Faith Thinking
The Dynamics of Christian Theology

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Introduction

The prime need of religion to-day is a theology. No religion can survive which does not know where it is. And current religion does not know where it is, and it hates to be made to ask. It hates theology.

Peter Taylor Forsyth

The model of theology which I shall seek to unpack and develop within the pages of this book is that referred to by the ancient description of the theological thinker as fidelis quaerens intellectum: a believer seeking understanding. Theology is the attempt by faith to understand itself, its object, and its place in today's world. In the words of our title it is, quite simply, faith thinking. This pursuit is an inevitable corollary of the existence of faith itself. For faith, if it is genuine faith, cannot help asking questions and seeking answers. Thus, theology is far from being a lofty academic intellectual game, the esoteric preserve of an initiated few, and essentially unrelated to the real life concerns of ordinary Christian men and women. Theology can be and is, of course, practised at highly intellectual levels, and there is a need for such professional engagement. But the activity known as 'Christian theology' is properly an inevitable consequence of life as a thinking Christian in the real world. By 'thinking' in this context I mean simply the sort of intellectual activity we engage in every day as human beings as we read newspapers, watch the TV, meet and interact with new people, new situations, and new information, and try to integrate it all into our larger picture of the world and our place within it. In this sense, while we may not all be formally trained as theologians, we are all nonetheless engaged in 'theology' to the extent that Christian faith for us forms an integral part of that picture.

In terms of the life of the community of faith, it may be argued, each level of engagement is equally vital. The church is called in every age afresh to give a coherent account of its faith, to testify to that living truth with which it has been entrusted, the gospel of Christ. Such articulation and proclamation cannot be limited to one
intellectual plane alone, any more than it can be restricted to any one social group or culture. Whatever our intellectual resources we are called upon to bear faithful and articulate witness to the source of our life and hope. Yet this task cannot even begin without due attention being given to the prior tasks of seeking to understand to the best of our individual ability the basic elements of the Christian story, and considering how this story might best be told afresh for our generation. For this reason alone theologizing must go on not only in the university or seminary, but in the life setting of every disciple of Christ as faith seeks to understand itself, its message and its salvation in order to share what it has with its neighbour. We shall not all be great evangelists or apologists, but just as surely as there is the priesthood of all believers in God's church, so too there is a theological prerogative belonging not only to an elite academic priesthood, guardians of the sanctuaries of learning, but to all God's people. For the task of responsible thinking about God, about faith, of faith seeking to understand itself and to articulate that understanding, is the essence of Christian theology. In this sense, of course, 'Everyone man, woman and child who thinks about God engages in theology.' No one is excused! All are called to participate in the theological task as part of the community of faith and witness.

Faith must seek to understand itself first in the sense of being aware of and confident in its own existence as a fundamental human disposition. I do not mean now specifically religious faith, whether Christian or otherwise, but rather faith defined in more general terms (of which religious faith is certainly an instance) as a disposition of passionate commitment to a truth which stands over against and demands an appropriate response from it, and yet a commitment the final legitimacy and veracity of which cannot be demonstrated or established beyond doubt in the situation of testimony or the confrontation with unbelief. In the current intellectual climate such a disposition may be frowned upon or treated as a second class entity. At best we shall be told that such a commitment is a matter purely of individual preference and perfectly acceptable so long as it is kept on a leash in public and not allowed to pester others with its claims. At worst we may find ourselves treated as adherents of an irrational and anachronistic superstition, a groundless opinion unsubstantiated by any firm evidence, and best abandoned in the interests of ourselves as individuals and society as a whole. The sooner we part company with our illusions (no matter how ancient or dearly cherished), the sooner we can all get on with living contentedly and clear-sightedly in the real world. In such a climate, we shall suggest, faith must face up to and come to terms with itself as it is, to discover a self-confidence which enables it to live with itself, liberating it from a constant, hopeless and therefore despairing attempt to justify its existence, in the eyes of those who would challenge its very right to exist. The first three chapters of this book will seek to enable this self-adjustment to take place, considering the nature of faith as a human disposition, its role in Christian life generally and its place in relation to theological activity in particular. The result of our labours will be to suggest that the disposition of faith or belief is not quite the patrimony of human knowing and thinking, of all truly 'rational' activity in fact.

Second, faith must always seek better to understand that in which it is faith. The fact that we believe something, or invest it with faith, in the first place implies, of course, an initial degree of understanding, however partial. After all, we could not properly be said to believe something of which we had no conception, something of which we could make no sense whatever. But very often the grasp which we do have at first is slight, and may even be virtually inarticulate. Yet the passion with which we grasp and seize it and turn it into an object of faith will not be satisfied for long with so little. Faith — when it is truly faith rather than a mere intellectual assent to some proposition or other — will always seek to enter into a fuller and deeper knowledge and understanding of that which matters most to it. And so Christian faith is driven by a desire to know more of that which is its source and raison d'être, to learn to speak and to think more appropriately of that reality, and of the various component parts of the knowledge of it which has been handed down through the ages by the community of faith; to consider the way in which all the things which are believed about this reality cohere with one another; and to explore the pattern of truth which pertains to it. In all this, faith is concerned with what might be called the 'internal coherence' of its own story or gospel.

This is a task within which we may, for convenience, identify two quite distinct elements: on the one hand there will be a descriptive and interpretative element in which faith seeks to set forth the sum of that which it believes in a clear and coherent manner, laying it out and seeking to make sense of it for the contemporary situation. In this there is a necessary dependence upon a received
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TRADITION OF BELief AND ARTICULATION OF BELIEF, A TRADITION WHICH WE FIND EMBODIED (IN THE CASE OF CHRISTIAN FAITH) IN CREEDS, IN WORSHIP, IN PREACHING AND IN MANY OTHER FORMS OF THE CHURCH’S LIFE AND PRACTICE. BUT THE TASK OF ATTENDING TO THE INTERNAL COHERENCE OF THE CHRISTIAN MESSAGE GOES BEYOND THAT OF DESCRIPTION, ARTICULATION AND INTERPRETATION, INVOLVING AN EQUALLY IMPORTANT NORMATIVE OR PRESCRIPTIVE TASK. IN OTHER WORDS, THE TASK OF THEOLOGY IS NOT SIMPLY TO ASK ‘WHAT HAS THE CHURCH SAID AND BELIEVED, AND HOW CAN WE BEST EXPRESS THAT SO THAT PEOPLE TODAY WILL BE ABLE TO UNDERSTAND IT?’ IT MUST ALSO ASK AND ANSWER THE QUESTION ‘SHOULD THE CHURCH SAY AND BELIEVE TODAY?’ CONSIDERATION OF THE INTERNAL COHERENCE MUST ALSO ENTAIL CONCERN FOR WHAT WE MIGHT CALL THE ‘EXTERNAL REFERENCE’ OF THE STORY WHICH THE CHURCH TELLS, OF ITS CORRESPONDENCE TO SOME ACTUAL STATE OF AFFAIRS IN AND BEYOND THE WORLD, ITS RESPONSIBILITY TO SOME OBJECTIVE REALITY WHICH STANDS OVER AGAINST ITSELF AND OF WHICH IT SEeks TO SPEAK. THIS IS VITAL IF THEOLOGY IS TO REMAIN ESSENTIALLY A QUEST FOR TRUTH, RATHER THAN A SIMPLE BID (DRIVEN BY NOSTALGIA OR A MISGUIDED SENSE OF HISTORICAL OBLIGATION) TO PRESERVE THE SHAPE AND COHERENCE OF A PARTICULAR THEOLOGICAL TRADITION AT ALL COSTS.

The sort of reflection appropriate for faith in its dialogue with the truth, that is to say, is precisely a critical reflection, and not a mere slavish reiteration of a received body of truths. This does not mean by any stretch of the imagination that we shall treat our received tradition lightly or that we shall even be able to engage in theology without beginning with and for the most part standing firmly within it. But, if our concern is genuinely to know the truth and to allow the truth to shape and mould our thinking and speaking about it, we shall maintain what one recent writer has referred to as an essentially interrogative rather than doctrinaire attitude in our theological thinking. Thus we might say that faith, standing upon the shoulders of a tradition which it has inherited from the past, must nonetheless always be open to the possibility that its encounter with the truth might force it to part company with that tradition in some fundamental way. We cannot proceed on the assumption that it will, but we must always be open to the possibility that it might. At such points a tension arises between our commitment to the tradition and our sense of the need to rebel against it. For obvious reasons such a perceived need must be carefully tested and weighed; but it can never be proscribed in advance, unless we are prepared to embrace the intellectual strait-jacket of fundamentalism or dogmatism, and to banish from the outset all possibility of genuine advance or discovery, or of creative genius. Once such matters are raised, of course, there must immediately follow a careful consideration of the criteria of evaluation which might be deployed in addressing them. Part of our concern in this book will be with the various ‘authorities for faith’ (scripture, tradition, reason, context, experience and so forth) and the ways in which they can be, have been, and are used and abused in the doing of theology.

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Third, faith must seek to understand its place within its own specific historical and cultural context. Both the task of interpretation and that of critical reflection demand and lead naturally into such a quest, and to that extent the attempt to reckon with the internal coherence of the church’s message cannot stand alone with this other, further task. For us this will involve asking just how far the commitments peculiar to Christian faith can be fitted together with that view of our world and the place of humans within it entertained by most of our contemporaries; the assumptions, attitudes and practices which might be referred to in a wholesale manner as the mindset of late-twentieth-century Western society. This is a vitally necessary task which must of necessity be repeated afresh on a regular basis. Yesterday’s answers will not address today’s questions; and while the task of theology or ‘faith seeking understanding’ is certainly not restricted to the answering of questions and problems thrown up by the agenda of society, nevertheless even in that more fundamental task of bearing witness, of seeking to give some meaningful account of itself and the object of its hope, faith must already take these factors into consideration – otherwise it will be forced into a ghetto of its own making, a self-imposed irrelevance and obscurantism. Precisely what it might mean for theology to be or to become ‘relevant’ is something which we shall be considering in later chapters. But whatever else it may or may not involve, a theology of relevance to the society within which it is forged will of necessity be one which speaks the language of that society, both literally and metaphorically, which is familiar with its concerns and its ways of thinking. Such familiarity is a prerequisite of all communication, let alone all good communication: we have to meet people and to address them where they are.

In reality, our situation as Christians in the world is such that for the most part we do not have to force ourselves to think about these things. It is something that we find ourselves doing as a matter of course, particularly when we encounter widely held attitudes or assumptions which appear to conflict with something basic in
our Christian faith, or when our own experience of the realities of life seem to present difficulties for or to challenge one element or another of what we believe. Inasmuch as it is true that 'faith is the certainty of things not seen' and the gospel 'foolishness to the Greeks', we can reasonably expect such questions to be thrust upon us with an inevitable regularity. Nor, of course, are we dealing with a situation in which we, as Christians, are set over against the assumptions and attitudes of society or culture. That would be true if we were missionaries in some foreign land. But as Christians seeking to make sense of our faith within our own context, the truth is that we are ourselves a part of that same society and culture – products of it – and to a greater or lesser extent, therefore, its attitudes and assumptions are ingrained within us.

What we must face, then, is not merely an external dialogue with those whose views in some sense challenge our own, but an internalized dialogue within ourselves as those who in some sense belong both to the community of faith and the society which lies beyond the boundaries of that community and to which the community seeks to bear meaningful witness to the Lordship of Christ. As the American Catholic theologian David Tracy has put it, it is not so much true that the Christian is in the world but not of it as that he is released from the world for the world. In terms of theology what this means is that – unless we are prepared to embrace a mentally disintegrated existence – we shall seek, in our own way and in our own time and to our own level, to come to terms with the problems and the possibilities of integrating our faith in its various aspects into a wider picture of things entertained by society; thereby inhabiting a more or less integrated world, a universe rather than a multiverse. Only thus can we be faithful to the call to bear witness to the gospel in a meaningful way to those who inhabit this same world. In the process it is inevitable (since Christian faith and the contemporary mind-set are certainly not identical!) that there will be an element of give and take, of rethinking and reshaping on both sides in order to reach a satisfactory adjustment. The question of how much faith can reasonably expect to give and how much it is likely to have to take is one which we shall consider duly.

It is also bound to be the case that at any point in our lives we shall find ourselves living with many questions still unresolved, since both the faith which we share and the wider understanding of things which we inherit from our culture are forever changing and developing. This means that the task is a perpetual one. We shall refer to this task in this book as the concern of faith for the 'external coherence' of its gospel, for the integration of that gospel with the wider sweep of human understanding. Here, too, I shall suggest, the concern cannot be for coherence alone, but must embrace the question of truth as a question about the correspondence of our carefully integrated 'understanding', our ideas and our statements, with the shape of reality itself. Theology, therefore, entails the attempt to sketch an intellectual contour of reality as it appears from within the stance of a living and active faith in Christ, 'a continuing intellectual effort after honest belief capable of throwing light on existence in all its complexity'. This, I shall suggest, is an activity which takes place within an existing and developing tradition of understanding, a 'community of faith and practice'. Only within such a community can serious thinking (about the gospel or anything else) take place.

In reality, these three aspects of the attempt by faith to attain to understanding are not separable, being but three elements of a common theological process. To repeat: theology understood thus, is an activity proper to the very essence of faith, and one in which faith engages naturally and inevitably, therefore, wherever it is to be found. But what is natural and inevitable is not necessarily for that reason guaranteed to proceed in an orderly or appropriate fashion. The Church of England Doctrine Commission's report Christian Believing puts it neatly. 'Theology is not undesirable, it is unavoidable. What matters is that it should be good theology.' It is important, therefore, that careful consideration should be given by the millions of 'lay theologians' in our churches to just how the theological task might best be engaged in.

It is with this very much in mind that this book has been written. It is addressed primarily not to the scholar or the theologically well-qualified reader, but to the person who is approaching the question of how to do theology for the first time. For this reason it will be short of much of the technical language and jargon of theological writing, and will attempt to unpack and explain it where its use becomes unavoidable for one reason or another. It will seek to tackle some of the central questions raised by the doing of theology, not in an attempt to provide prescriptive answers leading to guaranteed success (as if that were possible!) but rather to see how in actual fact these various questions have been and are answered by faith in action in the world. What we shall try to do, in other

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words, is to describe the ways in which theology is done, and to seek among them some lessons to guide the reader in his or her own ventures into theological territory. Along the way (to attract back those who have read other introductions to theological method, and are just about to place this one back on the shelf!) I hope that what will begin to emerge is a model for the doing of theology which has some new and creative aspects to it, and which may bring something fresh and illuminating to the approach to some old and tired problems.

'Asking questions is part of what it means to be human ... asking questions in the light of the grace of God in Jesus Christ is part of what it means to be Christian.'6 Thus we might say that every Christian has a theological calling and a theological responsibility under God, a calling and a responsibility to think about the gospel of Jesus Christ and to reflect on its internal and external coherence. My hope is that this book will serve in part as a guide to those who wish to take their responsibility to respond to this common calling seriously, which will help them to avoid some of the many pitfalls and to identify some of the clearer and more fruitful paths, and which will help to engender a renewed confidence in Christian faith as a respectable standpoint from which to view and to participate in life in the modern world.

NOTES
4 Christian Believing, p. 4.
5 Christian Believing, p. 4.
6 Migliore, Faith Seeking Understanding, p. 17.