

THEOLOGY AND THE SECULARIZATION OF SOCIETY

by Stuart Fowler

*Theology's struggle
for a meaningful place
in a secular world*

I. IN SEARCH OF A PLACE TO STAND

It has become commonplace to speak of the 20th century Western world as a secular society. A secular society is one in which God and religion do not count. It is a society with a predominantly this-worldly orientation. A society where faith, may still exist, but only as the private interest of some individuals that does not count in societal matters.

It can hardly be doubted that we do live in a secular society. This poses a special problem for the Church. The faith we profess appears irrelevant and meaningless for man in a secular society. His world is a secular world where the preacher of traditional Christianity appears preoccupied with unreal concerns and unconcerned about the real issues of man's life.

As a result the Church, which once dominated life in the Western world, has been pushed into a corner. At best it is thought of more and more as the private concern of a minority, and, at worst, it is seen as an irritating reactionary force engaged in a futile attempt to check the forward progress of the secular society.

This situation has not come on us overnight. The death of God as a decisive factor in Western thought took place long before theologians dared to talk about it. The sociologist, Peter Lawrence, with penetrating insight, has pointed out that the philosophical proofs of God's existence, offered by the Enlightenment philosophers of the 17th century, notably Descartes and Locke, "*represented the swansong of Christianity as an intellectual force God was no longer an unquestioned conviction. He existed now only by grace and favour of the secular human intellect.. Once man began to make God consciously in his own image, as the 18th century or Age of Enlightenment wore on, he began to assume that he could dispense with Him altogether.*"¹

The Age of Enlightenment marked a major turning point in Western thought. It brought the emancipation of thought, from the dominance of theology. Man's mind was set free to roam at will through the length and breadth of the creation without having to look over its shoulder all the time to see whether theology was approving.

¹ 'Daughter of Time' - Quadrant, Vol. XV No.3, May-June, 1971

In the mid-17th century John Owen, the great Puritan, in an address as Vice-Chancellor of Oxford University, was able to speak of theology as *“the queen and mistress of the other branches of learning, and it is almost our special task to see that these are ready handmaids to it.”*²

The Age of Enlightenment changed all that. “The other branches of learning” declared their independence, and nothing the theologians did could stop them. {1}

In the beginning the scholars and scientists of the Enlightenment had no desire to jettison faith. Its leading figures such as Newton, Locke, Descartes, declared themselves to be devout believers and saw their efforts as strengthening faith.

They claimed that ‘the book of nature’ lay open for all to read, needing no interpretation other than autonomous human thought. For them, this reading of ‘the book of nature’ led by a rigid logical necessity, to the indisputable fact of God.

At first sight this seemed to establish faith more firmly than ever, but, as Lawrence points out, God now existed ‘only by grace and favour of the secular human intellect.’ As the secular human intellect continued on its way it soon began to change the image of God. It reached conclusions about the nature of things that clashed head on with the accepted Christian faith and its concept of God. The findings of the other branches of learning came into ever more extensive and intensive conflict with the dogmas of theology. Soon it became evident that one or the other must give way and, in the mainstream of Western life it was theology that gave way.

THE RESPONSE OF THEOLOGY

A crucial question now faced the whole community of faith, but especially the theologians. How could a place be found for faith and also for theology in a world dominated by the secular human intellect. The subsequent development of theology may be viewed as the attempt, in various ways, to meet this dilemma.

It is beside our present purpose to attempt an exhaustive description of the various theological approaches to this problem. It will be enough to sketch the theological response in broad outline. For this purpose the various approaches may be classified under three categories, provided we keep in mind that, within each of these have been widely differing and warring theologies.

First, there have been those theologies that have adopted an immanent approach to the problem. These have accepted, without challenge, the claim of autonomy for theoretical thought, have admitted this to be all-embracing, and have proceeded to see faith as an impulse, or principle, in man directing his life toward the divine. Theology becomes little more than a branch of psychology or sociology. Both the liberalism of the turn of the century and the empiricist theologies that are currently enjoying a vogue in the Anglo-Saxon world belong in this category. They resolve the problem by surrender to the secular society. Pursued consistently they lead to ‘secular Christianity’

² ‘The Oxford Orations of Dr. John Owen’ Ed. Peter Toon, 1971

Secondly, there are those who adopt a transcendent approach. These also leave the idea of autonomous thought unchallenged, but are reluctant to surrender everything to it. They want to avoid a path that leads into a secular Christianity, so they see faith as originating in the divine act that wholly transcends the empirical world. In this way faith is thought to be preserved, and its roots in the gracious, redemptive act of God recognised, while, by lifting it out of the empirical realm in which autonomy is claimed for theoretical human thought, a clash of interests is avoided. {2}

Faith belongs wholly to a transcendent realm, separate and distinct from the immanent world of sense, time and space. The two find common ground only in man, and even there they are shut away from each other in separate, watertight compartments.

The outstanding representatives of this approach in this century are Karl Barth and Rudolph Bultmann. Although these two differ greatly in their theologies they are united in the adoption of a transcendent approach - i.e. placing faith in a transcendent realm outside of the immanent, empirical realm of space and time.³

Every transcendent approach also involves surrender to the secular society. A place is found for faith in another world of thought and experience alongside that of the secular society. The secular society is left to its secularism.

Those of the third group have attempted a transcendent-immanent approach. In order to avoid the naturalistic drift of the theologies of immanence they insist that room must be found for a crucial transcendent element in human life, and, in order to avoid the subjectivist drift in the theologies of transcendence, they insist on a basis for faith in the immanent world of time and space.

The main defenders of orthodox theology belong to this third group, but so do others. With its idea of a natural-supernatural overlap, orthodoxy has never been quite able to escape an inner tension where the supernatural overlaps the natural. The consistent adherent of the scientific method can never be reconciled to the intrusion of a supernatural element into the natural realm.

Aware of this problem, some have searched for a way to remove this tension without sacrificing the basic transcendent-immanent scheme of orthodoxy. One important attempt in this category is the salvation-history approach of Oscar Cullmann.

Cullmann insists on the foundation of faith in the divine revelation coming to man in the immanent world of time and space. Our faith is firmly rooted in what God actually said and did in past time in the world of space-time.

Having said this, Cullmann avoids the tension between theology and the 'natural' sciences which is threatened by the 'supernatural' elements in the biblical, history by lifting these out of the empirical realm into a realm of transcendent divine events. They are real events, but events on a different level to the events of secular history.

³ Another, contemporary approach along these lines is that of Thomas F. Torrance. Though strongly influenced by Barth, Torrance follows his own path with a decided rationalistic emphasis. He gives a full exposition of his ideas in "Theological Science" (Oxford - 1969)

They are 'non-verifiable', 'mythical' events beyond the reach of empirical investigation. In this way Cullmann avoids a collision with the secular human intellect.

REVELATION IN THE MOULD OF HISTORY

Another important attempt to meet the problem of finding a place for theology and faith in a secular world is that of Professor H. M. Kuitert, of Amsterdam. This is of special importance for us because it comes from within Reformed orthodoxy and is proving a catalyst for debate of far-reaching significance for the whole Reformed community world wide. {3}

Kuitert is concerned - and it is a very valid concern - with the isolation of faith from modern life. He is troubled that the orthodox approach has been powerless to prevent faith from being pushed into a corner.

He sees in existentialist theology a valid reaction against the 'metaphysical' structuring of orthodoxy with its concept of timeless, universally valid objective truths.⁴ He sees it as a salutary reminder that faith must involve personal encounter with the living Christ. For this reason he puts existentialist theology on a line with pietism.

Yet, he is not happy with the existentialist solution and offers some trenchant criticism of it. While he sees orthodoxy as deficient in the subjective element, he is not happy with what he sees as the pure subjectivism of existentialist theology.

As an alternative he offers us what he describes as '*a way between Protestant orthodoxy and existentialist theology*.'⁵ By a way between he does not mean a compromise. He means that '*we can best proceed in a quite new direction hoping thereby to find a way that stays clear of metaphysical theology without lapsing into existentialist theology. We must follow theology's OWN WAY - not merely a third way.*' This does mean a synthesis, but, Kuitert would say, it is not a radical synthesis of principles but only a methodological synthesis that extracts appropriate material from varying sources. Theology 'ought to be able to extract the elements from both existential interpretation and metaphysical theology that belong to the inalienable province of theology.'⁶

Kuitert states quite firmly that he desires above all else to be true to scripture. If he challenges elements in traditional orthodoxy it is because he holds that faithfulness to scripture demands it. He accuses orthodox theology of distorting scripture by forcing it into the framework of an alien philosophy, a Greek metaphysics. He sets himself to purify theology, thereby preserving the authority and message of scripture.

Pursuing this new route Kuitert insists that God has revealed himself in history. It is at this point that he dissents from the transcendent theologies, and, quite specifically, from existentialist theology. For Kuitert it is essential the biblical witness be seen as

⁴ "The Reality of Faith" Eerdmans, 1968, p. 25ff

⁵ The expression appears as the subtitle to the above book

⁶ *ibid.* p. 144

witnessing to events that have taken place in past time in the immanent world. Only in this way, he insists, can we avoid heading into a subjectivist dead-end.

Pursuing this theme still further, Kuitert maintains that the very historicity of revelation demands that we recognise that revelation has come to us ‘in the mould of history’. The idea of ‘revelation in the mould of history’ appears as an important key to Kuitert’s thought.

Orthodoxy has always recognised - even if it has not always done justice to the fact - that God revealed himself within specific historical contexts which affected the way Cod framed his message to man. For example, the Old Testament has a lot to say about various sorts of idols, images and objects of worship peculiar to the Palestinian world of that time, but says nothing directly about the sophisticated idolatry of the 20TH CENTURY Western world. The historical context within which the Word of Cod came has affected the way the message is formed. {4}

When Kuitert speaks of ‘revelation in the mould of history’, however, he means much more than this. He means that the revelation has come to us through human witnesses who pass on to us the revelation AS IT HAS BEEN PROCESSED IN THEIR OWN MINDS IN TERMS OF THEIR PRE-DETERMINED PATTERNS OF THOUGHT. The revelation is not time-conditioned. The human witnesses are. What we receive is never the revelation as such, nor the revelation divinely inscripturated, but always the revelation that has passed through the subjective experience of ‘men in covenant partnership with God’ and, in the process of passing through these men, has been coloured by the historically determined world view of these men.

There is no escape from this if we are to do justice to scripture, says Kuitert. “*Man exists historically*”. He is “*through and through historical*”.⁷ Revelation also, since it comes to us historically, through human witnesses, can come to us only in the mould, the changing mould, of history.

At this point there is a close affinity between Kuitert’s theology and the historicism expounded by the Gorman philosopher, Wilhelm Dilthey. Both in the central importance of history, and in the role of human appropriation and interpretation, Kuitert’s thought closely parallels Dilthey’s historicism.

Kuitert insists that we can never distinguish the historical mould, the packaging, from the divine revelation precisely; the two have become inseparably connected.⁸ Yet, we can see the distinction in rough outline.

We can see clearly that there are elements in the biblical witness which belong to the divine revelation and not the packaging. There is a ‘hard core’ of unique events that really happened. In particular, this ‘hard core’ means the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Yet this does not mean that these events happened just as the biblical writers say they happened; as historical events these also come to us through human witnesses in whose witness revelation and human interpretation mingle.⁹ In this case, however, unlike some other parts of the biblical witness, we must never forget or deny

⁷ *ibid*, p. 151,156

⁸ *ib.* pp. 168

⁹ *ib.* pp. 162ff

that the witnesses are so speaking about something that really happened, even if it did not happen just the way an uncritical reading of their report suggests.

On the other hand, we can also see clearly that certain parts of the biblical witness belong to the packaging which we can discard now. Indeed, we must discard it if we are to transmit the revelation. Revelation can come to fulfillment only within the ever changing, yet continuous, movement of history.¹⁰

Among this biblical material that we see as certainly belonging to the historical mould is everything that points to the nature of the world in which we live. The world view of scripture is entirely the out-dated world view of the human witnesses. Revelation does not point to the immanent cosmos but to the transcendent Christ.

A Christian world view and a Christian philosophy are therefore impossible. There is nothing in revelation, or in the faith that comes from it, to enable man to develop any sort of a *'philosophy of life, even a philosophy that is painted Christian . Christian faith is something else; it is partnership with God.'*¹¹ Consistent with this, when Kuitert speaks of general revelation he speaks of it as revelation without specific content.¹² If a philosophy is to be developed at all then, like science, it must be pursued, without help or guidance from faith. {5}

Scripture cannot help us here because the biblical writers not only used the language and idiom of their day but they also used the 'concepts of the past.' The concepts in which revelation comes to us are the now out-dated concepts of men at a past stage of historical development.¹³

The witness of the biblical writers, in principle, is no different to the witness of the 20th century preacher. There is, says Kuitert, *'no structural difference'* between the biblical witness and *'all the appropriation and passing on that has been done since the canon bias accepted.'*¹⁴ The process of appropriation and passing on which we see in the tradition of the Church through the ages is precisely the same process that produced scripture.

'There is a difference in authority.' The biblical witnesses have greater authority than any other, but this difference in authority is not due to any distinctive divine inspiration of the biblical writers. It is only *'the difference between what the first ear-and eye-witnesses noted and reported and all the other witnesses who depended on them'*¹⁵

So, in Kuitert's thought, if we are to get at the divine revelation without distortion, we must break the historical mould in which it comes to us. Yet, we can do this, and still preserve the Word of God, only by pouring the revelation into a new mould suited to

¹⁰ ib. p. 170

¹¹ ib. pp.151,152

¹² ib. p. 147n, 187

¹³ ib. p, 150

¹⁴ ib. p. 177

¹⁵ ib. p. 177

our present stage of historical development. Only by doing this can we see what is revealed and pass it on to those who come after us.

To round out our view of Kuitert's thought we must ask how he proposes that we should distinguish between the indispensable revelation and the discardable packaging of the human witnesses. His answer is simple: WE must decide. In making our decision we may be aided by the fruits of scientific research, and specially by historical-critical studies, but 'science' cannot decide the issue. WE must decide '*in free responsibility before God*.'¹⁶

Kuitert is particularly careful to insist that we must not let science decide this vital issue. We must make use of science in reaching our decision, but we cannot let it take over. On the contrary, we must demand of science that it be flexible and open minded enough to make room for faith's 'hard core' of unique, unrepeatable events. Using '*all the help that scientific, historical research can give us*' it is the free man who must decide what is and what is not revelation in the biblical witness. This is a responsibility we must gladly assume.¹⁷

For all his criticism of existentialist theology for its entanglement in the humanistic nature-freedom dualism, it is apparent that Kuitert himself has not escaped a similar entanglement. For Kuitert, the gospel means that man in freedom transcends nature¹⁸. Faith has nothing to do with nature; it has no significance for man, in the natural realm where autonomous theoretical thought reigns. Faith belongs to the realm of freedom where man rises above nature; where he is brought in free responsibility into a partnership with God that transcends the creation.

In harmony with this dualistic pattern of thought Kuitert distinguishes the truthfulness of faith statements from '*accurate scientific statements*'. Faith statements - statements about matters of faith - can never be accurate in the way statements about the empirical realm of nature can be accurate. They speak about a different realm. Their truthfulness lies, not in their {6} accuracy, but in their pointing to an always indefinable, transcendent reality.¹⁹

It is beside our present purpose to discuss all the weaknesses of Kuitert's approach - e.g. his confusion of historicity and temporality, his rationalistic view of man, his naïve view of science as nothing but man working with special tools, or his placing of scripture on a line with the post-biblical tradition. What is relevant to our present purpose is that, by his entanglement in the nature-freedom scheme, his approach is no more able than any of the others discussed to check the secularization of society.

On the contrary, his endorsement of the autonomous sovereignty of human thought gives fresh impetus to the secular society. All he asks is that faith be given an attic room to itself where it will neither disturb nor be disturbed. Man, he assures us, can 'trust his understanding'. Sin has not affected man's understanding.²⁰ Modern secular

¹⁶ "Do you understand what you read" Eerdmans.1970,p.102

¹⁷ ib. p.102 Also "The Reality of Faith" p.148f.

¹⁸ See "The Reality of Faith" pp. 172 ff, 195ff.

¹⁹ See "The Reality of Faith" p. 190

²⁰ "Do you Understand What You Read" p.99

man is right when he assumes he can reach a right understanding of the world by the use of his secular intellect'. Here faith does not count.

In view of his own disclaimers we cannot say that Kuitert has come to his theological task with a commitment to any specific philosophical system, but it is apparent that his thought is bound to concepts drawn from modern, humanistic philosophies with their assumption of autonomy for theoretical thought. In particular his theology depends, at its crucial point, on a view of history bearing striking resemblance to Diltheyan historicism.

Kuitert has certainly cut a new path in theology, but he has not reached any really new solution 'to the problem of faith in a secular world. He too aims for peaceful co-existence. In this respect he is one with the other modern responses to the secular society, They all follow either the path of total, surrender, or of peaceful co-existence.

THEOLOGICAL ORTHODOXY

It would appear, then, that only orthodox theology has offered any effective resistance to the secular society. Certainly, many like to think of it this way. Yet, at least in the mainstream of orthodoxy, this is an illusion.

Orthodox theology also has, pursued the path of peaceful co-existence. It has not succeeded in this as well as some others, yet the clashes it has had with the secular society have been no more than border skirmishes.

Orthodox theology has worked, either explicitly or implicitly, within the nature 'grace scheme of medieval scholasticism. It has distinguished between the natural realm, in which providence pursues an orderly course, always sufficiently predictable to make scientific activity possible, and the supernatural realm of grace, with the supernatural appearing from time to time in the natural realm by divine acts of intervention in the natural order. God is at work in both realms, but in the realm of nature he works exclusively through 'second causes', while in the realm of grace and the supernatural he works immediately, though also using 'means'.

All science and learning, outside theology, deals with the natural realm, while theology deals with the realm of grace and faith. 'In the realm of nature the autonomy of human thought is admitted. Being the natural realm it is fully accessible to the natural intellect. It is only in the realm {7} of grace that faith is crucial. Faith counts in the natural realm only so far as the supernatural realm of grace may influence the natural.

It is just here that the tension occurs. The two realms cannot be kept entirely apart. There are large areas where they are strictly separate, but there is a border area where they overlap. It is here that the border disputes take place.

Because these overlapping areas have a supernatural character, theology claims them as its special domain, and puts up "Keep out" signs. On the other hand, because it is part of the natural realm, secular science declares that theology's "Keep out" signs are illegal.

Secular science and learning says to orthodox theology: *“You admit our right to investigate and explore the natural realm, yet here is an important section of that realm around which you put up your ‘Keep Out’ signs. You can’t have it both ways. If this is really part of the natural realm then you must accept our right to investigate it and the validity of our findings concerning it. If it must remain closed to us then you must stop talking as though it is part of the natural realm.”*

This puts orthodoxy in a dilemma; a dilemma which has too often been evaded. There is a compelling force to the argument of secular science, yet orthodoxy cannot surrender this border area as an area of natural-supernatural overlap without destroying itself.

For the most part, to resolve the dilemma has but concentrated on finding ways ‘In reduce the tension to a bearable level. This it has done in two ways. First, by confining the area of overlap to past time. Secondly, by restricting the overlap in past time to the smallest possible area. Some have been willing to go much further than others in reducing the area of overlap by taking a second look at a wide range of supernatural elements in the orthodox view of biblical events. Few, if any, have not been ready to do something to reduce the overlap, and so the tension. This may be seen in the matter of the creation narrative, which has been a prime source of conflict. While some have gone ‘much further than others in attempts to reduce the overlap here, all the significant representatives of orthodoxy have long since abandoned the notion that God created all things in their present form and diversity; all are now ready to concede, and even insist on, a large measure of ‘natural’ diversification and development since creation., This reduces, but does not eliminate the tension.

In all this it is clear that orthodox theology offers no real resistance to the secular society. It too is, concerned only to have a room reserved for faith in the secular world. Its warring with the secular human intellect is confined to disputing over how big the - room will be.

Another important approach to the problem from within orthodoxy is that of the ‘revelation empiricists’, expounded by Clark H. Pinnock²¹, who follows closely in the footsteps of John Montgomery. Claiming to be in the tradition of old Princeton - the Hodges, Warfield - Pinnock takes up the rationalistic element in the Princeton theology and pursues it with rigid logical {8} consistency.

He too does what he can to reduce the area of natural-supernatural overlap, but, having done this he is aware - more so than many - of the problem that still remains if theology puts up its “Keep Out” signs around even this reduced area. He resolves the problem by removing the “Keep Out” signs. He invites the secular human intellect to come right in and investigate, from the ‘natural’ standpoint, this area too.

Pinnock is confident that the result will be favourable to faith - He is unhappy that the position of Locke and Descartes should be discarded. As fair, unprejudiced use of the secular human intellect, or, as Pinnock would put it, human reason, applied to the data of scripture will certainly verify the truth of revelation.²² Faith, he insists, is founded on a rational examination of the evidence. I believe because I am first persuaded

²¹ “Biblical Revelation ; The Foundation of - Christian Theology” by Clark H. Pinnock - Moody Press, 1971

rationally on the basis of empirical evidence that the biblical record is reliable. I accept the Christian revelation because it is empirically verifiable. Empirical verification lays the foundation for faith.

This may be helpful in relieving the tension between faith and science in the mind of an orthodox believer such as Pinnock. It can hardly help the unbeliever who does not find in the evidence any such rationally compelling force as Pinnock claims for it. And, more decidedly than the other variations of orthodoxy it reinforces the dogma of the autonomy of theoretical thought on which the secular society is built.

We can only conclude that, in all its bewildering varieties, Christian theology has been, and remains, an accessory to the secularization of society.

This raises important questions. Is this fact an indictment of theology, or is it to its credit? Is the secular society desirable or should it be resisted? Should Christians continue to look for ways of coming to terms with the secular society or should we provoke a confrontation? Should we think in terms of total surrender, peaceful co-existence, or total war? Our answers to these questions will determine the future direction, not only of our theology, but also of our faith. {9}

²² Pinnock defines 'reason' as 'the logical, discriminating faculty charges with detecting logical contradictions. op, cit. p.122 cf. p.38ff

II. THEOLOGY, FAITH, AND THE FUTURE

We have raised important questions affecting our whole faith, including also our theology. We must now attempt to find the answer to those questions. In doing this we must not confine our attention to the impact of the secular society on theology and ethics. By doing this too much already Christians have justified the rebuke that the Christian lives two lives; living as a secular man in everyday matters but, at a given point where he sees his faith as threatened, retreating “*into a Christian ghetto of traditional formulae in order to preserve his faith*”.²³

It is the great merit of modern empiricist theology that it challenges this Jekyll and Hyde method in Christian thought, calling Christians to a single, unifying motive for all their lives. At this one point its call is thoroughly biblical.²⁴

We must penetrate to the deepest roots of the secular way of thought and ask how these roots are related to the Christian gospel. Only by doing this can we determine what should be our attitude to the secular society, including its “new theology” and “new morality”.

SOLA SCRIPTURA

In looking for the answers to our questions we proceed with a firm commitment to the sola scriptura principle; the principle that scripture, and scripture alone, is the authoritative rule and guide of our faith. Only by close and obedient attention to scripture will faith enlighten the darkness of superstition and idolatry. To make every thought captive to scripture is the same as making every thought captive to Christ.²⁵

It is beside our present purpose to defend this commitment, though we are satisfied that it is the only defensible position for a Christian. For those to whom these thoughts are primarily addressed we are sure that no defence is needed. In this most fundamental conviction there is common ground with a great body of Christian thought, from the daring innovators, such as Kuitert, to the staunchest conservatives, who see the theology of the Puritans and old Princeton as the purest possible essence of the biblical faith. {10}

A BIBLICAL WORLD VIEW?

The fundamental assumption of the secular way of thought is that an understanding of the cosmos²⁶ must arise from within man himself; that any world view is inevitably the product of man’s observation, investigation, and reflection on the cosmos as he has access to it.

²³ “The Secular Meaning of the Gospel” - Paul M. van Buren (Pelican) 1968 p.16

²⁴ Perhaps the best known exponent of empiricist theology is John A.T. Robinson, the former Bishop of Woolwich. The most effective is Paul M. van Buren. The exposition of these men is also often called neo-positivist theology, but, as van Buren points out, while it does have an affinity with Logical Positivism, its more immediate roots are in British empiricism. See “The Secular Meaning of the Gospel” p. 27 ff.

²⁵ John 5:39, 40 II Cor. 10:2-6

²⁶ By ‘cosmos’ we mean the whole created universe.

In the mainstream of Western thought this has been joined with a basic faith in man which, in spite of many setbacks, has never been quite extinguished, since it was kindled in the rationalism of the Enlightenment. Because of this basic faith in man it is taken as axiomatic that the consensus of human understanding held by the majority, or, rather, accepted by the majority on the recommendation of the scientific elite, is the best possible understanding at a given point of history. Since the secular, scientific world view²⁷ represents the prevailing consensus it is the view that comes the nearest to the truth at this particular point of human development. It is tentative only because further development of human understanding may require its modification, but, for the present, it is mandatory for all intelligent, thinking men.

It is the apparently irresistible logic of this line of reasoning that has stampeded many Christians - yes, those within the orthodox, Reformed faith also - into an acceptance of the secular world view, qualifying it only where it openly threatens faith. It is believed that failure to accept the secular world view, at least as a tentative working hypothesis, would expose us as reactionary obscurantists who cannot see the nose on our own face, and discredit us and our faith in the eyes of all reasonable men. Even those of us who have fought hardest in border disputes with the secular intellect - for example, in defence of the miraculous element in scripture - have accepted the secular world view as a valid working hypothesis for large areas of life.

But are the assumptions on which this secular world view is founded valid? Is this the way scripture leads our thinking? If the assumptions are not valid, then the world view built on them cannot be valid even as a working hypothesis.²⁸

Men like Kuitert insist that the basic assumptions of the secular world view are valid.²⁹ We must dissent because we find these assumptions irreconcilable with scripture.

Scripture forbids the basic faith in the human consensus that underlies the secular way of thought. On the contrary, we find in scripture that man, in his wilful alienation from God, is ignorant and foolish, without understanding thinking empty thought. All his vaunted wisdom is nonsense³⁰ only as man's heart is re-directed in Christ with wholehearted love toward God is this darkness enlightened. In the renewal of the Spirit alone is man brought to know.³¹ {11}

A consensus of men lacking this faith commitment to God in Christ, however universal it may be, cannot yield a right view of the cosmos. By God's grace it may be constructed out of many useful bits of information and genuine insights into the real state of things - for God has not permitted man to lose all grip on meaning - but

²⁷ By "world view" is meant a full world and life view.

²⁸ This is not faced by those Christians who, while theoretically rejecting the secular world view, defend their use of it as a working hypothesis only in the pursuit of studies in their special area of interest e.g. in biology, history, sociology, economics, politics.

²⁹ "The Reality of Faith", p.151. For a spirited defence of acceptance of the the secular world view by Christians see "Christianity in a Mechanistic Universe" ed. D.M. Mackay (IVF,1965)

³⁰ Rom. 1:20-23 I Cor.3:19 Eph.4:17,18

³¹ Eph. 4:23,24 Col. 3:10

they will be like the bits of a jigsaw puzzle put the wrong way. They do not yield a true picture, a correct understanding of temporal reality. Unless man takes his starting point in the fear of God. he can know nothing as he should; all his wisdom is folly.³²

The first basic assumption of the secular society is equally out of harmony with scripture'. There IS a biblical world view that is neither a Hebraic nor Hellenic, nor any other culturally qualified world view.

This biblical world view is not given to us by the verbal idiom of scripture; an idiom that does often reflect the culturally qualified world view of the age - e.g. in the expression, "*heaven above, the earth beneath, and the waters under the earth*", or the windows in the sky, or the sky as a canopy.³³ For which the biblical writers to have avoided the standard idiom of the languages in which they wrote would have vastly impoverished scripture as verbal communication.

But, it is not to this verbal idiom that we are I to look for the biblical world view. Further, we will not find the biblical world view if we expect to find it presented to us in systematic propositions. What we do find is that the biblical revelation, to its very core, demands of us a particular way of viewing the cosmos; that there are biblical themes, woven into the very warp and woof of its fabric, that leave us with only one way of viewing I the world, and man's life in the world.

The creation of all things by God runs as a I persistent theme from Genesis to Revelation.³⁴ The whole of temporal reality, everything that is other than God himself, whether seen or unseen, is created by God.³⁵ Further, this creation is neither empty nor chaotic but ordered and pregnant with meaning by God's creative act.³⁶

As for man, he is declared to be part of this creation of God, set in it as the image bearer of God with a commission to rule it under God, not to exploit it, but to bring it to fulfilment.³⁷

This biblical creation theme in itself requires of us the elements of a distinct world view. It requires that we view the cosmos as a unity, free of all inherent dualism a unit y in which nothing can be meaningless or purposeless and in which idea that it can be man's task to give meaning or order to the world is ruled out since this is already given by God. Man's task can only be to bring to fulfilment, within the God-given order of creation, the meaning with which the cosmos is already pregnant.

³² Ps.111:10; Prov. 1:7

³³ These expressions may be found, among other places, in Gen. 1:6,7; 7:11; Ex. 20:4

³⁴ Gen. 1; Rev. 4:11

³⁵ Col. 1:16

³⁶ Ps. 19:1-6; 74:16,17; 148:5,6; 104 Is. 45:18 Jer. 31:35,36; 33:25 Rom. 1:20.

Christopher North translates Isaiah 45:18 : "The LORD ... formed the earth and made it; he established it firmly; he did not create it a chaos, he formed it to be inhabited." He comments: "It" is an orderly creation, not a chaos." "The Second Isaiah" (Oxford, 1964) ad loc.

³⁷ Gen. 1:27,28 Ps. 8:4-8 Rom. 8:19-22

Side by side with the theme of creation is the theme of sin. Man has rebelled against his Creator and King, repudiated the Creator's authority, and declared his own independence.³⁸ As a result he has brought on himself the {12} judgment of death.³⁹ Hostility and war has broken out between man and God, but also between man and man and between man and the rest of the creation. Sin has set not only man., but the whole creation on destruction course.⁴⁰ Further, man, in his rebellion, is in partnership with rebellious angels.⁴¹

As a sinner, man's heart is turned away from the true object of its loyalty, God, to idols, so that he suppresses the truth in favour of a lie. Unable to touch God himself, rebellious man attempts to destroy the God-given order and meaning of the creation, substituting an order and meaning of his own making.⁴²

Sin creates a picture of total despair, but, in scripture, it always appears alongside the theme of redemption in Christ. God does not allow his creation to be destroyed or robbed of its order and meaning. By Christ's redemption he saves it. Not only man "out the whole cosmos is saved from destruction in Christ and renewed in righteousness."⁴³

Yet, and this is important, redemption does not make sin meaningless, as it happens in a universalistic interpretation of redemption. Sin remains a reality in the cosmos and its destructive effects a practical reality to be reckoned with, both now and in the coming end of the age.⁴⁴

All this, also has far reaching implications for our view of the world. All dualism inherent in the created order is ruled out, whether it be the classical Greek dualism of form and matter, the scholastic dualism of nature and grace, or the humanistic dualism of nature and freedom. Yet there IS a dualism in temporal reality as we know it. It is the dualism of sin and grace, of judgment and redemption, of righteousness and unrighteousness, of the kingdom of God and the kingdom of darkness. It is the dualism of an irreconcilable antithesis that only by the final and total triumph can, never be resolved by a synthesis but only by the final and total triumph of the one over the other.⁴⁵

³⁸ Gen. 3:1-6 Rom. 1:21, 25, 28

³⁹ Rom. 5:12, 6:23, Jas. 1:15

⁴⁰ Gen. 3:17-19, Rom. 3:13-18, 8:20-22, Col. 1:21, Jas. 1:13-16, 4:1 2 Pet. 3:1-10

⁴¹ Matt. 25:41, John 8:44, Eph. 2:2, 2 Pet. 2:4, Jude 6

⁴² Rom. 1:21-23, John 3:19, Eph. 2:1-3, 5:8

⁴³ Eph. 1:10, Col. 1:13,20 2 Pet. 3: 13, Rev. 21:1-5

⁴⁴ We distinguish, therefore, between the biblical idea of a redemption that is cosmic in its scope and the unbiblical universalism that appears in the thinking of a wide range of contemporary theologians. In concern to exalt the biblical theme of grace, this unbiblical universalism makes sin and judgment, which are important biblical themes, meaningless. 'At this point, modern theology betrays a strong rationalist bent.

⁴⁵ Matt. 6:24, John 15:18,19, 2 Cor. 6:15, 16, Eph. 5:11, Jas. 4:4 It is an unwarranted assumption to understand 'the world' in these passages in exclusively ethical terms, yet this assumption has too often dominated exegesis and exposition. The antithesis presented here is religious, occurring at, the very heart of human existence.

This means, also, that any dualistic understanding of human life is fundamentally anti-human. Man's life, in its deepest roots, is an integral life. Only sin threatens this wholeness. Therefore, any world view that leads to, or permits any fundamental split in the life of man, such as the secular-sacred split common among 20th century Christians, is an apostate world view. {13}

The redemption of Christ brings man's life back to the wholeness of a life directed in all its areas by a single purpose and motive in whole-hearted, undivided love to God above all. "*The righteous lives in his faith commitment.*"⁴⁶ He does not live on faith, as the food of his life, but lives in faith as the unifying context of all his life.⁴⁷

We have done little more than sketch the barest outlines of the biblical worldview, but it will be sufficient, I trust, to show that there is a distinct biblical world view; a view that inevitably stands in an antithetic relation to all other world views. For this reason we must judge that the secular world view stands in a relation of irreconcilable antithesis to the Christian gospel, so that there can be no accommodation with the secular society without denial of Christ.

This does not mean that the Christian can have no meaningful relationship with secular man, or with the society dominated by secular man. It does mean that such a relationship, in which the Christian has meaningful, Christian contact with man in a secular world, can never be based on an accommodation, not even a partial, limited, or formal, accommodation with the secular way of life. We must set our whole life, and so also our theology, in another direction.⁴⁸

THEOLOGY AND PHILOSOPHY

Many Christians, even those who talk of a biblical world view, never bring their world view to articulate expression. In a secular society this is not good enough. Especially, it is not good enough for the Christian theologian. We must set the biblical world view as clearly and as explicitly as possible 'before our minds in all our thinking.

We can not evade this by saying that we do not commit ourselves to any particular world view. However vague, and unformed, it may be, we cannot live and think in interaction with the world without some view of the nature of the world and of ourselves in relation to it. Even if we operate without an integrating world view, but take each item as we come to it for what it is, or rather for what we see it to be, we are

⁴⁶ Hab. 2:4 By 'faith-commitment' I have tried to capture something of the fulness of meaning of the Hebrew which cannot be translated in a completely satisfactory way by any one English word. The idea of faith is present, but also much more than is conveyed by our English 'faith'.

⁴⁷ Matt. 6:24, 22:37,38 1 Cor. 10:31, Col. 3:17

⁴⁸ The objection is often raised against the antithesis approach that it shuts the Christian off from meaningful contribution to society. The truth is that it is the accommodation approach that shuts off the possibility of such contribution. In an accommodation approach, the limited commitment to the secular way of thought means that, in large areas, the Christian can say nothing radically different to the secularist, even if he does flavour it with Bible texts and Christian jargon, while any genuinely Christian insights he may offer must appear incongruous and irrelevant.

operating with a distinct world view; a view that assumes that temporal reality is a collection of discrete, items, each of which can be understood by itself. Such a view, of course, is radically unbiblical

Neither can we evade the issue by saying that theology is not effected by our world view since it deals with God and not with the cosmos. It is misleading, an obscuring of the true position, when we try to set theological thought apart {14} from the rest of human thought by saying that God “*is the object and theme of theological investigation*”⁴⁹ Theological thought is indeed concerned with God, but not with God apart from the temporal creation but only with God as he has revealed himself in that creation; a revelation that God has so embedded in the creation that it is part of the temporal order.

It is equally confusing if we attempt to find a special place for theological thought by saying that theology is concerned with “*eternal truths concerning, for example our triune God.*”⁵⁰ The only external truth outside the creation is God himself, for nothing exists but God, apart from the creation. There are no truths apart from God and the creation. So then, unless we are simply using the phrase “eternal truths concerning God” as a roundabout and obscure way of saying “God”, any truths about God must to the created order.

The fact is that Christian theology, so long as it remains Christian, and not an apostate, unbiblical speculation, is never concerned with an abstract idea of God, but always with the revealing Word of God as that Word has entered into our temporal horizon and become part of the temporal creation. The Word is not only in the creation, but, by God’s grace, is become part of the creation. Only as such can the Word of God become the object of theological thought’.⁵¹

⁴⁹ The expression is here taken from William G. T. Shedd - “Dogmatic Theology” (Zondervan - 1894) Vol. I p.17. On the contemporary scene, T.F. Torrance uses the idea of the uniqueness of theology’s object as the basis of an accommodation with secular scientific thought. See his work “God and Rationality” (Oxford 1971) for a useful introduction to his thought.

⁵⁰ This is a quotation from Hendrik G. Stoker in his article, “Van Til’s Theory of Knowledge” appearing in the book “Jerusalem and Athens” ed. E. R. Geehan (Presbyterian and Reformed 1971), p.39n. While sympathising with his concern at the possible ‘degradation’ of theology, for the above reasons. I (cannot agree with his view of the distinctive place of theology among the sciences and his description of theology as ‘scientia prima inter pares’ hardly seems satisfactory, even with Stoker’s careful qualification.

⁵¹ This does not mean, of course, that God is become part of the creation as though he has lost his separateness. it is simply recognising what has always been recognised in the doctrines of biblical inspiration and of the incarnation of the Word. To insist that the Word of God only comes to us in the temporal creation without being of that creation involves the docetic heresy that denies the true humanity of Christ. It also introduces an unbiblical dualism.

It should not need saying that what I have said here is something quite different from the notion that theological enquiry must begin with man and his experience. Such a notion is the very antithesis of what I have said since it denies the reality of a divine revelation within the temporal creation order.

We can speak of theology as having a distinctive character in that, as theoretical thought⁵² concentrated on the faith aspect of the creation, it has a unique transcendental character, directing our attention away from the creation to God, or, in an apostate theology, to a God-substitute. It is theoretical thought directed toward the faith aspect of the creation which “*was destined to function as the opened window of time through which the light of God’s eternity should shine into the whole temporal coherence of the world*”.⁵³ Let it be carefully noted, for it is crucial, it is not the open window through which man looks out onto God’s eternity, but the window through which the light of God’s eternity shines into man’s life. {15}

We must conclude, therefore, that, while theology has this distinctive transcendental character, it remains always an activity of human theoretical thought operating within the temporal boundaries of the creation. For this reason it cannot escape attachment to a world view, whether explicit or implicit, affecting all its thought.

But, theology, by its very nature as theoretical thought, demands something more than a world view; it demands the sort of theoretical total view that can be given only in philosophical thought.⁵⁴ Unless, therefore, theology works with a view of total reality theoretically articulated in a biblically directed philosophy, it will not escape entanglement with the ideas of unbiblical philosophies.

Two things will make sure of this. Firstly, our own inner sinfulness leads us away from the truth. It is only the constant, conscious subjection of our thought to the word of Christ that can purge this sinfulness from us.⁵⁵ Secondly, without a critical analysis based on an articulated world view, we will not see the apostate nature of many of the accepted “axioms” of our modern secular society. We will accept these ideas as axiomatic, because all thinking men around us do, without seeing that we are accepting the fruit of a tree whose roots are deeply planted in the apostate kingdom of darkness.

This makes it imperative that Christian theology work in a close partnership with Christian philosophy - i.e. philosophy consciously pursued under the direction of the divine word-revelation. Only such a philosophy can provide the theoretical insight into the total temporal coherence of the cosmos that theology needs to provide the theoretical context for its work.

We must repudiate, and root from our thinking the last remnants of both the Augustinian view of philosophy, that swallows philosophy up in Christian theology -

⁵² See appendix for a discussion of theoretical thought.

⁵³ “A New Critique of Theoretical Thought” - H. Dooyeweerd (Presb. & Ref. 1955) Vol. II p.302

⁵⁴ While a world view and a philosophy are inseparably connected in that a philosopher can only develop his philosophy in harmony with his world view, they must be distinguished from each other. Every man has a world view, a way of viewing the world and man’s life in the world. He cannot live without it. Philosophy, on the other hand, is a theoretical activity producing a theoretical view of total reality. Because theology is itself a theoretical activity it needs more than a pre-theoretical world view; it needs the theoretical work of philosophy.

⁵⁵ John 17:16, Eph. 5:26, Jas. 1:21,22

unsuccessfully - and the Thomist view, that sees philosophy as the work of 'natural' reason while theology is elevated above it as a supra-natural, sacred activity. The Christian philosophy with which Christian theology must enter partnership must be a philosophy that firmly repudiates the idea of the autonomy of theoretical thought, and, specifically, of philosophical thought; an idea that has dominated modern philosophical thought. "*Philosophy is its own final court of appeal. The first step in philosophy is the rejection of any possible court of appeal outside it.*"⁵⁶ All such thinking must be firmly rejected, not because theology demands it but because the Word of God demands it. A Christian philosophy can only be one that is directed by the Word of God from its very first step. {16}

There is, at the present time, only one serious attempt at such a philosophy; the philosophy of the cosmonomic idea developed initially by Professors Dooyeweerd and Vollenhoven.⁵⁷ Unless and until some Christian thinker comes forward with another philosophy more faithful to the Word of God and the created order, theology is clearly called to pursue its task in partnership with this Christian philosophy, accepting its theoretical view of the cosmos as a valid working model.

This does not mean that theologians must become Dooyeweerdian philosophers, nor does it mean that they must accept without question all the details of this philosophy as worked out by Dooyeweerd. While the leading role played by Dooyeweerd has linked his name inseparably with the philosophy of the cosmonomic idea, and given him a deservedly honoured place among those committed to this philosophy, it is by no means true that a commitment to the philosophy of the cosmonomic idea is a commitment to Dooyeweerd.⁵⁸ He himself would be the last to want any such thing.

The partnership must be both mutually dependent and mutually critical. Philosophy depends on theology for clearer insight into the faith aspect of temporal reality, while theology depends on philosophy for clearer insight into temporal reality as a whole. Yet, neither must surrender its sovereignty under Christ to the other. For either one to be subservient to the other would be apostasy; it would be exalting a human work to the place of sovereignty over man that belongs to Christ alone.

In this mutual relationship there will certainly be room for mutual criticism, with theologian and philosopher sharpening each other and drawing each other, each in his own calling to a closer adherence to the Word of God. Yet, this critical nature of the relationship not be taken to mean that the theologian can use philosophy in an eclectic manner, selecting from the philosopher's work bits and pieces that finds useful. He

⁵⁶ Paul Tillich in an article "Philosophy" published in "Twentieth Century Theology in the Making" ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (Fontana -1970) Vol. II p.246

⁵⁷ Some have spoken of the philosophy of Prof. Cornelius Van Til, of Westminster Theological Seminary Philadelphia. Van Til, however, is an apologist and not a philosopher, and, while he has offered some important discussions on particular points of philosophy, especially in his criticism of humanistic philosophies, he has not given us any distinctive and coherent philosophy. His great contribution has been in the field of apologetics.

⁵⁸ We have to think, in this respect, only of Prof. H.G. Stoker, of South Africa who has developed the philosophy of the cosmonomic idea along his own strongly independent lines, to recognise the truth of this statement.

must accept, as a working model the theoretical view total view of philosophy even while he may remain critical of certain details.

The failure to develop such a partnership has been a major weakness in the theology that sprang from the Reformation. Lacking a biblically directed philosophical foundation, theological thought has inevitably come to the scriptures with philosophical presuppositions drawn from alien philosophies. The result has been that scripture has been interpreted in the light of these philosophical presuppositions with a consequent obscuring of the Word of God at important points.

Where Reformed theology has followed medieval scholasticism in borrowing its philosophical concepts from classical Greek philosophy, as has been the usual procedure in the Anglo-Saxon world, the result has been not only the dualism referred to earlier, but the introduction of a heavy dose of rationalism into theology; a trend that became very apparent in the great Reformed theologians of the 19th century - e.g. Chalmers, the Hodges, Shedd, Warfield. {17}

Where it attempted to throw off these concepts and operate in independence of philosophy, as has been more common in the Netherlands, theology has fallen into the clutches of the prevailing philosophies of the day. This is very apparent in the contemporary instance of Kuitert, who, in spite of a declared intention to steer theology clear of philosophy has nevertheless produced a theology whose very roots are driven deeply into prevailing philosophical concepts, and specially those of historicism.

If theology today is to serve the Church in its confrontation with the secular society, and. its communication of the gospel to that society, it must renounce its proud independence, throw away its unworthy suspicion, and become the willing, wholehearted partner of Christian philosophy.⁵⁹

THEOLOGY AND SCIENCE

Theology alone, or theology with ethics, can never meet the challenge of our secular age; not even if it is pursued in partnership with a Christian philosophy. To attempt an ethico-theological assault on the secular society can lead only to the rebuff that comes to the Jekyll and Hyde method where the Christian attacks the secular society on one front while aiding it on a dozen others. Not only do men find it hard to know whether it is Jekyll or Hyde they should take seriously, but the Christian is in the situation of strengthening the defences of the secular society against his attacks on the ethico-theological front. His efforts are self-defeating.

In order to meet the challenge of our secular age in a biblical way it will be necessary for theology to work in partnership with the other sciences also. If we are to take the biblical view of the sciences as the investigation by man of the he various aspects of an integral creation, we cannot permit the sciences to work in isolation from each other, and, if we are to live as justified men then our scientific activity also must be pursued in a common faith commitment

⁵⁹ Science here is used in the broad sense to mean 'the pursuit of systematic and formulated knowledge' (Concise Oxford Dictionary), and is not restricted to 'the natural' sciences such as chemistry, biology, physics, etc.

This is decidedly not a call to add theology to the other sciences in order to inject into them in this way a faith element. This would be simply repeating the mistakes of the past.

The churches of the 16th and 17th centuries that grew out of the Reformation saw clearly that faith should direct all of life. They gave practical expression to that conviction in numerous ways such as Calvin's College of Geneva, the political action of the Scottish Covenanters, and the wide ranging efforts of the English Puritans at their best. The mistake made in all these efforts was in supposing that faith must direct man's life through theology. It was this that frustrated all their intentions. Because theology, human, thought concentrated in reflection on one aspect of the creation, was interposed between the Word of God and man's life in the world it is not surprising that the relevance of that Word for man's life was obscured and soon lost to sight altogether.

We must not repeat that mistake. We must leave behind, once and for all, all idea that theology can be in any sense the queen and mistress of the sciences. We must know and confess that science has no queen but only a King. We must equally remove all traces of the idea that theology is the mediator of the Word of God to men so that men can hear the Word correctly only as it is {18} interpreted by theology. The pursuit of scientific activity in Christian faith commitment requires that the scientist submit his scientific thought directly to the Word of God, and not to the Word theologically interpreted.

This does not mean that the scientist is exempted, as regards his scientific task, from listening, in faith, with reverent care, to the exposition of the scriptures by the teaching office of the church.

We must distinguish the task of theology from the teaching office of the church. The failure to do this leads to several evils, including the unbiblical constriction of the teaching office, and its ministry. It is the function of the teaching office to expound the divine word-revelation, not merely as a theological word, nor as an ethical word, but as the word of the living God directed in all its rich fulness to man's heart from which his whole life, in every area, issues in richly varied coherence.

To interpose a practical thought here, is it not worth considering, in view of this, whether our practice of providing training with a heavily one-sided ethico-theological emphasis for men destined for the teaching office does not need re-examination? Does training in theology and ethics prepare a man effectively to be a teacher of the Word of God? Does it not, in fact, make it difficult for him to teach anything else but an ethico-theological word?⁶⁰

To return to our theme, the challenge of our age can be met effectively only as theology takes its place alongside the other sciences and philosophy within a scientific faith-community in which, in mutual interdependence and interaction each science

⁶⁰ This problem is recognised by some churches that require, as a pre-requisite for theological training, a degree course at university level. However, this does not solve the problem, because the degree course is a secular course isolated from the theological study and, what is worse, from the Word of God. 'The result is simply confirmation of the unbiblical secular-sacred dualism.

pursues its task under the direction of the Word of God; the Word of God not being mediated by any one science to another, but being heard and obeyed by each in its direct relevance to the specific nature of that science, and by them all together in its direct relevance to the whole scientific task.

Only in this way may we hope to avoid the sinful glorification of one branch of the sciences, with its consequent distortion of the coherence of the creation⁶¹ and provide for the enrichment and clarification of all the sciences, including theology. The pressing challenge of the secular society makes such a scientific faith-community not just a grand ideal but an urgent need if the Church is to break out of its modern isolation to let its voice be heard in the market places of the modern secular society.⁶²
{19}

THEOLOGY'S INNER REFORMATION

The present, secular age also challenges theology to a new inner reformation. The Reformation of the 15th century brought about a major, radical reformation of the theology received from medieval scholasticism. It did this by bringing scholastic theology back to the rigorous test of the sola scriptura principle. Yet, the seeds of scholasticism being left by the failure to disengage theological thought from the philosophical sub-structure of scholasticism, these seeds soon began to bear fruit in an increasing leaven of rationalism and metaphysical speculation in Reformed theology.

Our task is to re-apply, to the Reformed theology we have received, the same rigorous test of the sola scriptura principle. We must set ourselves to the task of purging our theology ruthlessly of all traces of an alien philosophy, reconstructing it as nearly as we are able in harmony with scripture at every point. Something more than a touching up is needed. We need a thorough rebuilding. We need to do this, NOT in order to conform our theology to the thought of our age, or to make it more acceptable to modern secular man, but so that we may the more effectively confront the secular man with his sin and apostasy; so that the radical antithesis of sin and grace may be seen in sharper contrast.

While this is not the place to begin such a task, some concrete suggestions may serve to make clear the sort of task in view.

⁶¹ Such distortion resulted from the unbiblical glorification of theology as queen and mistress of the sciences. In our own day the distortion has come most notably from the glorification of the 'natural' sciences.

⁶² It may be asked why such a community is so essential if the Apostles seemed to manage very well without It. The answer is that they did not live in a secular, scientific world, so they did not need to 'confront apostate scientific thought with believing confession.' They did confront the apostate thought of the age. We must do the same.

Must we not abandon the natural-supernatural scheme in favour of one that does more justice to the biblical theme of creation?⁶³ Is there not an unbiblical dualism to be purged from our traditional discussion of miracles?⁶⁴

Is there not a considerable measure of metaphysical speculation in our doctrine of God? Is our tendency to present God in a rationalistic mould with a moralistic emphasis true to scripture?⁶⁵ When we say that God cannot do the logically impossible, because 'a logical impossibility is, in truth, a nonentity', are we not enslaving God within the laws of his own creation?⁶⁶ Is there any biblical foundation for the distinction of incommunicable attributes - God as absolute Being - and communicable attributes - God as personal Spirit?⁶⁷ Is the idea of an impassible God who is never moved to joy or sorrow by the sight of his creatures really the biblical picture of God, and demanded of us by scripture? Is it not the projection onto scripture of an unscriptural notion of divine perfection?

Does the creationist-traducianist problem have any meaning except in the context of an unbiblical dualistic anthropology?⁶⁸ Does our passion for logical systematisation in physical cause-effect categories seen in the discussions of the 'ordo salutis' perhaps obscure rather than clarify the nature of the divine work of salvation in the sinner? Has our commendable zeal to preserve the forensic {20} character of justification led to an unbiblical objectification? Is time really to be seen as an interlude between two eternities? Is the idea of Christ at his coming bringing time to an end, an idea reflected even in our hymnology, really biblical? Do we do justice to the biblical idea of this present age as the eschaton, the last days?

The answers to these, and other theological questions must not be given too quickly, even if we can support our answer with ready reference to proof texts. We will need to study such questions with care in the full light of the integral revelation of scripture and in conscious repudiation of alien philosophical categories of thought. And, of course, it is not just a purifying of alien ideas so that we can get back to the pure thought of Calvin, or the Puritans, or Abraham Kuyper that we need, but a purifying that brings our theology closer to the Word of God; a purifying that brings about not merely the pulling out of weeds, but the enriching of the whole garden of our theological thought.

THEOLOGY AND FAITH

⁶³ It should not need to be said that this will not mean a fall into a naturalistic scheme, but rather one that does more justice to God's activity in the creation than the natural-supernatural scheme ever did.

⁶⁴ A suggested alternative definition of a miracle might be 'an act of God's power within the creation evoking man's wonder.

⁶⁵ Note, for example, the categories under which the widely used Systematic Theology of L. Berkhof subsumes the communicable attributes 'Systematic Theology' (Banner of Truth - 1958) pp. 64ff.

⁶⁶ See W.G.T. Shedd, op. cit. Vol. I p. 359f.

⁶⁷ See Berkhof, op. cit. pp. 57,64

⁶⁸ Creationism-traducianism refers to the debate over whether the soul of each individual person is created by God in each case (creationism), or is produced, like the body, by ordinary generation (traducianism).

It may appear that what we have been saying relates only to the world of the scientist and scholar, remote from the everyday life of faith of the believer in a very practical, not to say pragmatic, world. This is not so, and yet it may very easily become so.

The danger of creating an elite Christian community of scholars isolated from the body of Christ is very real. It is not avoided merely by the elite keeping open physical links with others outside the group. Neither is it avoided by the scholars taking pains to communicate their ideas to others, endeavouring to relate theory to practice, and listening for 'feedback'.

It can be avoided only by taking seriously the biblical idea of the one body of Christ in which the believing labourer, and scholar, and housewife, and clerk, and scientist, and shopkeeper, are all not only members of Christ, but 'members of one another'.⁶⁹ It can be avoided only as we give consistent practical expression to the communion, the sharing together, of the body of Christ.

This will mean that all will listen gladly as the scholar attempts to share the fruit of his scholarship, but it will mean also that the scholar will be just as glad to sit and learn from the humblest member of Christ's body; yes, and to be shown by him, if need be, where he has been unfaithful to the Word of God.⁷⁰ We will share our joys and sorrow, our reproofs and corrections, our praises and applause. There can be no fully Christian, biblical pursuit of learning without this, not just in theory but in daily practice.

Only in this way will theology - and also philosophy and the other sciences not be in danger of forgetting that it is not the master of the faith, or of the faithful, but always the humble servant of both for Christ's sake. {21}

We have attempted to map out, under the direction of the Word of God, the way theology should take to fulfil its task in this present age. I would conclude by pointing out again the urgency of biblical action to confront our secular society; an urgency that presses not only on theology and theologians, but on the whole Christian community.

If we compare the response to the apostolic preaching to the response to today's proclamation - yes, in its most orthodox form - we find a striking contrast. Then, the message was not always received with gladness; sometimes it met with hostility, suspicion, hatred, scorn, but it did not meet indifference.

We have become too fond of attributing the indifference to the gospel in our day to the decadence of the age. This will not do. The apostolic age was also an age of decadence, in the afternoon hours of the Roman Empire and Greek civilization.

The key is in the proclamation itself. The apostolic proclamation confronted men of that day with the idolatry of the age, whether it be the idolatry of the Greek and

⁶⁹ Rom. 12:5

⁷⁰ Col. 3:16

Roman pantheon, or the idolatry of the Jewish legalists. The same may be said for the proclamation of the Reformation. It challenged the prevailing superstition and idolatry of an apostate Christianity. The Church in the 20th Century has not seriously challenged the 20th century idolatry.

The idolatry of this 20th century secular world is not the idolatry of the 1st century, nor is it the idolatry of the 15th century European world. It is a new, more sophisticated, scientific idolatry that, in various forms, deifies man himself. Only as we learn to challenge that idolatry relentlessly, not at one or two points, but at every point and in every area of life and thought, will our proclamation regain its relevance; a relevance that may be scorned and hated, but cannot be dismissed as irrelevant. {22}

APPENDIX

THEORETICAL AND PRE-THEORETICAL THOUGHT

Consider a tree. It has stood on the one spot for years, where it has been seen and admired by many people. Many have rested under its shade in the summer. When it was young someone brought it there, planted it, and tended it with care. A poet was inspired by it to write a poem. A novelist made it the focal point of a book. A business firm adopted it, in stylised form, as its trade mark. A group of tree lovers mounted a protest when there was talk of cutting it down.

All these people have thought about that tree in a pre-theoretical way. They have thought of it as a concrete object forming part of their life.

But now we want to know more about this concrete object we, call a tree. We want more penetrating insight into what it is and how it functions. To do this we must engage in theoretical thought. We call this second way of thought theoretical because, in it, we cease to think of the tree concretely, no longer focusing our thought on the tree as such, but on a theoretical abstraction., We think about it under the various aspects, or modalities in which it functions; aspects that only open out before our theoretical thought.

So, for example, one man comes to this tree in theoretical thought to consider it under its biotic aspect. Viewing it as a living subject he is engaged in what we call biology, and is able in this way to tell us much about the life processes of the tree. Another man considers the same tree under its physical aspect. As a physicist, he is able to tell us much about the physical characteristics of the tree, including its physical inner structure with the interaction of many elements.

Then an economist comes along. He sees the tree in economic terms and describes it in terms of its economic value. A dispute over ownership arises, so a lawyer is brought into the picture and he views it under its juridical aspect as a juridical object. Still another man considers this tree under its faith aspect. As a theologian he informs us that the tree reveals the hand of the Creator, who in his providence still rules over it and lavishes on it his care. Others still might consider this same tree in theoretical thought under still other aspects.

But we soon discover that these various aspects are not isolated from one another. They can be distinguished, but they are also inseparably intermingled. Here the theoretical thought we call philosophy is called into service to explain, still in theoretical abstraction, the internal structure of the tree in its various aspects or modalities, and its relationship with the rest of the creation. He is not concerned with the physical structure, or the biological structure, or the chemical structure, of the tree, but with the coherence of all the aspects in which the tree functions. {23}

Because all creation functions in each of these aspects that open out before theoretical thought, it is tempting for the scientist to suppose he can explain everything in terms of one aspect, the physical. This has, in fact, often happened, but it involves a falsification of reality that always breaks down in the face of the tests of life.

Everything may be explained, theoretically, in terms of one aspect, but nothing may be reduced to one aspect.

In the light of this understanding of the nature of theoretical thought it becomes clearer what is required if the Word of God is to direct in our scientific task. Consider a biologist called to lecture in biology. As a Christian he is aware that he must approach his task differently to the unbeliever, so he weaves into the fabric of his lectures the idea that biology is a study of what God has created and sustains by his providence, and that the wonders of the life processes direct our thought to the wonderful Creator. He is then satisfied that he has approached his biological task in a distinctively Christian way.

Yet, the fact is, the Word of God has not affected his biology at all. All he has done has been to ADD to his biology by PUTTING ALONGSIDE IT, pretheoretical faith statements, or, if he is theologically inclined, theological statements. His biology, as theoretical thought directed to the biotic aspect of temporal reality, is conducted without conscious direction from the Word of God.

It is certainly appropriate for him to state his faith commitment in connection with his biological task, but he should not think that this makes his scientific work subject to the Word of God, or, distinctively Christian. He must place himself under the direction of the Word of God in his theoretical thought itself as it is directed specifically to the biotic aspect of temporal reality; an aspect that must not be confused with the faith aspect.

Theoretical thought does not impose on the creation modalities that are not there. These modalities, or of created reality are not products of human reason. They open out to theoretical thought only because they are already given by God; they open out the meaning, and order given to the creation by the Creator and sustained in it by him. If theoretical thought attempts to impose its own creation or. temporal reality It loses touch with reality and ends in a world of pure fantasy.

It is a very serious mistake to suppose that theoretical thought is superior to the pre-theoretical. This is a fundamental mistake of modern secular man. Pre-theoretical thought is too often thought of as the kindergarten stage that can be left behind once we graduate to theoretical thought.

The fact is that the two ways of thought are complementary. While theoretical thought extends our insight into, the creation in a way impossible for pretheoretical thought, consequent practical advantages, in our dominion over the creation, it can never grasp the concreteness of things. This grasp of the concrete reality, so essential for our life in the world, is possible only by pre-theoretical thought. Pre-theoretical thought is therefore the indispensable, continuing pre-requisite, without which theoretical thought is impossible. This is why we call it pre-theoretical. {24}