

Reviews

THE PROBLEMS OF THEOLOGY by B. L. Hebblethwaite, *Cambridge University Press*, 1980. pp viii + 164 £8.95, p/b £2.95.

The 'problems of theology', as here presented, are primarily the problems of relation between theology and religious studies. Theology is now mainly done, the author thinks, within the wider context of religious studies: comparative religion, sociology of religion, and so on. Its main question therefore is how it relates to this wider context. One wonders if this emphasis is not exaggerated. Much theology, and good theology, seems still to be done by people who do not give much thought to Hinduism, or to Buddhism, or to the sociology of religion, and who work within parameters set by the faith of the church, and Dr Hebblethwaite seems to give no explanation of how this can be possible. One's impression in fact is that he is not really describing the situation of theology as it generally is, but rather stating how it ought to be, or how he himself does it.

The approach is a sort of correlation: religious studies provides a vast field of evidence and data, descriptively stated, within which theology attempts an evaluative account of claims to truth and distinctiveness. Theology is not a purely in-group activity assuming the faith of believers, but neither is it to be reduced to merely one of the phenomena of the world of religion, and therefore one has to resist the reductionist tendencies of sociological and comparative approaches. Thus the theologian 'will' (a common expression; it seems to mean 'should') see Christianity as part of the total scene of world religions,

but also should be able to pick out from all this data elements which can support the truth-claims of Christianity. He should be alert to the importance of historical understanding and observe how this fits with the nature of Christianity as a historical religion; but he should resist claims of historical methods to explain everything on a purely historical basis and be ready, for instance, to suggest that church history may be construed in terms of divine providence (p 114). The old sharp demarcations between philosophy and theology, between natural and revealed theology, are no longer useful; but the theologian must be critical of the failure of philosophers to ask questions about ultimate reality or to take religion seriously.

The result is to be praised as a fair-minded and equable attempt to deal with the relations between theology and the general study of religion. It overcomes the dogmatic imperialism of much twentieth-century theology, the insistence that in all matters of religion theology must have the controlling word. Firstly, as already remarked, the author seems not to face the fact that much, perhaps most, theology does not work in the way he wants. Granted (p 16) that faith does not form a private and undiscussable world, it remains true that most theology is the articulation of faith and operates within the assumptions of faith.

Secondly, there is reason to doubt whether the sort of correlation proposed can work. This is not because the reduc-

tionist tendencies of disciplines like history and sociology should be accepted, but for the quite other reason, apparently unconsidered by Hebblethwaite, that theology itself does not provide the resources for his method. Take for instance the idea that church history – or indeed any history – should be written ‘in terms of’ divine providence. We may well *believe* that divine providence operates in history. It is quite another thing to suggest that the historian should actually introduce this into the writing of history. This is not because history excludes the divine dimension: it is because God *does not tell us how* his providence relates to the stuff of history. Was God for King, or for Parliament, in the English Civil War? Was his providence behind the Reformation, and if so was it behind the Counter-Reformation too? We may attempt answers to these questions, but such answers are not history, they are simply statements of our own personal predilections. Analogous objections apply to the author’s idea that we, surveying world religions, should be able to discern the distinctive elements that mark off Christian doctrines and morals from those of Hinduism or Islam and thereby form a ground for the theologian’s evaluation of Christian claims; while contrariwise we ‘must’ (p 115) regard the church’s history as only one strand in the whole divine-human encounter. The integrity both of comparative religion and of theology makes these suggestions very questionable. Hebblethwaite’s correlation seems often to be a sort of mixture: it is soft and blurs the edges of different disciplines, instead of being hard and allowing them their own freedom and integrity. Writing about Gospel criticism, he recognises the importance of the work of the historian; it is, however, quite wrong to exclude ‘all’ reference to divine action or revelation. That is to say, the work should be historical, but there must be *some* reference to divine action, here and there. But this is merely slipshod. If the work is to be historical, then it must be rigorously historical; if it is to be a matter of revelation, then it has to be *all* revelation.

Particular judgments and arguments seem to me to be often challengeable; persons like Barth and Bultmann are seen too

much as English scholars, concerned with Anglo-Saxon questions, have seen and used them, too little as they really were in their own context. Bultmann, for instance, was certainly not influenced by ‘positivism’ (p 121), nor was he ‘sceptical’ (p 110), nor is it likely that he was much impressed by the work of Schweitzer on the quest of the historical Jesus. It is doubtful, again, whether the traditional English criticism of Barth as ‘irrationalist’ (p 16) can be made to stick. Barth did not suppose that faith constituted a ‘private and undiscussable mode of approach’. Concentrating on this probably untenable criticism, Hebblethwaite misses the more serious one: Barth’s approach is indeed a *rational* one in its construction (cf. p 15), but one that *assumes* the actual reality of God to be congruent with the model taken by Barth as his starting-point. I find it hard to accept that philosophy had little place in medieval Judaism and that Maimonides is therefore a somewhat isolated figure (p 69): the structure of Judaism, Christianity and Islam in this respect seems to me to have been very similar. A philosopher should know better than to confuse his readers with obvious etymological fallacy: *theology* does *not* really mean ‘rational thought or talk about God’ (p 1), and *philosophy* does not mean ‘love of wisdom’ (p 61).

The book assumes one particular stream of Christianity: incarnation and trinity are the essentials, and little consideration is given to the question of how it would all seem if another aspect of Christian truth, e.g. justification by faith, or the relation between Jews and Gentiles, or the institution of the church, were taken as equally central. There is once a cheap and unworthy jibe: when we hear of ‘the current tendency in Christian theology to reduce the characteristic Christian doctrines to something that could be said by Hindus anyway’ (p 156). This is hardly a worthy reference to an important current debate, and a debate which, for all its faults, has very much in common with the author’s own way of doing things. On the whole, however, this book gives a good impression of the manifold relations within which theology now operates, and should be widely used by students.

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