

Starting Theology

R. A. MARKUS

The variety of ways in which the study of theology may be incorporated into the 'General B.A.' degree, as it is called in most of our universities, is great. The structure of this degree is itself by no means uniform, and many universities are engaged in a revaluation or re-organisation of general studies. All this makes the drawing-up of blue-prints unrelated to particular circumstances an academic exercise without academic relevance. The 'Proposals',¹ however, are primarily a statement of principles; and it is as well to clarify principles independently, and before the onset, of the inevitable complications of their being put into practice. This note arises from discussion of the 'Proposals' in the light of the papers printed in the preceding pages; but it states only a personal view of some of the questions raised by discussion. What I offer here are reflections which others have done much to crystallise. The general framework, and by and large the actual content of the 'Proposals', are assumed to be acceptable. My reflections are confined to one point which I believe to be fundamental, and touches on incidental matters only in so far as they are related to this.

The fundamental point is bound up with the question as to how best to approach the study of theology in the first year, but it has wider bearings. In drawing up a syllabus for the study of any subject, we may, speaking broadly, adopt one of two approaches. Either we may begin by asking 'What ought a student to know about this subject, and, given that there is not time enough to teach him more than a fraction of what he ought to know, what is the minimum, or what is it most important that he should know?' Alternatively, we may shift the emphasis away from these questions about the content of knowledge we regard as desirable, and instead ask some such question as 'What kind of course will be educationally most valuable for the particular type of student, within the limits of the available time?' The agonised discussions which are taking place in so many schools of our universities—and by no means only the newest universities—about what to teach and how to teach it are turning increasingly towards this second approach. The phrase 'educationally valuable' is, of course, vague. Its general content can only

¹The 'Proposals' referred to are Chapter II, by Fr Laurence Bright, O.P., in *Theology and the University*.

be filled out in terms of the requirements of particular disciplines. The development of experimental skills, for instance, will clearly fall within its scope in the case of scientific studies. Ability to use evidence in a relevant manner, capacity for critical (and self-critical!) judgement, lucidity of thought, imaginative insight are only some of the more obvious qualities common to most disciplines. The student must also be introduced in the course of his studies to the basic range of material involved, he must be enabled to find his way and to have an opportunity of discovering the various techniques appropriate to dealing with the diversity of the relevant material. If we adopt this second approach to our syllabus-making problems, we shall be less concerned with the truth we must somehow convey to our student, and more with helping him to find in himself the passion for seeking it for himself and with helping him to develop in himself the resources with which to seek it. It goes without saying that the intellectual and moral qualities we wish to encourage cannot be 'taught' as such: they can be brought into play only in the course of actually pursuing the particular study, whether of history or literature or whatever it may be. But our choice of *what* bits of history or of literature to study, to study in particular ways and at particular stages of an academic career, will be dictated by considerations very different from those operative in the 'covering the ground' type of approach.

These remarks are so far entirely general. When we come to the study of theology, Catholics are perhaps more prone than others, and more prone than they would be in the case of other branches of study, to think in terms of the field 'covered', the truths taught. For many reasons, some obvious and others less so, any study of theology which falls short of considering its object in its whole amplitude, the revealed word of God proclaimed by the scriptures and the Church, is apt to leave us dissatisfied. We think of it as incomplete, as failing to do justice, even on a comparatively superficial level, to the essentially unitary character of our faith. This feeling has sound foundations; but I do not believe it justifies the approach to syllabus-making in theology which I have called the 'covering the ground' kind. In part, the problem is that embodied in the old antithesis: broad or narrow? And, as so often, the solution must lie in showing the antithesis to be false. The limits of the time available for the study of any one of the three components of a General B.A. course²

²The scheme envisaged in 'Proposals' is more restrictive than is generally the case. More frequently only two of three or four subjects are studied for the full three years. This arrangement allows more time to be given to the subjects continued into the third year, and therefore allows more elbow-room for each.

(and, to a lesser extent, this would still hold in the case of a Joint or even a single Honours School) forces a choice upon us: are we to opt for 'wide' courses covering the ground, or for something 'narrow' which will bring into play the academic qualities of the second approach I mentioned?

Put like that, the question answers itself: the Catholic, or the Christian of whatever communion for that matter, who may wish to achieve a further insight into his faith over the whole of its range should not look to the university to provide this. The university will perform its proper work if it teaches him *how* the task may be carried out.

Nevertheless, I believe that Fr Laurence Bright is right in stressing (p. 273) that 'theology cannot survive the process of fragmentation'. The study of theology is at least as liable to fragmentation as that of any other subject; perhaps, with the variety of disciplines involved, ranging from philological and historical scholarship to abstract argumentation, the danger is even more pronounced. For this reason it is important that the student be introduced to the principal components of the study of theology from the start. Not, of course, in the form of a bird's eye view of the Old Testament, the New Testament, biblical theology, history of doctrine, and so forth; bird's-eye-views only encourage bird-like minds. We need an introductory course which is narrow enough to be capable of being treated in reasonable depth, and yet lends itself to leading the student's interest beyond its strictly specifiable content. There is room for much variety and experiment here.

The choice of a New Testament text of manageable dimensions is one of the more obvious possibilities. To take, for instance, the epistle to the Romans as the 'text' studied in an introductory course would bring the student into contact with the mind of St Paul, lead him into following innumerable links with the rest of the Pauline corpus and, beyond it, into the gospels and the Bible as a whole. Its study could not but confront him with many of the central questions of Christian doctrine. It would open for him a perspective which includes Genesis at one end, Karl Barth at the other. Of course only some of the trails could be followed, and none, perhaps, very far; but even so, the study of such a text, if conceived in an open enough fashion, could be a gateway to theological thinking as well as satisfying the need for a solid scholarly core. Even if a student were to pursue a course in theology for no more than one year, he would have learnt something of value and interest. (The sort of propaedeutic study suggested by the Rev. K. Grayston, in the footnote on p. 274, while of undoubted value, would offer little satisfaction to a

student who might not intend to continue with further theological study; and even if he did, it may give him a sense of being kept at arm's length from theology for his first year.) The study of such a text would plunge the student straight into theological work; it would lend itself admirably to seminar-treatment; it would force him to widen his horizons over the whole field of the theologian's concern: the scriptures, Christian doctrine and its development and everything that the study of these involves. He would not emerge from it with a wide general understanding of his faith; but he would be able, if interested, to pursue theological reading and thinking for himself, even were he not to continue it as an academic study.

How such an introductory course might be followed up by those who do carry on beyond a first year is too large a question to be discussed in general terms. Further New and some Old Testament studies and work on some aspect of doctrine, with a pronounced historical ingredient, ought to find their place, and there should be a good deal of flexibility, especially in the choice of options towards the later stages of the course. Throughout, however, planning should be guided by considerations such as those I have sketched for the introductory year. Our primary concern should be with equipping a student for theological thinking proceeding from his own 'creative centre'. The basic materials on which he must work—the Bible, especially, being *par excellence* the foundation of his thinking—have to be given pride of place among the 'subjects' studied; but what we would wish a student to 'know' should always be a consideration subordinate to our primary objective: to create for him the conditions in which he can, within his own measure, perhaps within very modest limits, pursue the study of theology as an intellectual adventure. Only in this way can his study contribute to the life of either the academic or the believing and worshipping community.