

THEOLOGY AND SOCIAL RELEVANCE

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If we define theology as 'talk about God', we are explaining its etymology but we are saying only part of what the word generally means. The field of theological investigation is the whole of human experience as known and lived in the light of faith. Like the philosopher, the theologian is concerned with the ultimate meaning of human existence. Philosophy and theology can be considered as *socially relevant* in the sense that they are interested in those conditions which are necessary for man to live an *authentically* human life. Theology, however, makes its critical reflection on human experience not with the help of reason alone but of reason enlightened by faith in the Word of God.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

When society in general accepts the validity of the faith-perspective, as was the case in the Middle Ages, it is not difficult to show the usefulness of theology. Thomas Aquinas, the most prominent Medieval theologian, said that of all the sciences theology is the most useful because it deals with the highest wisdom open to man: the wisdom to see oneself, society and world in relation to their ultimate origin and final goal. Such wisdom enables man to keep everything in its proper perspective and to live in such a way that every action he performs is a step in the progressive realization of his goal and so an expression of a fuller human life. This argument, however, is convincing in the context of faith, i.e., assuming that this life is a prelude to another more perfect and definitive life and that personal communication with God is essential for man to reach the greatest possible happiness. But is theology a meaningful and relevant activity in a purely secular world?

Historically, the relevance of theology became doubtful as soon as society began to question the validity of the faith-perspective. Towards the end of the eighteenth century the Enlightenment affirmed that human maturity is possible only if man has the courage to emancipate himself from every sort of external authority and to take upon himself the burden of seeking and the risk of following a personal decision. As a study which believes in the absolute authority of the Word of God and the necessary, though relative, authority of the Church, theology came into direct conflict with the claims of the Enlightenment. In the Middle Ages the lawful rights

of reason were not denied but these rights were exercised peacefully under the sovereignty of a higher authority, i.e. the revealed Word of God. It was precisely the subservience of reason to revelation and of the world to the Church that became unacceptable to the new mentality.

With Marx and Freud the criticism of religion became even more radical. They saw religion as the result of a lack of dealing critically with the socio-economic (Marx) and the psychic (Freud) reality. According to this view religion is not merely superfluous or neutral but a negative phenomenon which hinders rather than helps the development of man. Marx and Freud were not isolated thinkers; they generated a movement of thought which continued to pose a serious challenge to the believer and made the task of the theologian more difficult than it used to be in the past.

From the eighteenth century onwards we meet, broadly speaking, two forms of theological reaction to the views of the modern world. The official reaction, representing the stand taken by the majority in the Catholic World, though more in the South than in the North, was negative. It tried to meet the modern challenge by reasserting the traditional, mainly medieval, concept of man, society and the world. As long as theology continued basically to repeat instead of developing further the old concepts, it could not enter into an effective contact with the real world in which people with new convictions, doubts and questions were living. Theology began to retreat more and more into a world of its own making and tended to become less and less meaningful and relevant to the problems and needs of modern man.

Another reaction, originating in some theological centres in France and Germany, was positive toward the new philosophy. It recognized the validity of critical inquiry and the autonomy of secular life and thought. But this trend in theology exercised only a marginal influence in the Church and in some instances it met even with opposition from an official level. During the thirties in France, Germany, Belgium and Holland a young generation of theologians made a new effort to rethink traditional Catholic doctrine first in the light of an updated interpretation of Thomistic philosophy and then also in the light of contemporary developments in science and Philosophy. This creative trend in theology eventually gained wider acceptance and was even substantially adopted by the Church. We can say that, generally speaking, theology is now trying to enter into a constructive dialogue with people holding different views in an attempt to express the Christian faith in a more meaningful and hence in a more effective language.

THE LOCAL SITUATION

(a) *The Past*

A history of theology in Malta has not yet been written. However, we can safely assume that theology in Malta generally followed the official tradition. It is not difficult to understand why this actually happened.¹ The theologian in Malta was teaching and writing in the context of a society where the Church occupied a relatively powerful and, in various ways, a privileged position. Catholic doctrine was accepted without any serious questioning. Until very recent times whatever opposition arose against the Church and traditional Catholic doctrine and practice could be effectively checked by means of a direct intervention of ecclesiastical authority. This strategy could succeed as long as Maltese society did not openly question or outrightly reject traditional Catholic values. The apparent success of this strategy, based on the use of ecclesiastical authority, did not necessitate theology to re-formulate Catholic teaching in view of the new questions that were being occasionally raised. Besides, theological innovation was looked upon as an unnecessary disturbance of the people's faith. So, not radically challenged and not altogether free from the fear of some possible censure, theology in Malta followed, with perhaps some very few exceptions, a conservative course and encouraged conformity in thought and conduct.

In the context of a closed society² education normally serves to uphold rather than to criticize the beliefs and values that have traditionally kept society together. Theological education in Malta served precisely such a purpose; it directed its efforts to the defence and the reassertion of traditional Catholic beliefs and customs.

(b) *The Present*

The local situation has now changed. The response required by the believing community and by theological reflection in the present circumstances has to be different. When speaking about the present, we should be careful not to assume that certain directions in Maltese social life have already been firmly established when they are still in a process of formation. With this qualification in

¹The sociological explanation which is being proposed here needs to be elaborated much further than is possible here within the limitations of space and those of the author. Besides, other theories may bring out aspects of the question which are not easily seen from the sociological viewpoint.

²For a description of the rôle played by religion and morality in a closed society see: Henri Bergson, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, trans. by R. Ashley Audra and Claudesley Brereton, London, 1935.

mind we can say that *freedom* is now a characteristic feature of Maltese socio-political life. Political independence from Britain reflected our national consciousness of the value of being free to frame our own economic and social policy on the foreign and local level. Yet such an event was more a challenge than an achievement. It has been constantly challenging us to deepen our understanding of freedom and to practice it rightly at all levels and in all spheres of life.

Before we discuss the part which theology can play in Malta at present, we have to study briefly two questions: religious freedom and the autonomy of politics from religion. These two questions have become urgent as a result of the strong emphasis they are receiving in Malta today.

(i) The right of every person in Malta to choose his own religion and to practise it publicly was legally recognized more than fifty years ago.³ But it seems that for quite a long time it was assumed that society should only *tolerate* the practice of a religion other than the Roman Catholic one, since the latter was the true religion and so it alone should enjoy the right to exist. Being false, other religions had, strictly speaking, no right to exist; they should, however, be tolerated in deference to the dignity of the human person.⁴ This view had been the source of a great deal of tension and sometimes even open conflict in Church-State relations in the past. Such a view is today on the way out, if it is not out already. Its place has been taken by the theory that the State should deal with the Catholic religion merely as *another* religion according to the principle that in society all religions should enjoy the same fundamental rights and be subject to the same limits.

The principle that all religions should be considered equal before the law has to be examined critically because it may give rise to certain misconceptions and create confusion in practice. First of all, the principle is a legal one and does not imply in any way that there are no objective criteria (of course, relatively speaking) to establish the validity or otherwise of a particular religion. This is indeed a crucial problem and a vital one too for every man. It is not the business of the law to say whether the religious consciousness is true or false, and if true, which particular religion is the true one. But it is certainly the responsibility of *each person* to decide one way or another about the question of religion after a careful and serious consideration of the matter.

The fact that the choice of a religion belongs exclusively to the person does not mean that religion is a purely private affair. Being

³ *The Malta Constitution*, 1921, 56(1), (2).

⁴ Cf. Arthur Bonnici, *Knisja u Stat*, Malta 1962.

an ultimate view on life, religion should influence all human activity whether it is being performed in private or in public. When we say that religion involves essentially a personal decision, we are not implying that religion belongs to the private sphere. We mean to say that no person can be forced to practise a particular religion. The person exists necessarily in society; so he is entitled to live his religion in the specifically religious community (i.e. the Church) as well as in society in general.

Finally, the principle that all religions are equal before the law says nothing about religion as a *social phenomenon*. The law of the country may make no distinction between one religion and another, but from a social point of view some religion or religions may be more important than others in view of the impact it has or they have upon the people. Hence, if we want to be realistic, we cannot jump to the conclusion that all religions play the same social rôle, because they all have basically the same juridical status. Politics is therefore expected to acknowledge the importance of the religion or religions which are actually forming the people's basic attitudes on the world, self and society. The well being of society as a whole and of each person and group requires respect for the actual religious feelings and opinions of the people.

Rightly understood, the principle that all religions are juridically equal is an affirmation of the right of each person to choose his own religion and to practise it without hindrance. But the person has the responsibility both of choosing his religion (he may, of course, decide not to choose any religion) and of living it in every sphere of life.

(ii) The separation between Church and State is another clearly emerging characteristic of Maltese society today. The State acquired a sense of autonomy vis-à-vis the Church; it does no longer understand itself as an institution which is at the service of the Church. The State is managing society in accordance with a policy that has been approved by the majority of the people. It is becoming increasingly clearer that the Church can no longer expect the State to support by means of relevant laws matters required either by ecclesiastical law or by Catholic morality *qua* Catholic.

But by the same principle of separation between Church and State, the Church should not be made subservient to any political system. As Church and State are two very important institutions in society they need to maintain a certain independence from each other to be really free in the management of their own specific affairs. Yet the separation between the two must not be overemphasized to such an extent that one loses sight of their common interest in the *quality* of human life. As a matter of fact, the Cath-

olic Church wants to collaborate with all men of good will, independently of their religious and political convictions, in the creation of a world that is more worthy for man to live in.

THE ROLE OF THEOLOGY IN MALTESE SOCIETY TODAY

As I have tried to show, the principles of the equality of all religions before the law and of the separation between Church and State do not imply that the State should refuse to deal with a particular religion in a special way, if such a religion happens to be that of the people in general. When the State gives special treatment to such a religion, it is simply showing that it does care for the actual religious feelings and ideas of the people. Our constitution does precisely this when it declares that the Roman Catholic religion is the religion of Malta and when it lays down that the State should provide the corresponding religious instruction in public schools. With this provision the State is recognizing that the religion of the people is important and deserves a place in the educational system of the country.

The problem, however, is the way in which the teaching of religion fits into the educational policy of the country. The Development Plan, 1973-80, speaks of the aims of education in these terms:

'The primary objective of education is to develop to the full the human personality. This will enable people to develop their abilities to the fullest extent, to make a constructive contribution to society and to lead a richer and fuller life. Education must also respond to the manpower requirements of society. But no less important is the need for the system to generate in its pupils an inquiring mind and a searching intellect.'⁵

It is interesting to note that without diminishing the importance of education, as training in the acquisition of skills needed for economic expansion, the present Development Plan recognizes that the primary objective of education is the *total* development of the person. The person matures insofar as he is not guided by his passions or by custom but by reason. Personal development requires increasing awareness of the *reason* for the beliefs one holds and for the actions one performs. When education is creating in the people the ability to reach enlightened judgements and adopt responsible decisions, it is actually forming a *really* independent nation.

Religious education, as it is given in Malta today, on all levels of education no longer aims at merely transmitting a specific set of truths. It is education in the real sense of the word, because it

⁵Outline of Development Plan for Malta, 1973-1980, p. 31.

tries to lead the students to discover the ground and implication of their religion. Without such critical reflection religion (and morality to the extent that is dependent on religion) would easily become simplistic or, worse still, a source of personal frustration and perhaps also a cause of social conflict instead of a call for personal fulfilment and social unity.

When we speak of theology, we generally have in mind the kind of religious education which is given at the tertiary level. The value of theology does not consist only in the fact that it provides the religious and moral educators of the people (priests and laity) with the necessary intellectual training; the value of theological reflection lies also in that it is a critical and comprehensive analysis of religion. A continuous radical examination of religion in the light of developments in science and philosophy is necessary in order to avoid the separation of religion from other spheres of human activity and to help the person integrate in a consistent manner his rationally reflected experience of the world with his religion.

When theology is helping the believer *to understand* his religion, it is actually preparing him *to communicate* more effectively with people who hold the same or a different religious belief (or no belief at all). Speaking of Christian theology, I can say that there has been a clear shift of emphasis from apologetics to hermeneutics. The purpose of theology today is not so much the defence of Christianity against its opponents as the discovery of the common ground between it and other religions and between God's self disclosure in Christ and human experience.

In communication or dialogue the primary objective is to clarify different positions and to see in a spirit of freedom and openness which position corresponds more to the truth and so leads to a greater and fuller *human* development. When judging what is more and what is less human, the theologian is, of course, guided by reason enlightened by faith. If he takes seriously the tendency towards individual and collective egoism, he is not relying only on his personal experience as lived and seen in the light of a particular psychological and sociological theory. He is also and primarily making his judgement according to his belief in the radical and pervading presence of sin in the world. Believing that man is called to live in peace with others, he would support those changes in society which are likely to lead to more participative forms of living. His faith in the divine promise of salvation would impel him to project ideals that are humanly desirable and possible to be realized in the present circumstances but it would dis-

pose him to review his plans continuously, since for him every revolution however just it may be, is only a prelude to the radical revolution, which is going to take place at the end of time as a result of a gratuitous act of God. If the Christian is asked to justify his belief, he would find theology helpful, because it would show him in a systematic manner the different ways in which Christians in the past and at present are trying to explain the reasonableness of their faith. Today, theology has become aware of the limits that it has when it tries to prove the truth of Christianity. Yet the present emphasis on the dynamic character of Christianity has shown that, as is the case with every revolutionary movement, the truth of Christianity would appear fully at the end when the revolution has actually reached its final phase. But until then, the task of the theologian is to help the believing community to discover ways of collaborating with all men, including non-believers, in the promotion of truth and justice. Such collaboration is the best way to prepare for the light and power of the Gospel to illuminate and renew the world.

During the past fifteen years the Faculty of Theology at our University has been trying to restructure its course, making it more unified, and to re-direct its teaching, stressing more and more the importance of confronting Christianity with other religions and philosophies. This is being done in order to prepare theology students – among whom not only candidates for the priesthood but also a considerable number of lay people are included – to live (and help others live) the Christian faith in the context of an open and developing country. This is being done also to help in the creation of that sort of society which is vividly described in the present Development Plan in these terms:

'The vision is one of a community, self-reliant and independent, willing and capable of making its own choices, receptive to new ideas and to modern science and technology; open to new friendships and willing to maintain old ones if they serve the cause of peace, it is the vision of an island population ready to embark with zest on new ventures which freedom has brought within the grasp of the younger generation.'⁶

In brief, the specific rôle of theology in the context of the present educational policy and of an open Maltese society is to help the people understand that their religion (which is our Constitution says is the Roman Catholic Religion) is a call for *total liberation* from anything that enslaves man and darkens his mind and for a life of *real communion* with all men in the kingdom of God.

⁶*Ibid.*, 24.