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Theology and Prayer

An issue of the *Canadian Journal of Theology* which devotes a substantial share of its attention to the liturgy needs no apology, but does offer occasion for reflection on the interconnection between theology and prayer. I say 'prayer' rather than 'liturgy,' because it does seem to this writer that at the present time some of the efforts at liturgical reform and renewal are proving disappointing because the issue of prayer is not adequately faced. One author has recently noted that the issue of prayer is now a deadly serious one – as serious as the issue of faith itself. It may indeed be possible to conduct an academic exercise called 'theology' which dissolves the living God, and to continue to pick over the bones for a time, but prayer – the response of the mind and heart to God – can scarcely survive such radical therapy. And without prayer, without personal communion and dialogue with the mystery of God – absolute Person and Love – liturgy can scarcely compete with the National Football League or the National Ballet or squaredancing, according to one's taste. The Archbishop of Canterbury has asked a very direct question which cannot be evaded: 'Liturgical movements strive to bridge the gap between worship and the common life, and just now they gather to themselves much enthusiasm and romance. But will these movements succeed unless there is with them a revival of contemplative prayer?'¹

Of course it is not news to say that contemporary man has his own difficulties when it comes to spontaneous prayer. His consciousness of his mastery of the universe, the closing of the famous 'gaps' where apparently God was easily seen and approached (I wonder), all the familiar descriptions of modern man's religious situation would seem to point to the difficulty of prayer in our time. On the other hand, it is precisely here that a vigorous and historically informed theology of prayer would be of service to God's people. This present situation might well be seen as a precious time of purification, where prayer and personal communion might be realized more quickly at the level proper to Christian faith and personal communion with the living God. All of the spiritual masters are there to assure us that man's personal communion with God must undergo such purification, such darkness and fire, if he is to increase, we to decrease. May it not be that this purifying pattern is writ large in the whole cultural-psychological situation of modern man at this time, and is not only to be found in the secret recesses of the individual's spiritual adventure?

Prayer is a crucial issue for theology, precisely because the reality of God

1. A. M. Ramsey, *Sacred and Secular* (London: Longmans, 1965), pp. 57f.

is finally the only issue. The God of Israel, the God who reveals himself in Christ and his Spirit, is one who approaches man and invites him to interpersonal communion and collaboration. The basic validity and necessity of prayer for the Christian is strictly correlative with the reality of God as Person both within and beyond man his creature. Prayer is simply a normal, necessary actualization of faith in the reality of the present God, who freely comes to man in creative power and loving, recreating forgiveness. As Edward Schillebeeckx has put it in response to Bishop Robinson's reflections: 'God transcends his "function" as the absolute foundation of existence: he is himself and by himself independently of man and the world – an absolutely personal being, worthy of being loved for himself, and not only because he is the ground of our being.'²

It is true that at times Christian prayer has been distorted as a kind of flight from present actualities and responsibilities. But the answer to this is the truth of the gospel, not suspicion of prayer. It is indeed remarkable how often the prayer of Christ is presented in a close connection with his mission, and his prayer itself is the very model of communion at once with the Person of the Father and with his purposes. To pray is not to escape from salvation-history, but to enter profoundly into its very dynamism and divine direction.

Theology today is a very sophisticated enterprise, demanding a wide range of technical competencies. A theologian who would dispense with the effort this enterprise implies would have little respect for his own craft, and would fail in his service to the gospel and to God's people. The old saw still holds: 'Piety is no substitute for technique.' But this very complexity of the tools and task of the theologian implies a certain 'distance' between his scientific work and the life of faith as such. There is no theology which does not issue from living faith and flow back into it in some way – hence its service to the community of faith. But a good case can be made for the claim that 'faith and reflection about faith are ... two completely different orientations of the spirit. Although faith is an "existential act," theology as a science is not. As reflection, theology is an act which, *as such*, stands outside man's affective and practical attitude towards the reality of faith.'³ As so often in the Christian pattern, there is only one thing necessary in terms of absolute choice, but concretely in history the church must have both 'existential' faith and theology, systematic reflection about faith – *scientia fidei*.

In our present context, prayer – the very movement of living faith itself – is the one thing necessary, but it will not long remain humanly healthy and manageable without theologizing about prayer. This may not be the most urgent task of contemporary theology, but it needs more attention than it has lately received. It may be a relatively modest task, but to undertake it will be a real service to the health and vigour of the community of faith, for living

2. Quoted by R. Ledogar, 'The Question of Daily Mass,' *Worship*, 43 (1969), 260.

3. E. Schillebeeckx, *Revelation and Theology*, vol. 2 (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1968), p. 114.

faith will not long survive the abandonment of its actualization in prayer and worship.

Theology, in turn, will be enlivened by frequent reflection on the expression of faith in prayer and praise. It is scarcely original to note that theology has to become relevant to the needs and problems of contemporary man in his psychological, social, and cultural dimensions. I suggest, however, that we must be aware of the constant attention (and tension) demanded if it is also to be relevant to the living God and his purposes in contemporary history. The 'existential act' of such 'attention' is surely the act of praying, and without its informing vigour theology and its practitioners will soon cease to interest men who, whether they know it or not, are called to converse with the living God.

E.B.A.

Karl Barth and Regular Dogmatics

In this issue we honour the first anniversary of Karl Barth's death on Monday, 9 December 1968, by devoting special articles to his memory and work.

As a theologian of giant stature – Pope John named him the greatest since Thomas – Barth was a model practitioner of what he called 'regular dogmatics,' which he distinguished by *completeness* from "irregular dogmatics." The former accepts the task of independent dogmatic work and the duty of school instruction, but its impulses are mostly derived from the latter, which emerges in treatises, commentaries, historical expositions, sermons, and devotional literature.¹

In contrast with these two kinds of dogmatics, Barth calls attention to the 'markedly journalistic stamp' of modern evangelical theology, resulting from 'an individualistic simplification and abbreviation of all questions.' Writing in 1932, he says: 'This declension has not been overcome today ... Would that we had only got the length at last of regular dogmatics being once more, at least for us, a persistent ideal worth striving after! ... Nothing that claims to be truly of the Church will need to shrink from the sober light of 'scholastic' ... The fear of scholasticism is the mark of the false prophet.'

Perhaps because of the pseudo-Protestant idea that every man has the right to say for himself what the Bible teaches, and perhaps still more from a cultural decadence that allows a man to reject – and to teach others to reject – whatever he does not, within his limited experience, see to be true, the catholic faith of the church gets a poor press from "journalistic" theologians. Is not *Honest to God* a good – or bad – example of 'an individualistic simplification and abbreviation of all questions,' or at any rate of some major ones, and is

1. *Church Dogmatics*, vol. I, pt. I (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1936), pp. 315ff. The following quotations come from this context.

not *The Secular City* a pretty cool rejection of the historic revelational goals of all school theology, without which completeness can never be achieved? What Barth calls completeness is really catholicity at the intellectual level. He is surely right in claiming that regular dogmatics is especially indispensable 'in the more disturbed times.' It is questionable whether our times are more disturbed than those in which he was writing, for it is astonishing how many of our own burning topics are directly addressed in volume one, part one, of *Church Dogmatics*, written a full generation ago. If some of these topics have entered a new phase, the need is all the more pressing for 'regular dogmatics,' lest we reduce the Christian faith to what may appeal to the journalistic mood of the moment, but cannot square with the total, biblical, hard-worked school-theology of the ages, to which Barth held himself always accountable.

In university circles, perhaps the most pressing of these topics – a very familiar one to Barth – is whether theology is to be prosecuted as dogmatics or, in accordance with Schleiermacher's programme, as 'history of religions' (*Religionsgeschichte*). Are universities to have faculties of theology or departments of religious studies? The disquieting thing is that this issue is tending to go by default. Under the 'axiom' that 'religion' cannot be scientifically studied from a dogmatic (Christian) basis – and in this connection it is to be remarked that even university people sometimes confuse the popular with the proper meaning of the word *dogmatic* – the inference tends to be drawn, without further discussion, that the alternative of departments of religion is the only academically respectable one.

The 'axiom' ought to be questioned and the validity of departments of religion seriously examined, not least in the interests of a truly scientific pursuit of truth. Such departments are scientifically dubious in the first place, because their subject matter is inherently indefinable. This charge is not now being made as a mere riposte to the common allegation that the subject matter of Christian dogmatics (that is, God) is indefinable. The allegation does not worry us, because the starting-place of Christian dogmatics has always been the only possible logical one of divine self-definition by revelation. No, what we mean is that departments of religion have to treat as 'religion' everything from atheism to God-knows-what, and to use one term for this confused spectrum, or rather chaos, is bogus terminology and bogus science. We are not unaware that genuine scientific researchers have problems of definition, whether it be the psychologist's problem of saying what he means by 'mind,' 'psyche,' or 'behaviour,' or the physiologist's efforts to delimit his field from the psychologist's, on the one hand, or from the biochemist's or even the chemist's on the other. But while such problems are due to the distinctiveness and the interpenetrations of different sciences, the term 'religion' as it must be used in departments of religious studies lacks the internally coherent distinctiveness of one field set among others, and the sub-divisions of 'religion,' so far from being separate and authentic fields of study to be related to one another systematically, as in the case of other sciences, are in fact mutually destructive phenomena. There is no scientific way of regularizing the subject

matter of departments of religion beyond the stage of superficial phenomenology. To take any further step means stepping into another department.

In the second place, departments of religion are inherently confused and confusing because they must at least purport to take the more-than-human object of religion – if any! – seriously, in this case they will be surreptitiously *theologizing*. And yet, to preserve their putative scientific character they must aver that their real subject is not a more-than-human object but *religion*, that is, human experiences and human expressions of a religious nature (whatever this indefinable means). In this case such departments ought to be seen for what they are, branches of psychology, sociology, anthropology, history, or literature, which, methodologically restricted as they are within the human dimension, are incapable of touching the sources of 'religion.' The fact is that departments of religion exist behind a façade of borrowings from *particular religions* (not 'religion') and the sciences of man. They are justified in a university as reporters on the phenomenology of man and his religions, but an investigation that can get no further than phenomenology is doomed to be arrested at the level of prolegomena to science. It can never itself be a science.

In the University of Toronto, in which departments of religion, undergraduate and graduate, are now appearing, it is clamantly urgent that the Toronto School of Theology, which has now also emerged, be grounded in the solid necessity for 'regular dogmatics,' without failing to claim that it alone can handle the problem of 'religion' upon a genuinely scientific basis. It will be good to have a lively dialogue between both types of school upon this issue. If the Toronto School of Theology is for its part to fulfil its theological role, it will need to do so on the basis of having, like Barth – whether with his particular theology or without it – a more-than-scientific task to discharge, which nevertheless calls for a scientific methodology.

D.W.H.

Notice to Subscribers

A profusion of apologies for the irregular appearance of the *Journal* cannot atone for inconvenience to both writers and readers. Nevertheless, we do apologize and assure you that steps have been taken to ensure the orderly and rapid publication of a number of issues to get us back on schedule.

The prospect for the future includes new challenges which only time and experience can evaluate. While formal ratification cannot be obtained until June 1970, it appears relatively certain that the *CJT* will undergo a major revamping, perhaps rebirth is more accurate. We anticipate joining forces entirely with the young and vigorous Canadian Society for the Study of Religion, to produce a new and broadened publication. This new journal, with a

new name, as yet undetermined, will incorporate and continue the high scholarly standards of the *CJT*; some of the key points of editorial policy will be:

- 1 Articles will cover all aspects of and approaches to religion and religions, including the present concerns of the *Journal*.
- 2 The new journal will provide ample space for articles in either French or English.
- 3 Interdisciplinary approaches in the general field of religion will be encouraged.
- 4 High standards of scholarly excellence will be the first criterion of selection.

It is hoped that this transition will be fully effected by January 1971. May we request that you plan to continue your subscription. If you have an article you wish considered for future publication, kindly send it to Canadian Journal of Theology, University of Toronto Press, Toronto. It will be acknowledged and held until June for the incoming editorial board.

Thank you for your support.

Norman E. Wagner, Chairman

Annual Meeting

The annual meeting of the *Canadian Journal of Theology* will be held at the University of Manitoba, Friday 12 June 1970, at 4:00 p.m.