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The Contemporary Crisis in English Academic Theology

JAMES RICHMOND

WE ARE ALL AWARE that Britain, at this moment, is passing through a crisis of the first magnitude – a crisis which is reflected in world affairs, Commonwealth affairs, European affairs, economic affairs. This crisis has to do with the changeability or unchangeability of a small and ancient set of islands, located geographically, but not culturally or ideologically, very near to continental Europe. The crisis largely concerns Britain's place, if any, in a rapidly shrinking and changing world which, because of improved transportation and communication techniques, is becoming daily more interrelated and more homogeneous. This crisis bears heavily on many aspects and spheres of Britain's life, but in this paper I want to consider it as it has appeared in one country in those islands – England – and as it bears on in one academic discipline which is of special interest to readers of this *Journal* – namely, university theology.

English theology, whether or not all English theologians or ecclesiastics would admit it, is going through a crisis of some magnitude, a crisis whose final outcome is very hard to predict. It shows itself in various ways; for example, there appear from time to time, both in learned and in more popular journals, attacks on the English academic theological establishment, and stern demands for radical change. It is not uncommon for some national learned journal to publish a brutally frank article describing the situation as scandalous or something equally derogatory.¹ Occasionally, we find university authorities themselves exerting pressures on the theological establishments. For instance, last year when Ian T. Ramsey vacated the famous Nolloth professorship of the Philosophy of the Christian Religion at Oxford, in order to become Bishop of Durham, there was a long and rather embarrassing pause during which no successor was appointed. There were rumours and counter-rumours; we heard first that the Nolloth Chair was not to be filled, then that it was, then denials of this. Finally, after much bargaining within the University, it was announced that the chair was to be filled, with the proviso that candidates would not, as formerly, be confined to those in communion with the Church of England. Occasionally there is no pause or uncertainty whatever. When the holder of the Chair of Divinity at the University of St. Andrews retired recently the University summarily suppressed the professor-

1. See, for example, Peter Way, "Britain's Theological Scandal," *New Statesman*, April 14, 1967.

ship. Again, we not infrequently see university authorities exerting pressure of a slightly different kind; when the chairman of a university department of theology dies or retires, and a successor must be found, there can be a considerable pause during which senior members of the university consider how, if at all, theology (now in danger of becoming a kind of academic black sheep) can be fitted into the curriculum of a modern university, set in the midst of a pluralistic society.

Again, the critics of English academic theology occasionally put forward statistical arguments from which they draw alarming conclusions. For example, it has recently been pointed out that the curricula of university departments of theology have for almost a century been formulated mainly in order to train Anglican ordinands. But the statistics are alarming: in 1963, 737 new Anglican ordinands came forward for training; in 1964, there were 656, a decrease of 81; in 1965, there were 472, a decrease of 184. The over-all decrease in the two years was 265.² The inevitable question is: if such a trend continues in the future, whither academic theology? Once again, these same critics point out that in Britain as a whole no less than 280 university theologians, the vast majority of whom are Protestant (i.e., non-Roman Catholic) Christians of some persuasion or other, have their salaries and pensions paid, their libraries stocked, and the majority of their students subsidized by the state's taxpayers, who include Roman Catholics, Jews, agnostic humanists, Hindus, Sikhs, Mohammedans. How long can it all last?³ Again, religious instruction (and in practice this means instruction in Christianity of that Protestant variety taught in English universities) must, by Act of Parliament, be taught in every school. It is true that the Jews, the Muslims, the agnostics, and the others are permitted to opt out of this on their children's behalf, but one still asks: How long can it all last?

Finally, there is so-called radical theology of a left-wing variety, now equipped with its journals and propaganda-machine, which demands above all else some kind of synthesis between Christian theology and contemporary culture, and increasingly suspects much traditional university theology of being irrelevant. Hence we have that crisis referred to in the title of this paper, that crisis whose final outcome is open to speculation, and about which I now want to speak in some depth.

At this point it is necessary to explore the historical background of English academic theology to find the roots of the crisis. Without such an understanding meaningful action and decision will be impossible. For nearly a century, English university theology has languished in cloistered quadrangles, relatively untroubled both from within and from without. How is it then, that it has found itself, within the past five years or so, at the centre of a complex crisis which even its practitioners find hard to grasp? The roots of English academic theology are to be sought within the two ancient universities of Oxford and Cambridge during the second half of the nineteenth century. For centuries (at least since the Reformation) these two institutions had been

2. Cf. *ibid.*

3. Cf. *ibid.*

academic extensions of the Church of England. As late as the middle of the nineteenth century, fellows of colleges were required, at their installation, to give formal assent to the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion of the Church of England. Nonconformists (i.e. dissenting non-Anglicans, including Roman Catholics) were ineligible for university degrees, university posts, and college offices. In a society which was, from the intellectual point of view, becoming rapidly secularized, this state of affairs became more and more intolerable and scandalous. The scandal was highlighted by the public resignation of famous university figures who refused to submit to religious tests. In consequence, Parliament was forced to intervene. This it did by means of a series of royal commissions charged by the crown with the task of reforming these two ancient universities in the light of modern ideas and needs. One of the better-known results of this reform was the abolition of all religious tests and the admission, for the first time, of nonconformists to university degrees and posts and to college offices.

Such reforms, of course, were not carried through without stiff, even violent opposition. One Oxford theology don, a fellow of Oriel College, wrote these words in 1854, after the passing of the first of those acts which ended the Church of England's monopoly over the two ancient universities:

Oxford, I fear, has seen her best days. Her sun has set and for ever. She never more can be what she has been – the great nursery of the Church. She will become a cage of unclean beasts at least. Of course we shall not live to see it; but *our great-grandchildren will*: and the Church (and Oxford itself) will rue the day when its liberties and its birthright were lost by a licentious vote of a *no longer Christian* House of Commons.⁴

However extravagant such a denunciation may sound, we must realize that the admission, for the first time, of non-Anglicans to theological degrees posed a set of tricky problems. The two universities, in an intensely agnostic age, could hardly permit the establishment of a theological syllabus which would simply produce interdenominational *odium theologicum*. Hence some sort of compromise became an urgent necessity. One was found and incorporated into the universities' statutes, and since its incorporation it has had an incalculably great effect, not merely on the two universities concerned, but on English academic theology as a whole. Briefly stated, the compromise was this: university theology, with hardly any exceptions at all, was to be confined to the scholarly study of the Hebrew Old Testament, the Greek Septuagint and New Testament, and patristic history and symbolics to A.D. 461. This will seem very odd to North Americans; they will note the omission, from the biblical field, of Old and New Testament theology; from the historical field, of all periods after A.D. 461; of the whole of what they call the theological field (including Christian ethics); and of the entire practical field. Yet it is not hard to grasp the logic which underlay those decisions of a century ago.

4. Quoted in John Coulson (ed.), *Theology and the University* (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1964), p. 156.

This type of theology, it was felt, was a natural complement to, and completion of, that predominantly classical education common in Victorian England. Also, in order to avoid interdenominational controversy at all costs, it was felt that theology of the above type (sometimes nicknamed by modern witty critics "Religious Developments from Abraham to Augustine" or "Hebrew-Christian Antiquities") was above all else factual, and as such unlikely to produce theological friction, let alone theological flames. The limitation of church history to A.D. 461 is interesting. The period of the undivided church was of quite crucial significance for the late nineteenth-century Church of England. Still unrecovered from the ravaging effects of the Anglo-Catholic revival, and damaged and drained by the steady loss of clergymen (of whom the most distinguished was John Henry Newman) to the Roman Catholic Communion, the Church of England of the 1860s and 1870s still firmly claimed unbroken continuity with the undivided church of the Fathers, even if smooth continuity with both the late medieval Latin church and the churches of the sixteenth-century Reformation, was a different, and more problematic, matter.

We should not think that the reformers of the theological curricula were apathetic or hostile towards what they excluded – namely systematic theology, applied theology, and modern church history. Since most of their pupils (if not all of them) were preparing for the ministry of one or other of the churches, and since their post-university training was completed at one of the many denominational (including Anglican) theological colleges (or seminaries), they could logically assume that such training would include subjects regarded in a university context as "controversial" – systematic and apologetic theology, medieval, Reformation, and post-Reformation church history, liturgics, and the application of the gospel to contemporary life and its problems.

Nor, at the close of the nineteenth century or in the early decades of the twentieth century, was English university theology so rigidly narrow or so boringly historical as we might think. This was because of the presence, within the university context, of the philosophy of religion. The practitioners of this subject were not, of course, as they are not all in England today, professional theologians with a philosophical training, but were rather professional philosophers intensely interested in the bearing of their subject upon religious issues. The more celebrated members of this group included thinkers like Clement Webb, Hastings Rashdall, and Cook Wilson of Oxford, F. R. Tennant and W. R. Sorley of Cambridge. There were others too: mention might be made of John Oman and P. T. Forsyth, although they were probably what we call nowadays "systematic theologians." Hence, during the period before World War I, the work of such people did provide a vital link between English theology and contemporary culture, and counterbalanced any tendency there may have been to regard theology as merely a curious form of Judaeo-Christian antiquarianism.

A word ought to be said now about the incorporation of theology into late

nineteenth- and early twentieth-century universities. It is vital to grasp that, when theology was introduced into the curricula of modern universities, the tendency, with a few exceptions, was to model it on the Oxford-Cambridge pattern. That is to say, the curriculum was almost exclusively confined to Old Testament, New Testament, and early church history, with here and there a concession to more modern themes. Two exceptions were the northern University of Manchester, where nonconformist influences were strong, and a few colleges of the University of London, founded by nonconformists for the education of their co-religionists. Certain other modern universities (e.g. Reading) declined to have theology at all, and in fact the University of Liverpool had written into its statutes provisions forbidding the teaching of theology altogether – provisions which were rescinded only as late as 1963, after recourse was had to the Privy Council. But by and large the pattern that spread gradually over the country as a whole was the one I have described: the study of the two Testaments and of patristics. Indeed, there were at least two universities in this period (Sheffield and Newcastle) which confined their theology to the Bible alone, excluding even early church history.

In my considered opinion, the real damage (from the standpoint of the contemporary crisis) to English academic theology was done in the 1920s and 1930s, during the interwar period. This came about almost entirely from the disastrous and calamitous conjunction within English universities of two movements, one theological and the other philosophical – movements which, in one of the greatest ironies of fate, proved that they could co-exist harmoniously in the same academic institution, so long as each acknowledged the significance of the other. But their co-existence did neither of them any good. The theological movement was twentieth-century “biblical” theology, influenced by, but not at all identical with, Barthian transcendentalism; the philosophical movement was logical positivism. A word must be said about these two disciplines and their co-existence between the two wars.

By “biblical theology” I mean not simply the scholarly study of biblical texts, but the position that maintains (implicitly or explicitly) that our knowledge of God is the result of an historic tradition whose unique source is Holy Scripture; that this tradition has evolved a way of thought (especially an Hebraic one) and an interrelated system of concepts which are quite unique in the history of human thought; that the concepts of Scripture illuminate each other and that the books of Scripture are also mutually illuminating; that the basic concepts of this tradition are comprehensible without reference to any alien (i.e. non-Hebraic) intellectual movement or system of thought. It follows from all this that theology is essentially the scholarly study of the Scriptures in the original languages, full use being made of all those tools available to modern biblical scholarship, including comparative philology and biblical and post-biblical archaeology. Hence in the modern period we have had the proliferation of “Theologies of the Old Testament,” “Theologies of the New Testament,” and sundry word-books and dictionaries of the Bible. But “biblical” theology of this type is not intrinsically biblical at all, precisely

because it makes so many philosophical (some would say, metaphysical) assumptions about our knowledge of God, and about the relationship between biblical insight into divine truth and the knowledge of God claimed in extra-biblical sources. However, the real danger of such theology was this: it began to flourish in an English environment which, as we have seen, was already strongly tending towards the exclusive identification of theology with the study of the Bible. In the long term, its effects were disastrous, owing to its academic conjunction with logical positivism, to which we must now briefly turn.

Logical positivism, stemming from the studies of the philosophy of language prosecuted by the so-called Vienna Circle after World War I, had almost become philosophical orthodoxy within English universities by the end of the 1920s and the beginning of the 1930s. From our point of view, its most significant tenet was that all statements making reference to metaphysical and transcendental realities or states of affairs were to be completely excluded from the cognitive realm as meaningless, originally because they were empirical unverifiable, and, later, because they were unfalsifiable. They were thus regarded as quite vacuous and insignificant. In England this position first received an extremely lucid and readable expression in A. J. Ayer's *Language, Truth and Logic*.⁵ The disastrous over-all effect of such positivism was to drive a large wedge between faith and knowledge, religion and reason, revelation and speculation. Of course, as far as logical positivists were concerned, academic biblical scholars could discuss to their hearts' content such questions as the date of the Flood, the date of the Exodus, the identity of Deutero-Isaiah, the self-consciousness of Jesus, and the origins of II Corinthians; however, any attempt to show that these discussions had any significant bearing upon the question of whether there was or was not a transcendent deity, or whether there was or was not a realm involving a nonspatial and nontemporal human destiny, would be decried as a move from the meaningful to the meaningless, from the empirical to the nonsensical. As has been well said: "The linguistic ban was on." Science was in, religion and metaphysics were out. It has been observed that, as far as the impossibility of rational theology was concerned, there was a large measure of agreement between Ayer and Wittgenstein on the one hand, and Karl Barth and his disciples on the other hand. From our point of view the vital point to grasp is that the complementary existence of these two movements within the same institutions hardened and confirmed the general English pattern, that the essence of academic theology was the Bible and patristics. If not speculative reason, then biblical revelation! Naturally, there were dissenters from this pattern; I think mainly of the two brilliant Anglican speculative theologians, Archbishop William Temple and Father Lionel Thornton, neither of whom spent their lives as university teachers. There were others too (e.g. Samuel Alexander of Manchester), but their work unfortunately did not significantly alter the established biblical-patristic academic pattern which I have described.

The period following World War II is immensely important for an under-

5. London: Gollancz, 1936.

standing of the present crisis. For one thing, the years 1945–1950 were years of discussion and decision about the establishment of a set of new English universities, and more especially about the exact character and function which they were to have in the post-war world. Unavoidably, the question of whether theology was to be included in the curricula, and if so what kind of theology, was raised. Amongst the flood of publications that appeared at that time, two especially deserve mention here. The first, written by a Christian and pleading for the retention of a more or less traditional pattern, was Sir Walter Moberly's *The Crisis in the University*.⁶ Moberly argued for the inclusion of theology in the new universities, but defined it as biblical exegesis and the study of church doctrine and history.⁷ He distinguished theology from "the science of religion" and from "comparative religion."⁸ Nor must theology, he insisted, be confused with "philosophy of religion." The trouble with the philosophy of religion, he argued, is that it regards the great questions of God, freedom, and immortality as *open* questions, requiring discussion and decision. But these, Moberly insisted, are not open questions for the university theologian. "What are ultimate questions for Philosophy," wrote Sir Walter, "are primary assurances for Religion. The theologian assumes that knowledge of God is both possible and actual; for him this is no longer an open question. . . . That is the theologian's basic presupposition. If he should ever be driven to regard it an illusion, that for him would be the end of theology."⁹ A more extreme and dubious case for the traditional pattern could hardly be imagined. To be fair to Moberly, up to a point he did see the writing on the wall and the floodwaters gathering. He did plead with those teaching biblical exegesis and church history to try to make their subjects relevant to life in the modern world, its institutions and occupations.¹⁰

The second book, written by an agnostic humanist, a professor of sociology at the University of London, was Barbara Wootton's *Testament for Social Science*.¹¹ Put very briefly, her case was this: those responsible for determining the character of the new universities must pay attention to the value of the verificational procedures inherent in modern scientific method, and must bear this carefully in mind when deciding exactly what disciplines were to be included within the new universities being established in a technological and pluralistic society. In the light of this appeal she proceeded to examine and discriminate between viable disciplines. Amongst these candidates was the (from her point of view) ancient and now rather shabby black sheep, theology. In a tough-minded, rather belligerent way, she took Sir Walter and those who thought like him to task. She demonstrated the immense difficulties encountered by those theologians who, in a pluralistic and secular society, based their claim to religious knowledge solely upon an allegedly supernatural

6. London: S.C.M. Press, 1949.

7. Cf. Moberly, *The Crisis in the University*, p. 288.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 281.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 282.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 288.

11. London: Allen and Unwin, 1950.

revelation. She dwelt upon the *impasse* between science and religion, crystallized in positivism's rejection of theistic statements as nonsensical. Most significantly of all, she attacked fiercely the proposed incorporation of the traditional theological pattern into secular universities; a faculty of theology – in contrast, say, to a faculty of pure science – does not, on Sir Walter's own grounds, have an open mind; "no British University would think of accepting a Chair for the propagation of Marxist Economics, of Logical Positivism, . . . or of Mendelian Biology."¹² Why then accept one for the propagation of the Christian faith when that faith is, from the philosophical point of view, but one hypothesis put forward as an explanation of phenomena perhaps explicable by competing hypotheses? The professor appointed to propagate one specific religious faith must differ from his university colleagues in one significant respect: unlike them he would be "patently guilty of the 'intellectual treason' of refusing in advance 'to follow the argument whithersoever it leads.'"¹³ She ended by warning university theologians of the consequences of retreating into revelation and of ignoring reason. "The doctrine that faith and science can live happily side by side, each cultivating its own garden of experience, must in the end . . . be cold comfort to religion. For the social sciences will no more keep to their side of the fence in the twentieth century than did the natural sciences in the nineteenth; and their conquests may well be equally sweeping."¹⁴ Significantly, Baroness Wootton did not plead for the exclusion of all theological study from the new universities. She was not averse to an attempt to study the claims of theology dispassionately and objectively – an attempt which would involve dialogue between theologian and critic, in which each would stimulate the other.

These then were, broadly speaking, the issues involved in the debate in the post-war years. We may well ask at this point: which side won? Which type of theology was adopted? Which pattern was accepted in the modern, post-war period? Astonishingly, the answer is that those newer universities which did accept academic theology (and not all of them did) accepted it on the Moberly basis; that is to say, they accepted it in its older, traditional pattern of biblical and patristic studies, combined with minor concessions to philosophy of religion and the history of modern theology. If I may be autobiographical for a moment, when I moved in 1961 to the University of Nottingham (where theology had been adopted in 1948), I found to my astonishment that even then it was possible for a student to take a perfectly respectable and complete honours degree without having written one single examination or paper in any theological subject apart from Old Testament, New Testament, and church history to A.D. 461. Nor was this an exceptional state of affairs among English provincial universities at that time. Of course, students could, and some did, opt for subsidiary theological subjects in which to write one (or at most two) examinations. This was entirely optional. But in no sense

12. Wootton, *Testament for Social Science*, p. 109.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 110.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 118.

were Old Testament, New Testament, or patristics optional. In brutal fact, things had not materially altered very much since around 1870. We may again ask: How long could it all last?

The obvious answer to this question, at the beginnings of the 1960s, was: "Not very long." The writing was clear on the walls; the floodwaters were beginning to move. The first sign of an approaching crisis was the publication of two books, independently of each other and in rapid succession. In the autumn of 1962 there appeared a volume of essays entitled *Soundings*, written by a group of theologians, mainly from Cambridge, under the editorship of A. R. Vidler.¹⁵ This event was followed, early in 1963, by the appearance of a book which turned out to be something of a bombshell, namely, the Bishop of Woolwich's celebrated (or notorious) *Honest To God*.¹⁶ I must say just a few words about these two in turn.

Soundings, which future generations may well judge to be the more significant book, made the frank confession that the Christian boat (contemporary English theology) was in considerable difficulty; it was still afloat, to be sure, but no one could be sure where it was going. Hence it was a time to take *soundings*, as a start to the task of charting the future destination, if any, of the English theological enterprise. The book frankly admitted that many English theologians were behaving, from the point of view of the contemporary world, in an alarmingly ostrich-like way; that highly important twentieth-century questions were simply being ignored by them, questions which the authors of the volume claimed they were trying to analyse. Within the book itself, opinions of varying grades of radicalism are to be found; the essay on philosophy of religion (an essay which enraged conservatives) had the daring title, "Beginning All Over Again"; another essay warned that it was foolhardy to imagine that the complacent and uneasy truce between religion and science could be permanent; Ninian Smart's essay on world religions attacked English religious and theological provincialism. The book contains a formidable attack on the fashionable biblical theology, a plea for a contemporary Christology, and one for a new interpretation of the Atonement. Another essay, by the Dean of Trinity (perhaps the most notorious essay of them all), pleaded for a reinterpretation of the Christian faith in the light of Freudianism, and contained an attack on the language of the Anglican Book of Common Prayer in the light of psychoanalytic theory. The volume concluded with an essay by the editor, which surveyed the present state of the Church of England in the light of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's plea for a "religionless Christianity." Unmistakably *Soundings* was a loud plea for an English systematic theology.

However, the publication of Dr. Robinson's *Honest to God* made a much louder splash. The bishop was much more adamant than the authors of *Soundings* that something was gravely wrong with English theology. He repudiated the notion that all that England required was a restatement of

15. Cambridge: University Press, 1962.

16. London: S.C.M. Press, 1963.

orthodoxy in contemporary terms. What was needed, rather, was a complete recasting of theology of such a radical nature that nothing would be immune from the melting-pot, not even the notions of God, of the supernatural, or of religion itself. In the outline of a tentative programme for such a radical recasting, the bishop appealed to three names particularly: Tillich, Bultmann, and Bonhoeffer – all of them, we may notice, German. Once more, we had an appeal, a louder (and perhaps more muddled) appeal than that of *Soundings*, for an English systematic theology.

As a result, the year 1963 was a year of ferocious theological controversy in England, in which there was unfortunately, no lack of *odium theologicum*. On the one hand, the authors of *Soundings* and the Bishop of Woolwich were denounced in pulpit and press; at one point, sinister questions were raised about the compatibility of their views with their holding office (in the bishop's case, very high office indeed) in the Church of England. On the other hand, in other quarters they were loudly hailed as the pioneers of a new style of theological thinking, which would assuredly rescue English theology from obscurantism and antiquarianism. One might have said that at this point the war had begun.

As a matter of fact, in my view, there was a real possibility in 1963 that the plea for a systematic theology might have fizzled out like a damp firework, had it not been for another, much more serious, if more technical, movement which had been going on for some time. After the war, the "linguistic ban," imposed by pre-war English positivists on metaphysical and theological language, was, owing mainly but not wholly to the later work of the Cambridge philosopher Wittgenstein, removed. English philosophy became much more tolerant and flexible, and no longer was it assumed that all metaphysical and theistic statements were meaningless. Hence, especially after 1950, English philosophers committed to the Christian tradition entered into serious dialogue with philosophical empiricists who were interested in exploring the logic of theological and metaphysical language. One of the results of this dialogue was the publication in 1955 of the extremely important *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*.¹⁷ About one half of the sixteen contributors were Christians, and the other half were uncommitted to any religious tradition. Two things might be said about *New Essays*. The first is that the volume contains a serious, careful, technical, tough-minded examination of the fundamental logic of religious belief. It is hard to think of a more searching and profound appraisal of theological commitment and discourse. And of course the distinction and solidity of the authors meant that it was impossible to dismiss this, as later happened in the case of *Honest to God*, as a piece of lightweight theological journalism.

The second point is this: the contributors to *New Essays*, Christians and non-Christians alike, simply ignored Sir Walter Moberly's definition of theology as exegesis and patristics; moreover, they rejected his refusal to incorporate the philosophy of religion into Christian theology, and repudiated his assertion that the questions of God, freedom, and immortality were closed

17. London: S.C.M. Press, 1955.

rather than open ones. The Christian contributors to *New Essays* made it clear that, in their view, in our society these are questions requiring the most careful examination that rational minds, Christian and non-Christian alike, can give them. *New Essays* was followed by two further symposia which examined the confrontation of Christian theology with logical empiricism. First, in 1957 there appeared *Faith and Logic*,¹⁸ whose authors were Oxford philosophers committed to Christianity, and then in 1961 there appeared the ecumenical (Anglican-Roman Catholic) *Prospect for Metaphysics*.¹⁹ But what, in terms of the crisis, does this movement boil down to? Surely it points to the emergence, at least in a preliminary way, of a new kind of systematic theology, proceeding from those epistemological and logical questions produced by a society deeply affected by positivism, empiricism, and the methodology of modern scientific enquiry.

To return finally to our main subject, the crisis in academic theology, we must ask this: What were the repercussions of all these movements and publications on the shape of curricula and courses? They were many and are still occurring. Very searching questions were asked about the shape of theology in general and about the training of theology undergraduates in particular. From these questions a few central ones appeared. It was asked, for example, why English theology should continue to regard as normative a narrow, rigid pattern forced on the universities in the admittedly difficult circumstances of over a century ago – circumstances which, because of vast historical changes, had long disappeared. Was it too late, or could theology change in England? Theological training also came under questioning. It was asked if there was now any wisdom at all in requiring students to spend the first two full years of a very exacting course studying the Bible and patristics, allowing them a mere glance at the historical, scientific, and philosophical developments since AD 461, in the year prior to graduation. Apart from the academic dubiety of this programme, not to mention the question of sending out into a secularist society young men and women disastrously ill-equipped to cope with the questions they would face there, there was the grave question of the psychological and spiritual harm that such a procedure might do. After all, if you give students the impression either implicitly or explicitly, that the main questions relating to Christian belief and commitment were somehow answered by A.D. 461, you cannot really complain if they go on to find the vast developments of almost fifteen subsequent centuries too much for them, psychologically, spiritually, and intellectually. Hence, proposals have been made that students should be exposed as early as is feasible to the criticisms and challenges implicit in contemporary society. Moreover, many have come to share Ninian Smart's opinion that "it is precisely when, in a [university] Department of Religion, theology is liable to be subjected to the cold winds of criticism and to the need to respond to the challenges of humanism, Marxism and the like, that serious theology gets done."²⁰

18. London: Allen and Unwin, 1957.

19. London: Allen and Unwin, 1961.

20. Quoted in Coulson (ed.), *Theology and the University*, p. 189.

Individual universities have responded in different ways. Many of them, notably the University of Cambridge, have thoroughly overhauled their theological curricula. Some have renamed their departments of theology "departments of theology and the study of religion." One university (Sussex) has incorporated theology into its School of European Studies. Another (Leicester) has incorporated theology as a sub-branch of philosophy, as the "phenomenology of religion." New teaching posts have been gradually created, especially in philosophical and modern historical theology. In 1966 the very new University of Lancaster, determined that theology should be opened wide to the difficulties and challenges inherent in the contemporary world, instituted a new School of Religious Studies; in advertising internationally for a head for the new school it announced, in the teeth of conservative criticism, that "candidates may be of any religious faith or of none." Hence we have the winds of change which may yet, for all we know, blow more strongly or more violently. The crisis has occurred, and no one, as I have said, can predict its final outcome. It is tempting to speculate, but we simply do not know.

And yet, one can perhaps ask one final radical question: Does it matter? In a rapidly changing world does English theology have a significant contribution to make to the world-wide debate which will occupy the last third of the twentieth century? To be fair, I think that it does. As I have said earlier, English philosophical theologians have been living and working, for at least a generation, in an intellectual atmosphere shaped by empiricism, scientific humanism, and other philosophies based upon, and highly reverent towards scientific attitudes and procedures. They have worked out, in a cautious and careful way, in the teeth of epistemologies which take scientific cognition as their norm and ideal, analyses of concepts such as evidence, verification, falsification, prediction, fact, existence, metaphysics, transcendence, hypothesis, cognition, and many more. And their work is going on. If some of the prophets are right, and if secularization based on scientific enquiry is a movement which has yet to reach its full momentum during this century and to reveal the full measure of its challenge to theological thinking, it may well be that such analyses, made by English post-analytic theologians, and already tested by time and dialogue, will prove to be most valuable contributions to future discussion of the crucial assertion that modern man can no longer conceive, think, or speak of the transcendent.