

THE STUDY OF THEOLOGY

I WISH, in this paper, to say something about the spirit in which theology should be studied. I begin with a quotation for the length of which I must crave your indulgence:

This then is a second and not the least pernicious peculiarity of Romanism. It professes to be a complete theology. It arranges, adjusts, explains, exhausts every part of the Divine Economy. It may be said to leave no region unexplored, no heights unattempted, rounding off its doctrines with a neatness and finish which is destructive of many of the most noble and most salutary exercises of mind in the individual Christian. That feeling of awe and piety which the mysteriousness of the Gospel should excite fades away under the fictitious illumination which is poured over the entire Dispensation. Criticism, we know, is commonly considered fatal to poetical fervour and imagination; and in like manner this technical religion destroys the delicacy and reverence of the Christian mind. So little has actually been revealed to us in a systematic way, that the genuine science of the Gospel, carried to its fullest limits, has no tendency to foster a spirit of rationalism. But Rome would classify and number everything; she would settle every sort of question, as if determined to detect and compass by the reason what runs out into the next world or is lost in this It is sufficiently evident what an opening is given by a theology of so ambitious a character to pride and self-confidence. It has been said that knowledge is power; and at least it creates in us the imagination of possessing it. This is what makes scientific and physical researches so intoxicating; it is the feeling they inspire of perfect acquaintance with the constitution of nature. He who considers himself fully to understand a system, seems to have sway over it. Astronomers can predict the motions of the heavenly bodies, with an accuracy which in their own fancy places them above them. Now religion is the great chastiser of human pride; nor would I say, that however perverted, it can ever cease to be so; yet it is plain that when thus turned into an intellectual science, even polytheism answers such a purpose better than it Romanism adopts a minute, technical and imperative theology, which is no part of Revelation, and which produces a number of serious moral evils, which is shallow in philosophy, as professing to exclude doubt and imperfection, and dangerous to the Christian spirit, as encouraging us to ask for more than is given

us, as fostering irreverence and presumption, confidence in our reason, and a formal or carnal view of Christian obedience.

A consideration of these words, or of the charge contained in them, would, I think, be in place at the beginning of any year of theological study, but is surely particularly appropriate at the beginning of the present year. For they were spoken, here in Oxford at St. Mary's, in Adam de Brome's Chapel, practically a hundred years ago by Newman, the then Vicar, and afterwards published, in 1837, in a book which, though apparently little read nowadays, is of great importance in the history of the Oxford Movement.¹

What are we to say of the indictment? It is, of course, impossible for us to endorse it as it stands, but some of us at least, perhaps many of us, would confess that in our study of Scholastic Theology we have at times been troubled with thoughts not altogether dissimilar. It is interesting to recall first of all the reply which Newman himself gave to a cognate difficulty in the admirable lectures which he delivered as a Catholic a dozen years later and published in 1850 as *Difficulties felt by Anglicans in Catholic Teaching considered in twelve lectures addressed to the Party of the Religious Movement of 1833*. In the lecture entitled 'The Religious State of Catholic Countries no Prejudice to the Sanctity of the Church,' he imagines an objector saying (p. 233)² that

the reproach of Catholicism is, not what it does not do, so much as what it does; that its teaching and its training do produce a certain very definite character on a nation and on individuals; and that character, so far from being too religious or too spiritual, is just the reverse, very like the world's; that religion is a sacred, awful, mysterious, solemn matter; that it should be approached with fear, and named, as it were, *sotto voce*; whereas Catholics, whether in the North or the South, in the

¹ *Lectures on the Prophetical Office of the Church viewed relatively to Romanism and Popular Protestantism*. (London, 1837; pp. 108-110, 125).

² I quote from the Fourth Edition (Burns & Oates; no date given).

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sickly child, bringing it out of doors only on fine days. They feel very clear and quite satisfied, while they are very still; but if they turn about their head, or change their posture ever so little, the vision of the Unseen, like a mirage, is gone from them. So they keep the exhibition of their faith for high days and great occasions, when it comes forth with sufficient pomp and gravity of language, and ceremonial of manner. Truths slowly totter out with scripture texts at their elbow, as unable to walk alone (p. 254).

Though we may think that the Oratorian is perhaps a little too lenient to what the Vicar of St. Mary's had called 'our bard, irreverent, extravagant tone in religion,' he does explain how it arises, and what he says of a Catholic nation may also, *mutatis mutandis*, be applied to the race of theologians. But for the moment let us consider his statement that for us revealed truths are '*facts, primary points of thought, and landmarks, as it were, upon the territory of knowledge.*'

If there exists in the world a Sacred Theology at all, it is indeed just because for certain men, that is, for Catholics, revealed truths are 'primary points of thought and landmarks, as it were, upon the territory of knowledge.' A science may be described, in its content, as a body of conclusions demonstratively drawn from principles which are absolutely certain. According to Père Chenu,³ William of Auxerre (died about 1231) is the first to liken the articles of faith to the principles of a science. He even speaks of these *principia fidei* as *per se nota*, so calling them because they are assented to, not at the term of a chain of reasoning, but directly in themselves as being the word of God. St. Thomas, some years later, will use the same analogy: the articles of Faith are to Theology what principles are to a science; and in his *Commentary on the Sentences* (written about 1254) he will even follow William in speaking of the *articuli fidei* as *per se noti habenti fidem, sicut et principia naturaliter nobis insita per lumen intellectus agentis*. Such a way of speaking is not altogether easy to

³ *La Théologie comme science au XIII^e siècle* in *Archives d'histoire doctrinale et littéraire du Moyen Age*, 1927, p. 51.

justify, and later, in his commentary (about 1257-1258) on the *De Trinitate* of Boethius, and again in the *Summa Theologica* (1267-1268), he adopted another point of view, and was able in consequence to apply to Theology even more rigorously the Aristotelian conception of a science. Though every science must start from principles which are immediately evident, it is not necessary that those principles should be evident to that particular science itself; it may take them on faith from a higher science to which they are so evident. Thus the primary truths from which music starts are guaranteed by mathematics. In a like manner the truths which stand as the principles of Theology, though not immediately evident to Theology, are so to a higher science, indeed to the highest of all sciences, God's science and that of the blessed, and God having revealed them Theology takes them on faith (I^a Pars, qu. 1, art. 2).

Let me recall here the old dispute whether Theology is, or is not, a supernatural 'habitus.' The common Thomistic teaching, and it is surely correct, is that though not supernatural *entitatively* or in itself, it is supernatural *radicaliter*. That it is not supernatural in itself would seem clear, for, as St. Thomas notes, it is acquired by human study, and a supernatural 'habitus' would require a supernatural cause. But it is supernatural *radicaliter*, that is, it depends on a 'habitus' which is supernatural. It presupposes the existence in the same subject of the supernatural virtue of faith. The point is of importance. Only Catholics can be theologians in any strict sense. But surely, it may be objected, without having faith a man can use the articles of faith as premisses and proceed to draw out the conclusions contained in them. And here in Oxford, only a few years ago, in what I can only describe as a thoroughly low-minded lecture,⁴ Professor Clement Webb spoke of Sacred Theology as a kind of intellectual pastime; without necessarily believing in the truth of the principles you accept them at any rate for the time being—as the rules of the

⁴ Published in *A Century of Anglican Theology and other Lectures*.

game, so to say—and then entertain yourself by deducing from them as many conclusions as you can. It is sufficient for the moment to reply that if theology is to exist in the mind as a science, the conclusions must be assented to as true, and not merely as following logically from certain premisses, and this can be done only by one who definitely accepts the truth of the premisses. Heretics or unbelievers can have no Theology. History itself confirms this truth. As Newman said in the most famous of his University Sermons, that on *The Theory of Developments in Religious Doctrine*, preached only two years before his conversion: ‘Heresy has no theology . . . It turns to Biblical Criticism, or to the Evidences of Religion, for want of a province.’⁵ If that was true in 1843, how much truer is it in 1933! Sacred Theology as a science is unknown outside the Church, for the very principles are wanting. It exists with us just because we are provided with those primary points of thought required to constitute it a science.

No wonder Newman in his earlier days was angry with Romanism for ‘adopting a minute, technical, and imperative theology which is no part of Revelation.’ The Oxford Movement began as a campaign on behalf of the principle of dogma, and if it took ‘*Antiquity*, not the *existing Church*, as the oracle of truth,’ it was in order to assure the immutability of the truth revealed to the Apostles, and precisely in this way to enable men to give to that truth absolute assent as being the very word of God Himself. But as Newman came to see later, ‘the common sense of mankind feels that the very idea of revelation implies a present informant and guide, and that an infallible one; not a mere abstract declaration of truths unknown before to man, or a record of history, or the result of an antiquarian research, but a message and a lesson speaking to this man and that . . . A revelation is not given, if there be no authority to decide what is given.’⁶ Antiquity as the

⁵ *Sermons, chiefly on the theory of religious belief, preached before the University of Oxford.* (London: 1843; pp. 318, 319).

⁶ *Development of Christian Doctrine*; p. 87 f.

oracle of truth must mean private judgment, and 'private judgment does but create opinions, and nothing more.' St. Thomas has precisely the same teaching in II^a II^{ae}, qu. 5, art. 3. But opinions cannot serve as the principles of a science. 'Men have no certainty of the doctrines they profess . . . Truths slowly totter out with Scripture texts [or quotations from the Fathers] at their elbow, as unable to walk alone.' No wonder Newman, in 1837, was irritated with the robustness of a state of mind so much in contrast with his own. For the Catholic revealed truths are immutable, incontestable facts, 'brought home to him by that supernatural faith, with which he assents to the Divine Word speaking through Holy Church,' and just because they are such, they naturally give rise to a science, which, however minute and technical, is still in a sense part of Revelation. For, as St. Thomas says, I^a Pars, qu. 1, art. 3, Theology has to do with *revelabilia*, that is, with truths which, though not contained formally, are contained virtually in Revelation, and are capable of being deduced therefrom by reasoning. And it is precisely love and reverence, and a keen and vivid realizing of the Divine Deposit of Faith, which will lead to these conclusions being deduced.

In the sermon quoted above, Newman, still an Anglican, recognized this. He took as his text, 'Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart,' and he said: 'Mary is our pattern of Faith, both in the reception and in the study of Divine Truth. She does not think it enough to accept, she dwells upon it; not enough to possess, she uses it; not enough to assent, she develops it; not enough to submit the Reason, she reasons upon it; not indeed reasoning first, and believing afterwards, with Zacharias, yet first believing without reasoning, next from love and reverence, reasoning after believing' (p. 312). 'It would appear that even the most subtle questions of the school may have a real meaning . . . no questions may be safely despised' (p. 352).

On the other hand, it is a fact that the study of theology often proves, to use Newman's earlier words, 'dangerous to the Christian spirit, as fostering irreverence and pre-

sumption, confidence in our reason, and a formal view of Christian obedience.' It is a fact that a theologian's calling is a dangerous one. As Blessed Jordan of Saxony notes somewhere, two classes of people often end by not genuflecting when passing before the Blessed Sacrament—sacristans and theologians. How, then, is the danger to be overcome?

There is, surely, one truth which the theologian needs to be penetrated with, a truth on which St. Thomas insists again and again, though, curiously enough, not so much in the *Summa Theologica* as elsewhere. At any rate, the most striking formulations of it are found in his other works, and perhaps the best is that of *De Veritate*, qu. 2, art. 1, ad gum: 'Quid est ipsius Dei semper nobis occultum est; et haec est summa cognitio quam de ipso in statu viae habere possumus, ut cognoscamus Deum esse supra omne id quod cogitamus de eo.' '*Summa cognitio*, the highest knowledge, that we can have of God here below is the conviction that He is beyond anything we can think about Him.' If it is objected that I am but stating a commonplace, I agree, but would add that there is a difference between—if I may adapt Newman's terminology—a notional and a real assent. Does not St. John of the Cross assure us that 'one of the greatest favours bestowed on the soul in this life is to enable it to see so distinctly and to feel so profoundly that it cannot comprehend God'? And do all scholastics give the impression of being aware of the truth in question, commonplace though it be? Are there not some whose dialectical assurance, as Père Gardeil says,⁷ frightens us, resembling as it does, the dexterity of conjurers juggling with precious and fragile *objets d'art* wholly unconscious of their value?

Let me recall, too, a similar passage found in the *Summa contra Gentiles* (Lib. i, c. 5), a passage impressive for the striking reason given for the necessity of the revelation of supernatural truths. 'Est etiam necessarium huiusmodi veritatem ad credendum hominibus proponi ad Dei cogni-

⁷ *Le donné révélé et la théologie*; p. 134.

tionem veriore[m] habendam. Tunc enim solum Deum vere cognoscimus quando ipsum esse credimus supra omne id quod de Deo cogitari ab homine possibile est . . . Per hoc ergo quod homini de Deo aliqua proponuntur quae rationem excedunt, firmatur in homine opinio quod Deus sit aliquid supra id quod cogitare potest.' Again the same doctrine. *Tunc solum vere* . . . then only do we really know God when we are convinced that He is beyond anything it is possible for man to think about Him. A notional assent to the truth, St. Thomas seems to suggest, is easy enough, for it is a truth of the natural order. But to give us a real conviction of it the revelation of supernatural truths was necessary.⁸

I need not point out that the truth in question will never be absent from the theologian's thoughts if he is true to his science. For is not the subject of that science ever and always *Deus sub ratione Deitatis*, that is, God considered not merely as the First Being, or as the First Cause and Last End of all things in the natural order, but God considered as *God*, considered, that is to say, in His own hidden Excellence naturally unknowable by man, in the mystery of His own inner Life, and as the Author of the supernatural order? 'Theology's distinctive work is to treat of God, not simply as regards what is knowable by means of creatures, but also as regards what He alone knows about Himself, and shares with others by revelation' (I^a Pars, qu. 1, art. 6). That is the real subject of Theology, and whatever the true theologian considers, he considers it *sub ratione Dei*, in its relation to God as God. Ever, therefore, he

Heareth between star and other star,
Through the door of the darkness fallen ajar,
The council, eldest of things that are,
The talk of the Three in One.

⁸ There is a remarkably similar passage in one of Newman's Anglican sermons, preached on Trinity Sunday, on *The Mystery of our Present Being*.

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He need, then, have no fear for his spirit of reverence. For is not the conviction of which I have been speaking at the root of the virtue of Religion, concerned as this is with God's own peculiar Excellence, 'in quantum omnia in infinitum transcendit secundum omnimodum excessum' (II^a II^{ae}, qu. 81, art. 4)? And you know the rôle reverence plays in the virtue of Religion. Is it surprising, then, that the, in some ways, most characteristic treatise of the greatest of theologians should be his treatise *De Religione*, and one of his most characteristic virtues the virtue of Religion? And I may remark, in conclusion, that the intensity in which he possessed that noble virtue is a characteristic he shared with Newman, who certainly has a claim to be considered the greatest of English theologians.

LUKE WALKER, O.P.