

The Conflict of the Faculties: Theology and the Economy of the Sciences

John Milbank

The first thing which members of a modern theology or religious studies department must face up to is that a large percentage of their atheist or agnostic colleagues in the academic world probably consider theology or any other mode of religious reflection as none other than a fantasising about the void. As to the study of religion, they may very well consider it valid to ask just why it is that humanity has systematically pursued so many will o' the wisps, but they are far less likely to be convinced that one requires an entire separate department devoted to this task. If religion is a human phenomenon, they may be inclined to argue, then the human sciences – psychological, social and even biological – must take it within their purview for the sake of completeness. A separate department of religious studies, however purged of theology, still wafts behind it a trace of the odour of sanctity: for if the human sciences cannot deal comprehensively with religion, this still implies that there is something 'religious', something transcendently in excess of the biological, historical, social and psychological.

In the face of such doubts there is, in the end, no convincing apologetic ground upon which theology and religious studies can stand. In secular terms, they should not exist. One might protest at this point that the question of God, or of other religious beliefs, remains something which can be given objective, rational consideration. And that may be fair enough, but such an issue is adequately dealt with in terms of the philosophy syllabus. Another,

more valid, objection would be that there are other examples of subject areas organised by field of studies, rather than field plus angle of approach: urban studies for example, or environmental studies, which are unified only by an object of enquiry, to which several different disciplinary approaches may be taken. This is, of course, the case, but such subject areas are inherently vulnerable to collapse from within and takeover bids from without. They tend to exist at all only for temporary or expedient reasons. Moreover, in the case of religion, as we shall see, a third cause of strain is the question as to whether 'religion' defines with sufficient precision any discrete area of enquiry whatsoever.

Thus one is returned to the truth that self-justification of theology or religious studies before a secular court is well-nigh impossible, and that religious studies is in no better case here than theology. Nonetheless one should not despair, for one reason which is entirely cynical, and for another which is entirely theological. The cynical reason can be dealt with in a short paragraph; the theological one will occupy the rest of this essay. The cynical reason is that utter incoherence and lack of ability to withstand the critical trial of reason does not matter so long as one can come up with cash and customers; in our postmodern era the 'free, rational inquiry' of the Enlightenment which could reveal only formal truths as objectively real, thus handing over the whole realm of the substantive to the play of agnostic forces, has itself been inevitably invaded by such forces, since form feeds only on the substantive, and never perfectly inhabits its own purity. Enlightenment, therefore, is bound to evolve into the postmodern mixture of the purest, most unbounded and therefore most rigorous logic, plus the most untrammelled sway of vanity and fashion. In many ways a 'religious studies department' is well adapted to our era. But we should be warned: the point of fashion is to change, and religious constituencies may well yet further wither away, or more probably mutate and take their custom elsewhere, far away from universities (or what in the future will remain of them).

The cynical reason for not despairing, as outlined above,

may be entertained by religious studies, and even by theology, so long as it remains aware that it is, indeed, cynicism. However the second, and alone substantive, or genuinely hopeful reason for not despairing, is not available to religious studies. It is a theological reason alone. This is the possibility that the secular atheist, or agnostic, consensus might be challenged. And the grounds for this challenge would be simply that they have got everything the wrong way round. They claim that theology, alone amongst purported academic disciplines, is really 'about nothing'. But theological reason, if it is true to itself, replies to this with a counter-claim – all other disciplines, which claim to be about objects regardless of whether or not these objects are related to God, are, just for this reason about nothing whatsoever. This claim holds true for theology, however much these disciplines may assist us, in both good and evil fashion, in practical negotiations with the objective appearances of things, for, if we take an appearance as a mere 'object', that is to say if we take it in abstraction from the question whether or not it discloses in some degree God – as being his creature – we treat it effectively in an atheistic manner, whether or not we remain agnostic as to the answer to the question. And atheism is but a polite English name for what on the Continent has more often been called what it is: nihilism. It is not, in any sense, as its own apologetic insinuates, the negative doubting of God: on the contrary, it is the positive affirmation of the absoluteness of the void, and the capacity of that void to generate the appearance of a solid something – for all that this appearance, if it arises from nothing, must be without ontological remainder, and must at every instant vanish, not just from our sight but in itself. The object, concerning whose participation in infinite actuality – God – we maintain a gnoseological suspense, is an object construed as indeed a will o' the wisp. For if it is taken apart from God, as something in itself, then this must mean a something arising from nothing: therefore the object – the very objectivity of the object as that which appears to the evidence of sight without reference to its origins, or its inevitably hidden aspects – is constituted by

its disguise of the real, a real which is really nothing. By contrast, the only 'something' for this secular outlook is the appearance of the object which is *mere* appearance or illusion, since there can be no disclosive relation between something and nothing: of nothing there is nothing to disclose. It seems that atheism turns out to be much more difficult and indeed mystical than theology, as serious atheists, unlike smug, thoughtless ones, have always known.

Thus for theology, other disciplines, even if they can show us how, amorally, to seek more and more to possess a realm of illusion (though such possession will finally defeat us) and although they can refine more and more the increasingly bizarre and nihilistic paradoxes of logic and mathematics, as well as physics divorced from metaphysics and biology divorced from teleology, are, precisely as secular disciplines (although they will nearly always possess also an implicit and redeeming supernatural orientation), through and through nihilistic. By contrast, theology understands itself as alone studying things as ineliminably real, in that they are taken as having their source in an original indefeasible actuality. A consequence of this view is that theology also understands itself as alone able to remain with the question of truth, without running into inevitable aporias. For theology, indeed, truth is an adequation or correspondence of knowledge with the real, since the one entirely real reality, God, is itself both infinitely actual and infinitely knowing. As real, he is also manifest and self-aware, or truthful. For us to express a truth means that to a degree we correspond in our being to God via an awareness of aspects of the creation to whose lesser reality we also correspond, since the creation is rooted in God, and its being is entirely from God. From this theological perspective alone it makes sense to say that knowing corresponds to being, even though we have no other access to being, other than via knowing, and thus a claim that our knowledge 'corresponds' can never be checked up on. We cannot compare what is known with the knowledge of it, since what is known is not available other than through knowledge. Hence a claim to know

truly, a claim to know at all, as Plato argued, only makes sense within the framework of *meathexis* (participation), for it amounts to a faith that what one shows or expresses in knowledge radiates mysteriously, and in a limited measure yet not deceptively, from a plenitudinous origin that is both the source of all things and the genuine depth of all things.

Outside this theological framework, the redundancy theorists of truth are right: 'truth' is an eliminable term since it only means that what is 'is', and 'is' in this context can only mean that which appears to us (in terms of both nature and culture) to be – the world as we either pragmatically or conventionally reckon with it.¹ However, there is no secure phenomenalist resting point here, no safe version of transcendental 'limits of human reason' within which there may persist a certain sort of certainty concerning the real. For behind the complacency of so-called redundancy or disquotational theory lurks the more fearful spectre of 'diagonalisation'. With the diagonalising perspective, to say that true statements pertain to the world as we pragmatically or conventionally handle it raises the reflexive problem of how that statement itself is legitimated, since it cannot itself be pragmatically or conventionally grounded or disquotationally reduced.² It seems that in one instance we cannot substitute for the word true – that is the instance when we say 'it is true that all uses of the word true can be translated into other terms'. For even if we say instead 'all uses of the word true can be translated into other terms', the fact that we need to make this assertion shows that to affirm the redundancy theory

¹ See Arthur Fine, *The Shaky Game* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 112–71; Hilary Putnam, *Pragmatism: An Open Question* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995); Donald Davidson, 'The Structure and Content of Truth', in the *Journal of Philosophy* 87 (June 1990), 279–326; Richard Rorty 'Pragmatism, Davidson and Truth', in *Truth and Interpretation* ed. Ernest LePore (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), 333–55; Bruce D. Marshall, 'We Shall Bear the Image of the Man of Heaven'; 'Theology and the Concept of Truth', in *Rethinking Metaphysics*, eds. G. L. Jones and S. E. Rowle (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 93–117.

² On 'diagonalisation', see Graham Priest, *Beyond the Limits of Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

is to assert that the redundancy of use of the word 'truth' corresponds to the way things are, such that after all we encounter here an unavoidable speculative gap between knowledge and being where use of the word 'true' or equivalent phrasing still has an irreducible function. In a corresponding fashion, if we elect to think that it is true that 'true' indicates only what appears to us to be the case, then (as Plato pointed out in the *Theaetetus*)³ we still have to say 'it appears to me that truth reduces to whatever appears to anyone to be'. And here again truth is not disquotable, nor reducible to appearance, since an 'appearance' which establishes that truth resides only in appearings-to-be cannot itself be within the normal plane of appearances, but is rather a meta-appearing which establishes the absoluteness of this plane. Yet at the same time a meta-appearing must after all be regarded as also just another contingent and subjective appearing and so as contradictorily belonging on the same first-order plane after all. In this way it is, in principle, open to challenge by another appearance which could disclose the non-ultimateness of mere appearing-to-be itself. So here once again, there arises an unavoidable – if undecidable – issue about correspondence and thus about truth.

It has now been seen, both from the way in which 'truth' is not redundant in asserting its redundancy, and the way in which the theory of truth as appearance both is not and yet is itself an appearance, that these theories are beset by deconstructive paradox. Thus to uphold the limits of pragmatic or conventional reason, and a disquotational theory of truth with its accompanying phenomenalism, one must also transgress those limits or 'diagonalise' out of them, to use the jargon, and risk the notion that one's decision to regard the world only pragmatically or else conventionally does after all correspond – beyond mere pragmatism or conventionalism – to the way things are. This 'way things are', this implicit ontology, would be that the world is through and through phenomenal without disclosure of anything deeper, that is to say that for

³ Plato, *Theaetetus* 161C–162A.

working purposes it is a meaningless and partially manipulable flux floating above a void (an implied 'centre' of lack of reasons and non-origination). So after all, phenomena without truth, that is to say, phenomena containing no inner impetus to self-disclosure (as in a theological theory which accepts an ontological dimension to truth) do nonetheless disclose the truth of the void. But as we have seen, this is a self-cancelling form of self-disclosure, which announces the equal untruth as much as truth of what is disclosed, since the void discloses nothing, and in consequence the truth entertained here is a truth crossed out, a contradictory untruth, just as the result, as Hegel realised, of any transcendental limitation of possible knowledge is a constitutive contradiction. For if, as we have seen, in the theory under consideration, all truth relates only to appearances, then according to the logic of set-theory this statement itself both must and yet cannot be merely phenomenal: it is simultaneously groundless, floating in a void, and yet grounded within the phenomenal horizon. Hence, just as for secular knowledge all appearances equally are and are not, so also reality is disclosed truly and yet as entirely untrue. Plato, followed by Augustine, Dionysius and the whole Christian tradition up to Aquinas and Eckhart (and in his wake Nicholas of Cusa), was right: in the mere finite flux taken in itself there resides no truth, and the principle of non-contradiction of logic itself cannot be upheld or grounded logically, but only through assent to the realm of eternal unchanging forms, or of the ideas in the mind of God, where what is actual abides, and as infinite or 'outside itself' escapes all set-theoretical contradictions.

The above reasonings suggest that theology, in the face of secular attack, is only on secure ground if it adopts the most extreme mode of counterattack: namely that unless other disciplines are (at least implicitly) ordered to theology (assuming that this means participation in God's self-knowledge – as in the Augustinian tradition) they are objectively and demonstrably null and void, altogether lacking in truth, which to have any meaning must involve some sort of adequation (for mere 'coherence' can only

concern the coherence of conventions or appearances). But one might well protest, how does this picture relate to the real situation in today's universities where it is simply not the case that with 100 per cent consistency secular academics say to students of theology or religion, 'You speak of nothing' and even less true that those students solemnly intone in reply, 'No, it is rather you who speak of nothing.' However, to understand why what I believe is the real situation rarely emerges to the surface, one needs to consider briefly the historical emergence of modern theology and religious studies, and in particular the often hidden role of the state in this emergence.

There are four significant dimensions here which I want now to enumerate.

First, around 1300 or so, theology itself perversely invented the possibility of an entirely non-theological mode of knowledge. Duns Scotus and his successors through Suarez and Descartes to Kant, elaborated the notion that it was possible adequately to think of Being as such, apart from its instantiation as the infinite actuality of God. In consequence it became legitimate to think of the being of a creature apart from its creaturehood. But this alters altogether the meaning of contingency. No longer is the apparent being of a thing taken as God's willed partial disclosure of himself; instead it is taken as raw possibility. For if God has been bracketed out, the being of a creature is exhaustively that which appears to our knowledge, and that which appears to our knowledge, that which we can clearly and distinctly grasp, is simply that which is thinkably coherent and so possible. Thus a being taken in abstraction from God is immediately reduced to its enablement by possible being, rather than prior actuality. But if possibility is prior, then a 'might not be' or 'nothing' is on the same level with being, and meontology as fundamental as ontology. As J-F. Courtine puts it, the contention of Eckhart (but also of Augustine and Aquinas) which was the inner kernel of orthodoxy tragically rejected as heterodox by the Catholic Church itself before and around 1300 - namely that in its most actual self the creature in some sense is God, and of itself is nothing, is negatively

demonstrated to be correct by all subsequent deviant scholasticism. In this later, and decadent, development, the inner essence of a finite being becomes nothing as much as something, so that in Suarez and then in Wolff, and even in Kant's first critique, the real subject of ontology is not *ens*, but *aliquid* (something) or *objectum*, the 'transcendental' reality that might equally be or not be. I have already indicated how this, the substructure of most modern pragmatism, most phenomenology, and most analytic philosophy – is implicitly nihilist – rendering the question of 'postmodernism' a trivial irrelevance.⁴

The second dimension is closely related to the first. Once the fundamental Augustinian-Dionysian-Thomist structure of analogy of being and participation in being had been destroyed by the Scotist view that finite and infinite being 'are' in the same univocal sense, theology gradually changed its character. For Aquinas, to talk adequately of anything, one had to speak of it as a creature, to refer its being to God as alone truly being in himself. In consequence, metaphysics, understood by Aquinas primarily as ontology, diagonalised out of itself in dealing with one topic – namely the first cause, God – that fell within its purview. Paradoxically this one topic, God, is for the Thomist view of metaphysics (as not for Aristotle who remained with a strange aporetic tension) bigger, of greater scope than its supposed all comprehensive subject matter of *ens commune* – 'being in common'.⁵ There is, however, no real paradox here, only because this subject matter of metaphysics, *ens commune*, is itself provided by a higher cause, which is the subject of a higher science. But here, uniquely, the cause and the science are at one – they are the first cause and its own self-knowledge: God himself and

⁴ See Jean-François Courtine, *Suarez et le problème de la métaphysique* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1990); Eric Alliez, *Capital Times* trans. George van den Abbeele (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1996), 141–241.

⁵ See Courtine, *Suarez et le problème de la métaphysique*; Alain de Libera, *Le problème de l'être chez Maître Eckhart: Logique et métaphysique de l'analogie* (Geneva: Cahiers de la Revue de Théologie et de Philosophie 4, 1980); Edward Booth, *Aristotelian Aporetic Ontology in Islamic and Christian Thinkers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

his *scientia Dei* which is theology, utterly ineffable and beyond our grasp. The basic conclusions of metaphysics, that there is a cause of being, and that this cause of being is itself a plenitudinous being, are for Aquinas flickering and uncertain, just because we only ever weakly participate in being and truth, and are, besides, fallen creatures. They are only truly confirmed, established from their ground, by God's imparting to us his own self-knowledge, through his entry gradually into human time (the typology of the Old Testament) and finally with Christ at the incarnation. This entry not only confirms God as first cause and *esse ipsum* to our wavering reason, but also discloses the inner reality of God as Trinitarian, namely as an infinite will to give being, to be known and loved through self-manifestation which pre-grounds the creative act.

But after Aquinas and Eckhart, this sense of theology as participation in the science of God and the blessed gradually evaporated, and indeed was subject already to a kind of secularisation such that theology as such was really already abandoned. How? Because instead of the most fundamental determination of being as theological, one now has a theologically-neutral determination of being, and theology is forced to work within this framework as if, idolatrously, there was something more ontologically fundamental than God. For the figure of participation is substituted the figure of distance: as if God were a very remote, infinitely-large object. And where infinite was traditionally a negative description of God, it now, in the late Middle Ages, became a positive definition of his essence. And of course a God whose defining nature is to be unbounded, and a God of which nothing finite necessarily discloses anything, since its finite essence is simply a logical or grammatical 'might not be', is a God who quickly becomes hypostasised will or force. The late mediaeval imagining of a reality divided between infinite arbitrariness on the one hand and finite contingent possibilities on the other already projected in advance a nihilistic imagining of a blind flux undergirding meaningless and delusory appearances. Increasingly the

Scotist 'proofs of God' in terms of the necessary priority of infinite Being, did not seem like proofs of God, as opposed to proofs of some sort of immanent absolute or even immanent absolute void: a conclusion eventually arrived at by Spinoza. As a result, theology was thrown more and more back on a new sort of foundation in positive revelation. But in this case also, it was just as true that theology took for granted a philosophical pre-establishment of what an object or a fact was: something clear and evident, without depth, unambiguous and provable according to 'evidence'. God was now seen as disclosing himself in facts which, increasingly, to distinguish themselves as divine facts, had to be miraculous facts, or else their recognition depended upon an entirely separate, internal – and only accidentally related to the revealed object – movement of our understanding by the Holy Spirit.⁶ The traditional integrity of theology was thereby lost: for previously theology was not a secondary reflection upon data, whether of Scripture or tradition; on the contrary, theology was the event of divine disclosure, a happening in which inner inspiration and outward expression in signs were seamlessly and intrinsically united. Instead of this sophisticated and believable notion that theology concerns the gradually renewed disclosure of God himself through creatures which makes use of the ceaseless becoming of creation in time, an entirely superstitious and contemptible notion of an arbitrary and blind faith in certain supposedly revealed facts was substituted. Yet this strange fideistic superstition is itself captive to the emerging secularity of a God reduced to the status of an object, and so able to disclose himself according to his arbitrary will, through lesser objective possibilities. Thus, although this circumstance was for a long time hidden, the mainstream of learned theology effectively ceased to be theology long ago. Above all, it ceased to be about God, because it ceased to be itself the existential event of divine illumination, and

⁶ See Avery Dulles, *The Assurance of Things Hoped For: A Theology of Christian Faith* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994); René Latourelle, *Theology of Revelation* (Staten Island, NY: Alba House, 1967).

became instead a second-order reflection on facts or practices of some sort. (When, for example, Barth says that theology is primarily about the Church and its conformity to Scripture it seems to me that he has not escaped this post-1300 decadence).⁷

The third dimension concerns the state. Ockhamist distance from an absolute voluntarist God, from the outset meshed nicely with, and was used to support, a new conception of earthly authority as legitimate according to the exercise of power by a single sovereign centre if constituted by and exercised in the right formal terms, quite apart from the question of the inherent justice of its acts. This meant that public life, as fallen entirely under such sovereign sway, was subject to a paradoxically theological secularisation, in that its ordering, though divinely legitimate, no longer in any way reflected divine order or cosmic hierarchy. Partly as a result, 'religion' ceased to betoken specific patterns of individual participation in public practice, ceased, in short to be a 'virtue', and became instead a private attitude; not even any longer a disposition to virtue, but rather an act of assent to certain emotionally neutral 'beliefs' in certain revealed facts and propositions. Moreover, in the early modern period, while the state was unable altogether to escape the assumption that the practice of religion alone held society together, it quickly came to suppose that the state simply required general assent to some set of beliefs for the sake of disciplined and uniform public worship, plus the supernatural sanctioning of morality and its own positive laws. In that moment the notion of 'a religion', and of a plurality of 'religions' was born, and later inappropriately used to classify the practices and inherited wisdoms of other cultures.⁸ Even today, the state retains some vestigial interest in the usefulness of a

⁷ Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*, trans. G. T. Thomson (London: SCM Press, 1996), 9–14.

⁸ See Peter Harrison, *Religion and the Religious Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993); W. T. Cavanaugh, "A fire strong enough to consume the house": The Wars of Religion and the Rise of the State', *Modern Theology* 11 (1995), 397–420.

private sphere of piety, and therefore tends to encourage the notion that there is a 'religious' dimension of life, which assists the state's own ends without trespassing on its sovereignty.

Concomitantly, it still prefers the public dimension of religion – mystical attachment to corporate bodies and organisations of social practice – to be alienated to its own domain: hence the occasionally re-emerging phenomenon of 'civil religion'.

The fourth dimension, after those of modern ontology without God, modern debased theology, and the modern theopolitical co-determination of the state and religion, concern the emergence of a notion of 'ritual' activity. In the Middle Ages, and in most traditional societies, all proper action is ritual in the sense that it reflects a cosmic order: as Talal Asad has stressed, the monk's writing in the scriptorium or labouring in the field was as much liturgical as his saying of the offices in chapel.⁹ And all these ritual acts were no mysterious symbolic language for some sort of psychological secret attitude; on the contrary they were simply plain, ordinary, transparent acts, whose structure nonetheless pointed to an inexhaustable depth of divine mystery. But later, with the reduction of religion to mean primarily a set of beliefs, actions related to those beliefs started to be thought of as strange, as hovering between real, normal actions, and certain psychological dispositions: in this way a realm of 'ritual' or 'symbolic actions' was born, which helped to strengthen the illusion that these are religious phenomena, available for study and inquiry. Whereas, in fact, this is a modern Western projection: traditional Hinduism, for example, was not a religion, not an aspect of the Indian way of life, it simply was that life or rather plural lives in their specific totality, their specific structuring and specific visions.

Taken altogether these four dimensions have helped to shape the modern disciplines of theology and religious studies. Theology has been regarded, unlike philosophy, as a 'positive science' concerned with a certain delimited

⁹ Asad, *Genealogies of Religion*, 125–71.

field, rather than as the very consummation and transfiguration of philosophy or the science of being as such. It has also been frequently regarded by the state as primarily functional and practical in character. In Kant's strange last published work, *The Conflict of the Faculties*, he argued that the higher university faculties, theology, law and medicine, can be allowed only limited freedom, since they serve the practical and legal purposes of the state, whereas philosophy, a lower faculty, as being without public responsibilities or direct public consequences, is free to pursue pure truth without hindrance.¹⁰ But this, we can now see, is the perfect political equivalence of nihilism: philosophy which can only after all for Kant attain the truth of appearances can think what it likes (is a kind of adventure playground, without upshot), and yet beyond philosophy, and beyond appearances in the noumenal void, a strict formalism for the safeguarding and sacralising of an empty freedom as the essence of subjectivity, pertains. And it is finally theology justified by practical truth which upholds this politically amoral realm of strict and empty formalism. It is no longer, by Kant, allowed, beyond the formal exigencies of the state legal practice, to think the ratio between the unknown and manifest appearances (thanks to Kant's strict duality of the sublime and the beautiful), despite the fact that this is the only true site for Christian theology.¹¹ Within the bounds laid down by the state, theology is instead confined to upholding a supposedly universal morality and to better scholarly establishment of the facts which are now taken to ground belief. Thus theology in the course of the nineteenth century acquired wholly questionable sub-disciplines which were no longer expected to participate in God's self-knowledge, but were instead expected simply to establish the foundational facts with pure historical neutrality (on

¹⁰ Immanuel Kant, 'The Conflict of the Faculties', in *Religion and Rational Theology*, trans. A. W. Wood and G. di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) 233–329.

¹¹ See John Milbank, 'Sublimity, the Modern Transcendent', in *Religion, Modernity and Postmodernity*, ed. P. Heelas and P. Morris (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998).

which the Church as department of state depends): Biblical criticism, church history (as no longer a reflection on divine providence), historical theology and so forth. Even after the decline of public belief, theology has hoped that this self-desiccation of its unity into non-theological components will win it general respectability. But it is a short-term strategy, and in the end theology is here only preparing its own auctioning-off to other faculties: to history, Oriental studies, classics, and the like. So the task now for theology is not, of course, to abandon historical scholarship, but to reinvent Biblical studies, church history and so forth as also attempts, beyond scholarship, to participate in the mind of God.

Alongside theology, religious studies has emerged as the study of a questionably (for reasons we have seen) discrete area of human existence. To that extent, it is not a readily defensible discipline, even if history of religions at its best has attempted an interesting sort of historical ethnography and *histoire totale* of human culture. But what alone really drives the study of religion as a distinct discipline is either a vacuous and impossible pluralist theology (whose impossibility I have discussed elsewhere),¹² or else the atheist or agnostic attempt to explain whatever in human culture falls outside the norms of Western, post-Scotist reason. It is perfectly all right to admit such attempts within a theology and religious studies department, as long as one insists that the department is still – as a whole and primarily – committed to theology. For otherwise, if one adopts a neutral stance, one is really giving free rein to one inevitable ambition of such inquiries, namely to get rid of theology as an academic venture. By all means, we should include in our endeavours, for example, the psychology of religion: but never should we be under any illusion that this is partially in order to encourage a dialogue between theology and psychology. Why not? Because while theology is perfectly open and always has been to discourses about physical

¹² John Milbank, 'The End of Dialogue', in *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered*, ed. Gavin d'Costa (New York: Orbis 1990), 174–92.

influences on the soul (the traditional theory of melancholy and so forth), it regards itself, in one central aspect, as the discourse about the soul's psychic reality. Hence psychology, outside of physical and behavioural science, is a rival of theology: indeed it is easy to show genealogically that it is itself but the faint trace of religious belief in the soul, an absurd attempt to talk about the soul without God, despite the fact that the soul as 'spiritual' has only been historically constituted in terms of our point of contact with transcendence.¹³ Such an attempt is strictly analogous to all post-Scotist attempts to talk about actuality apart from God, and with the same result: finite actuality, here spiritual actuality, must fade away. And, furthermore, the attempt also inherits a theological privatisation of religion whereby, instead of the 'humanly psychic' simply being taken as coterminous with all specifically human outward activity as the spring of 'life' and principle of order in such activity (as the psychic is also the principle of life and the measure of all other, non-human, realities) it is seen as denoting some elusive, mysterious, supposedly 'internal' aspect of our existence, such that the 'psychic' is supposed to be more manifest to laboratory investigation of an isolated individual under artificial experimental conditions, than in ordinary interpersonal everyday life.

Thus in relation to secular inquiries into religion, theology should never surrender its hegemony. But ironically, nor should the practitioners of such enquiries want it to, at least if they wish to remain focused upon religion or, *a fortiori*, to remain located within a religious studies department. For without theology's unique assertion of a *raison d'être*, namely maintenance of at least the possibility of an alternative to secular nihilism, the long-term threat of an 'auctioning off' of such secular studies of religion remains.

And rather similar considerations apply to the study of other religions (though that is the wrong term). One should say here, first of all, that theology itself should of course

¹³ The point is well made from a stance hostile to religion by Richard Webster in his *Why Freud Was Wrong* (London: HarperCollins, 1996), esp. 457-77.

include a reflection on the theological meaning of the history of religions. Alongside this, a religious studies department will validly include 'neutral' studies of such history, besides, where possible, encouragement of interior intellectual developments of other traditions by practitioners of such traditions themselves – although I think we need to be aware of the degree to which the tradition of such reflection in the case of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam has been historically ruptured: we must not be taken in by inauthentic modern simulacra of such reflection. The facts of history and simple pressure of numbers dictates that such reflection will continue to be more carried out by Christians and by Jews. But there are also two further points. The first is that the very rationale for allowing a pluralist encouragement of different traditions of reasoned enquiry, also demands continuing Christian theological hegemony. Why? Because this rationale denies that reason can ever be divorced first from a more than rational commitment, and second from the specificity of time and place. Thus, this rationale itself requires that as Christian theologians we sustain our tradition of reflection as a matter of more than rational commitment, which means in turn that we have to insist that a faculty of religion is, whatever else it is, at least a faculty of theology, meaning, of course, Christian theology, as well as that more simply 'metaphysical' theology inherited from the Greeks and common to the three monotheistic faiths. But in addition, the realities of time and place to which a theory of 'traditioned' reason is committed, still in Europe and America for the moment require the culturally-prior role of Christian reflection. And since the notion of traditioned reason alone can withstand the sway of a supposedly neutral reason, and since this notion demands for the above reasons that we sustain the distinction of Christian commitment and assert its priority for theology and religious studies, then it is paradoxically this priority alone which shelters other modes of traditional or religious reflection. By contrast, a strictly secular, neutral regard would simply sweep them away in the wake of Christian theology itself.

It is inconceivable and simply idolatrous to suppose that theology could ever be a component of some supposedly more inclusive and hybrid discipline of religion and theology in general (even though, of course, it is possible to imagine that a Christian theology 'track' within a department of religion and theology could readily share in common courses on say the Old Testament, Greek Philosophy and Mediaeval Philosophy with Islamic, Jewish and History of Religions tracks). And yet, I can hear a Muslim or a Jew protest, is there not something very strange about what you say? How can Christian theology shelter other religious visions, if it is within this tradition alone that secular nihilism was pre-invented. There is no answer I can give here which they will find acceptable, and yet there is an answer which is highly relevant for Christians. This is that despite the fact that Christian learned theology abandoned the framework of analogy and participation for a kind of proto-nihilism, it was nonetheless Christian thinkers alone in the Middle Ages who fully succeeded in elaborating such a framework. Without the encouragement of the Trinitarian sense that God is in himself the God who expresses himself creatively, and the Christological sense that God only speaks from within history and can only restore a broken history by kenotically entering personally within it, the Arabic and Jewish scholastics (*as well as* the Jewish Kabbalists) tended not to be able to reconcile God's simplicity and supremacy of will with his eminent possession of the excellencies of goodness, truth and beauty manifest in the creation (despite their intense will to do so). With the abandonment of participation by Christian theologians, such an inability invaded Christendom also, with the inverse consequence that the trinitarian and christological doctrines started to lose their centrality and inherent logic, becoming the subjects of mere authorised belief.¹⁴ For this reason it can

¹⁴ See John Milbank, 'History of the One God', in *Heythrop Journal* 38 (1997), 371-400, and David B. Burrell, *Knowing the Unknowable God* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986), *Freedom and Creation in Three Traditions* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993).

validly be asserted (and should be accepted by Christians), that the call to recover analogy and participation, which is equivalent to a call to reinstate the hegemony of theology as an alternative to nihilism, will tend to be also (if by no means exclusively since one has no warrant to rule out the possibility of future more successful Jewish and Islamic neoplatonisms), a call to recover specifically Christian theology.

ALD
BJ
1251
F35
2000

T&T CLARK LTD
59 GEORGE STREET
EDINBURGH EH2 2LQ
SCOTLAND
www.tandtclark.co.uk

Copyright © T&T Clark Ltd, 2000

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher.

First published 2000

ISBN 0 567 08738 7

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the
British Library

Typeset by Fakenham Photosetting Ltd, Fakenham, Norfolk
Printed and bound in Great Britain by MPG Books, Bodmin