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## Is there such a subject?

### Introduction

In most of the universities of western Europe, there survives a faculty of Christian theology (occasionally more than one, as in the Protestant and Catholic faculties at some German universities). In colleges of education, in some newer universities, and, increasingly, in schools, if the subject is studied at all, it is more likely to be under the heading of 'religious studies'. Nevertheless there are departments of theology, there are such people as theologians, and a surprisingly large number of theological books are still being published. Even in religious studies, theology appears as one among many phenomena in the whole world of religion.

To ask, then, Is there such a subject?, might seem to be a foolish question. For clearly there is. Is it not more sensible to ask, What is theology?, What do theologians think they are doing?, Ought there still to be theology faculties in the universities? But I stick by the question in this chapter's title for the following reason. The word 'theology' means rational thought or talk about God, and this is what, for the most part, theologians have held their subject to be. But we live in a time when the majority of educated people in the west do not believe in God. For them there is, strictly speaking, no such subject as theology; for its subject matter or object does not exist. Of course it is easy to reply that the beliefs existed once and still, to some extent at least, do exist. We can study the scriptures and other writings in which men's beliefs in God have found expression, and we can study the

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history of religious belief in God, just as we can study any other aspect of religion. Isn't that what theology really is – the study of *belief* in God?

By going along with this view it might appear that we *can* subsume theology under the wider and more secure umbrella of religious studies. Two further points tend to reinforce this view. Firstly not all religions include or imply theology. We have, in religious studies, to reckon with the non-theistic religions such as Theravada Buddhism and certain strands in Hinduism, and also with religions such as Jainism, Taoism and Confucianism, which treat belief in God or the gods as relatively unimportant. Secondly we have to reckon with the plurality of theistic religions, each involving its own theology. We can study Hindu theology, Jewish theology, Christian theology, Muslim theology and so on. On these grounds, too, we might suppose that theology is best thought of as a relatively restricted (though pluriform) branch of religious studies.

If we accept these lines of argument, we are still left with the problem expressed in the title of this chapter. We may have rescued theology from uncertainty about its alleged object, but we have not thereby succeeded in defending the singling out of Christian theology as an academic subject in western universities. For if Christian theology is but one aspect of one theistic stream within the wider history of religions, how can we defend restriction of academic interest to it alone? No doubt something can be said about the impossibility of studying the whole sphere of religion and about the importance of Christianity in the history of the west, but there remains a suspicion of arbitrariness, especially in the university financed by the state, if we insist on the study of Christian theology alone.

On the other hand no theologian, in any theistic tradition, will accept the reduction of his discipline to one aspect of religious studies. The reason for this can per-

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haps be brought out if we put the matter hypothetically. If God exists, the theologian will argue, then theology is concerned not just with the different beliefs of the theistic religions within the wider religious life of man, but rather with the realities of God, man and the universe in their true nature and interrelation. In other words, if God exists, it is not religious studies which includes theology, but theology which includes religious studies along with everything else.

Here is a problem indeed. It is by far the greatest of the problems with which this book is concerned. On the one hand theology, as understood by its practitioners, seems to depend on a widely disputed premise, namely, the existence of God. On the other hand *if* God exists, then theology has good reason to claim to be dealing with the ultimate reality behind all other realities, all other objects of study which there may be.

On any view, however, theology itself must reckon with the plurality of theistic and non-theistic religions in the world. Even if God does exist and can be thought about rationally in the discipline known as theology, each religious tradition which claims to provide knowledge of God must have something to say about the different claims of the other religions. Each tradition's theology, therefore, must include from its own standpoint the theology *of* religion and the religions, the attempt, that is, to *explain* the plurality of religions. We shall try to keep this in mind throughout the book as a problem affecting all the other problems which we explore.

One further question arises from what has just been said. Can an atheist be a theologian? Clearly an atheist can study religion; but if theology is concerned with the reality of God, then surely it presupposes belief? It must be done from the inside by those who actually believe in God. Otherwise one is just studying other people's belief, and theology once again is swallowed up as an aspect of

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religious studies. The question is not, however, quite so easily answered as that. You will recall that the notion of theology as the wider discipline, as concerned with God, man and the universe in their true nature and interrelation, was introduced hypothetically. If God exists, that is the proper status of theology. Now an atheist can entertain hypotheses. If he is prepared to enter sympathetically into the *possibility* that God exists, he will be able to appreciate what theologians working from within the world of belief are doing, and, indeed, perhaps contribute to their work. For the believing theologian in the modern world must keep in mind the fact that God's existence is disputed, and must be prepared to scrutinise the arguments and grounds for and against belief in God. The interchange between believer and unbeliever over the grounds for belief as well as over the rationality of what is said from within belief is important for theology. Theologians cannot live in a private world, least of all in the university.

More will be said about this problem of the degree to which theology presupposes belief when we come to consider the methods of theology. But it needs to be pointed out at once that this compromise solution to the question, Can an atheist be a theologian?, whereby the interchange between believer and unbeliever is seen to be helpful to the theological enterprise, is possible only on two conditions, one on the believer's side and one on the unbeliever's side.

On the believer's side this solution will work only if theology is recognised to be a thoroughly self-critical and rational discipline, and if believing theologians are prepared to enter into open-minded discussion with unbelieving ones and with their colleagues in other fields. We shall see that there are ways of understanding theology which on religious grounds rule out such self-criticism of the bases of theology. If they are right, theology's place in the university is highly dubious. It would be much more

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reasonable to restrict it to seminaries and schools of divinity set up by churches themselves.

On the unbeliever's side this solution will work only if the notion of God's existence is admitted as both important and not obviously false. The scholar who *presupposes* that all religion is wish-fulfilment or a solace in unjust social conditions will be quite unable to make any contribution to theology or to see the point of there being such a subject, let alone its place in the university.

If theology remains open and self-critical, and if the fundamental questions of truth and meaning with which it deals are acknowledged to be both important and unsettled, then there is a strong case for keeping theology as an independent discipline and refusing to let it be swallowed up by religious studies.

Of all academic subjects, however, theology is the most precarious. Yet in claiming to deal with fundamental questions of truth and meaning it sets a salutary question mark against the assumptions of more manageable disciplines. We have insisted that neither believer nor unbeliever is absolved from some anxiety where theology is concerned. Both will be tempted to take refuge in the more secure sphere of the scientific study and the comparative study of religion. But both may find themselves admitting that truth will be served less well if they do so. The university (and the state), one hopes, will maintain faculties of theology, if they see in them the search for ultimate truth rigorously and responsibly pursued.

Theology may be a particularly precarious subject, but it is not unique in carrying such anxieties. The human sciences, generally, provoke existential questions. Sociology frequently puts the way of life of its own practitioners in question. History constantly confronts the student with warnings to himself and his society. No one can study English without being forced by great literature to ask about the meaning of his own life and that of

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his society. Even the natural sciences, paradigms of objectivity and rigorous method, confront the scholar with agonising moral choices: Is research into the genetic material to carry on regardless of the consequences for the future of man? A discipline which investigates the question whether or not these and other problems are to be faced in the context of an ultimate horizon of meaning is not to be despised. Certainly those states (and universities) which have abolished faculties of theology appear to have solved neither the theoretical nor the practical problems of understanding and living in the world.

### **The object of theology**

It was pointed out at the beginning that the word 'theology' means rational thought or talk about God. If we are to accept this definition, we need to meet a number of powerful objections, both from the side of philosophy and from that of theology itself.

Theologians cannot even begin their work unless they have some preliminary notion of what the word 'God' might mean. We have to remember that an influential group of philosophers profess themselves unable to attach any meaning to the word at all. However, this is little more than a sceptical gambit, and there is no reason why one cannot begin with certain extremely simple, even naive, definitions such as anyone might be inclined to give. 'Creator of the world' is one such definition; another is 'the mind or will or spirit behind the universe'; a third might be something like 'ultimate reality conceived of as personal, worshipful, giving meaning to the world and to life'. All kinds of objections spring to mind on being offered such definitions, but to criticise them and refine them is to begin to do theology.

Certain basic questions, however, are obviously being begged in the attempt to specify the concept of God by

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means of such provisional definitions. They reflect the understanding of God as personal creator fostered in religions such as Judaism, Christianity and Islam. It is possible to begin at a less question-begging, more philosophical, if vaguer level by speaking, as the German theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg does, of God as 'the all-determining reality'. Towards the end of the previous section, I myself attempted to locate the area of theological concern even more vaguely by speaking of 'an ultimate horizon of meaning'. Similarly the German-American theologian, Paul Tillich, used vague phrases such as 'ultimate reality' and 'ground of being' in the attempt to locate talk of God.

It is important, at some stage, to try to press back from the more specific notions fostered in particular theistic traditions to more philosophical and more general notions, which do not presuppose alleged self-revelations of a personal creator. This is necessary if there is to be dialogue between, say, the Hindu theologian and the Christian theologian, let alone between believer and unbeliever. But it is far from clear that we have to begin so far back. On the other hand it would obviously be a mistake to begin with highly specific developed notions of God such as 'the Blessed Trinity revealed in the incarnation of the Son of God in Jesus Christ'. For the word 'God' is not the private property of Christians and we must retain some links with its more general use in the history of religions and in different religious traditions today. The rough definitions which I suggested as a starting point, such as 'creator of the world', involve some selectivity from the many different ideas of God or the gods to be found in the history of religions, but it is not an arbitrary selection, given the actual course of the development of the great monotheistic faiths in world history.

Adopting some such rough and ready starting point as a provisional indication of what the theologian is talking

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about, we recognise straight away that it is a mistake to think of the word 'God' as a name. The logician Peter Geach has pointed out that 'God' functions as a descriptive term.\* It is more like 'the prime minister' than 'Mrs Thatcher'.

The object of theology, then, can be thought of as the ultimate reality whom certain religions teach us to think of as personal creator and lord of the universe (though we realise that it is disputed even within the world of religion whether we can assume that ultimate reality is personal).

From the side of theology itself comes quite a different objection to the notion that we can speak of God as the object of theology. Protestant Christianity, especially in Germany, has fought shy of the implication that the human mind can treat God as an object, least of all as an object of rational enquiry. God must be thought of, according to this school, always as subject. His reality is invariably misconceived when we think we have him within the grasp of human knowledge. This is a serious objection, and needs to be examined, not only by the *Christian* theologian. The dangers of what the Germans call 'objectification' in speaking of God are real, and will have to be borne in mind when we turn to the methods of theology. Suffice it to say here that a recognition of this problem need not deter us from the attempt to think and argue rationally, clearly (and reverently), about the one in whom we or our friends believe. This is quite compatible with admitting that God, if he exists, is not one object among others on the same level of existence as the things and persons in the world. Certainly, as we shall see, the unique nature of the object of theology determines our means of access to it. It would be irrational to think otherwise. But that does not mean that

\* *God and the Soul* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969), p. 108.



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we should follow Paul Tillich in refusing to say either that God exists or that he does not exist. It is just confusing thus to restrict the term 'exists' to objects in the world, even if Tillich was trying thereby to make an important point about the ultimacy of God.

I have suggested that theology, in the sense of rational thought or talk about God, may be undertaken self-critically by the believing theologian and hypothetically by the atheist or agnostic. In what follows I attempt to describe the theological enterprise more precisely, with the example of the believing theologian chiefly in mind. My description, as will be obvious, is that of a believing theologian; but at the same time it is offered as an extended hypothesis, to be considered seriously by the unbeliever too.

How, then, might the would-be theologian proceed, given the rough and provisional characterisation of the object of his study suggested in the preceding paragraphs? The next step would be to examine some examples of theological writing from the past and present of one or more of the great theistic faiths. The theologian, we learn, sets himself to achieve increasing sensitivity to the different ways in which men and women at different periods of history and in different cultural situations have expressed belief in God. Great stress has recently been laid in Christian theology upon the fact that the theologian must become aware of the degree to which conceptions of the nature of God, of the relation between God and the world, and of the way God works in the world, are conditioned by limited and changing categories of thought. But it is easy to exaggerate this point. The fact that the twentieth-century theologian has to explore what it means to speak of God in terms of his own cultural self-consciousness and in the light of modern knowledge of the world need not be held to cut him off from the faith and the theology of first-century or medieval men and women. To put the

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matter hypothetically once again, if God exists, ultimate reality remains the same despite man's changing understanding. It is perfectly true, however, that human categories of thought and understanding do change, and theological reflection has to take account of the changes.

The Christian theologian, like any other, has to become aware of the strangeness of, for example, first-century and medieval thought. Yet the superficial scanner of cultural change can easily be over-impressed by this awareness. To read the ancient and medieval theologians from Paul onwards is sometimes to move in a quite alien and incomprehensible world, but sometimes to catch glimpses of acute and permanent penetration into what it means to speak of God, and to see oneself and the world as related to God. Part of the Christian theologian's task is to trace the continuity in experience and understanding of God between Paul, Augustine, Luther, Calvin, Kierkegaard and Barth, to mention but one (branching) strand in the Christian tradition. Another example of what I call permanent penetration into the rationality of belief in God is to be found in Anselm's definition of God as 'that than which nothing greater can be conceived', another in Aquinas's grasp of the way in which human concepts must be applied analogically in making judgements about God. There is in Aquinas, the thirteenth-century systematic theologian (and saint), a most subtle awareness of the impossibility of treating God as one entity among others, as well as of the difficulties involved in projecting our language beyond its normal field of reference. To become a Christian theologian one would need to master the technical language of such men as Athanasius, Augustine, Anselm and Aquinas, not in order to juggle with the concepts like counters in a game, but in order to appreciate the genuine, if partial, perception of reality which they express, or at least to see the point of such claimed perception. The skill with which such men