

The Vocation of the Theologian — an ecumenist's comments

J. Heywood Thomas

My aim is to make some observations on the recent Instruction from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (summarised in *The Tablet* of 30 June, pp. 838—841) in an attempt to clarify certain issues and assist the debate which has been initiated, of which this journal has revealed ample evidence. These are observations born of the awareness that the language of this document finds interesting echoes within my own tradition and consciousness as a Reformed theologian.

The very notion of a vocation of theology is an interesting reflection of the sense that theology is a church-related activity. As terminology employed to specify a certain view of ecclesiastical polity it is in fact reminiscent of Calvin's *Institutes* and so—naturally—this view of theology and the theologian has been one of the main features of 20th Century Protestant theology, with its rediscovery of Classical Reform. Part of that lovely sense of theology as a church-related and indeed church-based activity has been the realisation that theology is of necessity an ecumenical task. When this is ignored its practice is less than its profession and its efficacy is at once frustrated. Hence my title; for it is neither as an onlooker judging somebody else's concerns nor as an outsider with no interest or involvement in the issue that I would make these comments. Rather, this is the deliberate attempt to bring what assistance one part of the Church can offer to another—and this on the basis of the unity of our common faith and the singleness of theological purpose. Years ago when *Soundings* was published and had been lauded by most reviewers as a fine piece of Anglican theology I sounded a slightly discordant note in my review in *The Scottish Journal of Theology* by saying 'The question is not whether it is fine Anglican theology but whether it is good theology'. As my appreciation of that contribution was not the expression of a ghetto-consciousness so my comments here arise from the same kind of catholicity. Nor do I do this because I feel that any one of us can afford to claim extraordinary understanding in this. The situation is in fact quite different from that because there are issues here which are *common* problems and there are problems to which solutions are likely to be offered which themselves are only too likely to create greater problems facing ecumenical endeavour.

To an academic theologian accustomed to working within rather strict confines of expertise one of the strange features of this document is the way in which its argument is a mixture of scriptural hermeneutic, ecclesiology

and philosophical theology. I mention this mainly in order to highlight the patience and loyalty of Catholic theologians, which seems to me a point well worth making when the September issue of *New Blackfriars* talks of there being 'enough paranoia—mirrored paranoia, mainly—around already in the Church' (p. 366). Without in any way wishing to score debating points or to offer nit-picking criticism let me illustrate my criticism by taking two points that are made in the document. In section I it is emphasized that the dynamism of faith is repeated in theology (n. 7). I think that this point is entirely sound and, moreover, the kind of point that can so well be argued from St Thomas' view of the relation of faith and reason. However, the argument in the document substantiating this point is nothing but a pastiche of dubious exegeses of scripture. Again, any theologian worth his salt could easily produce destructive comments on the discussion of the epistemological requirements of the discipline of theology (nn. 8—10). This whole section moves with extraordinary rashness from an incautiously naive theological reason for which God is said—*simpliciter*—to be the object of theology through vagueness and ambiguity on the nature of the cognitive attitude of the theologian to some dubious talk about revealed doctrine. My point is that the discussion that has been evoked by the document has been characterized by a most commendable seriousness of purpose—and an equally noteworthy sense of cooperation. Such an attitude is all the more incumbent on myself.

Let me then return to my original point—this document's emphasis on the inter-relation of theology and church is one I welcome. My fear is that this is something all too easily misunderstood; for we are too prone to adopt quite wrong models for talking of the relation of the believer and the Church. I can express one of my fundamental worries regarding the Instruction by saying that though it seems to me to proclaim that glorious sense of the freedom of the Christian which is both the fount and the goal of theology (cf e.g. nn. 3. 21) it often speaks the language of control and restriction. The significant contribution of this document is the way it reminds the Church that theology is an essential feature of the Church and an essential part of her life (n. 1). As the Church is not an accidental collection of people but the body of those who have been called out of the world (or, to use the old Puritan phrase, the gathered saints and body of the elect), so the term vocation is an appropriate one to use of the task of the theologian. If this is how we should think of theology then we should also realise that the relation of the members of the body to one another is one of inter-dependence, not one of control. Theology and life of faith are not separate and the nature of theology reflects the life of faith, as the document points out. If so, then the theologian's humble worship of God and obedience to the divine call sets him or her free from all other authority. The paradox of the Church is that this obedience is freedom. My point here is that this truth which we are so ready to recognize in our ecclesiological doctrine must—by the very logic of this document's thesis—also be asserted in regard to theology. That is, we cannot both say that theology is a feature

538

of the Church and treat the activity of theologians as the work of those who are propagandists of some political ideology. (Here, I add, I am not only working within the definition of the nature and function of the magisterium but, more particularly, I am arguing on the basis of what this document says about it.)

Let me make a related but slightly different point so as to illustrate this. One interesting argument in the document concerns the identity and difference of theology and magisterium. The purpose of that argument is clear enough, and to say that it is an attempt to have your cake and eat it would be a crude over-simplification of the issue. It is obviously an eirenic approach to theologians, seeking their goodwill and cooperation. The unity of which we have spoken thus far is then described as an identity between the purpose of the magisterium and the purpose of a different part of the Church, viz. theology. 'The living Magisterium of the Church', it is said, 'and theology, while having different gifts and functions, ultimately have the same goal: preserving the People of God in the truth.' (n. 21) What exactly constitutes the distinction between goal and function is not made clear; but, allowing for the possibility of this being adequately clarified, I cannot see that the logical relation that obtains between magisterium and theology is in any way clarified by talk of 'a reciprocal relationship' (n. 21), 'collaboration' and 'participation' (n. 22). If there is indeed some unity of purpose, then whatever the difference in means, there can be no difference in the purpose. If I intend to get to London from Nottingham, then my choice of air rather than rail as *means* of travel does not imply that my purpose can be different.

To put the matter concretely, whilst I am quite clear that once you talk of a magisterium you introduce into your polity a hierarchical scheme which does not exist in a Reformed polity, that hierarchy cannot be made to imply a difference in the purposes, which are indeed identical. If, then, there is only one purpose, there seems to me no way in which the theologian's fulfilment of purpose can be said to be subject to control. My point could perhaps be put as an *argumentum ad hominem* in this way: if the document grants that the purpose of theology is being fulfilled, then 'control' must surely be unnecessary and irrelevant. It might be thought that, even if I understand the function of the magisterium, I am here merely indulging in some romantic idealisation of both theology and church. However, this is not so, I am perfectly aware of the way in which *politically* the notions of freedom and control function quite happily together. My ecclesiological difficulties concern the notion of 'control' as such and *in se*. What I am arguing is that if the magisterium takes the view that something is bad theology then it is to be refuted as such and not condemned because it is said to be something subject to control.

I want to say something too about the issue of intellectual freedom. It is one which has surfaced in all kinds of discussions concerning the developments within universities during the last five to ten years. To see it emerge in this context then is very interesting; for in no way are the contexts

the same and yet the same problem is raised. We do not need to concern ourselves here with what has been said by university academics about tenure and the like beyond saying that their fundamental concern is with the preservation of the intellectual virtue of truthfulness. This enables us to see why the same problem arises here. What I find very encouraging is the recognition made in the document that such an attitude is essential for theology (n. 12). Unfortunately, however, intellectual freedom is then made synonymous with some kind of foolish rashness, as when it is said that theologians often feel the compulsion to be 'daring' (n. 11).

I know that one can often use hyperbole and that it is sometimes necessary, when teaching, to propound a useful lie; but these are effective *only* when they are presented as such. Their function, in any case, is to prevent the kind of over-simplification and carelessness of which Fr Häring complained in his letter to the Pope (*The Tablet* 30 June, pp. 841–3). I entirely agree with the contention of the document that a theologian is bound by respect for the truth to present hypotheses and conclusions of investigations as always open to argument (n. 11). Yet it does not follow from this that *no* theological position is more likely to be true than the deliverances of the magisterium—any more than it follows from the fact that a theologian claims the right to question what the magisterium says that it is thought the magisterium is habitually mistaken. Two kinds of confusion are involved here. First it is thought that the possibility of error implies incapacity to make true judgments whereas it is only because we are in the habit of making true judgments that we do recognise when we are mistaken about things. Secondly, there seems to me a tendency in discussing the history of doctrine to treat all doctrinal statements as if they were the same and as if there were only one kind of statement involved. The truth is that there are many but in particular there are two kinds—what I would call the rule-statements of the Creeds and Definitions and what might be called theological hypotheses. The importance of this is twofold; for rules are in fact very strange propositions and have even been described as empty of propositional content, and so clearly leave no room for the discussion of content which propositions elicit. My point is that while the Church recognizes the rule of faith in the Creeds I am not as a theologian confined to that in the elaboration of whatever doctrine it is that I discuss. The rule is followed in theology but theology is more than the repetition of the rule.

My final point is another expression of pleasure. More than once I have said that the Instruction seems to me to take away with one hand what it has given with the other. One could even say that its authors have perhaps too often frightened themselves and for each step forward have taken two back. Yet, however strange it sits in the context of what is so clearly a somewhat negative statement, there is here a glorious recognition of the unconquerable nature of Truth. This delights my Puritan conscience and reassures my ecumenical hope. Because we are indeed called by 'the mighty Victor' who is the Truth we can as theologians be sure that, whatever happens to us, the task will succeed. As Milton wrote in *Areopagitica*, 'If Truth be in the battlefield let none fear the issue of the conflict'.