

TRUTH AND VERIFICATION IN THEOLOGY

CORNELIUS ERNST, O.P.

I MUST begin by saying how much I appreciate the honour of being asked to address a group of scientists on this subject;¹ and my only hope is that what I have to say will not prove entirely irrelevant to the concerns of those who practise experimental science in one form or another, though I suspect that the *kind* of relevance which I shall suggest is rather a peculiar one.

Part I. The Uniqueness of Theology

While the experimental sciences—what is usually meant by ‘science’—have become highly diversified today, so much so that divisions of the sciences such as ‘physics’, ‘chemistry’, ‘botany’ and so on, are so general as to be pretty well unusable, one feature in particular distinguishes theology from all of them and indeed from any other intellectual pursuit whatsoever: the fact that theology itself belongs to the supernatural order. By ‘theology’ I shall always mean ‘sacred theology’ and not ‘natural theology’, which is properly a special way of practising metaphysics. To say that theology in this sense belongs to the supernatural order is not merely to say that its object, what it studies, is something supernatural, the Revealed. It is also to say that it is itself, in its intrinsic movement and apprehension of truth, something supernatural. It is not merely the application of procedures already practised in other fields to a special field, a special set of data, though it certainly is that too, as we shall see: but its very intellectual activity shares the specific character of the special field which it investigates. It is, that is to say, an activity of divine faith: it belongs to that whole mode of being which we call supernatural, meaning by that not something just laid over natural structures, a plus-quantity, but something which radically transfigures the natural structures without destroying them. It is important to say *both* that theology is unique *and* that it retains ordinary modes of thought. If it did not retain ordinary

¹ A paper read at a Philosophy of Science Weekend at Spode House, Hawkesyard Priory in September, 1957. If this paper should happen to catch the eye of any professional theologian, I hope he will bear in mind the special audience to which it was addressed.

modes of thought, there would be no point at all in my addressing you, not to mention other rather more damaging consequences; but for the moment I wish to emphasize the uniqueness and shall return to the similarity later, in Part II. For my purpose, then, I shall examine a group of terms which occur in the New Testament writings, especially in the Epistles of St Paul, in order to show how theology is unique in being itself a revealed notion. I need hardly say that my presentation will be synoptic, and is not intended to serve as an account of the teachings of any one of the New Testament writers.

The three terms I have in mind are *mysterion*, *gnosis* and *pneuma*, roughly, mystery, knowledge and spirit. The pattern I wish to point to is the way in which *Spirit* leads to *knowledge* of the *Mystery*. The Mystery is a characteristically Pauline notion, especially in the later Epistles. Radically it is the saving purpose of God from all eternity, worked out in the saving history (*Heilsgeschichte*) of the Old Testament and consummated in the sending of the Son in human flesh, in which he suffered, died, rose again and ascended into heaven. This central event of saving history has cosmic consequences: it involves the subordination of all created things to the glorified Christ, and is now visibly manifest in the union of Jew and Greek in the one Church, the Body of Christ. Radically, though, it is the divine purpose, the counsel (*sodh*) of God, that which gives meaning to all process, whether historical or cosmic: it is the purpose of the New Creation which takes up, renews, completes and confirms the original creation. And it is this mystery which it is the function of the Apostles to proclaim, the message of salvation which must be made known to all men: the *kerygma*, the Gospel of the mystery. *Pneuma*, the *pneuma hagion*, *pneuma theou* or *pneuma Christou*, is the Spirit which is given by the glorified Christ and leads men back to him. It is not merely 'spiritual', in itself or in its effects, in the sense of being 'non-material', 'mental': it is 'Spirit' as opposed to *sarx*, flesh, the corruptible and transitory and separate from God. Spirit is actively sanctifying, proceeding personally from God and Christ, and transforming our fleshly bodies into spiritual bodies, i.e. roughly, transforming our nature from fallen natures into graced and glorified natures. This sanctifying action of the Spirit by which we are led back to Christ and inserted into his corporal Mystery is a leading into *truth*: the Spirit leads us into

all truth. Once again, the truth is not merely something mental: St John's notion of *aletheia* includes not only the Greek notion of ideal, intellectual truth but also the Hebrew notion of personal truth and fidelity, *emeth* (amen): the reality of the divine truth which gives meaning to all existence, the divine truth embodied in Christ glorified, Way, Truth and Life.

Now *gnosis*—and this is the point I have been leading up to—is a correlative of *mysterion* and *pneuma*. Whatever may be the antecedents of its use by St Paul, it is clear that for him it is *religious* knowledge. No more than *pistis*, faith, is it something purely intellectual: it is what engenders communion in the object known—*credere in Deum*. It is the entrance into the holy mystery, the *sacrum secretum*, of all that is, and it is essentially and intrinsically *Christian*, in that it proceeds under the movement of the Spirit of Christ to penetrate into the mystery of Christ. Whatever formal structures theology may adopt—and they are all of them structures connatural with the human mind—its existential reality, its mode of being, is Christian and 'gnostic' in the sense which I have tried to indicate.

It will be clear that theology cannot be concerned with nature alone, but also and even primarily (in a sense to be discussed) with history. It is unfortunate, perhaps, that no historian has been invited to address us on 'Truth and Verification in History'; and this must be my excuse for some of the particularly inadequate remarks which I shall be offering on this subject. We have seen that theology is distinct from all other intellectual disciplines by being itself a revealed notion, 'gnostic' in its mode of being as correlative with the Mystery and the Spirit of Christ. But the supreme Revelation of that Mystery was the historical Event of Christ's death and resurrection in the flesh which he had made his own at a particular point in place and time and at a particular confluence of world history. Further, that Revelation has been entrusted to a unique society which is Christ's own Body, and which is both acted upon by, and acts upon, the world history of which it forms a part and to which it gives meaning by orientating all things to the Second Coming. If theology is existentially gnostic, it is also existentially historical.

Once again, this does not mean merely that it is concerned with the interpretation of what has happened in the past, though it certainly does mean that too. To say that theology is existentially

historical is also to say that its mode of being is intrinsically historical: it develops.

We shall consider these two points in succession. Firstly, then, since the central object of Christian theology is the Event of Christ, it is clear that it must be concerned with what happened once and once for all. And so far as other historical events are connected with that central Event, either by leading up to it or by following from it, theology must be concerned with the history of the Old Testament and with the history of the Church. Here we have a first concrete example of the way in which the existentially unique mode of theology is bound to adopt intellectual structures which are connatural with the human mind. To be concerned with objective history means that procedures relevant to such a concern must be practised; so that the theologian is bound to be concerned with the historical truth and verification of the events of the history of salvation. This is not a fundamentally important part of theology, and in fact the theologian normally leaves it to someone else to do and makes use of his results; but even then he must practise the ordinary tests which any historian must practise who uses somebody else's results. Clearly palaeography, textual criticism, archaeology are all involved. Sometimes this sort of scientific investigation may have unexpected results. Once it has been shown, for instance, that the chronology of the Pentateuch cannot be made to correspond with any scientifically established chronology, it becomes easier to see that the chronology offered by the Old Testament writers is symbolic; so that the theologian is now bound to concern himself with comparative historiography as well as with history; and in fact this is much more important for the theologian than any details of historical verification as such. It is not really very important for the theologian to know in what year exactly our Lord was born; but the genealogies in the Gospels are extremely illuminating.

But the history of salvation is not merely a sequence of historical events, subject to historical verification, nor even such a sequence as interpreted in human historical categories, whether these be the categories of the class-struggle, or challenge and response, or the Apollonian and the Dionysian, Marx, Toynbee or Spengler. The history of salvation, as we have seen, is a manifestation of the *mysterion* of God's saving purpose, decreed from all eternity in Christ; and it is here that we must discuss briefly

the concurrence of nature and history in the object of theology. The great triumph of the scholastic method in theology, in its greatest exponent St Thomas Aquinas, was to apply (transforming them) two traditions of Greek thought to the interpretation of Revelation, the Aristotelian tradition and the tradition of the Pseudo-Dionysius. It may be said with sufficient accuracy for present purposes that the effect of this application was intellectually to insert *Nature* into the heart of Christian Revelation, a revelation given in history. But the consequences of what was undoubtedly a triumph have not been so happy; for what began as a means of making humanly intelligible the content of Revelation by seeing it as structurally analogous to natural processes and cycles, has become objectified, generally speaking, in a timeless and ahistorical universe where the Reality revealed is identified with the structures taken over from natural philosophy, and differentiated from them only by being labelled *supernatural*. It is difficult to credit, but true, that only a few years ago theologians were seriously discussing the question whether, when it was said that grace was a participation in the divine nature, it was the divine nature as known by philosophers, as known by theologians, or in itself, that was meant. One reason for this sclerosis is perhaps the theologians' increasing ignorance of science. If they had seriously recognized the scientists' lack of interest in Aristotelian physics it might not have been so easy for them to continue to use it in its secondary, applied form when its primary use had ceased to be of any practical interest. But what is important for our purposes here is to see that the insertion of Nature into Revelation must always be a fundamental procedure of theology.

The basic reason for this procedure is that there is only one God, Lord not only of heaven but also of earth, one author of nature and grace. To ask 'What is God?', as St Thomas did as a child at Monte Cassino and continued to do for the rest of his life, is to ask about this one God. All things flow from him, the processes of nature as well as of saving history, and all things proclaim him. The unity of theology depends on the unity of God, the one source of these multiple effects. Consequently theology can have no unity except in so far as nature and grace are seen as proceeding from the one God. But, through a human nature in concrete fact ordained to supernatural beatitude, all

nature is ordained to the God who revealed the mystery of his purpose in his Son; and it is in this sense that Nature must be inserted into Revelation. The determinateness of natural process as well as the contingency of human history both find their ultimate meaning in the purpose of God. And God has finally sanctioned and consummated his purpose by setting up in the created cosmos a humanity, Christ's glorified humanity, to exercise royal dominion over all that is. Nature is as it were the projection on to a plane of a three-dimensional prism: it can be examined independently of the prism of total being, provided always that its existential limitation and dependency are recognized. Theology is at least *de jure* queen of the sciences, by reason of its object: to claim that it is in fact such today would of course be absurd.

It is perhaps easier to see now why theology is existentially historical, historical in its mode of being as well as because of its object: for it corresponds to all the dimensions of that process by which the kingdom of heaven is realized on earth. Its own development is part of the total development of God's purpose: it prepares for the manifestation of the sons of God. The development of dogma, in which theological development plays so large a part, is not just an odd feature of the life of the Church, not just a reaction to heresy, but an entrance in history into the heart of the mystery. Once again, the structures of this development are very similar to those in the historical development of any intellectual pursuit, as for instance analysed by Professor Polanyi in his Riddell lectures with reference to research in the experimental sciences: the structures of patterns of communication. But theological development is also very like, in some ways more like, literary or artistic development, as analysed by T. S. Eliot in his essay on 'Tradition and the Individual Talent'. Properly to compare these three kinds of development—the theological, the scientific and the literary or cultural—would require an analysis of the nature of the present, the Now. *Pace* the historians of science, it is much less *important* for scientists to consider the past than for theologians or poets: for these latter the *now* is not only determined in relation to 'current work' but also in relation to a significant and changing pattern of the past. On the other hand theological truth is more than significance, more than a contribution to our awareness of human relevance (if this is

acceptable as a description of literary and cultural activity); so that theological development is at least in this respect closer to scientific development. More will be said about this later.

Part II. The Intellectual Structure of Theology

All that has so far been said has been aimed at showing that theology is existentially unique, in so far as by its mode of being it belongs to the sphere of Revelation and is co-extensive with it. What we have now to see is how it assumes intelligible form and structure in the human mind: how, that is to say, it can be said to be at least analogous to science.

'Science' is of course a highly equivocal word. It was much easier for St Thomas to make claims for the scientific character of theology when there was only one recognized pattern of science, found in the writings of Aristotle. The theologian today who refuses to take account of modern experimental science, would find himself in the embarrassing position of showing to his own satisfaction that theology is, at least analogically, an Aristotelian science and thus not scientific in the modern sense. We shall have to try and suggest a more generalized notion of science which at the same time is concrete enough to make discussion and comparison profitable. Fortunately there is a great deal in St Thomas to help us here: all he says about the *via inventionis*, the way of discovery, as opposed to the *via demonstrationis* or *doctrinae* respectively, the procedures proper to a science seeking general principles and to one which has found them.

I want to start with the idea of a science as an *expanding* body of knowledge, knowledge in the process of *growing*. This seems to me to be quite basic if you and I are going to be talking about anything real at all; and I emphasize it because although it may be commonplace enough to scientists, it certainly is not, explicitly at least, to theologians. Any question of truth and verification presupposes this concept of a growing body of knowledge. At the same time the notion of growth itself becomes inapplicable unless there is something definite which grows, what here I have spoken of as a 'body of knowledge'. To talk usefully about a science, then, we need at least this notion of knowledge as capable of inner coherence and assimilation from without, assimilation which, in accordance with the etymological sense of the word, does not destroy the coherence though it may 'modify' it.

What kind of coherence and what sort of assimilation? These are questions about the dynamism of the human mind, and scientists and theologians both need answers to them, because in both theology and science the human mind is at work, although for the theologian in the existential mode of *gnosis*.

What do we do when we ask questions? We may ignore the existential aspect of questioning (what happens to *me* when I ask a question) although this is of great theological interest as an intelligible manifestation of the mind's appetite for divine truth. Here we shall only consider the formal aspect, noting with regret in passing that the linguistic analysts do not seem to have taken up this particular problem. In the traditional language, this is the problem of the *dialectic*. The word evokes a whole series of philosophical attitudes, from Plato to Hegel; and its treatment by Aristotle in the *Topics* was the basis for the dialectical theology of Abelard's *Sic et Non* and for St Thomas's formal analysis of the way of discovery in theology as well as in the other sciences.

We cannot ask questions without previous knowledge. This is true whether the question is a request for information or merely the practice of systematic doubt. Both these ways of asking questions are found in theology, though the practice of systematic doubt is closer to its essential nature. The theological request for information is obvious enough: the theologian clearly must know his sources. But what are the sources of theology and how can the theologian inform himself of them? Objectively these sources are Tradition and Scripture, and Scripture as communicated by Tradition. Tradition again must be distinguished into its ordinary form, the writings of the Fathers, the liturgy and so on, and its extraordinary form, the authoritative definitions of Popes and Councils. The distinction is important, because it allows us to see how the theologian's sources are more than merely objective: the *defined* Tradition, basically the Creed, is what is globally appropriated in faith; and at least in the form of the Creed articulates that prior knowledge which he must have if he is to ask theological questions. There is, that is to say, a difference in logical status between defined Tradition on the one hand, and Scripture in undefined tradition on the other. We might put this by saying that Scripture in undefined tradition is the *field* of theological investigation while defined Tradition provides the incontrovertible principles which define the coherence of the

body of knowledge which is in process of growth. Clearly there is a constant passage from the field to the principles but not vice versa. Whenever a proposition is defined as being *de fide*, it changes in logical status and becomes a principle, and thereby modifies the inner coherence of the body of theological knowledge. For instance, the definition of the dogma of our Lady's bodily Assumption into heaven does not modify the *content* of our faith concerning her but it does modify its theological structure: no Mariological treatise which does not make the Assumption one of its *principles* can any longer be acceptable or adequate. (We should remember the existentially historical mode of theology here.) Consequently that form of theological questioning which is a request for information is *directed* and not merely accumulative: it is aimed at showing either the historical density of dogma, its power to assimilate the scattered data of Scripture in undefined tradition, and in this way is rather like experimental verification; or it is aimed at showing that other elements in undefined tradition exhibit the unity and consistency of principle, and so may be appropriate for definition, if other conditions are fulfilled which need not be mentioned here. In this case we have something like the formulation of a hypothesis. The parallels I have suggested here (verification and hypothesis) are not close. Once a dogma is defined its truth is not open to real question (although, as we shall see in a moment, it is open to dialectical question), so that verification is simply a matter of seeing the truth of the dogma in all possible aspects and relations within the field of investigation. And the formulation of an hypothesis in the way indicated would be extremely peculiar if it were not part of the second kind of theological questioning, what I have called systematic doubt, in some particular instance.

The practice of systematic doubt in theology is the formalization of theological inquiry first achieved by Abelard. *Sic et non*: yes and no: faced by a bewildering mass of conflicting interpretations of Scripture, Abelard took the radical way out of exhibiting the opposition formally or even contriving it, with the intention of resolving the opposition in a whole variety of ways but primarily by means of linguistic analysis. By the thirteenth century this had become the kind of *quaestio* which is familiar to anyone who has ever looked at an article of St Thomas's *Summa: Utrum*, whether, so-and-so; for instance, whether God

exists. It is not, of course, that there is often any real doubt about the answer; but by submitting the whole body of theological knowledge to systematic doubt, the propositions of theology are now going to have the new epistemological status of an answered question: they are going to be held reflexively and not merely entertained in faith. But this reflexivity is of two kinds: in Aristotelian terminology, it is going to be either scientific or dialectical. This distinction is of the utmost importance, because if, as is common among theologians today, attention is directed only to the 'scientific' (in the Aristotelian sense) reflexivity, it becomes impossible for theology to grow at all.

Whether the reflexivity of the answered question is scientific or dialectical, the process of answering may fairly be called verification. The proposition is questioned with a view to showing how it *follows from* one or more other propositions. If the reflexivity is to be scientific, these primary propositions must be what we have called principles or must be derived from those principles. Ideally, for the scholastic theologian at least, theology becomes scientific by exhibiting all its propositions as following strictly from defined Tradition; and in order to do this it has often to apply analogically concepts whose primary use is in other fields, e.g. the use of 'person' and 'nature' in discussing the Trinity or the Incarnation. In fact, of course, this sort of scientific reflexivity is extremely rare, though theologians do not like to admit it. What is far more common is the kind of reflexivity being practised in this paper, where appeal is made to all sorts of truths which do not have the logical status of *principle* in theological knowledge. We began, for instance, by examining Scriptural usage and generalizing it: the generalized pattern suggested (*mysterion-gnosis-pneuma*) certainly cannot claim the status of principle. The next step was to introduce ideas about history and about human knowledge which again lack even the reflexive certainty which Aristotle and St Thomas thought was possible within natural human knowledge; it will not be surprising then that no scientific certainty is claimed for this paper. But I want to claim that this is the *normal* case in theological inquiry: that the normal means of maintaining a theological position is to appeal to *topoi, loci theologici*, which provide grounds, but not conclusive grounds, for the position maintained. It is here that the theologian normally makes his request for information: 'everything goes to

show' that such-and-such: the usage of Scripture, the agreement of the Fathers, liturgical practice, iconography and so on. Hence the need to provide a treatise *de locis theologicis*, which assesses and evaluates the relative significance of sources in general, although of course an assessment of this kind is required in a particularized form for every individual question. But it must be repeated that even this dialectical procedure is reflexive: it does aim at showing that a given position follows from others which are found in Tradition and Scripture: it does try to argue the position and present it as an answered question, and in this sense we have genuine verification.

There is, however, another aspect of this dialectical procedure which is not touched upon by Aristotle and St Thomas, perhaps because of a characteristic preoccupation with propositions. The dialectical procedure does not merely aim at verifying propositions already given: it is concerned with what might be called the creation of concepts. The theologian does not merely maintain prepared positions: he makes expeditions into the unknown. The 'position' maintained may be a 'view', a raid upon the inarticulate which succeeds only if the position *reached* is given structure by the employment of some freshly coined concept. Historical examples of this are the concept of the supernatural, grace, sacrament and so on. We are here faced with the problem of theological truth. This is obviously too large a question to be raised properly here, but the following considerations, derived from St Thomas, may be offered. Theological truth is a reflection of the truth of God: it is the human expression of divine truth. But this may also be said of Scripture and Revelation generally. The problem of theological truth first arises in its own right when Scriptural language is replaced by a language which is more like the language of other intellectual disciplines than it is like the language of Scripture. We have to ask, then, in what way theology as a body of knowledge *with its own coherency* is a reflection of divine truth. St Thomas usually talks of 'subordination' here. But this subordination can mean rather different things. It can mean the subordination of one (Aristotelian) science to another, a relationship like that of pure to applied mathematics. In this sense, theology is a science whose principles are derived from a superior science, the science of God. This picture would do if theology were nothing more than the

demonstration of more and more conclusions, the exhibition of theological propositions as answered questions. But the weakness of this model is that it makes no allowance for a growth in depth, a penetration into the mysteries of God; at best we could hope for a more detailed and articulate knowledge of the mysteries severally. And in fact St Thomas proposes another model of subordination too: the subordination of a pupil's knowledge of his master's. This model precisely allows for a growth *inwards*, a growth in comprehension. The creation of concepts is clearly a fundamental aspect of this growth in the inner comprehension of God, the humanly intelligible manifestation of the 'gnostic' life of theology. A new concept is a means of simplification of the multiplicity of Revelation, an advance towards seeing God's unity as the one source of all truth. The purpose of theological investigation, even of the investigation offered in this paper, is to enter more closely into a knowledge of God; which is not only to know God better as an object, but also to share more fully in his own knowledge of himself. It seems clear to me that this process also has its natural analogues: I cannot conceive of any intellectual discipline which does not criticize and simplify its own concepts, and which does not suppose, when it does so, that it is advancing towards a 'higher' truth.

I remarked at the beginning of this paper that the kind of relevance which it might have for working scientists would perhaps be a little surprising. I do not know if that is in fact the case; but the relevance, if any, is that it has tried to offer, however inadequately, an account of the way in which an existentially unique reality is deployed in the natural structures of the human mind. These structures are very various; but because theology engages most, if not all of them, it ought to be possible to see their transcendental unity, as it were: the very life of the human spirit in its search for truth. I do not honestly think that theology has any other special relevance for scientists as such. Perhaps it might have been simpler to have said this at the beginning and stopped there.