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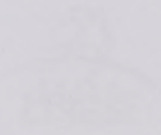
Rethinking the Character
and Task of Christian
Theology for the
Third Millennium

An Essay by J A (Bobby) Loubser

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University of South Africa, Pretoria

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*Keep thy heart with all diligence; For out of it are the issues of life
(Proverbs 4:23, ASV).*

CONTENTS

Preface by G. C. J. Oosthuizen ix

Introduction xi

Part One

Science and Religion as Cultural Expressions 1

1. **Culture** 3
 - Cultural competence 3
 - Self-consciousness 4
 - Technology, philosophy and religion 6
 - Media 6
 - Characteristics of symbolic systems 8
 - What is involved in the process of symbolic representation? 9
 - Tradition 10
2. **Science** 12
 - Science as culture 12
 - The scientific process 13
 - The role of tradition in scientific research 15
 - Science and technology 15
3. **Religion** 16
 - Religion as culture 16
 - The scope and purpose of religion 16
 - Religion and media 17
 - The principle of reduction 18
 - The heuristic principle 18
 - Development of religion 18
 - Religious and secular manifestations 19
 - Religion and faith 20
 - Analysis of religion 20

Part Two

The Place of Theology Within a Theory of Culture 23

4. **Theology as Scientific Culture** 25
 - 'Christian' theology 25
 - The primacy of theology 26
 - Theology and religious studies 26
5. **Theology and Faith** 28
 - A brief historical synopsis 28
 - Theology as sacred science 29
 - Theology as secular project 31
 - The partial compromise 33
 - The dialectical position 35
 - Choosing a model 37

6. The Epistemology of Theology	38
Coping with conflicting intellectual systems	39
Ego states, channels and rationalities	40
The real interests of the theologian	42
Theology and power	43
Audiences and interlocutors	43

Part Three

Theology as Dialectical Process	45
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7. The Theological Process	47
The primary dialectic	47
The secondary dialectic	47
The relationship between historical, systematic and practical subjects	48
8. Theoretical Theology (1): The Historical-Analytical Dimension	51
The scope of historical investigation	51
Does theology require a special method of analysis?	52
A 'richer' view of history	53
The Bible: history of early Christianity	53
Other historical disciplines	57
9. Theoretical Theology (2): The Systematic-Synthetic Dimension	62
Systematic theology and the scope of religion	62
The contextual nature of systematic theology	62
The theological task of systematic theology	62
The conventional divisions of systematic theology	63
Overcoming the essentialist fallacy	64
An exercise: a theology of love	65
Philosophy and theology	68
Christianity at its worst	68
10. Practical Theology: The Empirical-Practical Dimension	70
Traditional scope and sub-disciplines	70
Place within the theological dialectic	70
Contribution to other disciplines	71
Empirical method	72
An example of innovation through empirical observation: liberation theology	72
11. Summary and Conclusion: Getting Out of the Ghetto	76
A theology of our future evolution	77
Open schools, faculties and seminaries in service of an open society	77
Notes	80
Bibliography	86

PREFACE

The cultural impact of historical Christianity around the globe is receding at an alarming rate except in Africa and some parts of South America. The contemporary problem of theology is that so little 'rethinking' has been done, particularly in the Western-oriented so-called historic churches – called 'mainline' churches in South Africa – so that a fully fledged post-Christian era is becoming an existential and historical fact.

This study, with its emphasis on 'rethinking theology', gives an appropriately incisive analysis of the basic issues at stake. The first of the three parts of this 'essay' is of special significance. It points to the genesis of culture in its primordial and developed stages and the symbolical reconstruction of reality through mental concepts represented by secondary media.

The second part of the 'essay' concentrates on the role of theology within a theory of culture – it shares all the common features of scientific cultural expression; it functions 'within the primary dialectic of theory and practice' in which 'the historical-analytical and systematic-synthetic dimensions' are closely investigated. Helpful distinctions are made between sacred theology, secular theology, partially compromised, and dialectical theology. The author has wrestled with the implications of these various stances in theology as a discipline. His main concern is to lift the present state of theology out of the ghetto of meaningless, pious, basically unconcerned, embedded scholastic (called academic) dispositions – unconcerned because hardly any empirical research has been done. If consistent empirical research does not assume primary significance, the 'pie-in-the-sky' syndrome will destroy the church's outreach and thus its life.

Part 3 is devoted to the dialectical processes that have a bearing on theological production. The relation between historic, systematic and practical disciplines is brilliantly sketched, clarifying their places within the context of the theological discipline as a whole. The old linear relationship between these subjects 'suppresses the complexity of the interaction between the different elements which leads to an authoritarian and imperialist culture where there is no space for innovation'. The emphasis is thus on mutual dependency of these subjects and not on dichotomous separation. They are mutually dependent and can never be separated eclectically. If each one remains in his/her own pigeonhole, without an overarching perspective, it breeds skewed eye vision, a menace to the discipline and its outreach. *It is not a question of synthesis but a 'dialectical flow between theory and practice'*. It is not merely a matter of proclamation but maintaining a dialectical stance. It is helpful to see that philosophical reasoning is part of the scientific apparatus of the theologian.

Brilliantly stated, but concise, is the disposition of the philosophers. Part 3 concludes with a sketch of practical theology showing its connection to the needs of the church. This is, of course, much more evident in the African Initiated Churches than in most of the so-called mainline churches.

Bobby Loubser's study points to theology as a living, challenging, and all-encompassing discipline instead of being merely an abstract field of study. Theology should be deeply related to the life and work of church people in a world that will experience perhaps its most crucial but meaningful developments in the third millennium, in which the concern will be less with the church as institution, and more with the church as organism. If the 'people' do not predominate in the context of research and study, the 'organisation' will be sidelined and recede into obscurity and even meaninglessness.

Prof G. C. J. 'Pippin' Oosthuizen
Westville, Durban

INTRODUCTION

Like Christianity itself, Christian theology needs to be radically open to the world. This was always the case at times when Christianity was at the height of its influence in human affairs. Unfortunately there is also a tendency to the opposite, that is, to withdraw into a supposedly safe haven where it can indulge in its own internal rhythms. What was declared by the Lausanne Covenant in 1974 still holds true: 'We need to break out of our ecclesiastical ghettos . . . World evangelisation requires the whole church to take the whole gospel to the whole world.'¹ This essay is about the theological ramifications of this statement. It is about the place and function of theology in society in a time that we are experiencing a massive reorganisation of cultural patterns owing to globalisation.² It is also a response to the challenge of survival as an academic discipline in an increasingly hostile environment.

Although the essay grew out of concern for the future of theological education in South Africa, it is essentially global in scope. When considering the wider dimensions of theology, the task ahead seems formidable, for it has to provide intellectual support for the faith of 34% of the world's population who adhere to the Christian message (1,9 billion people toward the end of the second millennium). It is within this context that Christian theology has to find its place and make a contribution.

In this essay I do not present a simplistic method for doing theology. Nor do I prescribe a singular educational model to be followed universally. Neither do I offer an explicit 'theology of theology', though the fact that I hail from a Reformed background and am teaching New Testament at an open faculty with students from the major Christian traditions in post-apartheid South Africa certainly has had a formative influence on my thinking. Nonetheless, I hope to engage representatives from other traditions in thinking creatively about our common task. I believe that the ecumenical church needs a special quality of theological formation if it is to serve the world of the future. At its best, theology as a scientific discipline should help the believer to do everything in his or her power to ensure that the Christian message is authoritative, based on truth, and responsible in the most circumspect manner. If the centre of its message is love for God and neighbour, the importance of this enterprise should be clear. God's plan for the world includes a critical and scientific study of his world and his Word.

In this essay Christian theology is understood to be an integral function of the Christian faith, which in turn is a function of human religion and culture in general. Christians will do well to consider this. To a great extent the future of Christianity is related to the future of religion in general. Now, more than ever, it is imperative for Christianity to come to terms with its position *vis-à-vis* other religions. Without any doubt one can say that the shape of the world in this third millennium – in both its

positive and negative aspects – will be deeply influenced by religion in general. Through the religions of the world, 83,6% of humankind is contemplating its origins, managing the present and gearing up for the future.³ In its regular form religion is never the privileged possession of merely a few initiates, but an enterprise in which humanity as a whole shares through mutual exchange, understanding and a joint celebration of meaning. Our noblest aspirations and worst behaviours are rooted in our religious heritage. It represents our richest tradition, drawing wisdom from all other subjects. It is too crucial an aspect not to be the subject of intensive and continuous reflection.

Under optimal conditions Christian theology is strategically positioned to be the guardian of true religion, the avenging angel of injustice and inhumanity. Being one of the most challenging and stimulating scientific disciplines, theology is also an art, for it opens a window on mankind's highest delight, its experience of infinite wisdom and unspeakable beauty.

There seldom was a time that religion and theology in particular had been under more pressure than in the past decades. This is my impression after having visited various theological faculties, seminaries and religious studies departments from Nanjing to Nashville and from Melbourne to Cairo. To surf the Internet and to note the manner in which theological faculties from Copenhagen to Montreal are positioning themselves to justify their existence is almost as enlightening as visiting the institutes in person.

Particularly as an academic subject at public institutions of learning, theology finds itself under crossfire. Although this is a worldwide trend, this is especially true of theology in my native country. Since the adoption of a new South African Constitution (1994) and the ongoing restructuring of tertiary education, radical questions are now being raised.⁴ The demand for equity among religions has put a question mark behind the traditional manner of accommodating Christianity in public schools and universities. In addition, the shortage of funds and the demand for career-oriented education raise questions as to the utility and desirability of religious subjects. This debate is bound to intensify as new policies are implemented.

One of the most burning questions is: 'Does Christian theology have a place in the academic sphere?' Other questions concern the utility of theology and its origin, orientation, practice and outcomes. From the side of theologians a general effort is being made to present the subject in the most relevant way possible.⁵ Emphasis is placed on the moral and ethical aspects of the discipline. However, this calls for a radical investigation of the nature and scope of theology as an academic subject.

In this study, the character and task of theology will be examined. Fundamental questions will be asked. For example, 'Is theology essentially a part of human religion?' 'Is religion an intrinsic part of human culture?' 'How do religion and

culture relate to one another?' Eventually a case will be developed for theology as a scientific discipline. The outcome of this study is a demonstration of how theology indeed acts as an expression of human religion, which in turn is an integral part of human culture. Therefore, if we know what culture is, we can develop an idea of what religion is and from there proceed to an understanding of theology and its various disciplines.

As a rule I have tried to limit the references in this essay. In fact, I was advised to use many more, so that the uninitiated could follow the argument! The informed reader, however, will notice allusions to the works of some of the great minds of our time. Apart from the influence of theologians such as Karl Barth, Paul Tillich, Teilhard de Chardin, Hans Küng and many others, I have taken the liberty of incorporating insights from such outstanding thinkers as Thomas Kuhn, Anatol Rapoport, Ludwig Von Bertalanffy, Marshall McLuhan, Michel Foucault, Karl Popper and others who are not mentioned in the notes or bibliography.

I am also deeply indebted to many gifted conversation partners and colleagues such as Alrah Pitchers, Danie and Robin Lombard, Pippin Oosthuizen, Charles Dlamini, Lincoln Mitchell, Irvin Chetty, Henrietta Nel, Martin Prozesky, Bertie du Plessis, Arthur Song, Mike Kitshoff, Pratap Kumar, Gerhard van den Heever, Bernard Lategan, Cilliers Breytenbach, Carel and Christine Anthonissen, Jabu Maphalala, Michael Pye, Rosalind Hackett, Gerald West, Edmondo Lupieri, Vernon Robbins, Christo Lombard and Daniel Patte, who have all made remarks that were assimilated into this work (though some might not recognise their own contributions). To these I owe my sincere appreciation.

The last phase of this essay was completed at the Institute for Ecumenical and Cultural Research at St John's University in Collegeville, Minnesota. I am deeply indebted to the scholarly feedback received from my colleagues at the Institute. Thanks also to Conrad Wethmar, John Cobb and Richard Penaskovitch, who read the essay in draft form and supplied valued criticism.

To Minnie, my wife and resident psychologist, I owe a great deal of gratitude for her loyal support in my quest for understanding. This essay is dedicated to Willie Jonker, emeritus professor of the Faculty of Theology at Stellenbosch University, from whom I have learned how constructive an enterprise theology can be when one is humble enough to take the 'other voices' seriously.

CHAPTER ONE

Culture

PART ONE

Science and Religion as Cultural Expressions

Science and religion are two of the most prominent and enduring cultural expressions of humanity. Both have shaped the course of human history, influencing our understanding of the world and our place in it. Science, through its systematic inquiry and empirical methods, has led to remarkable technological and medical advancements. Religion, through its spiritual and moral teachings, has provided a sense of purpose and community for billions of people. Together, they represent the dual aspects of human nature: the quest for knowledge and the search for meaning.

In a world where the boundaries between the two are increasingly blurred, it is essential to explore their cultural significance. This chapter will examine the historical and contemporary roles of science and religion, highlighting their shared values and the unique contributions each has made to human progress. We will also discuss the challenges and opportunities that arise as these two powerful forces continue to evolve and interact in the modern world.

Cultural Competence

In our increasingly diverse and globalized world, the ability to understand and appreciate different cultures is essential. Cultural competence is the skill of interacting effectively with people from diverse backgrounds. It involves not only recognizing and respecting differences but also being able to communicate and collaborate across cultural boundaries. This is particularly important in a world where science and religion often intersect, as understanding the cultural context of each is key to their effective application and integration.

In the coming years, as we continue to advance in both science and religion, it is crucial that we maintain a strong sense of cultural competence. This means being open to new ideas and perspectives, and being willing to learn from the experiences of others. Only by embracing our shared humanity and the rich tapestry of our cultures can we truly progress and thrive in the 21st century.



CHAPTER ONE

Culture

Before considering the character and function of theology we shall in turn investigate the nature of culture, religion and science. As we proceed, the purpose of this exercise will become clear.

Among the many, often-controversial definitions of culture there is the constant notion that culture is the human modification of nature. Culture is something that humans acquire in their grappling with nature. It is therefore a human product, artificially created. Culture is also understood to determine all aspects of human life: thoughts, beliefs, actions, social patterns, etc. It is passed on from generation to generation, and although it is in a constant process of becoming, it cannot be completely changed. In addition, it is specific to groups of people, though no group can claim to have a 'pure' or homogenous culture.

In a narrower sense the word *culture* is often used to indicate artistic products typical of a certain group. We thus speak of *African culture* as expressed by its art, music and folklore. For our present purpose we shall use the widest definition possible, namely a comprehensive framework in terms of which humans define and interact with their world. In other words, the definition goes beyond the tangible artefacts produced by a certain society. Culture is thus seen as both a precondition for and the result of human action.

Cultural competence

We shall begin our deliberations by considering a simple question: 'Wherein lies the human competence for culture?' The first observation is that humans have a cultural competence that is unique among all living beings. In spite of all the intrinsic qualities that humans share with other creatures, it is obvious that they alone are capable of producing cultural products. Sea otters may crack abalone shells on their chests with rocks, and chimpanzees may use sticks to catch scorpions, but these examples are not indicative of a cultural competence.

In the animal world we also find many species with elaborate social and kinship systems, but these do not qualify as cultural products, for they remain rigid and unchanging within the lifespan of individuals. At most we can say that they are

weak signs of proto-culture. When applied to animals, the word 'culture' can only be used metaphorically.

Culture, then, sets humans apart from animals, for only humans can restructure their environment on a massive scale. The phenomenon of language may serve to illustrate this distinction. In California a gorilla, Koko, is reported to have learned 500 symbols of American sign language. Apart from being able to construct simple sentences, she is also on record as having expressed the intention of teaching her future baby sign language.⁶ In tests on the linguistic ability of chimpanzees, it was found that through human training they mastered between 400 and 500 'words' (including hand-signs) and expressed themselves in sentences. However, the differences between human sentences and gorilla and chimp ones are remarkable. It was found that the gorillas and chimps have no competence for syntax. They always understand words in the same way, regardless of their order. To them 'words' always have only one meaning. The capacity for polysemy is lacking.

In view of this one may define the essential difference between human and animal behaviour as a *qualitative* difference in the competence for symbolic representation. Whereas primates such as chimps and gorillas are able to use a limited number of symbols, they do not have the ability to rearrange or represent these symbols. As it turns out then, the phenomenon of culture depends on *a unique ability of humans for symbolic representation*.⁷ As we have noted, even the most advanced animals master only a very limited number of symbols ('words') and never proceed beyond a stage where these symbols refer to more than one possible object.

Self-consciousness

Because of a qualitatively superior capacity for symbolic representation, humans can grasp aspects of reality and restructure these on a massive scale. The ability for such superior symbolisation is closely bound to the idea of self-consciousness. By way of generalisation one can say that animals possess consciousness, whereas humans possess both consciousness and self-consciousness. The ability for symbolic representation is given with the fact that humans are not merely conscious of reality, but that they are (at times) conscious *that* they are conscious.

Let us then assume that culture is concurrent with human self-consciousness as expressed by human language as a superior system of symbolic representation.⁸ In this sense, language itself is a primary indication of human culture. Through language, reality is not only symbolically represented, but also restructured. As a cultural product, language is itself a symbolic system that restructures elements of perceived reality (objects, events, abstract qualifications and relations). One can go back one step beyond language, however. One can say that the roots of culture

become evident in the way that reality, as perceived through the senses, is self-consciously grasped and restructured. In other words, language is a manifestation of the mental ability to symbolise reality and to restructure it inside the mind. As such, language can be seen as the primary product of the human competence for culture itself. It is the most pervasive cultural system devised. Language is simultaneously the product of and agent for the symbolic restructuring of reality.

Until now we have not asked why humans have this unique ability. In response to this question we can only reply with certainty that this secret has not yet been discovered. In ancient anthropology this activity was ascribed to the human soul. Recent materialist theories look for the solution in the way that the human brain is 'wired'. A popular theory is that the brain disposes of a vast number of 'micro co-processors' that are structured in such a way that conceptualisation becomes possible through a process of interactive recursions. Another way of visualising this activity of the human brain is to see its activities as emergent properties of interactive neural systems (that is, properties that are not present in the components, but emerge through complex systemic interactions). In whichever way we try to describe it, it is evident that the human self can mentally represent and objectify distinct elements of perceived reality. In simple language, humans can experience themselves seeing 'pictures' and hearing sentences in their minds, of which they themselves are not directly part. Although animals undoubtedly also see pictures and hear sounds in their minds, as can be observed when dogs are dreaming, it is doubtful whether they have the experience of an inner self that consciously *reflects* on these 'pictures' (and sounds, etc) as distinct from the self. It must be noted that some researchers maintain that at least some of the apes have learned to understand 'words' as abstractions.⁹

Whether the human ability for self-conscious, symbolic representation developed gradually in the evolutionary process, or whether a structural 'quantum leap' occurred at a specific stage, also remains an open question. The same can be said of the question of whether self-consciousness can be artificially reproduced in a subsequent generation of computers, if at all possible. Thus the secret of human cultural competence, like the secret of life itself, is still securely hidden within the human genome (or elsewhere). From a scientific point of view it is preferable not to formulate it in terms of 'essentialist' breaks between animal and human qualities, but rather to employ the model of a sliding scale. However, phenomenologically speaking, such breaks are quite apparent.

What we do know, as should be evident from the discussion, is that the unique ability for self-conscious representation lies at the root of culture. As such, it is the basis of all human activities, which range from art, politics, religion and philosophy to science and technology. In all cases perceived reality is symbolically represented and consequently manipulated and restructured on various levels.

Technology, philosophy and religion

We are now at a point where we can investigate how symbolical representation operates. Let us consider technology as an illustration. Technology is the result of a dialectical interaction between mentally constructed systems and external (or natural) systems. Thus systems in the natural world are examined, grasped and represented artificially in the human mind before being reorganised and represented in the material world. Such artificial representations whether in the mind or in the material world are never complete, but remain open to constant modification. Does this imply that technological products such as aeroplanes or telephones are symbolical representations? The answer to this is yes and no. They do not exactly represent objects in the natural world, but they are artificial representations and reconstructions and rearrangements of processes perceived in the natural world. In a certain sense one can view all technological products as mental symbolic representations that extend into the material world. In other words, we can describe them as *reified* symbolic representations.

As much as 'mental' disciplines such as philosophy or religion may differ from natural science or technology, they arise from the same basic processes. Both philosophy and science originate from a dialectical interaction between humans and their external environment, and both consist of a mental grasp of systems that are perceived to exist in reality. These systems are symbolically represented and restructured. Such symbolical reconstructions are done by mental means in order to represent the invisible or spiritual reality of humanity, but they can also lead to material representations.

Media

At this point the concept of 'medium' may prove to be of use. The symbolical representation and reconstruction of reality is always done by means of a variety of available *media*. Under 'medium' we understand the *physical material used for symbolical representation*. No symbolisation is possible without media. In the human brain primary representation is *mediated* through electro-chemical neural processes that are not well understood. Through systemic processes concepts are formed, organised, transmitted and stored. Some of the most ancient media used by humans are gestures, sounds and graphic representations on stone and papyrus.

A feature of the use of media is that only seldom does one use one medium at a time. Usually a number of secondary media are employed simultaneously. In language, for example, symbolic representation of mental concepts is further mediated through bodily gestures, phonetic units, or words written on paper, e-mail.

The use of media depends on the technology available to a specific society. Put in different words, technology is the result of a dialectical interaction between human

thought patterns and the natural world in the process of symbolisation. This interaction facilitates the formation of mental patterns in the brain (for example thoughts and ideas), but also involves the development of material objects (for example gestures, phonetic symbols, characters in ink on paper).

The regular use of the concept of 'technology' is with reference to industrial culture. However, such technological systems in the material world differ from other reconstructions only in the media used. In other words, industrial technology *reifies* culture to a higher degree than the intellectual and social disciplines. Although symbolic representation happens in different media and on various levels, the basic processes remain the same. They proceed from the primary level (brain, neuro-chemical medium) to a number of other levels, each employing a variety of media. Each succeeding level is to some degree a symbolisation and continuation of the symbolisation on the previous level. Thus, for example, an electric motor is a symbolic representation in a material (cold) medium of a symbolic representation of a drawing on paper, which in turn is a symbolic representation of a system conceived in the mind. The simple diagram below represents the transition from one medium to another:

Concepts in the mind	Designs on paper >	Material representations
Hot media		Cold media

An important point to note is that each medium exhibits specific regulating properties of its own. Whereas a specific medium enables specific types of symbolisation, it also imposes restrictions on the process. The types of symbolisation depend on the properties of the medium. Media range from 'hot' to 'cold' media, the properties of which may regulate aspects such as density of information, durability, censorship, control and accessibility.

The basic medium used by language, for example, is sound. In the evolutionary process the use of sound was an advance on bodily gestures, because, unlike gestures, sound signals can be perceived in the dark and from all around. Sound signals also allow for a much greater variety in signals than gestures. However, a volatile medium such as sound allows for a relatively low infodensity and endures only as long as the sound symbols are heard or remembered and is accessible to an audience within hearing range. When the sound medium is supported by electronic amplification, a larger audience can be reached. Supported by writing, language gains in infodensity (more information can be transmitted in the same period of time), it is more durable, and can reach many more people than with the spoken word. Technological products that are cast in cold media, such as automobiles or polished diamonds, each employ the aspects of their media in a unique way. A point that is not always considered is that the media themselves exercise a determining

influence on the symbolic representation and no cultural product can be understood without knowledge of the peculiar properties of the media involved.

We now turn to a brief examination of some of the typical features of symbolic representation.

Characteristics of symbolic systems

Reduction of reality

I understand a symbol as that which stands for, or points to, something else. For example, words are symbols. A symbolic system is a system that symbolises reality. It is not reality itself. Symbolic systems are always reductions of realities, which themselves are too complex and chaotic to represent in totality.¹⁰ The human mind cannot produce an exact mental map of reality, but can only arrive at approximations of reality. No system can therefore be devised without a reduction of the reality it tries to represent. As an illustration of this, one must note that no scientific formula can express all natural processes and no social or economic theory can do the same for their fields. Whereas some religions attempt to project a global view of reality, the mere existence of different religions is an indication that religious systems are contingent and limited reductions of reality.

Utility

Since symbolic representations reduce certain aspects of reality, there is always a pragmatic reason for constructing a *specific* symbolic structure of a *specific* aspect of reality. One can say that symbolic systems are useful when they fulfil the reason for which they have been constructed, so, for example, humans will devise shelters to live in, vehicles to transport them, machines to assist in the production of food. When these structures do this efficiently, they become part of the general culture that is transmitted on a wider scale. By far the greatest number of the systems that are constructed are unsuccessful and are discarded while still in their primary levels of symbolisation. Eventually only those systems that are most useful in humanity's quest for survival and wellbeing are retained. Systems that 'work' are reproduced on a massive scale and soon become part of the reality that they symbolise.

It is noteworthy, however, that humans are sometimes interested in some systems that apparently have no utilitarian value. An example of such an interest is found in abstract mathematics. Whereas regular mathematics can be described as the symbolic restructuring of relations perceived in reality, *abstract* mathematics represents a further step. Abstract mathematicians take the reality created by ordinary mathematics as point of departure and then construct second-order symbolical representations of this mathematical reality with apparently no practical

applications in view. Sometimes useful applications of such 'higher' mathematics are found retrospectively, for example in describing the complex structures of crystals.¹¹ The same phenomenon can be observed in many other disciplines, for example in philosophy. This tendency to indulge in activities with no immediate use in view corresponds to the super-abundance in nature, where, for example, in the plant kingdom flowers and seed are produced in such multitudes that their numbers exceed all utilitarian needs for reproduction.¹²

When we therefore establish that there is a utilitarian aspect to symbolic representation, we have to understand it in a relatively broad sense. Ultimately evolutionary economy demands the elimination of representations that do not serve human survival, but since reality in itself is almost infinitely complex (at least to the human observer) it is difficult to determine which representations should be discarded.¹³ In a culture many strategies are preserved that might at a future time prove necessary for survival. Religious culture in particular serves as a repository for the preservation of such strategies.

Heuristic invention

The manner in which cultural products are evaluated and retained depends on heuristic processes where inductive exercises are constantly under way. The feature of heuristics (invention by trial and error, inductive reasoning) applies to all manifestations of culture. Of a great number of attempts at effective symbolisation only a small number of successful ones are retained. An example of this procedure is the development of acupuncture in Chinese society. While there is an ongoing experimentation on the effect of needles inserted in the human body, only those insertions that produce results are noted and repeated, seemingly in the complete absence of any theoretical reflection on why such effects are produced.

Thus three basic principles are involved in human symbolisation: the principle of reduction, the utilitarian principle and the heuristic principle. In a subsequent section we shall see how this also applies to religious symbolisation.

What is involved in the process of symbolic representation?

This question focuses on the internal operation of symbolisation. At present this process is only vaguely understood, so a comprehensive theory cannot be formulated. However, some advances have been made mainly through the study of language. It is fairly certain that the human mind uses a binary process at its most basic level. Through the systemic interaction of massive hierarchies of binary relations, recursive procedures are generated through which complicated concepts are symbolised.

These concepts fall into four basic categories: objects, events, abstract qualities and relations.¹⁴ This is true not only of linguistic systems, but of all systems (for example mathematics as a symbolic structure representing abstract relations). On a higher level of linguistic organisation concepts of relations dominate. Relations can be categorised into co-ordinate (paratactic) and subordinate (syntactic) relations. Co-ordinate relations may be contrastive, alternative or a hybrid of these. Subordinate relations can be either logical or subjunctive. On a further level these sets of relations might group into larger sets of actants and roles. Beyond these, there are numerous other levels (for example forms, genres, discourses and canons) on which information can be structured, depending on the type of system one is symbolising. On each succeeding level one finds a somewhat different 'grammar', according to which symbolisation takes place.

The point I wish to establish here is that symbolic representation does not involve direct symbolisation so much as secondary symbolisation of other symbolic systems.¹⁵ An analysis of symbolisation therefore always has the dual task of distinguishing between the different levels on which reality is symbolised and restructured in terms of secondary media; and the different levels within the process of symbolisation itself (that is, the hierarchies of codes employed to internally organise the symbolic systems).

The human perception of reality itself (whether as primary experiences of natural processes or as representations that have become part of the present reality) is never 'pure'. It is always mediated through the symbolic representations that are already part of culture. Accordingly, the social and individual needs of the human agent involved in cultural production play a vital role in the production.

Tradition


From the above description the role of tradition should be noted. Culture in all its manifestations, from the most primary stages of symbolic representation to the ultimate stages, is transmitted from one individual to another and from one generation to another. This transmission not only concerns the end products of culture, but also involves the transmission of complete systems of representation, depending on the durability of the media, the intelligibility of the symbols and the need for that particular system.

Virtually every human achievement can be ascribed to our cultural competence, through which symbolic representations are made in a wide variety of media that are transmitted from individual to individual and from generation to generation. Archaeologists assure us that the human brain has remained more or less the same over the past 100 000 years. It is only through the development and transmission of culture that human society has made huge advances in restructuring its natural environment.

Because culture is transmitted in systems, we find that different cultures arise at different times and circumstances. Hence one culture would exhibit characteristics that would differ from other cultures. An extremely generalised synopsis of the variety of cultures that have evolved in the history of humanity is given below.

Synopsis of different cultural traditions

Social units	Politics	Technology	Transport	Media
Hunter-gatherer groups	Group leaders, wise individuals	Fire, stone utensils	Feet	Pure orality
Nomadic clans	Patriarchs and elders	Ceramics	Animal transport	First recording techniques
Agricultural settlements	Kings and scribes	Metal utensils	Carts	Experiments with writing
Cities and towns	Feudal kings and councils	First machines	Trade routes	Scribal culture
Feudal empires	Emperors, large councils	Primitive machines	Highways, bridges, ships	Manuscripts
Nation states, mercantile leagues	Monarchs, democratic bodies	Steam, electricity	Trains, aeroplanes	Printing, silent reading
Supra-national units	Multi-national bodies	Nuclear power, computers	Space	TV, Internet, via satellites



CHAPTER TWO

Science

Science as culture

As the purpose of this essay is to inquire whether theology can be regarded as a science, let us now investigate the concept of 'science'.

Since the beginning of those features that make us human – language, self-consciousness and religion – people have had the ability for science. In all societies from time to time gifted individuals have received flashes of brilliant scientific insight. However, science as a consistent discipline had a very specific origin in classical Greece. In later developments the practice of science came to be embedded within a linear timeframe (that possibly originated in Ancient Near Eastern thought around the 8th century BCE). Only since the European Renaissance and particularly since the period of the European Enlightenment has science developed into the discipline that it is today. Science has been progressive in the sense that it enabled the implementation of cultural (especially technological) change on a grand and organised scale. As such, it has not only contributed to the material advances of the Western world, but it has enabled enormous technological advances in countries around the globe and has played a decisive part in the formation of today's global culture.

Because it is a cultural product, we can expect science to exhibit all the features of culture in general. As a cultural product, science itself is a symbolic representation of reality, which results in the restructuring of our social and material world.

Science, however, differs from other types of symbolic representation by focusing on *refining the process of symbolic representation itself*. It reflects consciously on the trial-and-error (heuristic) procedures of culture production and seeks to eliminate superfluous and unnecessary activity. It therefore seeks to develop and refine symbolic strategies to understand and manipulate those aspects of reality that it concentrates on. As such, science is inherently an *abstract* discipline, primarily defined by its unique methodology, rather than a specific object of investigation. Although the word 'science' is sometimes used to indicate the field of natural science, the scientific method can be applied to any field, namely sociology, psychology, religion, etc. In each respective discipline, the science of that discipline seeks to refine the process of symbolic representation as it is found in it.

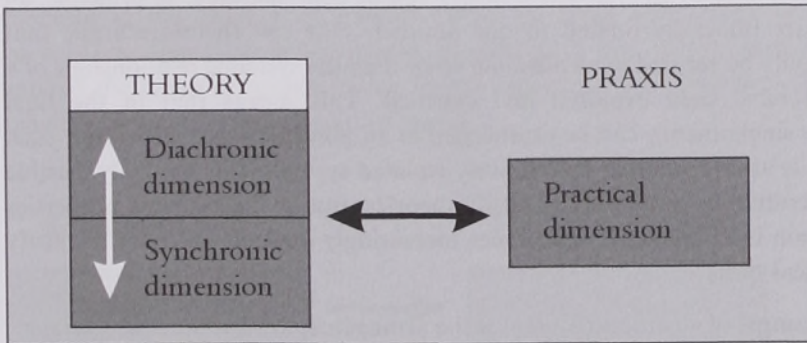
The scientific process

Science seeks to *understand*, *explain* and systematically *organise* aspects of reality. This activity is conducted by developing and testing *hypotheses* in order to arrive at stable *theories*. Theories are abstract symbolic representations that are expressed in terms of fundamental and comprehensive laws or propositions. Accordingly, scientific theories enable the rational systematisation and integration of knowledge about the social and material world in an orderly manner. This does not mean that development in science is the result of smooth and regular processes. At certain stages in history new hypotheses can overturn old ones in a revolutionary manner, causing the scientific community to re-define its major theories in terms of the new hypotheses.¹⁶

In order to arrive at viable theories, scientists involve themselves in *theoretical* and *practical* exercises. Practical considerations may lead to a search for new theories, while theoretical considerations may lead to new empirical research and practical applications.¹⁷ Per definition, the scientific process is a constant often dramatic and haphazard interaction between theory and practice, practice and theory. In other words we can say that the primary dialectic of the scientific process is between theory and practice.

The theoretical activity of scientists assumes two dimensions, namely *diachronic* and *synchronic* dimensions. The diachronic dimension refers to a research of the history of science. The synchronic dimension involves the present analysis and integration of data in terms of viable theories.

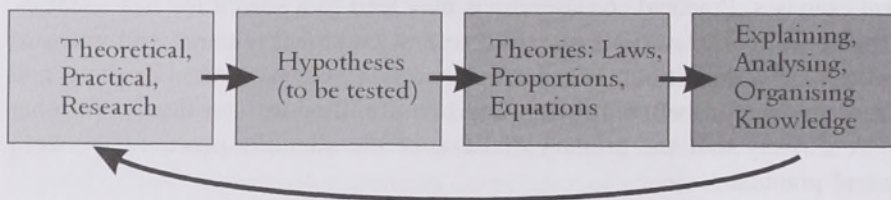
Dialectic of the scientific process



The formulation and testing of hypotheses

All theories begin as hypotheses, which are arrived at through processes that are not well understood. Empirical observation, introspective reasoning and imagination all play a part. There is no automatic method for arriving at workable scientific hypotheses.¹⁸ The more coherent and applicable the scientific hypotheses, the more successful they are. Once speculative hypotheses have been tested by reason and empirical research, and have been found to explain certain phenomena adequately, they receive the status of theories. A rational principle for testing hypotheses is that the outcome of a certain test cannot confirm a theory unless it is logically possible that there could be another outcome that could prove the theory false.¹⁹ Though this test is seldom executable, it remains an important control measure.

Stages in the scientific process



An example of a type of hypothesis that cannot be proven is the so-called Big Bang Theory to account for the origin of the universe. Because of the dimension of this theory, it is virtually impossible to conduct empirical experiments in order to verify or falsify it. Only secondary phenomena can be considered. It remains unlikely that the logical possibility of an alternative theory can be demonstrated. In principle, all phenomena are integrally related to one another. One can therefore argue that theories can only be verified in an absolute sense if all the systemic relationships of a specific field have been explored and clarified. This means that in the final reckoning no single theory can be established in an absolute sense. However, such an argument is an abstraction. In relatively isolated systems, it is not only feasible but also imperative to verify and/or falsify theories. But as the systemic properties of an issue gain in complexity, it becomes increasingly difficult to verify or falsify their theoretical basis.

A familiar example of a complex system is the arrangement of sub-nuclear particles. Heisenberg's well-known 'uncertainty principle' expresses the notion that human understanding of this system is *in principle* impossible. The problem with testing hypotheses concerning complex systems is that the human subjects involved in the investigation become part of the equation, and their perspectives change constantly in the course of the experiment.²⁰ Other systems that are so global and

comprehensive that their theoretical basis cannot be verified are weather systems, the global economy, stock exchanges and religious systems.

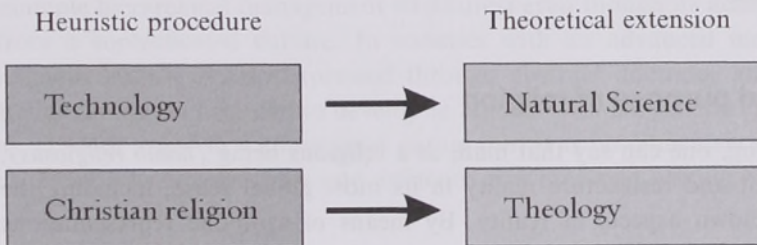
The role of tradition in scientific research

Like all cultural products, science is accumulative. It becomes part of reality that informs further scientific investigation. Scientific observation is therefore never neutral or free from preconceptions. It is deeply influenced by the general cultural strategies (for example value systems) of society. This aspect has only recently come into focus in Kuhn's theory of scientific revolutions ('paradigm shifts'), according to which all scientific activity is understood to be conducted within the limits of specific historical paradigms that involve not only the natural sciences, but the whole cultural encyclopaedia.²¹

Science and technology

In the preceding discussion we defined the difference between science and technology. Science is a more abstract discipline, concerned with theories that explain and facilitate and enhance technological innovation. Technology is concerned with the development of the material hardware needed by humanity.

Whereas humans have been involved in technology since the earliest times, science is a relative newcomer to the scene. In this regard *science resembles theology*, while *technology resembles religion*. Technology and religion are both ancient cultural phenomena, developed by humans through heuristic methods. Both resemble a double-edged sword, displaying conservative and progressive tendencies. Both can function in the absence of scientific theories. Once technology or religion has become an object of self-conscious investigation and systematisation, we have entered the realm of science. What natural science is to technology, theology is to religion, namely its theoretical extension.²²





CHAPTER THREE

Religion

Religion is one of the most ancient and pervasive manifestations of culture. From the preceding section on culture in general it is obvious that religion is part and parcel of human culture. It is noteworthy that there are no human societies without religion, although individuals within a culture might be more or less inclined toward religion. The oldest evidence of religion has been found at a 100 000–60 000 years old Neanderthal burial site, where the presence of flower pollen indicates the performance of some burial ritual.²³ Although the interpretation of findings at this site is contested, it seems plausible to place the emergence of religious culture at a phase in evolution when human language also began to develop.

In the animal world we have only vague traces of proto-religion, just as there are traces of a proto-culture and proto-language, as Walter Burkert has shown.²⁴ Religion therefore, like culture, is a specific human product.

Religion as culture

As a cultural product, religion is a symbolic representation of reality, unique to the human species. Through religion, as through culture in general, aspects of reality that have been perceived and grasped are restructured. As with technology and culture, the aim of religion is the manipulation and restructuring of reality in order to enhance the possibilities of survival and wellbeing. It differs from technology only by focusing on different aspects of reality and by employing different media in the representation.

The scope and purpose of religion

Generally speaking, one can say that man, as a religious being (*homo religiosus*), seeks to represent and restructure reality in its most global sense, including the hidden and unknown aspects of reality. By means of symbolic representations religious people *present comprehensive structures of meaning within which they are socialised and solve existential problems*.²⁵ Many ancient and primal cultures do not

distinguish between secular and religious aspects of society 'religion' is understood to embrace all aspects of reality.

Although the distinct concept of 'religion' was well known centuries before the modernist period,²⁶ it was only with the advance of modern secular society (especially in the 18th century) that 'religion' came to be identified as something separate within the life of a society. It is within this context that 'religion' acquired the connotation of 'primitive' and 'backward' as opposed to a progressive and scientific secular culture.

Since humanity perceives itself to be threatened by the unknown and the uncanny, religion deals in particular with that part of reality that is beyond human control and is not seen or known. Therefore issues such as life and death, origins and endings, heaven and earth, humanity and nature, the living and the dead, the visible and the invisible forces that determine human wellbeing are some of the aspects that fall within the scope of religion. Religion tends to elude all efforts to reduce it to anything else, for example to philosophical themes, subjective feelings and political strategies.²⁷ Religious systems are extremely stable and self-regulating.

Religion and media

Because religion is one of humanity's most ancient cultural expressions, there always has been a close connection between religion and the conventions of primary oral communication. All the ancient religions are structured by means of symbolic conventions determined by the oral medium. Long after societies have been introduced to other media, social conventions based on orality, such as trances, speaking in tongues, blessings and exorcisms, are retained in religious practices and it is an open question whether any religion would still qualify as religion without employing some of these primary oral social conventions. In a specific sense religious culture is characterised by the use of myths and rituals (for example rites of passage, sacrifices, cleansing and communication rites). Its material culture includes places of worship, special clothing and sacred spaces, times, objects and persons. It will also employ social structures that derive from primary oral cultures (for example hierarchical management structures) even though its adherents may come from a sophisticated culture. In societies with an advanced media technology, religious culture is also expressed through abstract doctrines and ethical codes. Religious culture is bound to develop in tandem with the general culture of society, as we shall argue in a subsequent paragraph. It is no coincidence that all the so-called world religions came into existence at a time that writing began.

The principle of reduction

Like all symbolic systems, religious systems represent a suppression and reduction of selected aspects of reality. These systems should never be confused with reality itself. Religious systems represent particular aspects of reality and are peculiar to a specific religion. Just as culture takes on many different forms in different societies, so does religious expression. The empirical fact that there are different religions competing for the same social and intellectual space is an indication of the limited ability of any single cultural system to represent the totality of reality.

The heuristic principle

Like human culture in general, religions arise out of dire necessity for social, spiritual and individual wellbeing. According to the heuristic principle of culture, religious systems have to be 'successful' to this end in order to survive. Through an inductive process, those representations that turn out to be unsuccessful are discarded, while successful ones assume their place. Outdated strategies are regularly revised and modified, either through default or by gifted individuals.

This is the reason that religions are usually amalgams of successful religious strategies developed over long periods of time. Once they have been developed and recognised as such, successful religious strategies are preserved and absorbed into the worldview. Thus religion is part and parcel of the process of social evolution. Therefore religion presents a treasure chest of vital information on cultural development, authority structures, personality development, economic realities, art, technology and almost every aspect of human life. Like all cultural achievements, religion exhibits both conservative and progressive aspects. Even in its most dogmatic and uncompromising form, when defying empirical evidence and enforcing an uncritical commitment, religion is very much a product of human culture, resembling technology in the manner that it came into being.

Development of religion

We have already noted the element of change in religious expression. Humanity constantly faces new challenges and dangers. As the need for survival and wellbeing changes, these conditions cause structural shifts in the systems of religious symbolisation. Thus we find that changes in culture occur together with the changes and developments of the society and the environment. Shifts in media technologies from one cultural phase to another greatly influence this development. As already stated, for example, universal religions appeared on the scene only after the invention of writing. Apparently the advance of writing opened new ways of managing information that enabled a move away from localised tribal religion.

The media available for cultural expression have a broad impact on all sectors of society, and even if religious expressions have mainly preserved oral symbolisations, these take on different forms consonant with the changes in culture. An extension of the diagram presented above would show the following result:²⁸

Social units	Media culture	Type of religion
Hunter-gatherer societies	Pure orality	Nature religions, fetishism, totemism and animism
Pastoral-nomadic societies	Orality with some recording ability	Shamanic religion, ancestor veneration
Agricultural societies, villages, small cities	Scribality	Cults, pantheisms
City states and empires	Different kinds of manuscript culture	Moralistic and legalistic religions, monotheisms (universalistic religions); historical religions, concept of revelation
National states	Printing	Foundationalist religion
Supra-national societies	Electronic media	Multi-religious expressions

The above (incomplete) scheme is, of course, a generalisation with infinite possibilities for exceptions to the rule. However, it illustrates the correlation of a general development in culture with a development in media technologies and with religious expression. Each successive stage does not discard the media technologies or religious forms of the previous stages, but incorporates them into the present symbolic systems. The hierarchic presentation of the above scheme can be misleading when it is understood as meaning that one stage is *necessarily* 'more advanced' than another. It is perfectly conceivable that humans in one religious mode are not necessarily better adjusted to society and experience more truthfulness and meaning than in any other. In reality the typology presents different cultural modes that may be present within a single area, society or even person. A point of interest is that Christianity functions in all these types of society.

Religious and secular manifestations

Religion manifests itself as a communicative event operating by means of ancient oral-based forms such as taboo, myth and ritual. Specific cults and movements combine these in specific ways and fill them with their own specific content. Modern secular counterparts of these manifestations are the legal system, the complex literature-science-philosophy and sport. These contemporary systems at their

deepest level are also based on assumptions that cannot be rationally verified, but are consensually adopted on the grounds of their provision for social needs different from those of religion. To some extent, all social activity exhibits aspects of these, but they become religious when they are founded on considerations that are not immediately evident, deal with the unknown and pertain to global issues.

Religion has the special characteristic that its main tenets have to be accepted without criticism, though criticism on aspects of lesser importance is allowed. When 'messages' are 'received' from the unknown and invisible, these are perceived to be *illuminations* or *revelations*. Particularly in transcendental religions, where ultimate reality is perceived to be something that can never completely be seen or known, revelation becomes a key concept (though it is absent in non-theistic religions).

Religion and faith

Under the term 'religion' we normally understand the religious system as cultural expression. Related to this term, though not identical with it, is the concept of 'faith', which points to the existential appropriation of a specific religious system.²⁹ Particularly when the main tenets of religions are propagated in an uncritical manner, the issue of faith becomes important. It is generally assumed that 'religion' as a cultural system is accessible to all observers. In contrast with this, it is assumed that 'faith' is the prerogative of the insiders of a specific religion. One way of expressing this difference is by distinguishing between 'emic' and 'etic' perspectives, where the emic pertains to a perspective from the inside (that of faith) and the etic to a perspective from the outside (that of religion).³⁰

With regard to the contrast between religion and faith, one has to take care not to generalise. The level of faith required can differ from religion to religion. Religious systems tend to operate as holistic systems that demand uncritical participation. As seen and experienced 'from the inside' (the emic perspective), religions take on different meanings from when seen 'from the outside' (the etic perspective).³¹ It is therefore extremely difficult to define the exact difference between faith and religion. It can be helpful (to some extent at least) to see each perspective as a 'Gestalt' that embodies a self-explanatory and self-regulatory strategy for approaching reality. According to this definition, it is impossible and even useless to attempt a comparison of faiths or religions. The emic/etic debate has served to alert the scholarly world that *both* perspectives are valid and necessary.³²

Analysis of religion

The last point to note is that the religious reality can never be perceived by anyone in a pure or neutral manner it is always mediated through language. Existing

epistemological traditions and competencies form the mediating framework through which further symbolisation takes place. In the symbolic restructuring itself the elements and procedures common to culture in general are used. Also in the analysis of religion there is the dual task of distinguishing between the symbolisation of reality and the secondary symbolisation of other symbolic structures. When reading contemporary theology one often has the impression that it only deals with the theological constructs of other theologians (that is, the latter aspect mentioned in the previous sentence) and does not refer at all to the reality that it is supposed to represent.

Until now no undisputed method has been developed to study religion in general and it remains an open question whether such a method will ever be developed and generally accepted. But significant advances have been made in interfaith dialogue as well as in religious studies.



CHAPTER FOUR

Theology as Scientific Culture

In an attempt to explain the nature, method and outcomes of theology we have argued above that theology is an expression of scientific culture as applied to religion. As such, theology shares in all the common features of culture and specifically in the features of science as a cultural expression. It employs a symbolic representation that functions on an abstract level and seeks to explain, analyse and organise its field of investigation. It makes use of hypotheses and theories that are expressed in terms of general rules and equations that are open to rational and empirical control. Like all scientific work, theology functions within the primary dialectic of theory and practice. For its theoretical function it depends on the historical-analytical and systematic-synthetic processes. These are all aspects that theology has in common with science in general.

How does theology differ from the other sciences and from natural science in particular?

'Christian' theology

The most obvious difference from the other sciences lies in its field of study, namely the Christian religion. The term 'theology' is also applied to Judaism and Islam, but its first conventional use in the way it is understood today is Christian. There are still serious problems when extending the term to other religions.³³ In the pre-scientific, classical Greek world in which the word *theologia* originated, it merely meant 'oracle', 'divine words' or 'the study of God'. For our purpose we shall use the term 'theology' in a restricted sense to refer to the scientific study of the Christian religion. The expression 'Christian religion' is a deliberate choice, since it indicates all aspects of Christianity, including the faith and life of the Christian church, in the past as well as the present. It also includes its message and the reception of that message.

The primacy of theology

As a science, theology focuses on the religious aspect of reality. It deals with the construction of *global* meaning and strategies for wellbeing as practised specifically within the Christian tradition. Because of this global range in the sense of general and all-encompassing a multitude of aspects from all other academic subjects fall within its scope.

This should not come as a surprise. Since the beginning of universities in the Western world, theology as a subject has held the position of *primus inter pares*. This was not only because many universities developed out of papal or imperial bulls, but because the subject of theology served to supply the themes and motivation for the development of other subjects. From the beginning of academic life in Europe in the *studia generalia* (thirteenth-century precursors of the universities at Paris, Bologna, Naples, Toulouse, Oxford, etc.) there was an immediate bond between theology and the other disciplines. In a historical sense theology deserved the designation as the *regina omnium scientiarum* ('queen of all the sciences'). Now, three centuries after the Enlightenment, theology is no longer 'enthroned in glory with the natural sciences perched on her footstool'.³⁴ The former queen faces expulsion by her former ancillaries, which she had assisted in establishing.

Theology and religious studies

Since theology is defined as a conscious and scientific reflection on the Christian religion, this raises a number of questions. One could then ask: 'Would it not be appropriate to define theology as religious studies as applied to Christianity?' This is a question to which almost no one gives a positive response.³⁵ Generally speaking there is wide consensus that theology and religious studies are two separate, if not opposing, disciplines. Theology aims to train people for some form of Christian ministry and is usually conducted from an engaged point of view. It is assumed that there are matters specific to the study of theology that cannot be adequately treated from a detached and neutral position. Religious studies (also known as religious studies, religion studies, comparative religion, history of religions, religiology, etc.) has a sociological or anthropological interest and employs a more detached approach. Its scope covers the whole spectrum of religious systems.³⁶

This distinction raises serious questions as to the relationship between these two disciplines. Religious studies has had an arduous task to loosen itself from the seminaries and faculties of theology where it originated as an ancillary sub-discipline of missiology or apologetics. Consequently, at many institutions Christianity is still omitted from the religious studies curriculum, while at many Christian seminaries and theological faculties a study of religions still merely

functions as ancillary to missiology and apologetics. This is partly because religious studies was originally developed as a Christian discipline to assist theologians in understanding religions other than Christianity. The relationship between the two is an uneasy one, since many proponents of religious studies view themselves as 'scientific' and deserving of a place at a university, while denying theology the same.

At this point we cannot enter into a full discussion of the relationship between the two fields. We can just mention three points. The first is that the assumption that religious studies can be conducted as a value-free and neutral scientific enterprise is increasingly coming under pressure.³⁷ A parallel example could be psychoanalysis, which until recently styled itself as a neutral and value-free discipline, but this position is currently under review. Another point to note is that denying the existence of theology as a scientific discipline could defeat the purpose of religious studies. The object of the latter is the study of religion. Would it serve any purpose to deny the study of Christianity by practising Christians any scientific status? Does it not compromise the scientific quality of religious studies to impose an etic (outsider) perspective at the cost of an emic (insider) point of view? The third point that cautions against an over-hasty rejection of theology is that in the present state of research, religious studies does not have a clear and undisputed methodology that can be equally applied to all religions.³⁸ Theology and religious studies have both been drawn into a multi-disciplinary scene that can hardly be overlooked.³⁹ For some time now both have been exploring dialogue on various fronts between religions, between traditions within the same religion and between scientific disciplines. This shared 'inclusivist' approach is opening many new avenues for dialogue and co-operation between theology and religious studies.

These questions touch the very core of the issue at stake: 'What is the nature of theology and does it deserve a place at the university?' To all involved in this debate a word of caution is advisable because of the above points. The distinction between theology and religious studies is not as clear-cut as it seems. Whether a universal methodology for both can be developed is a matter for future research.⁴⁰ When we now proceed to investigate the relation between theology and faith, some of the present issues will be clarified.



CHAPTER FIVE

Theology and Faith

A brief historical synopsis

This rift between the secular (scientific) and sacred (faith-based) approaches to the study of Christianity dominated theology for the latter part of the twentieth century with several schools of thought putting forward different solutions.

The history of exegesis began with the Church Fathers (2nd–5th centuries), who explained Scripture in terms of its literal, allegorical, mystical and anagogical meanings. Towards the end of the Middle Ages the Reformation (15th–16th centuries) corrected the neglect of the literal-historical meaning of Scripture. After the time of the Enlightenment (17th century)⁴¹ the emphasis on the literal-historical meaning of Scripture developed into the historical-critical method, which in the 19th century coincided with the development of liberal theology. This development marked a break between the church and the academy. Whereas the church was interested in interpreting the Bible in the service of the propagation of the Gospel, the academy came to regard the study of the Bible and Christianity as a secular enterprise. Orthodox Protestantism responded to this by re-emphasising pneumatic exegesis as the method of a ‘sacred hermeneutics’. The Catholic and Orthodox branches of Christianity initially resisted the results of the historical-critical approach, though the Roman Catholic Church made significant shifts in 1943 (in the encyclical *Divino afflante Spiritu*) and particularly after Vatican II (1962–1965) to accommodate some of its strategies.

We do not need to enter into the particulars here, but can observe that all recent theological constructions still treat this problem as basic, each positioning itself with reference to historical-critical views on the Bible and theology.⁴²

A matter that complicates the issue is the question whether theologians employ a methodology that is dependent on faith *in such a way that it is inaccessible to non-believers*. It stands to reason that no one can research any subject with which he or she is not familiar. In the human and social sciences in particular a great deal depends on intuition, a feeling for the subject. Making faith a prerequisite for theological activity, however, is more than just demanding respect for, and familiarity with a subject. It is also demanding an unconditional religious

commitment (for example 'to love God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind and all your strength, and your neighbour as yourself').

The question of the relation between theology and faith is further complicated because theologians are generally involved in the (religious) education and training of pastors and preachers for the Christian ministry. The end products of theological activity are sermons, pastoral counselling, prayers, witnessing to different audiences, commentaries, social action and academic writings. Do we thus have to conclude that theology is privy to a special, sacred, super-natural methodology that sets it apart from science in general?

This is a question that not only affects the scientific status of theology as an academic subject, but cuts through all aspects of the theological debate. Whatever the position taken, it affects all other aspects of theology. There are four basic options that can be exercised.

Theology can be seen as an activity to be pursued completely within the ambience of the Christian faith. All other activity is then rejected as the *theologia irrogenitorum* (theology of the unredeemed).

Theology can also be seen as the opposite of the above: a discipline that is completely scientific, does not require faith, and remains radically open to testing and correction. This would include criticism of the notion of God and the authority of Scripture. From this point of view, 'sacred hermeneutics' is discarded and replaced by a secular hermeneutics.

There can also be a partial compromise between these two positions in which it is acknowledged that the basic propositions of the Christian faith are beyond scientific reach, and the scientific process is supposed to build on those propositions, not explaining, analysing or testing those, but scientifically examining the outcomes.

A fourth option would be to accept a dialectical position, where the inherent conflict between the sacred and the secular approaches are acknowledged, and where both are recognised to be necessary.

We shall now examine these various options.

Theology as a sacred science

Theology, pursued as a sacred science, requires the theologian to be ultimately committed to the Christian message, which renders all else relative and preliminary. He or she has to be a 'God-intoxicated' person (in the words of Spinoza) who lives in unconditional surrender in an existential communion with God and pursues this with an infinite passion. For Christianity this is religion in the true sense of *religio*:

that which binds humans at the deepest level of their existence. From this perspective, theology is the lifelong, inexhaustible, joyful adventure of studying the grace of God.⁴³

Because it is unclear to what extent this religious commitment engages the rational mind, does it not in principle compromise the scientific integrity of the theologian? Whereas scientific theories *remain fundamentally open* to testing and correction, the doctrines of faith are held to be immutable and absolute. From a scientific perspective, theories of science can be tested by empirical research. Propositions such as the 'existence of the one God', however, are of such nature that in principle they can *never* be verified empirically. At most, theology can develop *relative* 'proofs' and put forward theories regarding the origin, functioning and outcomes of such propositions.

According to this position, the theologian should be a believer. Theology is conceived as an activity that is done completely within faith. *Faith is understood as having cognitive implications that fundamentally determine the theological process.*

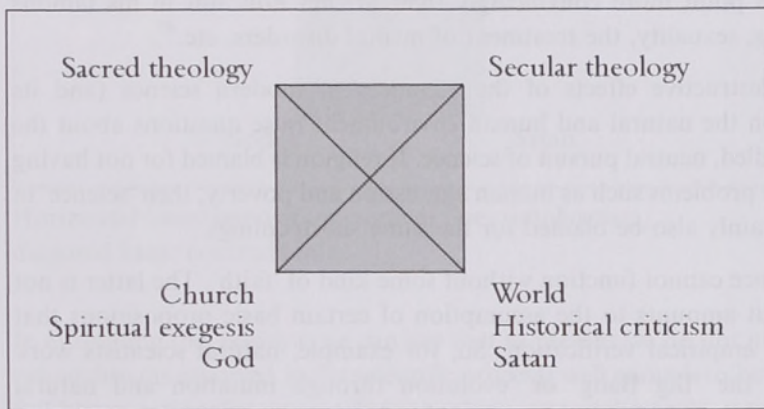
This position, however, is prone to deconstructing itself. One can ask: 'Who then has enough faith? Who is there that completely believes with heart, mind and soul? Isn't there some disbelief and doubt in all human beings, even the best among us? And is doubt not sometimes necessary to destroy our superficial vanities?' There always remains an element of doubt and alienation. If this is so, who can then be a true theologian?⁴⁴ If faith has immediate cognitive implications, why then involve oneself in explaining, analysing and organising knowledge? Can any theologian do theology in a scientific way without some 'suspension of belief'?

The historical development of theology as an academic discipline provides empirical evidence that faith does not exclude the need for rational scientific research. Religion and technology have both developed over many centuries through 'normal' heuristic processes. Just as natural science has developed as a necessary theoretical extension of technology, so theology has developed as a necessary theoretical extension of the Christian religion. In contrast to religion and technology, theology and natural science represent more abstract approaches to their respective fields. Inasmuch as scientific investigation is inherently part of sophisticated human culture, one can argue that theology is an inevitable development. Wherever religion is practised in a sophisticated intellectual environment, humans will eventually reflect on their religious faith and seek to develop more adequate and rational theories based on the problems they experience in that sphere.

Theologians who accept sacred theology believe that there is a fundamental dichotomy between science and theology. Among those taking this position are the fundamentalists and pietists that point out the failure of the secular view. They have a pessimistic view of secular disciplines, and hold that sacred knowledge can only be

attained through special illumination by the Holy Spirit. This does not mean that they reject the secular view completely, but many make it clear that their primary orientation is the sacred, and other insights are only acceptable insofar they are not in conflict with the sacred view. This view preserves a frame of reference within which theology can be viewed 'from the inside'. Since the Bible, the confessions of the Church and all the writings of the Apostolic Fathers up to the Reformers take this point of view, it is extremely powerful when prescribing ethical precepts for the church.

The conceptual frame of sacred theology



Horizontal lines: opposition; vertical lines: implication;
diagonal lines: contradiction

In conclusion we can state that the 'sacred' approach contains certain aspects that are indispensable to the Christian religion, but it cannot satisfy or exhaust the need for a critical reflection on the Christian faith.

Theology as secular project

In contrast to the approach discussed above, there is the opposite position, namely that of theology as a completely secular enterprise. Theology in this sense does not differ from religious studies (science of religion).⁴⁵ It is treated in an objective, scientific and neutral manner. However, the position of theology as a secular science is not unassailable. Theories such as the theory of relativity, quantum theory and the 'uncertainty principle' have been popularised (if not vulgarised!) to show the fragility of the ideal of neutrality and objectivity in the scientific process.

With the introduction of *paradigm theory* for understanding the historical phases of natural science, it became clear that science is not the neutral, fully objective enterprise that it was once thought to be. Natural science is a historical enterprise conducted by an interpretative community that from time to time determines the goals and values of research. Also, natural science has its 'dogmas'⁴⁶ that inform the broad context within which scientific research is conducted. These remain fundamentally open to testing and modification, but they achieve a degree of stability that changes only when major paradigm shifts occur over the whole cultural spectrum. It is now much better understood that natural scientists, like their counterparts in the humanities, conduct their activity as interested partners for a specific community with specific material interests. It is doubtful whether anyone has laboured this point more convincingly than Michel Foucault in his famous studies on prisons, sexuality, the treatment of mental disorders, etc.⁴⁷

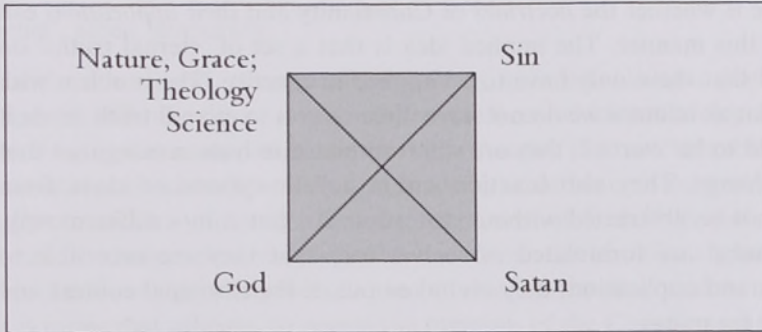
Moreover, the destructive effects of the advances of modern science (and its methodologies) on the natural and human environment raise questions about the ethos of an unbridled, neutral pursuit of science. If religion is blamed for not having been able to solve problems such as human aggression and poverty, then 'science' in principle can certainly also be blamed for the same shortcomings.

It seems that science cannot function without some kind of 'faith'. The latter is not religious faith, but amounts to the assumption of certain basic propositions that elude rational or empirical verification. So, for example, natural scientists work with theories of the 'Big Bang' or 'evolution through mutation and natural selection' that defy immediate verification or falsification. One can ask how such assumptions differ from propositions such as the existence of God and the resurrection of the dead? Obviously there are differences, but the resemblance between science and theology in this regard remains striking. Where scientists assume, for example, that they have to work with certain hypotheses that can never be verified, this approaches the rationality that operates in theology. Thus we do not observe a break between the two rationalities, but a continuum. People in our time witness to the post-modern deconstruction of a scientism that once proclaimed the scientific method as the new religion (championed, for example, by Emile Zola).⁴⁸ There is a new epistemological awareness of which the full implications will take time to work through.

A possibility that has been explored from various points of view within this frame of thinking is that there need not be a fundamental break between science and faith. Therefore some have sought to demonstrate by means of rational and historical-scientific arguments that science actually proves faith. By negating the break, they seek to abolish the need for a sacred, church-oriented view altogether, maintaining that they can fully integrate both secular and sacred approaches. For the latter it is possible to 'prove' the validity of the resurrection of Jesus, for example through universal historical procedures. This places theology squarely within secular history and subjects

its outcomes to a purely scientific historical debate. This approach has contributed to new invigorating insights and a creative debate among secular historians and theologians, but neither the medieval scholastics nor Wolfhart Pannenberg have been successful in establishing theology as a purely rational science.⁴⁹

Conceptual frame of secular theology



Horizontal lines: opposition; vertical lines: implication;
diagonal lines: contradiction

In evaluating this position we can say that at present we do not understand human rationality (as involved in the scientific process) well enough to be able to endorse a full-blown rationalist approach to theology, or to religion in general. On the other hand, the migration of theology to secular institutions should not be lamented, for it precipitated a number of innovations in the discipline.⁵⁰

The partial compromise

In the light of the shortcomings of the previous two approaches, it seems appropriate to adopt a position of compromise. This position has historical roots that reach back to medieval times. Thomas Aquinas first formulated such a view in response to Averroës, the Spanish-Muslim scholar, who asserted that the structure of religious knowledge was entirely heterogeneous to rational knowledge. Some time after 1266 Averroës' ideas began to influence disciples in the Faculty of Arts at the University of Paris. It was against these that Aquinas rose in protest. According to Aquinas, reason is able to operate within faith and yet according to its own laws. He explained theology as a 'science', as knowledge that is rationally derived from revealed propositions.⁵¹

This remains the implied position at most tertiary institutions where theology is taught. It is assumed that the basic propositions of Christianity are not open to scientific enquiry, and it is understood that theologians should subscribe to these.

Among these propositions are the doctrines of God, the Trinity, the divinity of Jesus and the afterlife. Scientific investigation is then supposed to depart from these premises and to concern itself with the application of these doctrines in the life of the Church and society. Once assumptions have been made on matters such as the divinity of Jesus Christ, the authority of the Bible and the Trinity, theology can begin to hypothesise on the origins, effects, reception and outcomes of such ideas. The compromise position might seem to be viable, but it raises serious questions.

The first of these is whether the *doctrines* of Christianity and their *applications* can be separated in this manner. The implied idea is that a set of 'eternal truths' do indeed exist and that these only have to be applied in practice. The problem with such a view is that as humans we do not have direct access to eternal truth. Even if doctrines are held to be 'eternal', they are still formulated in human categories that are subject to change. They also function within holistic systems of ideas, from which they cannot be abstracted without distortion. To put it in a different way, once 'eternal truths' are formulated in such a way that they are accessible to rational analysis and application, they are taken out of their original context and acquire different meanings.

A second observation is that the sharp distinction between doctrine and application implies an abstract, idealist approach with serious shortcomings. It violates the dialectic of theory and practice by not allowing adequate feedback. Once 'eternal' doctrines are formulated in a specific way, they predetermine the outcomes to such an extent that this stifles all creativity and obstructs not only scientific processes but also their original intentions.

A third observation is that this model of doctrine and application is part of a general intellectual strategy that is suspect because of its imperialist and authoritarian connotations. In this model the doctrines of a specific group with specific material interests are always defined and entrenched as 'eternal' principles, which are dispensed in an imperialist manner to 'the others'.

A fourth observation is that a compromise should be seen for what it is: the accommodation of two potentially hostile disciplines as a matter of convenience. Is such a compromise not 'a house divided against itself'? One also has to ask whether it is intellectually sound to try 'to serve two masters' at the same time. And, one is tempted to ask, does it not inevitably lead to the theologian serving one master better than the other? Either the 'doctrinal' bias will impinge on the scientific ethos, or vice versa.

A final observation is that the formulation of doctrine to make it accessible to the scientific theological enterprise requires a rationalist reduction. Once religious doctrines, which are instruments of faith, are defined in a rational manner as propositions in a scientific endeavour, do they still function as doctrines of faith? Is abstract theorising about the Christian religion not contrary to the requirement of

faith itself? To this question mystics would provide a positive answer. For them, faith has a surplus value that cannot be rationally expressed. Seen in the light of our argument about culture in general, they do have a valid point. Theological propositions, like all cultural expressions, are symbolical representations of reality, and as such are reductions and simplifications of reality. Reality, and religious reality, as Niklas Luhmann has reminded us, has a surplus value that can never be comprehensively represented. Once a theologian engages in scientific activity, he or she has to take a rational view of doctrine, which implies some 'suspension of belief', albeit temporary.

On the other hand, theoretically speaking, an academic who does not believe in God can still take this as a rational premise from which to develop further theories. Such an agnostic academic may develop theories that are valuable to the various constituencies (church, society and academy) that have an interest in the Christian religion, and may in such a way be supportive of faith.⁵² In such a case we may speak of a 'suspension of *disbelief*.' An academic can also (for argument's sake) take an atheistic or agnostic point of view and develop theories 'as if there were no God'. It is ironic that atheists, to negate the premises of the Christian religion, cannot *but* involve themselves in theological activity. In such a case values that ultimately also elude rational proof (for example materialism, the interests of the working class and human rights) can become the premises.

In summary one can say that the compromise position, though widely adopted for utilitarian purposes, is theoretically untenable. It compromises both scientific and theological endeavour, while structured in such a way that it promotes authoritarian practices. The inherent tension in this position might be the very reason that theology as an academic subject is called into question from time to time.

The dialectical position

The dialectical position is an extension of the compromise position and has developed as a response to prolonged exposure to it. Those who see advantages in both secular and sacred approaches and profess to feel at home in both usually take this option.⁵³

A solution to the inherent problems is sought by allowing the secular pursuit of theology and the sacred within the same academic space and without any compromise. 'Dialectic' is understood to be an arrangement where two opposing and apparently mutually exclusive systems are both held to be valuable and are therefore put in a position of creative tension. (It has nothing to do with the Hegelian dialectic of thesis, antithesis and synthesis.) The word *dialectic* is derived from the same word group as *dialogue* and implies an interactive dialogue between

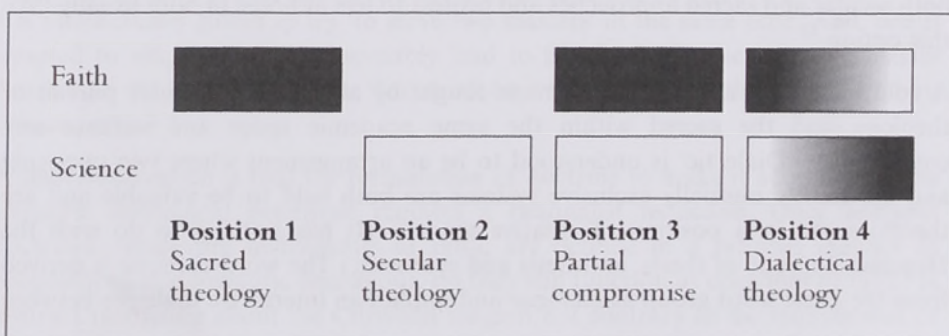
two opposing conversation partners, with the understanding that each holds a different view from the other, and that one point of view should not be dissolved into the other. In fact, *the tension between the two opposing parties is understood to be constitutive of the larger process.*

This is basically a liberal option and has led to open faculties of theology where there is place for both agnostics and fundamentalists. This position usually finds support from those who take a 'post-modern' view. The scientific ethos of such faculties is usually carried by the secular theologians,⁵⁴ who argue that the inclusion of 'sacred' theology is necessary for the scientific process. In the dialectical process sacred and secular theologies are conceived as conversation partners. Such a dialectical process might also take place within the mind of an individual theologian, who would strive to argue alternately 'from above' and 'from below'.

The advantage of such a position is that theologians can enjoy the 'best of both worlds' without compromising intellectual integrity. The weakness of this dialectical position is that it remains extremely difficult to arrive at unambiguous positions. Any statement made from one point of view immediately calls for reflection on the alternative. For Christian denominations that need pastors and preachers with a clear message, this approach has led to a great deal of uncertainty.

In the graphic model below, the different positions are each indicated by two rectangles. The top rectangle represents 'faith' and the bottom one 'science'. Unlike the rectangles representing the positions of the other models, it is clear that in dialectical theology (position 4) both exhibit an element of ambiguity. Faith gradually fades into science and vice versa. In a true dialectical position, the 'sacred' theologian and the 'secular' theologian will learn to empathise with each other. At times the secular theologian will feel a cold shiver running down the spine when encountering the numinous, while sometimes the Christian theologian will also experience the iconoclastic enthusiasm of the atheist. Thus both dialectical partners will be challenged to cope with the ambiguity and irony of their own positions.

Graphic summary of the different theological positions



Choosing a model

The preceding review of the different positions showed that faith plays a complex role in the theological enterprise. The way in which theological institutions are structured depends on how the relationship between science and religious faith is conceived. From the discussion it should be clear that each model bears positive and negative aspects, though the dialectical model seems to provide the most creative environment for doing theology and for developing balanced and sensitive scholarship. The type of scholar needed in the faculty of the future is one who is able to empathise with the greatest variety of viewpoints. There is a kind of theological scholar that has a *prima facie* right to be in any faculty.⁵⁵ This is usually the scholar who would feel at home in such an institution.

The basic question that emerges from the preceding discussion is how apparently conflicting positions regarding Christian faith and science can be accommodated in the service of theology and the university. It would be presumptuous to pretend to have an answer to the basic dilemma of contemporary theology. However, post-modern epistemology has introduced new insights in terms of which the problems might be redefined.