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Theology for a New World

BY ANTHONY C. THISELTON

WHAT comes after the 'new' theology? In Europe the well-worn debates about demythologisation have given way to more fruitful discussions about the new hermeneutic, although Fuchs and Ebeling have to share the limelight not only with Ott but also with Pannenberg. Already, in the United States, the death-of-God debates and Process Thought tend to make Tillich seem almost a distant memory. Yet in the judgment of Herbert Richardson none of these approaches is sufficiently 'contemporary' to grapple successfully with the problems of today's world.

Herbert W. Richardson holds a professorship at Harvard Divinity School, and he attempts to formulate a new and distinctively 'American' theology. 'The radical theologians,' he writes, 'have introduced believers in pre-Copernican Christianity to the theology of the last generation. Bishop Robinson has told us about Bultmann and Tillich; Bishop Pike has reminded us of Harnack on the Trinity.' But we now live in what Dr. Richardson calls 'the sociotechnic age', and he claims that this calls for a newer-than-new theology. This will emerge, he believes, in the nation of greatest sociotechnic advance, and hence the centre of gravity in theological pioneering is shifting inevitably from Germany to America.

This newer-than-new theology has just entered its preliminary stages of production. As a first step towards a unified and comprehensive approach, Herbert Richardson has published five essays under the title *Theology for a New World*. It appears in the 'Contemporary Theology' series of SCM Press (London 1968, 170 pp., 30s.). Whatever our verdict on the book as a whole, it combines sufficient substance and originality to suggest we shall hear increasingly of Dr. Richardson in future years. Thus the publication of this volume provides a welcome opportunity to examine some ideas which may eventually become influential, and also to suggest some questions and comments.

MODERN THEOLOGY AND THE WORLD OF TOMORROW

Professor Richardson defines 'sociotechnics' as 'that new knowledge whereby man exercises technical control not only over nature, but also over . . . economics, education, science, and politics' (p. 16). 'Cybernetics' might have been a less daunting term, but the two words may not be quite synonymous for the author. Sociotechnics denotes a *unified* control, whereby scientific and sociological factors combine to produce a *total artificial environment* for man. In spite of some bizarre features, science-fiction of the quasi-philosophical type offers abundant examples of such a phenomenon. Huxley's *Brave New World* and Orwell's *Nineteen-Eighty-four* provide two widely-known examples; Clifford Simak and other writers suggest many more. But

already, Richardson points out, we live in an age when 'pollsters, psychological testing, and economic indicators all become the information-gatherers of the sociotechnicians' (p. 18). Mass media already possess the capacity to shape public opinion decisively, and then to appear to corroborate the judgments which it first suggested. In their thousands and in their millions the aggregate value-judgments of a society constitute the vast over-all pattern of a single, integrated, cybernetic system.

No complaint is made about the inevitable advent of sociotechnics. Professor Richardson reserves his criticisms for other theologians, insisting that 'the problem of modern man is not what Bultmann, Teilhard de Chardin, Tillich, Satre or Ogden have understood it to be' (p. 16). Both sides in the death-of-God debate come in for special attack. The debate, he argues, is vitiated by a glaring absence of *historical* perspective, and by a failure to distinguish clearly enough between different *kinds* of public atheism. Both points are well argued. Public atheism, he notes, has occurred in at least three periods of history, each of which marks a point of transition between an old and a new culture. Present secularism, therefore, cannot be explained 'as the mere *terminus* of an historical process that is tending toward an ultimate irreligion' (p. 4). It marks a changeover in (but not the end of) successive theological orientations, and it heralds the dawn of a new cultural epoch.

This leads naturally on to what has become a favourite topic among American theologians, namely the relationship between theology and human culture. Dr. Richardson makes some useful comments, although by no means all of these are new. Cultures, he argues, become established on the basis of certain assumptions about life (although these may be deeper and less conscious or unified, than might be implied by such a term as 'world-view'). They constitute a matrix of meaning, and thus provide an authority-structure and relative continuity for the duration of the culture in question. But this carries with it a built-in difficulty: it 'determines the kinds of things about which we want to know the truth'; and it may eliminate other considerations 'by making them appear meaningless' (p. 6). Nevertheless, this does not mean the end of Christianity. For it is 'not confined to any particular cultural expression, but is rooted in a divine revelation' (p. 29).

Little or none of this, as yet, is new or startling, and as a descriptive analysis it defies easy criticism. Novelty and difficulties emerge, however, in subsequent theses of the first two essays.

Firstly, every cultural 'intellectus', Dr. Richardson maintains, entails 'some characteristic conception of God' (p. 161). Clearly this goes well beyond the point on which many philosophers and sociologists agree, namely that any given culture presupposes an *epistemology*. Admittedly it is possible that the author is right. But he rests his case on over-selective examples, and it becomes necessary to compare the conclusions with those reached in broader surveys. One such survey is the important international symposium *Cross Cultural Understanding: Epistemology in Anthropology* (edited by F. S. C. Northrop and H. H. Livingston, New York 1964), in which some

twenty writers examine the presuppositions of cultures from ancient Mexico to modern Burma. They tend to agree that each culture entails its own complex of *philosophical* assumptions; but some of these only barely, if at all, amount to conceptions of God. It is also arguable that this is indirectly confirmed by certain strands in German hermeneutical philosophy. But the author does not explicitly investigate this possibility.

The second thesis, together with its criticism, is closely related to the first. Dr. Richardson believes that many Christian themes gain or lose their value and relevance with the passing of a given cultural epoch. He applies this to conceptions of God and to ethical ideals, as well as to areas of confrontation between the Church and the world. Thus, 'humility, self-sacrifice, celibacy, obedience, and silence' lose their value with the passing of the mediaeval world (p. 25). And the author does not flinch at drawing a parallel conclusion about inherited ethics today.

There is so much that is excellent and compelling in Dr. Richardson's analysis that some readers may be puzzled at the radical conclusions to which they seem to point. An analogy may serve to pin-point the difficulty. It is one thing to select a particular brand of goods for special display in a window; it is quite another thing to withdraw everything else from stock. Dr. Richardson's argument certainly shows that where given cultures have drawn on certain Christian ideas, this largely determines the area of witness and confrontation between the Church and the world in given periods. Indeed as a handbook for the Christian *apologist* the essay 'Five Kinds of Faith' is packed with relevant warnings and hints about procedure. But whatever Tillich may have said, theology is broader in scope than apologetics, and we must not mistake the part for the whole. The confusion may easily arise in historical analyses because we tend to see chiefly the most *publicised* aspects of the Church's faith in any age. But whatever their starting-points devout believers have always sought to grow into the wholeness of what is valued or demanded in revealed theology. Seventeenth-century Protestants who were mature in faith did not in fact minimise humility or self-sacrifice, as can be seen from the devotional writings of the day.

We must admit that it is not entirely clear how much Dr. Richardson wishes to prove. But if he is saying any less than we have implied, he would merely be repeating Tillich's principle of correlation, with the sole additional twist of bringing it up to date on sociotechnics. He rightly warns us against blurring the differences between various *kinds* of 'unbelief'; but this must not be taken to prove more than it directly suggests.

Dr. Richardson's third thesis is that 'theology must develop a conception of God which can undergird the primary realities of the cybernetic world . . . God . . . will be the unity of an encompassing system of relations' (p. 23). The author discusses his language about 'unity' in later essays. The urgent point at this juncture concerns the logical relationship between the *is* and the *ought* in his argument. He begins with the *is* of historical generalisations, and arrives on this basis at the *ought* of a future theological programme. At best it is

arguable that this is pragmatism; at worst some might wish to call it naturalism. But Dr. Richardson has not yet finished. Having decided that we *ought* to have a new conception of God, he proposes that we now assume that God *is* what this implies. Some critics might call this wishful thinking; others might argue that he reaches a conclusion that has hermeneutic value, but has reached it by the wrong route.

This last point suggests two final comments on this first part of *Theology for a New World*. Firstly, Dr. Richardson's arguments would have been clarified if he had explained where he endorsed, and where he differed from, other writers who face similar problems. Even if we ignore, for example, the historian A. J. Toynbee, much has been written on the hidden assumptions of cultural language-traditions which relate directly to questions raised in this book. The later Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer and Heinz Kimmerle come first to mind, although Wittgenstein's ideas about language and *Lebensform* may also be relevant. Secondly, some may suspect the breath-taking neatness which marks so many of the author's historical generalisations. Some of these may seem hazardous in the light of so many variable factors; for we are relating together theology, history, sociology, the language of faith, and the languages of given historical cultures. We might well compare, for example, Dr. Richardson's comments on gnosticism with Samuel Laeuchli's delicate critique in *The Language of Faith* (London 1965).

QUESTIONS ABOUT LANGUAGE AND A PHILOSOPHY OF UNITY

Dr. Richardson's third and fourth essays are the most valuable and constructive, and most of his originality comes to light in the fourth study. Both chapters are concerned with language.

An initial minor difficulty, however, arises over the problem of terminology. To denote the complex notion of 'images of the felt whole', Dr. Richardson uses the notoriously loaded term 'myth'. But it would have been less immediately misleading either to coin another term, or as a last resort to retain the more cumbersome phrase. Even Mircea Eleade concedes that definitions of myth encounter almost insuperable difficulties (cf. his *Aspects du mythe*. 1963, pp. 14-15). Given this qualification, however, we may endorse Professor Richardson's contention that proposals to eliminate the symbol-myth-image complex are misguided. He presses the point that analytical and discursive reasoning often fails to reach through beyond a superficial intellectual surface. But one other proviso must also be added. To recognise that symbols perform an indispensable function in Christian experience is not to say that they should not be tested at the bar of discursive language. And unlike Tillich, Dr. Richardson does not explicitly shut the door to this possibility.

This brings us to an important section. Following Marshall McLuhan, Professor Richardson rightly stresses the significant role of linguistic media in conveying meanings; and he offers an excellent discussion of linguistic units and levels of meaning. It should perhaps be mentioned that many other writers have already developed Dr. Richardson's points at a deeper and more technical level. (cf. for example, Ian

Ramsey on the Gestalt, Paul Tillich on symbolism, the later Wittgenstein and J. L. Austin on levels of meaning, and a number of writers, including Alston and Ziff in America, on linguistic units and syntactical operators). The author's contribution is to gather these approaches together, and to co-ordinate them as a ground-work for contentions in the fourth essay. Incidentally, Ramsey's use of the phrase 'the penny drops' is given a new label for 'American' new theology. It becomes the 'Aha experience' (*sic*, p. 58)! (This is one of the few shafts of humour that the new world will find in its theology.)

Once again, it might have been useful to compare the language-theory behind the new hermeneutic. To what extent does the notion of 'the penny drops' correspond with the notion of language-event? And to what extent does Dr. Richardson's emphasis on feeling and linguistic wholeness match linguistic concerns in the hermeneutic of the later Heidegger?

In the fourth essay Dr. Richardson grapples with important and urgent questions about the relationship between category-systems and ontology. It is here that he contributes his most original suggestions, apart from his general concern about sociotechnics. He examines some of the historical problems about identity, existence, and concepts of 'being', and postulates the use of three category-systems each of which corresponds to a given notion of 'unity'. He calls these: (1) the unity of individuality; (2) the unity of relationality; and (3) the unity of wholeness. He believes that 'every philosophy based on *one* of the three possible systems . . . can give an exhaustive account of reality' (p. 89, my italics). But he adds, 'All these systems make an equal claim upon us', revealing 'an intrinsic demand for a theory of polysemous (manifold) explanation' (p. 90).

What are we to make of all this? Dr. Richardson rightly sees that if we are to talk meaningfully about 'unity', we must first distinguish between its basic language-uses and correlate these with corresponding category-systems. But it is difficult to prove conclusively that any *one* of these systems (language-games?) can give an *exhaustive* account of 'reality', or indeed make 'claims' that we should use it. Concerning the first point, one might prefer to say with Wittgenstein, 'Yes, it is appropriate, but only for this narrowly circumscribed region, not for the whole of what you are claiming to describe' (*Philosophical Investigations*, Oxford 1967, section three). And the second smacks of a return to *prescriptive* views of language.

Nor is it entirely clear that Dr. Richardson succeeds at every point in discussion of 'polysemous explanations' (pp. 91-95). Can it be correct, for example, to relegate P. F. Strawson to the category of 'monothematic explanations'? His careful account of the overlapping of M predicates and P predicates hardly seems to suggest this (cf. *Individuals An Essay in Descriptive Metaphysics*, London 1964 pp. 103 ff.). Similarly, do the examples from Quenstedt and Coleridge adequately illustrate the postulated distinction between cross-thematic and triune-thematic explanations? One may suspect that there is something either tautologous or else over-simple about Dr. Richardson's careful correlations between the linguistic units of (1) word (2) sentence, and (3) *Gestalt*, with (1) logical identity, (2) logical relation, and (3)

an experience of wholeness. For if for example he means *logical* sentence, this verges on tautology; but if he means *grammatical* sentence or *grammatical* word, this threatens to be an over-simplification in the light of actual language-uses. (cf. the essay 'The Meaning of a Word' in J. L. Austin, *Philosophical Papers*, Oxford 1961, pp. 23-43; also printed in C. E. Caton, ed., *Philosophy and Ordinary Language*, Illinois 1963, pp. 1-21). But these suggestions are tentative and whatever may be our final verdict, Professor Richardson has given us much to think about. He has certainly approached linguistic problems from the right direction.

AN AMERICAN THEOLOGY

We have left space only for a brief postscript on the fifth and final essay. Dr. Richardson gives it the title 'Towards an American Theology'. After so much close reasoning, it comes as something of an anticlimax, apart from flashes of keen observation here and there. But the essay addresses important enough questions: (1) Why did God create the world? (2) Why did He become man? And (3) Why does He send the Holy Spirit to dwell in our hearts?

On Dr. Richardson's own admission some of the most constructive constituents in his 'American' answers come from no less a writer than Jonathan Edwards. But 'the fundamental perspective . . . is the American vision of worldly holiness, the sanctification of all things by the Holy Spirit . . . America is the cradle of Pentecostalism and the adopted homeland of religious utopianism' (p. 112). Dr. Richardson continues, 'The goal of my undertaking therefore is to show that God's end in creation is the sanctification, or spiritualisation, of the world' (ibid). He also claims that Sabbath observance and the theme of the glory of God are 'two characteristic elements in American Christianity' (p. 126), and that 'the only genuine Christian trinitarianism has been found in American religion' (p. 151).

It is best perhaps not to comment on this new form of theological imperialism. After all, until recently many lay Englishmen imagined that 'the Church' was the product of Anglicanism. Dr. Richardson makes two allusions to Jonathan Edwards, however, which do call for comment. Firstly, earlier in the book, he quotes a passage from Edwards from which he infers his 'feeling of union with the All-encompassing Whole' (p. 60). Although the passage may give this impression, care should be taken not to identify Edwards' concern about 'religious affections' with the kind of stress on feeling-states that we find in Otto, Schleiermacher, and Tillich. Edwards *did* stress the role of feeling, but he did so firmly in the context of a robust Biblical theism. Secondly, why is Jonathan Edwards only 'supposedly' a traditional Calvinist, in the context of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit? (p. 150). In all its essentials what Edwards expounded does not seem to go radically beyond what can be found in John Calvin (cf. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book II, chapter I, and his commentaries on relevant passages).

Dr. Richardson has percolated a subtle blend of constructive seed-thoughts and off-beat curiosities. What kind of aroma will come from the next (supposedly all-American) pot?