

The Theological Task

Fr. Robert Brungs, SJ

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Institute for Theological Encounter with Science and Technology

Cardinal Rigali Center • 20 Archbishop May Drive • Suite 3400-A • St. Louis, Missouri 63119 • USA
314.792.7220 • www.faithscience.org • E-mail: mariannepost@archstl.org

It is, undoubtedly, quite clear from the talks already presented this weekend that there is a theological task of major proportion facing the Church. It is my estimate that the religious implications of the advances in science, especially in the life-sciences, are of the same magnitude as those of the Christological and Trinitarian controversies of the fourth and fifth centuries. To appreciate better the theological task it would not be inappropriate to look first at both the function and the scope of theology. _

First of all dogmatic theology is not revelation, nor is it merely a psycho-sociological estimate of reality. It is not a model-making operation, in the sense that that notion is used in the physical sciences. It is not an observational-inferential system of describing reality, and therefore it is not a logic. Although dogmatic theology depends in part on the contribution from all the other human modes of inquiry it is not merely the integrated sum of those ways of knowing. Finally, dogmatic theology is not concerned with concrete application, that is, it is not a problem solving discipline in that sense. This “negative theologizing” about dogmatic theology is not meant to be exclusive, but it will help us to clarify the issue somewhat. _

All modes of human inquiry are based on some suppositional premises. In all non-theological modes of inquiry, the suppositional base of the art or science is some epistemological stance or other. The science forms a logic-system. In theology, however, the suppositional base, if I may put it so, is not “thinking” but “living.” A true dogmatic theology is a “lived-science,” not a “thought-science.” It requires the fundamental stance of faith, of credal commitment. This says, in effect, that a non-believer cannot be a Christian theologian. This is true of, say, the Buddhist who may indeed think and write about Christian theology, but is incapable of being a Christian theologian. Faith is the necessary but not sufficient source of the work of Christian theologizing. We shall return to the “necessary-sufficient” distinction later. Suffice it to say here that credal faith is the sine qua non of the dogmatic theologian. This is merely a restatement of the role of the theologian as *fides quaerens intellectum*, the believer seeking understanding. The emphasis is on believer. _

The credal base of Christian theology grows from the revelational faith experience of the Christian community. This, of course, embraces the scriptural and traditional expression of faith in Christ. The credal commitment is not the faith-acceptance of a series of propositions, as has so often been asserted. It is not belief in an ontology or a metaphysics. It is faith in Jesus Christ as expressed in human modes of understanding. Credal expressions do change. This is immediately clear from a comparison of early creeds with each other and with the more fully developed credal statements of the early ecumenical Councils. There can never be the absolute best credal statement. But to move into an analysis of creeds would take us afield at this point. _

The base of any Christian theology is belief in a person, Jesus Christ, and a response to him on a personal level. Theology is the Pauline *koue-apokoue*, (hearing-responding) on an intellectual-moral level. This *koue-apokoue*, even on a personal level, however, does not occur in a vacuum; it occurs within the community of believers, within the People of God. The People of God has a history, even an “intellectual history”; it is this that we call doctrinal tradition. The “hearing-responding” of the dogmatist must occur in the framework of the historical “hearing-responding” of the faith-community. Without this acceptance of the tradition, one can write about Christian theology, but only write about it. One can show, for example, how one theological position flowed from or reacted to another. Or one can show the effect of a specific theology on the society of its time. But the former is history, the latter social theory; neither is theology. _

But the theological task was earlier defined as *fides quaerens intellectum*. If faith is the basis, already a graced situation, mind and heart are the vehicles. Theology is more than just a sophisticated statement of personal faith. It is an attempt to understand reality in the light of faith. Faith has been said before to be the necessary but not sufficient source of dogmatic theology. To be sufficient, theology cannot be divorced from its contemporary milieu. Were Christianity a religion that looked only to the past, faith and theology would be equivalent. Were Christianity concerned with only the problems of the present, then faith would be a hindrance to our understanding of reality. But Christianity is basically oriented to “eschaton.” Therefore it cannot be separated from the past nor unconcerned with the present, since it is only in the historical continuity of past and present

that the future can be addressed. In this sense, Christian dogmatic theology is temporally co-terminus with the Incarnate God who existed, exists and will exist. The Incarnate God cannot be understood, even approached, as simply past or present. He will be clearly known only in eschaton and it is toward this understanding that the theologian must proceed. But for the person (and hence the theologian), as presently constituted in essential not knowing, the only approach to the ultimate future is in terms of the present and past which one can know partially although inadequately. Until mystery yields to vision this is the constituted order of things. _

Yet this constituted order is not static, nor is it an equilibrium situation. Our attempt to know God, our task of hearing-responding is not amenable to a “steady-state” situation. Insofar as the reality of the whole Christ, head and members, as Paul tells us (Ephesians 4:12-13), is growing, so too, must our understanding. It is a commonplace to say that the theology of the fourth century is inadequate to the twentieth century. It is also to say that the theology of the twentieth century will be inadequate to the twenty-third century. All this means is that the reality toward which theology looks is an organic, growing reality. The theologian is hung, consequently, on the cruel dilemma of the present-past as referents to the future. He must look to the unknowable term of the growing reality while being a part of that growth at a given historical moment. He cannot remove himself from the limited perspective of a moment of growth nor can he abandon his organic relation to the term of the growth. He is caught in the web of a continuity- change-matrix which spans effectively the history of the people of the Incarnate God. _

In terms both of theology itself and of its relation to the types of scientific change that have been so ably put before us this weekend, the real problem is that of change in continuity or in continuity with change. The faith-basis of Christian theology remains what it has always been, the Incarnate-God revealed to us in revelation, in scripture and tradition. But at the same time our understanding of creation, and therefore our approach to God, does undergo change. The expression of the truth of revelation, to remain itself, must change. _

The problem of change within continuity is not new to the Christian theological community. Gregory Nazianzen fifteen hundred years ago made the following assessment: “Here (in revelation) perfection is reached by additions. For the matter stands thus. The Old Testament proclaimed the Father openly, and the Son more obscurely. The New manifested the Son, and suggested the divinity of the Spirit. Now the Spirit himself dwells among us and supplies us with a clearer demonstration of himself you see lights breaking on us gradually, and (you see) the order of theology, which it is better for us to keep, neither proclaiming things too suddenly nor yet keeping them hidden to the end. For the former course would be unscientific, the latter atheistical (Ord. Theol. 5, rm. 26, 27; Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers 7, 326). _

What is the model for change in theology? Is it the scientific notion of “breaking the paradigm”? Is it a quantum leap,” a type of change that was suggested at the Villa Cavalletti (1972) ITEST meeting last September? Or is it an assimilation-accommodation type model? It might be worth briefly considering each of these models for change. Let us begin with “breaking the-paradigm” model. It has been said (Alvin M. Weinberg, “The Axiology of Science”, American Scientist , Vol. 58, No. 6., Nov-Dec 1970, p. 613-615) that “paradigm breaking is better than spectroscopy.” This is used in T.S. Kuhn’s sense: “scientific progress’ is punctuated by ‘revolutions’ which break existing patterns; in between such revolutions, scientists add details within an existing paradigm --- this I call ‘spectroscopy.’” If we consider, for instance Newtonian physics as the paradigm, then Einstein’s relativity theory shattered the paradigm. The work done since the teens of this century in both special and general relativity would come under the heading of “spectroscopy.” Can we legitimately expect such a “paradigm breaking” to occur in Christian dogmatic thought? _

I believe we should not expect such a breakthrough. This I say for one particular reason: there is a world of difference between the logical model-making and model-breaking of the scientist and the theological experience of the Christian community. Christianity is not a logic; it is a history. There is, for example, little, if any, continuity between the Copernican model of the solar system and the Ptolemaic model, little continuity between quantum mechanics and classical mechanics on the deepest levels of supposition. Although it can be shown that classical mechanics is a special case of quantum theory, compare the basic suppositions, the total determinacy

of classical physics and the indeterminacy of modern physics. This represents more than merely a greater sophistication. It involves a contradictory view of basic physical reality. Can this happen in dogmatics? It seems not, short of a new revelation. The faith-supposition of Christian theology (and doctrine) must remain intact. What can be done in a logic cannot be repeated in a history. _

Let us look to the notion of “the quantum leap” in theology, as a model of theological change. I was not in the group at Cavalletti in which this model was offered as perhaps valuable to our understanding of theological change. As a physicist I cannot accept the term in view of the physical analogy it suggests. To a physicist, a quantum leap is process-less. If, say, an electron in energy state A makes a “quantum leap” to energy state B, there is no process involved. That means that the electron is in either state A or state B; it is never in-between these two states. This model may sound absurd to the non-physicist, but this is the parent model of the term “quantum leap.” Now, it may be that all that was meant by the term was a leap of intuition. If so, I do believe the intuitive leap is possible in theology, but it is more likely to be found in mystical theology than in dogmatic theology. The strict meaning of the phrase “quantum leap” cannot be applied to Christian dogmatics precisely because it implies complete discontinuity. _

The final model I would like to propose is that of assimilation-accommodation in the sense of Piaget. In the process of assimilation an organism takes in something other and changes it to the extent that it becomes a living part of the organism. In accommodation the organism changes and adapts to the other. These two processes imply a tension and, in a healthy organism they work in a counterpoised equilibrium. This analysis has several features that are valuable. It stresses the organic continuity that a dogmatic must have. It includes the notion that what is brought into the organism is that which is favorable to its preservation and growth. This organic analogy is quite appropriate for understanding the patterns of change and continuity in dogmatics. Vincent of Lerins used it long ago: “Let the soul’s religion imitate the law of the body, which as years go on develops indeed and opens out its due proportions, and yet remains identically what it was. Small are a baby’s limbs, a youth’s are larger, yet they are the same”. (*Commonit* , 29). John Henry Newman, in commenting on this remarks: “The unity of type, characteristic as it is of faithful developments, must not be pressed to the extent of denying all variation, nay considerable alteration of proportion and relation, as time goes on, in the parts or aspects of an idea the butterfly is the development, but not in any sense the mage, of the grub.” (*An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, p. 161.) _

In summary, there is change needed in dogmatic theology to handle the questions that are arising from the new scientific discoveries. The faith-content must be preserved. The changes must represent an organic assimilation of and accommodation to this new state of human affairs. In our present situation we can be sure there will be no new revelation. It becomes a problem of searching the faith-content for those aspects of revelation that are most directly valuable in understanding and assimilating the new human situation. _

In order to come to a real dogmatic position, it is vitally important to understand and to state accurately the theological question that is being asked. The question is obviously enough concerned with the relationship between humans and between humans and God. The former network of relations on both the human-human and human-God levels will be altered by those discoveries that come under the designation of the “new biology.” I propose that the theological question here is this: is man’s effort to seize control of human biological development (and, consequently, human development) compatible with his worship of God in history? If so, how is it compatible and to what extent? _

Any approach to God is made in history. This, obviously, is not meant to imply a dichotomy between the human and all the things we classify as “nature.” Nature, too, has its history and its covenant with God: “When the rainbow is in the clouds I shall see it and call to mind the lasting covenant between God and every living creature of every kind that is found on the earth” (*Genesis 9:16*). The important thing, however, is not to forget the free historicity of the Christian and of the growing Kingdom of God. It is within this history, as a part of this history, that the dogmatic task must be carried out. _

The dogmatist's task in the present theological crisis is not the providing of practical answers to the practical questions of concrete human behavior either individually or collectively. The task is, rather, to provide a vision of reality that is truly Christian and truly one with the faith. The dogmatist must weave from the thematic threads of tradition a new understanding of revelation. It is not for him or her to say that such an act is good or bad, that such a social experiment is timely or untimely. It is for him or her, if it may be so stated, to incorporate the present problematic into the unchanging faith. _

Perhaps we can best illustrate the dogmatic task by the use of an extended metaphor --- please remember it is only a metaphor. In its totality, doctrine, of which theology is the speculative expression, becomes vision in eschatological completion. Then we shall have the clear and unmistakable grasp of reality, the entire picture in all its unity will be clear. But at present we have a situation not unlike a large jigsaw puzzle, mostly unassembled of course. We have a large number of pieces, all seemingly shaped at random, all merely bits and splashes of color, meaningless at present in terms of the ultimate texture and beauty of definitive reality. Where does the dogmatist start? _

Certainly the first thing to be done is to form the edges of the puzzle. In dogmatic terms this would effectively delineate the edges of the problems, give the constraints within which a solution is to be sought. This process is not vastly different from boundary value problems in physics. Take, for instance, the problem of the vibrations of a drum. There is a whole system of constraints that have to be considered, the shape of the drum, the tension in the drum-head and so on. These form the boundary within which the problem is to be solved. _

The edges or values of the dogmatic puzzle we mentioned are what Cardinal Newman would call dogmatic principles. They form the framework within which doctrine (and theology) can develop. One of these constraints would be the Lordship of Christ and the co-Lordship of man. Any dogmatic approach that would, for instance, deny man any place in the development of the human race or in the growth of the full Kingdom of God would have to be discarded. The obverse is also true: any dogmatic approach which considered man as autonomous in his activities, here in the life sciences, would have to be eliminated since it denies the absolute Lordship of Christ. _

Another of the constraints is the dogmatic principle of the ultimate capability of participation in God of all of creation, including non-human creation. Any dogmatic position, therefore, that relegates the human body or material reality to the level of means only would have to be rejected. No dogmatic that stressed the spiritual nature of the human and of eschatological reality to the exclusion of the material would fit within the constraint system. And so on. _

What then are some of the major themes that a dogmatic consideration of the new biological revolution would develop? We shall devote the rest of this development to a brief sketch of the dogmatic context. It would not be inadvisable here to remark that what is being stated here is only the context of the beginning of the dogmatic task, not its conclusion. We are establishing, in admittedly broad statements, the position out of which a dogmatic exploration can proceed. _

The story of development of creation is embodied, typified, by Abraham, who gave up his home, went into the unknown to follow God. He gave up security, lived as a stranger in a foreign land. This he did with good grace and humor. All creation, like Abraham, looks to future fulfillment, a fulfillment that is at present unknowable. Creation is not an event, it is a saga to be sung with exaltation and human good grace. Creation is the saga of God's redeeming activity, redemption from sin, death, decay, dissolution. The revealed progress of redemption history discloses God's Lordship over all that he has made. It has been revealed also that, in time, God entered so totally into history that this unique entrance can be dated in terms of the history of the Roman Empire. The historically unique events of the years zero to thirty of our era are determinative of the history of all creation. All creation, man and cosmos, owes its beginning to the Word made flesh and finds its fulfillment in Him. _

Christ's Lordship is a radically totalitarian claim: there is no other Lord. Creation has no meaning and no destiny apart from Christ. Therefore any and all dualism between creation and redemption is inadmissible.

In Christ-still-man “history” and “nature” become one, are equivalent. The fact that the Son of God became flesh is central in the unfolding destiny of all creation. But the Son of God has retained his human nature, his flesh, in resurrection and ascension. As man, Christ is Lord of all. In the Incarnation-Resurrection unity, God has definitively revealed his will for creation: he has joined all creation to himself in the human nature of his own divine Son. God has definitively and absolutely ratified his initial judgment of creation --- that it was good. But more than this, in Christ the entire cosmic reality has become holy, consecrated to God and capable of participation in the Trinitarian life of God. In terms of the Greek Fathers, God has declared all creation to be divinizable. Christianity proclaims the holiness of the human body, the holiness of the entire cosmos. The Christian cannot dismiss the cosmos as irrelevant, meaningless or evil. The Christian cannot ignore the material world nor can he exploit it without regard for the Lordship of Christ over it. _

The above affirmations contrast sharply with modern culture, which does not assign to the human any dignity higher than that of a technologically-oriented animal, nor any destiny greater than the few years he has to manipulate matter. In such a culture, human success is judged by what he or she can acquire by manipulative genius. Thus, devoid of any meaning except the present, the human cannot afford to take himself seriously and a fortiori cannot allow material creation to be taken seriously. Our culture has ended up denying the value of matter, making creation merely something to be manipulated by the only animal capable of manipulating it. Nothing has any true value except to be used. The cultural situation has to be truly gauged in any honest dogmatic approach. For the Christian, however, the orientation must be toward the respect for the holy character of creation and to worship of its Creator. _

Both Harvey Wheeler (“Bringing Science under Law”, Center Magazine , March 1969) and Lynn White, Jr. in his now famous article (“The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,” Science , 155, 1967, pp. 1203-1207) stress Christianity’s role in the secularization of nature and society. There, of course, is some truth in this position insofar as the “sacred” mentioned by Wheeler and White did die with the advent of Christianity. The “sacred beings” who died seem to be those “elemental principles of this world” mentioned by St. Paul (Galatians 4:3). Christianity denied the sacredness of nature insofar as it depended on the mastery of elementary spirits. It rejected the sacredness of any society that depended on the “divinity” of political leaders. Anything that derogated from the total Lordship of Christ was absolutely rejected. Now granted that the Christian message denied the sacredness of nature that had been attributed to the elemental spirits, it recognized in nature and in history a different sacredness. Nature and history took on an aspect of divinity, i.e., was holy, because God, in Christ, had entered history and became a part of nature. _

Christianity teaches that nature is not only holy, it is also sacramental, a point totally missed by both Wheeler and White. The created order is a symbol of the definitive Kingdom of God. The cosmos, corrupt and subject to decay, is an effective symbol of the final Kingdom of God, in which material reality will be liberated from its bondage to decay. (cf. Romans 8:20). This process, sustained in the Body of Christ, is sacramental in nature. In Ephesians (1:22-23) and Colossians (1:17-18)¹, Paul equates, in the final state of things, the Church, the Body of Christ and the cosmos. The human effort to incorporate reality into Christ, both in himself and in nature and history, is symbolic effectively in bringing about the final state of reality to which Paul refers in Ephesians . This occurs in the Church, as Rahner points out (The Church and the Sacraments , New York: Herder and Herder, 1963, pp. 18-19): _

The Church is the abiding presence of that primal sacramental word of definitive grace, which Christ is in the world, effecting what is uttered by uttering it in sign. By the very fact of being in that way the enduring presence of Christ in the world, the Church is truly the fundamental sacrament _

In the present age of the world, in the interim between the First and Second coming of Christ, God in Christ abides with us under a sacramental mode in the Eucharist. It is in and through the Eucharist that the cosmos is being transformed into the state which will be apt, at the fitting time (the Kairos), for the final and absolutely definitive return of Christ. It is not possible for us to conceptualize fully what the Eucharistic consummation of all reality means since this is the center of the mystery of the eschatological fulfillment in Christ. The Eucharist,

since it is the center of the life of the Church, is the center of the continuing mission of the Church to bring the rebirth given in the Spirit to all of creation. The further probing of the Eucharist as the center of the cosmic transformation is one of the most important parts of the present dogmatic task. The Eucharist stands, if you will, midway between the continuing stewardship of Christ who stands, human-divine, at the right hand of the Father and the growing stewardship of humans, struggling to grow into the fullness of Christ's mission and life. Dogmatic consideration of the recognition of the centrality of the Eucharist in the development of a more explicit concept of co-lordship is greatly needed. _

The above are merely some of the dogmatic positions that form the basis of further dogmatic reflection on the issues raised by biological discovery. They are, however, essential to that reflection. The dogmatic task is to probe these mysteries --- and let's not forget we are dealing with mystery --- in the context of the modern situation. The above dogmatic statements are necessary insofar as no truly Christian approach to man's control of and use of these discoveries can be developed without them. At the risk of being anticlimactic, it must be stated that little more can be said at this time. The dogmatic work is just beginning. _

The Christians' concern with and involvement in history is their worship of God. This worship is the expression of their free historical activity in the ongoing living out of salvation history. The attempt, more specifically, to cope on the dogmatic level with the new powers of the human is a part of that worship. To the dogmatist belongs the duty of developing the Christian realization of the place of these new discoveries in the building of the Kingdom of God, which is and must be prime and really only concern of the Christian. The theological question can be repeated: Is the human effort to gain control of human biological development compatible with the worship of God in history? _

The crisis facing the Church today can be summed up in a statement of Newman's (*An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* , p. 29) "The assailants of dogmatic truth have got the start of its adherents of whatever Creed; philosophy is completing what criticism has begun; and apprehensions are not unreasonably excited lest we should have a new world to conquer before we have weapons for the warfare." _

ENDNOTES

(1) Jerusalem Bible, p. 331, footnote to 1:23: "fills all in all." The Church, as the body of Christ can be called the fullness insofar as it includes the whole new creation that shares (since it forms the setting of the human race) in the cosmic rebirth under Christ its ruler and head.