be that), but because it isn't being rethought with the necessary *determination*; and anybody who has had the privilege of seeing the intensity and the concentration with which he thinks during a theological discussion knows at last what it might be to be a master in sacred theology.

In 1934 Karl Rahner was sent by his superiors to study philosophy at Freiburg (his native town), not with Heidegger but under the supervision of Martin Honecker, an obscure neo-scholastic. He did in fact attend Heidegger's course, and he is usually classified in the school of Heideggerian Thomists: Gustav Siewerth, Bernhard Welte, Max Müller and J. B. Lotz. It seems to me, however, that a larger view of his work would suggest that he owes a good deal less to Heidegger than he does to the writings of Joseph Maréchal, the Louvain Jesuit whose books he studied very carefully several years before he went to Freiburg. However, this may be, it is plain enough that Rahner's work bears little evidence of influence of the thinking of the later Heidegger.

It is as yet mostly in periodicals and still more in conversation that one meets the influence on Catholics of Heidegger's ideas about the history of metaphysics. Max Müller, however, now professor of philosophy in Munich, has recently brought out the third edition of his book *Existenzphilosophie im geistigen Leben der Gegenwart*. The original core of the book, first published in 1949, remains a very sound introduction to Heidegger's work as a whole. The newly added chapters constitute a sort of programme for the future of Catholic theology and it is with an outline of them that we shall end this survey.

According to Max Müller, Heidegger has made his case about the partial inadequacy of the metaphysics with which theology traditionally operates. The difficulty is ultimately that this metaphysics rests on the experience of the world the ancient Greeks had, and this experience fails to make room for a proper sense of historical process. The biblical experience of human existence, on the other hand, is shot through and through with the categories of historicity: time, event, decision, culpability, and so on. What Müller is proposing, in other words, is a fresh encounter between the Greek and the biblical experiences of being – and the present moment is propitious because for the first time we possess the philosophical language to bring out the specificity of the historical. Intimately connected with this is the fact that modern exegesis has shown us how central historical categories are in the Bible, in the original biblical experience. Müller is at present lecturing on St Augustine and St Thomas, proposing them as the great exemplars of such encounter between the Greek and the biblical experiences. He is arguing that we can no more rest content with St Thomas's synthesis of them than he could with that of St Augustine – that is, we have to take

his achievement up, as he did St Augustine's, into some larger synthesis, the necessity for which is forced upon us by our deeper understanding of the historical nature of human existence. Our basic interpretative concepts require to be deepened and resituated. Our Graeco-scholastic conception of truth as *adequatio* or correspondence between thought or statement and reality needs to be inserted into the context of the biblical understanding of truth as historical self-revelation of reality in our presence. Our conception of language as a system of signs, inherited from Aristotle, needs to be set in the context of an understanding of language as disclosure of being. This is something very different from the negative attitude taken up by some of the theologians of *la nouvelle théologie* towards scholastic metaphysics: it is not a matter of its being 'wrong' or out-of-date. It is rather that traditional metaphysics itself, in the existence of so original a metaphysician as Heidegger appears to Müller to be, is demanding from within, as it were, to display and thus surmount its present limitations. Nothing is being abandoned, nothing is being destroyed. Everything is being deepened and enlarged, and there is thus need for genuine re-vision. The basic concepts with which we have hitherto operated are proving to be richer than we had supposed. We have thus the chance to see more and to interpret better – the chance, but also the fate.

For these perspectives are certainly disquieting. There is, so it seems to me, no more need to fear for the future of theology than there is to fear for the future of faith itself. But there is no such thing as instant theology, and the road towards the much-desired reformulation of systematic theology will be long and very hard.

Rome and Canterbury

'We may be asked, "What will be the outcome of the present relation between the Mother-See of Rome and her beloved child Canterbury?" We say, a little sadly, "We do not know". No quarrels are more enduring or more deadly than those between next-of-kin. The issues between mother and child depend wholly upon human wills. But when human wills are set resolutely upon God's truth and God's will it is hard to find therein any other signs than those that look towards hope.'

Fr Vincent McNabb, O.P.

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