

## QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STRUCTURE OF THEOLOGY

### A. What is Theology?

*Address for the seventy-fifth birthday of Hermann Cardinal Volk*

From: Principles of Catholic Theology:  
Building Stones for a Fundamental  
Theology, by Joseph  
Cardinal Ratzinger  
(San Francisco: Ignatius Press,  
1987), pp. 315-331

Anyone who has known Cardinal Volk in the context of Vatican Council II, in the commissions of the postconciliar era or in the synods of the German bishops or who has had the privilege of working with him in the German Bishops' Conference knows his characteristic way of posing a question. His thinking does not stop short at peripheral arguments, nor is it content to belabor the obvious. It leads always to the heart of the matter. With inimitable perspicacity, it penetrates to the real alternatives that are hidden behind the tactical and strategical considerations. When opinions differ as to what should be done or when it should be done, he sweeps all this to one side with a firm gesture and asks: What is the truth? What is the interior motive that leads to such alternatives? What hidden forces are at work here? He makes plain the insufficiency of mere pragmatism and reveals the problems that are genuinely pressing and often suppressed. The call to return to the matter at hand is typical of him; and that may justify the fact that this address on the occasion of his seventy-fifth birthday is not to be a *laudatio* of him and his achievements but a consideration of the matter that has been and is of primary importance to him.

Any attempt to interpret this matter reveals, however, just how unsatisfactory the word "matter" is in this case. For Cardinal Volk's "matter", the matter he has zealously pursued, is the person—both divine and human. But this orientation toward the person has, on the other hand, its own objectivity. For Cardinal Volk, its medium is theology. In view of Cardinal Volk's own endeavors, I should like, therefore, to offer on this occasion a few reflections on the always pressing question: What is theology? When I attempt to address this question in the context of Cardinal Volk's efforts, two thoughts immediately present themselves. On the one hand, I think of the motto on his coat of arms (which is also the title of one of his books): "God Is All In All", and of the spiritual program it implies; on the other hand, there comes to my mind something I have already mentioned: a mode of questioning that is entirely philosophical,

that does not stop with apparent or real historical facts, with sociological diagnoses or with pastoral techniques but insists inexorably on the search for causes.

Two themes suggest themselves, therefore, as guides for our inquiry into the nature of theology:

1. Theology has to do with God.
2. Theological speculation is linked to philosophical inquiry as its basic methodology.

The two themes will seem contradictory if, on the one hand, we include under philosophy a way of thinking that, by its nature, belongs—and must belong—to revelation and if, on the other hand, we adopt the view that God can be known only by way of revelation and that the question of God is actually not a problem of reason as reason. I am convinced that such a position, which, in recent times, has become more and more a kind of *sententia communis* for philosophers and theologians, will in the end prove crippling to both philosophy and theology. But if it is true that the search for truth and the openness to it that are the subject matter of both philosophy and theology are indispensable to the humanity of man, then we have arrived here at a very central point. I am convinced, in fact, that the crisis we are experiencing in the Church and in humanity is closely allied to the exclusion of God as a topic with which reason can properly be concerned—an exclusion that has led to the degeneration of theology first into historicism, then into sociologism and, at the same time, to the impoverishment of philosophy. Against initial appearances, I maintain, therefore, that precisely the opposite is true: the two theses we have named condition each other. If theology has to do primarily with God, if its ultimate and proper theme is not salvation history or Church or community but simply God, then it must think in philosophical terms. On the other hand, it cannot be denied that philosophy precedes theology and, even after revelation has taken place, is never subsumed by theology but continues to be an independent path of the human spirit, in such a way, however, that philosophical speculation can enter into theological speculation without thereby being destroyed as philosophy.

Theology has to do with God, and, in that way, it also fulfills the ultimate task of philosophical speculation. I would like now to develop this thesis positively in two steps, both of which are derived from fundamental insights of medieval theology, since they both touch upon one of the controversial points in the crisis of the thirteenth century, which was soon formalized as a Scholastic antithesis but continues to be raised as an actual problem of theology. If I am correct, Thomas Aquinas was the first to draw, with any emphasis, from the concept *theo-logy* the conclusion that the object—he even says “the subject”—of this science is

God.<sup>1</sup> With that conclusion, he was at odds with a number of contrary concepts. First of all, and in the foreground of medieval thought, was the definition to be found in the theological manual that was authoritative throughout the Middle Ages—the *Sententiae* of Peter Lombard. Taking as his point of departure a comment of St. Augustine's, Lombard named *res et signa* as the object of theology—the doctrine of reality and signs.<sup>2</sup> This somewhat peripheral schema nevertheless raises a very basic question when we realize that what we have there is a variation of the earlier division into theology and economy and that the question of the relationship between the two still remains: Is economy, which is the doctrine of salvation history and the elucidation of signs—that is, of the sacramental realm and, therefore, of the doctrine of the Church—is economy to be called “theology”? Or are the two to be kept always separate? If the first alternative is correct, then there is danger that “economy” will solidify into either a salvation-historical or an ecclesiological positivism, or that it will become mythology and perhaps even mythological pragmatism. From this perspective, the new designations of the object of theology by the Victorines and by early Franciscan theology did not really offer new alternatives when they named as the object of theology the *opera reparationis*, for these could be equally well designated as salvation history or as the “whole Christ”. In the theology of the period between the two world wars, the last concept was enthusiastically promoted as a call—in which there was likewise concealed a criticism of the metaphysical redundancy of Neo-Scholasticism<sup>3</sup>—for a christocentric theology. Such a christocentric theology, as a theology of *Christus totus*, considers itself also an ecclesiology. In contrast to Neo-Scholasticism, it can be very positive because, in its thinking, it does not go beyond what has been positively established but rather finds in what is positive, in the Church, the reflection of God's nature and being. We can hardly fail to notice that, in its basic assumptions, Vatican Council II was strongly characterized by this way of thinking. The statement that the Council's whole content can be subsumed

<sup>1</sup> ST Iq 1 a 7.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Lombard, *Magistri Sententiarum Libri IIII* [henceforth *Sent.*], (Lyons: apud Antonium Tardif., 1581), liber I, dist 1, c 1, 1, 2. Lombard is referring here to St. Augustine's *De doctrina christiana libri IV*, 1:22 (see CChr 32 [1962]: 7).

<sup>3</sup> On the decidedly salvation-historical conception of Hugo of St. Victor, cf. esp. “*Libri prioris de Sacramentis*”, prologus, c 2, PL 176:183–84, and “*Commentarium in Hierarchiam Coelestem S. Dionysii Areopagitae*”, cap. 1, PL 175:923–28. Note the modification of the formula to be found in Alexander of Hales, *Summa theologica* 1 (Florence: Ad claras aquas, 1924), *Tractatus introductorius*, q 1 c 3 resp. 6: “*Theologia est scientia de substantia divina cognoscenda per Christum in opere reparationis.*” Representative of the revival of such views in the interval between the two world wars is Emile Mersch, *Le Corps mystique du Christ*, *Études de théologie historique* (Louvain: Museum Lessianum, 1933).



under the division "the Church *ad intra*" and "the Church *ad extra*" has, it is true, never become an official component of conciliar doctrine, but the concept did, nevertheless, have a decisive influence on the selection and arrangement of materials.<sup>4</sup>

Before taking a position, we must, however, shed some light on the problem as a whole. These differences with regard to the object of theology are linked, of necessity, to a variety of methodological orientations and to different concepts of the goal to be attained. Both differences are most concisely characterized by the corresponding key words of the thirteenth-century controversy. According to one—the Thomistic—view, theology is to be regarded as a *scientia speculativa*; according to the other—the Franciscan—view, it is to be regarded as a *scientia practica*.<sup>5</sup> Without need of lengthy proof, we can see again how current this question is when we recall the key words "orthodoxy" and "orthopraxis" that came into use after the Council to describe the attempt to reorient theology. In the meantime, however, a controversy has broken out, the like of which would have been inconceivable in the Middle Ages. For if the word "orthopraxis" is pushed to its most radical meaning, it presumes that no truth exists that is antecedent to praxis but rather that truth can be established only on the basis of correct praxis, which has the task of creating meaning out of and in the face of meaninglessness.<sup>6</sup> Theology becomes then no more than a guide to action, which, by reflecting on praxis, continually develops new modes of praxis. If not only redemption but truth as well is regarded as "post hoc", then truth becomes the product of man. At the same time, man, who is no longer measured against truth but produces it, becomes himself a product. Granted, the most extreme positions occur but rarely. But less militant—what we might call Western bourgeois—forms of the undivided sovereignty of *scientia practica* are ultimately marked by the same loss of truth. When it is claimed positively that truth is, in any event, inconceivable and that to believe otherwise is tantamount to an attack on tolerance and pluralism, there the method produces

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Guilherme Baraúna, *De Ecclesia. Beiträge zur Konstitution "Über die Kirche" des Zweiten Vatikanischen Konzils I* (Freiburg: Herder, 1966); Gérard Philips, *L'Église et son mystère I*. Cf. also the texts of Pope Paul VI in Yves Congar, Hans Küng and D. O'Hanlon, *Konzilsreden* (Einsiedeln, 1964), 15ff.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Thomas Aquinas, ST I q 1 a 4: "Sed contra: omnis scientia practica est de rebus operabilibus ab homine. . . Sacra autem doctrina est principaliter de Deo". St. Bonaventure, *Opera omnia I*, "Commentaria in quatuor libros sententiarum Magistri Petri Lombardi", prooem q 1 resp. 7: "hic (sc. habitus) est contemplationis gratia et ut boni fiamus, principaliter tamen ut boni fiamus."

<sup>6</sup> Cf. D. Berdesinski, *Die Praxis—Kriterium für die Wahrheit des Glaubens? Untersuchungen zu einem Aspekt politischer Theologie* (Munich, 1973). Cf. also Part Two, Chapter 3b of the present work and the bibliographical references listed there in n. 42.

its own truth, that is, the decision about *what* to communicate is decreed in terms of *how* it is to be communicated; there is no longer any attempt to decide *how* a message is to be communicated in terms of *what* is to be communicated. The fundamental rejection of a catechism that we have witnessed in the last ten years is perhaps the plainest example of an attitude that lets the question of communication be determined by methodological praxis rather than by seeking a means of communication that is appropriate to the matter. I have the impression that, even in the realm of spiritual exercises and pastoral counseling, the formal psychomontage replaces, more often than not, an objective content that is no longer trusted; but, because the purely formal treatment of man and his being is just as little possible as the pure self-reflection of praxis, new content slips in unnoticed, the justification of which is just the expected "functioning" of man—who, deprived of truth, can no longer be anything more than the functioning of a system of no particular finality.

In the early 1920s, Romano Guardini spoke of the primacy of *logos* over *ethos*,<sup>7</sup> intending thereby to defend the Thomistic position of *scientia speculativa*: a view of theology in which the meaning of christocentrism consists in transcending oneself and, through the *history* of God's dealings with mankind, making possible the encounter with the *being* of God himself. I admit that it has become clear to me only through the developments of recent years how fundamental this question actually is. For Thomas Aquinas had, in fact, only reflected anew on an answer already formulated by Irenaeus of Lyons, the real founder of Catholic theology, in his controversies with Gnosticism: The new message of Jesus Christ, he said, consists in the fact that he opened the way to a meeting with him who had until then been the Untouchable, the Unreachable, with the Father himself, and destroyed the insurmountable wall that had separated mankind from the *being* and truth of God.<sup>8</sup> This means that we fail to understand the meaning of Christology precisely when it remains locked in a historico-anthropological circle and does not become a real theology, in which the metaphysical reality of God is what is discussed. On the other hand, this means that, in the last analysis, it is only theology that can guarantee the continuing possibility of metaphysical inquiry;

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Josef Pieper's report of his first meeting with Romano Guardini, in which he became aware of the superiority of *being* over *duty* and so found the topic of his dissertation: *Die ontische Grundlage des Sittlichen nach Thomas von Aquin*, in Josef Pieper, *Noch wusste es niemand. Autobiographische Aufzeichnungen 1904-1945* (Munich, 1976), 69ff. [English trans.: *No One Could Have Known . . . , an Autobiographical Sketch* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987). (Trans.)]

<sup>8</sup> Cf. L. Tremblay, *La Manifestation et la vision de Dieu selon St. Irénée de Lyon* (Münster: Aschendorff, 1978).

Q

ala  
Rehner  
?



where theology does so, the way is also cleared for philosophy to pursue the question of cause to its ultimate radicality.

We have thus returned to the point from which we started: theology has to do with God, and it conducts its inquiry in the manner of philosophy. The challenge and the difficulty of such a concept will have become clear by now. Such a metaphysical (ontological) alignment of theology is not, as we have long feared, a betrayal of salvation history. On the contrary, if theology will remain true to its historical beginnings, to the salvation event in Christ to which the Bible bears witness, it must transcend history and speak ultimately of God himself. If it will remain true to the practical content of the gospel, which is the salvation of mankind, it must first be a scientia speculativa; it cannot start by being a scientia practica. It must preserve the primacy of that truth that is self-subsistent and that must be discovered in its self-ness before it can be measured in terms of its usefulness to mankind.

If we thus agree with Thomas Aquinas' basic alignment, that is not to say that the direction taken by St. Bonaventure—who, incidentally, was in total accord with Thomas' central thesis—has no meaning for us. He, too, states explicitly that the subject of theology, to which all else is referred, is God himself.<sup>9</sup> But he links this thought, which received its definitive form from Thomas Aquinas, to a very different concept of human reason. Bonaventure knows a *violencia rationis*—a violence of reason—that is not to be measured by personal reality.<sup>10</sup> He argues that the concept "Christ died for us" has an impact on the human intellect that is different from that made by a mathematical theorem: "Fides sic est in intellectu", he says, "ut . . . nata sit movere affectum."<sup>11</sup> Later, the notion that God is the subject of theology acquires, in his thought, a new depth in which this specific challenge to the human intellect finds its ultimate foundation. After the *Itinerarium mentis in Deum*, that is, after the year 1259, a gradual change of meaning becomes apparent in his concept of theology as a result of his reading of the works of the pseudo-Dionysius. Dionysius still accepted the ancient Greek use of the word *θεολογία* to designate, not a human science, but the divine discourse itself, for which reason the Greeks logically designated as "theologians" only those who

<sup>9</sup> I Sent., prooem q 1 resp, 7: "Nam subiectum, ad quod omnia reducuntur ut ad principium, est ipse Deus. Subiectum . . . ad quod omnia reducuntur . . . ut ad totum integrum, est Christus. . . Subiectum . . . ad quod omnia reducuntur sicut ad totum universale . . . est res et signum."

<sup>10</sup> I Sent., prooem q 2 ad 6, 11: "in anima hominis dominantur violencia rationis. Sed quando fides non assentit propter rationem, sed propter amorem eius, cui assentit, desiderat habere rationes".

<sup>11</sup> I Sent., prooem q 2 resp, 13.

could be regarded as the voice of the deity himself, as instruments of the divine discourse—for example, Orpheus and Hesiod.<sup>12</sup> Hence Aristotle draws a distinction between *θεολογία* and *θεολογική*—between theology and the study of theology. By the first, he distinguishes the divine discourse; by the second, human effort to understand the divine.<sup>13</sup> On the basis of this linguistic tradition, pseudo-Dionysius used the word "theology" to designate Holy Scripture; for him, it is what the ancients meant by the word—the discourse of God rendered in human words. In his later years, Bonaventure made this mode of speech his own and, on the basis of it, rethought his understanding of theology as a whole.<sup>14</sup> Properly speaking, God himself must be the subject of theology. Therefore, Scripture alone is theology in the fullest sense of the word because it truly has God as its subject; it does not just speak of him but is his own speech. It lets God himself speak. But Bonaventure does not thereby overlook the fact that this speaking on the part of God is, nevertheless, a human speaking. The writers of Holy Scripture speak as themselves, as men, and yet, precisely in doing so, they are "theologoi", those through whom God as subject, as the word that speaks itself, enters into history. What distinguishes Holy Scripture from all later theology is thus completely safeguarded, but, at the same time, the Bible becomes the model of all theology, and those who are the bearers of it become the norm of the theologian, who accomplishes his task properly only to the extent that he makes God himself his subject. In this way, Bonaventure achieved in his later works the synthesis he had sought in his earlier ones, where he had affirmed the ontological character of theology and thus the proper rank of the theoretical and yet had spoken, at the same time, of the necessary self-transcendence of contemplation into the practice of the faith. What we have said can now be formulated as the third and final thesis of these remarks: theology is a spiritual science. The normative theologians are the authors of Holy Scripture. This statement is valid not only with reference to the objective written document they left behind but also with reference to their manner of speaking, in which it is God himself who speaks.

<sup>12</sup> Cf., for example, B. F. Kattenbusch, *Die Entstehung einer christlichen Theologie*, new printing (Darmstadt, 1962; first published, 1930), 4, n. 2.

<sup>13</sup> *θεολογία* appears only once in Aristotle: in *Μετεωρολογica*, B 1, line 35, *Aristotelis opera*, ex recensione Immanuelis Bekkeris (Berlin: Gruyter, 1960), 353. *θεολογική* appears frequently, e.g., in τὰ μετὰ τὰ φυσικά 5:1, line 19, in *ibid.*, 2:1026.

<sup>14</sup> The following passage from the prologue to the "Breviloquium" (St. Bonaventure, *Opera omnia*, 5:201) is typical of Bonaventure's later linguistic usage: "sacrae scripturae, quae theologia dicitur". Cf. Jacques Guy Bougerol, *Breviloquium I, Prologue* (Paris, 1966), 76ff. On the relationship between Bonaventure's usage and that of pseudo-Dionysius, cf. Joseph Ratzinger, *Die Geschichtstheologie des heiligen Bonaventura*, 92, n. 18.

int.  
that  
see how  
it may  
be in



I think this fact has great significance for our present situation. It was an unprecedented turn of events when Abélard moved theology out of the monastery and into the classroom—and so into the neutrality of academe.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, it remained clear in the following centuries that theology could be studied only in the context of a corresponding spiritual praxis and of a readiness to understand it, at the same time, as a requirement that must be lived. It seems to me that it was only after World War II and completely only after Vatican Council II that we came to think that theology, like any exotic subject, can be studied from a purely academic perspective from which one acquires knowledge that can be useful in life. But just as we cannot learn to swim without water, so we cannot learn theology without the spiritual praxis in which it lives. This is by no means intended as an attack on lay theologians, whose spiritual life often enough puts us priests to shame, but, rather, as a very basic question about how the study of theology can be meaningfully structured so that it does not succumb to academic neutralization in which theology becomes ultimately a contradiction of itself.

With that, I have reached the end of my remarks. It will not have escaped the attentive reader that everything I have said, while it has referred directly to the question about the nature of theology, has been, nevertheless, an implicit *laudatio* of Cardinal Volk. With admirable steadfastness, he has held continually before us the primacy of *logos* over *pragma*; he has opened to us the philosophical depth of theological questions; and, last but not least, he has given us the example of a truly spiritual theologian. For all this, it is fitting that all of us express to him now our heartfelt thanks.

## B. The Church and Scientific Theology

With the topic "The Church and Scientific Theology" we encounter a sensitive area of contemporary consciousness. Anyone who approaches it enters upon a battlefield where strong emotions are in conflict. On the one hand, it is the point of crystallization for attacks against the official Church, which, from Galileo to Küng, has been accused of being hostile to science and—without having learned anything in the process or even being embarrassed by her past errors—of continuing her stubborn resistance to progress and of preventing the victory of better insights as long as she was able to do so. From the perspective of the logic of modern

<sup>15</sup> On the characteristics of monastic vs. Scholastic theology, cf. Jean Leclercq, *Wissenschaft und Gottverlangen. Zur Mönchstheologie des Mittelalters* (Düsseldorf, 1963). On the distinction between cloister and school, see esp. 223ff. and 237 (Bernard and Abélard).

science, which obeys the inner demand of enlightened reason, the problem is even more fundamental: science can find its norm only in itself. It is regulated and criticized only by the scientific process of forming hypotheses which it then shows to be either true or false. It is against the very nature of modern science to allow any external court of appeals to share in this process. If a science allows this to happen, it ceases to be a science in the contemporary sense of the word because it no longer follows the one law of its own being, its own methodology, but, by submitting to a power outside itself, betrays its own fundamental law.

For such a concept of science, it is absurd that the ecclesial Magisterium should claim to be the highest court for the interpretation of Holy Scripture or should hold fast to dogma as the binding interpretation of the Bible. Such an action is regarded as a clinging to medieval conditions in which the intellectual step of the Enlightenment, of the transition to the modern era, has not yet been taken. The claim that a theology open to such a mode of thinking and believing is a science, as the word is understood in academic circles today, is categorically denied; conversely, a theology that claims to be a science will, for that very reason, feel itself obliged to protest against the possibility of such incursions into its domain. It will not be able to understand from what source the Magisterium receives its normative judgment in matters of biblical exegesis since such historical insight is to be found only in the historical method, which resides in the sciences—and nowhere else. The Church comes thus to be regarded as an extrascientific organization that can serve as a vehicle for scientific undertakings but may not share in the scientific process itself.

When we have pursued the matter thus far, questions arise that lead beyond emotions and differences of opinion to a more basic form of reflection. Is a theology for which the Church is no longer meaningful really a theology in the proper sense of the word? Let us omit, for the moment, the specifically Christian aspect of the question and concentrate, instead, on the questionable aspects of modern science itself. Is the strict self-determination of science really as unlimited as it seems to be? Is it not clearly marked, in the questions it poses as well as in the methods it employs, by a multiplicity of preexisting values and interests? At the end of the sixties, neo-Marxist criticism claimed with caricature-like exaggeration that the apparent disinterestedness of science was but a camouflage for the anonymous interest of the capitalistic world and a cloak for its claim to power. Today it is hardly necessary to show that this criticism was itself a bid for power or to describe the kind of power to which it aspired. The real point of these remarks is that all questioning is accompanied by premises and that mere technical ability can never be the sole criterion of science. All too often, the proof of error comes too late.



Today we know that many a specialization leads only to a bypath and that reconsideration of the whole is imperative even in the case of individuals. The portals are beginning to open, however, cautiously, to a self-criticism of enlightened reason. If, then, the coordination of Church and theology is described as medieval, that fact should raise the basic question of whether it is not precisely here that enlightened reason finds its limits.

Before pursuing this line of thought any further, we must look at the opposing criticism of the relationship between the Church and scientific theology, which also has strong supporters today. Whenever theology begins to play a role in the Catholic Church similar to that which it has long played in the Protestant domain, there appears among us, too, that reaction that, in the Protestant churches, goes by the name of fundamentalism. Against the complication and conditioning of Christianity that occurs in the academic world the protest is raised for a simple faith that opposes to the "ifs" and "buts" of the scholar the plain Yes and No of faith. The shepherds of the Church not only find themselves exposed today to the accusation that they still hold fast to the methods of the Inquisition and try to strangle the Spirit by the repressive power of their office; they are, at the same time, attacked by the voice of the faithful, who accuse them more and more loudly of being mute and cowardly watchdogs that stand idly by under the pressure of liberal publicity while the faith is being sold piecemeal for the dish of pottage of being recognized as "modern". An important scholar, who is likewise a thoughtful and intelligent Christian, recently reduced this protest to an unforgettable formula. He writes: "A more or less lengthy visit to a Catholic bookstore does not encourage one to pray with the psalmist: 'You will reveal the path of life to me.' Not only does one quickly discover there that Jesus did not turn water into wine but one also gains insight into the art of turning wine into water. This new magic bears the name 'aggiornamento'."<sup>16</sup> Under this new aspect, the shepherd of the Church is offered the opportunity of giving his teaching ministry a democratic form of becoming the advocate of the faithful, of the people, against the elitist power of the intellectuals. Actually, absolutism is an invention, an inner consequence, of the Enlightenment. Advised by enlightened minds and himself at the pinnacle of the Enlightenment, the king knew the needs of the unenlightened people better than they did themselves. Therefore, he canceled their freedoms and the rights of the social classes that limited his powers in order thus to give full sway to the demands of that reason of which he was the representative. The absolutist

<sup>16</sup> Robert Spaemann, *Einsprüche. Christliche Reden* (Einsiedeln, 1977), 7. To avoid misunderstanding: Spaemann's book has nothing to do with "fundamentalism". It is a model of responsible philosophical participation in the inquiry into the present status of the faith.

claim to power is not, as it were, a relic of the Middle Ages; it is a product of the Enlightenment and is represented symbolically by the Sun King. Only the inner conviction that reason, which was the sole norm, was also something that could be administered made absolutism possible.<sup>17</sup> Some of this absolutism of the Enlightenment is still to be found among intellectuals today, and many an ecclesial reform would surely have been carried out more prudently if the triumphant enthusiasm of being right had not set the tempo. To that extent, we are correct in seeing in the function of the ecclesial Magisterium a democratic element that derives from its Christian origin. But we must, at the same time, be mindful of the fact that the protest against modern theology is always meaningless if it is based only on the rejection of what is new or on a fundamental hostility to science and its contributions: a mere negation cannot support faith, and democratic representation is equally useless if it has no spiritual basis. Quantity can never replace truth—that insight does not apply only to the Church; the fact that it is hardly reflected in our political theory is one of the causes of the present loss of confidence in democracies.

But let us return to our topic. From the opposing views regarding it, some facts have emerged that can, perhaps, be summarized as follows. Faith is not to be placed in opposition to reason, but neither must it fall under the absolute power of enlightened reason and its methods. This insight, which, I think, expresses the central concept of what I have to say, must now be substantiated and developed. It has always been clear from its very structure that Christian faith is not to be divorced from reason. In his book about the two kinds of faith, Martin Buber has pointed out that, for Christian faith, the act of conversion and, with it, the act of "holding as true" are fundamental.<sup>18</sup> However much we may criticize his reflections in other respects, he is undoubtedly right when he says that affirmation—saying Yes—is a constant element of Christian faith; that it is true that Christian faith, in its most basic form, has never been a formless trust but always a trust in a particular Someone and in his word—that is, an encounter with truth that must be affirmed in its content. Precisely this marks its unique position in the history of religion.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. H. Staudinger and W. Behler, *Chance und Risiko der Gegenwart* (Paderborn, 1976), 49–96.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Martin Buber, *Zwei Glaubensweisen*, in Martin Buber, *Werke 1* (Munich-Heidelberg: Kösel, 1962): 651–782. [For an English translation, see Martin Buber, *Two Types of Faith* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1961). (Trans.)] Cf. also, Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Spiritus Creator. Skizzen zur Theologie 3* (Einsiedeln: Johannes, 1967): 51–91. The excellent article "πιστεύω" by Bultmann and Weiser, in *ThWNT 6*: 193–230, esp. 216ff., is important and illuminating for our subject.



Some forty years ago, Hendrik Kraemer formulated the distinction between Hinduism and Christianity in these terms: Hinduism, he said, knows no orthodoxy but only orthopraxis.<sup>19</sup> In other words, the Hindu religions are characterized by no binding common belief but only by common forms of cultic praxis that vary in the degree to which they are binding, while, for Christianity, a common belief—orthodoxy—is both characteristic and indispensable. From this follows something of great importance: whereas the religious philosophy of Buddhism—and, for a long time now, of Hinduism as well—regards all religious knowledge as merely symbolical, Christian belief has always insisted on the reality of that knowledge in which truth reveals itself in a form for which other symbols cannot be substituted. Hinduism, for instance, preserves very impressive myths about the descent of the god Krishna. But because, in the last analysis, they are for it only images of the infinite that can never be confined in words, these histories can be extended, rewritten, enlarged by borrowings and varied in a number of other ways; there is, therefore, no problem about adopting the history of Jesus Christ as one of the descents of Krishna.<sup>20</sup> Christian faith, on the other hand, holds firmly that, in Jesus, God really came into the world in a way that is historical, not symbolical. This does not mean that the Krishna-myths have no value. But the way in which a Christian can understand them is different from the fusion with Christ that occurs in Hinduism. For the Christian, Krishna is a dramatic symbol of Christ, who is reality, and this relationship is not reversible.

What does this mean in relation to our question? It means that Christian faith affirms truths, the contents of which are not subject to a totally free symbolic interpretation but are to be understood as statements that are valid and true as they stand. This holds good in the realm of history as well as in that of philosophy. Christian faith maintains that this Jesus lived, died and rose again from the dead at a particular time. It maintains that the same God who became man in Jesus Christ is the Creator of the world. By such statements, Christian faith goes beyond the domain of merely symbolical knowledge and enters the realm of historical and philosophical reason; its intention is to say only what is in accordance with reason and so to address reason itself, to make it an instrument in the act of conversion. The fact that Christian faith has, from the beginning, had a missionary character is

<sup>19</sup> H. Kraemer, *Die christliche Botschaft in einer nichtchristlichen Welt* (1940). [For an English translation, see *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World* (London: Edinburgh House, 1938). (Trans.)] See also, H. Kraemer, *Religion und christlicher Glaube* (Göttingen, 1959). Cf. Helmuth von Glasenapp, *Die fünf grossen Religionen* (Düsseldorf-Cologne, 1952), 1:7-25; H. W. Gensichen, *RGG* 3:349-52.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. J. Neuner, "Das Christus-Mysterium und die indische Lehre von den Avatáras", in Grillmeier and Bacht, *Das Konzil von Chalkedon*, 3:785-824.

due to its structure. Its purpose is to lead out of the past and to guide to new knowledge. Because it proposes both truths and facts, it is not just the preserver of tradition in a limited circle; from the beginning, it has existed as the recipient of facts and the revealer of truths that forced its first confessors to leave the place where they were and to call others into the new community. That is why theology is a peculiarly Christian phenomenon: the Eastern religions produced religious philosophies in which religious symbols were explained and interpreted intellectually. By contrast, theology is something quite different: a rationality that remains within faith itself and that develops the appropriate context of faith. This fact explains also the peculiar phenomenon that the Christian faith, in its early days, found its ally, not in other religions, but in the great philosophy of the Greeks. The Christian mission borrowed the criticism of the mythical religions from Greek enlightenment and thus continued the line of Old Testament prophets and wisdom teachers who, in their criticism of the pagan gods and their cults, spoke the language of the enlightenment.

The Christian mission sought to persuade men to abandon false religions and turn to the true one. It saw the greatest evil of the mythical religions in the fact that they led people to worship as real what could be, at best, only a symbol and so to become untrue themselves because they treated the symbol as reality. In this sense, the Christian mission participated energetically in the demythologizing of the world and in furthering the action of *logos* against *mythos*. In the struggle for the human soul, it regarded, not the existing religions, but rational philosophy as its partner, and, in the constant disputes among the various groups, it aligned itself with philosophy. The synthesis with Greek philosophy is already discernible in the sermons of the earliest Christian missionaries, which, in their turn, had been strongly influenced by the intellectual efforts of the Jewish diaspora.<sup>21</sup>

We can say, then, that it is characteristic of Christian belief to seek to reveal true knowledge, which, as such, is also immediately meaningful to reason. That is why it pertains to the nature of faith to develop theology; any fundamental rejection of theology would be a denial of its own inner starting point. Granted, theology in this original Christian sense of reason that exists in and from faith is seriously threatened by the intellectual climate of our time; this crisis of theology reveals, at the same time, the deep-rooted crisis of faith itself. The contemporary scientific approach has a tendency to reduce to two disciplines what was once regarded as theology. On the one hand, theology becomes the philosophy of religion,

<sup>21</sup> Cf. my article, "Der christliche Glaube und die Weltreligionen", in Johannes Baptist Metz, Walter Kern, Adolf Darlapp and Herbert Vorgrimler, *Gott in Welt*, Festgabe für Karl Rahner, 2 vols. (Freiburg: Herder, 1964), 287-305.







community that lives it, that is bound to it and that adheres to it in its very power to bind mankind. Just as revelation transcends literature, so it also transcends the limits of the pure scientism of historical reason. In this sense, it can be said that the inner nature of faith justifies the Church's claim to be the primary interpreter of the word and that this claim cannot be abdicated in favor of enlightened reason without rendering questionable the very structure of faith as a possibility for mankind.<sup>25</sup> Community of faith is the situs of understanding. It cannot be replaced by the science of history.

But in what does this transcendence of communal understanding over the mere exegesis of texts consist? The germ of an answer can be found in the first epistle of John. It was composed at a time when the emergence of a new group of intellectuals, the so-called Gnostics, raised problems that are not unlike those we are facing today. They interpreted the Christianity of the Church as a Christianity of the naive in comparison with the "real" Christianity, in which the letter of faith, which Christians had thus far accepted, could be manipulated by sophisticated methods of interpretation to accord with one's own views. Simple Christians felt themselves deceived and, at the same time, more or less helplessly victimized by the intellectual superiority of the Gnostics and their inventions. In his response (1 Jn 2:18-27), John says: You have all received the anointing that instructed you; you have no need of further instruction. The Apostle opposed to the arrogance of an intellectual elite the unsurpassability of simple faith and of the insight it bestows. By the word "anointing", he recalls the baptismal catechesis and its central content: that is, Christ, the Son of God, who was anointed by the Holy Spirit, and the consequently trinitarian character of faith. This common knowledge, which comes from baptism, is not subject to a higher interpretation; it is itself the measure of every interpretation. It is the source of life for the Church, which, in the sacrament and in the catechesis that is part of the sacrament, is the real bearer of the word.<sup>26</sup>

We come thus to understand the duty of bishops as representatives of the Church with regard to theology. Their obligation as bishops is not to seek to play an instrument in the concert of specialists but, rather, to embody the voice of simple faith and its simple primitive instincts, which precede

<sup>25</sup> This is the substance of Tertullian's clear-sighted comments in *De praescriptione haereticorum* (see Part Two, Chapter 2A, n. 6, for bibliographical information). For a discussion of this fundamental text by the great African ecclesiologist, see Otto Kuss, "Zur Hermeneutik Tertullians", in Josef Blinzler, Otto Kuss, Franz Mussner, *Neutestamentliche Aufsätze, Festschrift für Josef Schmid* (Regensburg: Pustet, 1963), 138-60.

<sup>26</sup> For a commentary on the biblical text, cf. Rudolf Schnackenburg, *Die Johannesbriefe* (Freiburg: Herder, 1953), 124-43.

science and threaten to disappear where science makes itself absolute. In this sense, they serve, in fact, a completely democratic function that rests, not on statistics, but on the common gift of baptism. We might, perhaps, say here in passing that even modern society should seek something of this kind—a council of the wise as it were—to remind it of values that are basic and immutable. For these values do not constrain science; they challenge it and set its tasks. But let us return to the specific structure of the Church and her faith, which can certainly not be imitated by the state. The common ground of baptismal faith, which the Magisterium must protect, does not fetter a theology that properly understands itself but rather issues to it that challenge that has proved fruitful again and again throughout the centuries. The model of enlightened reason cannot assimilate the structure of faith. That is our problem today. But faith, for its part, is comprehensive enough to assimilate the intellectual offer of the Enlightenment and give it a task that is meaningful also for faith. That is our opportunity. We must make the effort to accept it.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>27</sup> The relationship between this topic and the universal political and intellectual problems of our age has been impressively analyzed by M. Kriele, *Befreiung und politische Aufklärung* (Freiburg, 1980), 239-55.