

Editorial

Systematic theology

Professor Stephen Sykes, in his trenchant critique of Anglicanism (*The Integrity of Anglicanism*, Mowbrays: London 1978), draws attention to the way in which he believes systematic theology has been neglected in British universities and theological colleges (pp 76 and 79-82). He argues that, though scriptural and patristic texts have been important in university theology courses, because of the unresolved theological problems of interpretation the emphasis has been on their historical and literary meaning and that the task of working out a systematic theology has been largely avoided. The failure to train systematic theologians at the universities has had, of course, consequences for theological colleges; and the fact that their staff have been required to teach 'an impossibly wide spectrum' (p 82) has meant that the defect could not be overcome. As a result, Professor Sykes judges that the scholarly output of theological staff has been 'scandalously meagre', particularly in dogmatic and systematic theology (p 81). Though the degree of specialization in theological-college teaching has increased more than Professor Sykes' analysis allows, it is not evident that the systematic output has risen significantly. To this generalization evangelical colleges are not an exception, and the departure of Dr J. I. Packer to Vancouver makes the critique all the more acute within this tradition.

Professor Sykes defines systematic theology as being 'that constructive discipline which presents the substance of the Christian faith with a claim on the minds of men.' (p ix) It requires, therefore, the ability to hear the questions raised within one's own culture, to understand the conclusions reached in many different disciplines within theology, and to produce a coherent theology which takes account of these questions and conclusions—without of course necessarily accepting them—and relates them to the deposit of faith. This means, on the one hand, that the systematic theologian will raise questions for the specialist in other theological fields which may lead him to a new concept of his work. So one notes the dramatic effect of Barth on biblical scholarship in the second quarter of the twentieth century. On the other hand, the systematic theologian may be forced to re-express his understanding in the light of the conclusions reached by the specialist scholars.

If there are no systematic theologians, this two-way process cannot take place. Within Anglicanism generally, the lack of outstanding systematic theologians probably makes the achievement of widely-

based comprehensiveness easier. Within evangelicalism, the effect is rather different. Its problem is that, though it has a high respect for systematic theology, it has few who undertake it. It is therefore driven to take refuge in the systematics of the past. There must always, of course, be for any systematic theologian a deep rooting in past traditions, but these must be understood and interpreted in the context of present dilemmas and questions. There are signs that the paucity of systematic theologians means that this is not happening in our constituency any more than in others.

Evangelical scholarship has advanced very greatly in recent years, most significantly in the field of biblical scholarship. The work of some evangelical scholars is highly regarded and, in particular, *New Testament Interpretation* (ed. I. Howard Marshall, Paternoster : Exeter 1977) represents a landmark of their achievements. These scholars have shown integrity and courage in adhering to the great evangelical emphases and, at the same time, facing squarely the issues raised by historical criticism. Inevitably, their conclusions have not always been framed in the terms of their forefathers and this has caused some to fear. If systematic theology had kept pace with the developments amongst the biblical scholars, then a healthy interaction would be expected in which, though the conclusions of a particular scholar might be questioned, modified or rejected, his approach would be understood and his integrity welcomed. Because it has not kept pace, there are indications that the reaction of some of those who guard the traditions of the past is of a particularly negative sort. Conclusions are questioned because they might give offence or because they are different in some detail or another from the received orthodoxy. It is manifestly right to raise questions, either out of pastoral concern or out of respect for the formulations of the past but, if this is done constantly within terms of reference which are rigid and wooden and which seem never to understand the questions raised and the conclusions reached, then the prospects of commending the Christian faith to our age and culture are poor. It is for this reason that we need to pray for, and encourage, the most gifted young evangelical scholars—it is a calling open only to the very gifted—to become systematic theologians.

Thamesmead

The Bishop of Southwark's criticism of theological colleges for his failure to find a priest prepared to serve in Thamesmead has, at the time of writing (July), stirred up an interesting debate in the media. Dr Stockwood calls the theological college 'a factory-farm for middle-class clergymen who are at a loss when it comes to dealing with people who have not had their own middle-class education.' (*Church Times*, 27 July 1979) There is no doubt truth in this stricture, but it is surely more complex than he suggests. Theological colleges may

have remarkably independent foundations and governing bodies, but they are very much in fact servants of the church, and ultimately of bishops, in the sort of courses they offer and the sort of candidates they train. They have been, as it happens, in front, rather than behind, general church stipulations in the importance they attach to pastoral training. It was only in the summer of 1978 that pastoral studies became mandatory for all ACCM-accredited courses, though they have been provided as a necessary extra, with varying degrees of expertise, since theological colleges were first established. Clearly improvement will always be possible here, and, in particular, courses in cross-cultural communication should be encouraged for ministry in a multi-cultural, multi-religious society.

There is, however, another and more important dimension to the Thamesmead crisis. To reiterate and apply a point made in a previous editorial (*Churchman* 94:2, pp 101-2), the problem lies in the model of the ordained ministry which pertains in Anglicanism. Middle-class theological colleges are criticized, perhaps rightly, for providing clergy able to speak only to the middle-classes, but should not questions be asked of the bishops who send overwhelmingly middle-class candidates to the colleges, and who insist on a high academic standard which effectively excludes much working-class potential? The sadness of Thamesmead is a double one. The lesser sadness lies in the failure to find a suitable middle-class priest. The greater sadness is that the church, after a century and a half of mission in industrial centres, was still looking for a missionary from another culture to undertake the task. The problem is, of course, of long standing. E. R. Norman dates it back to the seventeenth century and the loss of 'the peasant clergy' (*Guardian*, 28 July 1979). If the theological colleges have much to learn about the better equipment of cross-cultural missionaries, the church in general, and the episcopate in particular, have still to ask why they have not found adequate 'natives' to minister in the Thamesmeads of Britain.

Robin Nixon

One of the most rewarding sources for the student of church history is the sheer volume of large, well-documented biographies of ecclesiastical figures. Their objectives, hagiographical or otherwise, need to be carefully weighed, but they nonetheless give order and substance to figures who might otherwise have been shadowy and obscure and beyond recall. Such large-scale biographies are now reserved only for the very distinguished and influential, and one wonders how the future historian will manage. Noel Pollard is therefore to be congratulated for editing *Robin Nixon: A Life and Tribute* (Grove Books : Bramcote 1979) so quickly. It is of course small, but it does provide the facts about Robin's life and gives the feel of the man and of the

institutions with which he was associated. It also details what must have been a most moving 'farewell service' and funeral. It is a book which all Robin's friends and admirers will want to have.

PETER WILLIAMS

Attention Please

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