THE THREE-FOLD CONTEXT FOR THEOLOGY

LEROY T. HOWE

One indispensable condition for understanding theology is knowing the distinctive spheres of experience in which theological thinking is indulged initially. This essay seeks to distinguish three such spheres, and will argue further that while any one may be of greater importance for some than to others, none by itself can produce a comprehensive style of theologizing which does full justice to the complexity of faith. Each distinctive style of theologizing restricts possibilities for interpretation, and therefore must be compensated for by other styles pertinent to other situations in which faith is seeking an understanding of itself and the reality to which it witnesses.

(1) THEOLOGY IN AND FOR THE CHURCH

In part, theology is the attempt of a community of believers, a church, to formulate its common convictions about divine reality in clear statements which are both believable and true. From this perspective, theology's task is to provide the church with a carefully considered exposition of the message it is to announce confidently in the world. In contributing to "church theology" of this sort, the individual theologian aims to provoke the community's own deliberations about its faith. And however brilliant or pedestrian the individual theologian may be, his work will be assessed finally in terms of how helpful it is to the church's on-going task of clarifying its belief. This mode of theologizing is visible especially during representative gatherings of the church, such as the Ecumenical Councils, which discuss and decide among many alternatives the most adequate means of proclaiming God's Word in a particular age. The classical creeds represent the fruit of such labors. Though a great deal survives of data provided the Councils by individual theologians throughout the Christian world, what is truly theological is not that data, but the doctrinal decisions reached on the basis of it, "acceptable opinion" over against diverse alternative claims decreed beyond permissible bounds of belief ("heresy"). Though orthodoxy never has been merely that which was set in contrast with prevalent heresies, no attempt to define normative doctrine failed altogether to refer to counter-positions currently threatening. In sum: one context for theology, which generates a distinctive style of theological reflection, is the church. In the words of Karl Barth, the most significant contemporary practitioner of such an

LEROY T. HOWE is Associate Professor of Philosophical Theology at Perkins School of Theology, Southern Methodist University.

enterprise, theology is an interprise of, in, and for the church, incomprehensible unless so viewed and illegitimate unless so performed.

Certainly the *church* looks upon theology in this way. If churchmen have expectations about theologians at all, it is that they will concentrate upon clairifying the message entrusted to the church; when the theologian appears not to be directly concerned with that task, his credentials immediately become suspect. (One has only to think of the outraged demands of churchmen that the "radical theologians" receive no further support from the institution they were believed, not altogether wrongly, to be undermining.) To suppose, however, that the church is exclusively the source for and beneficiary of theology is unjustifiably to narrow the scope of divine revelation, to which faith is the response, to a single human community. Though he may protest loudly that God's grace knows no bounds, the "church theologian" just as frequently betrays his habit of believing, sometimes unconsciously, that only some of God's creatures have genuinely received God's self-disclosures and that he is one of them. Instead, however, the revelatory disclosures of God to man occur in a variety of situations, even seemingly to conflict with one another over the course of time.

First, revelation takes place in many believing communities within Christendom; there is no *one* congregation of the elect. Further, it is impossible to deny that God reveals himself decisively in non-Christian communities as well. (The very term "non-Christian community" is misleading because it suggests that there may be religious communities without the benefit of revelation.) Finally, revelation occurs to individulas as well as in communities, even to individuals whose destiny has not been bound to that of the particular religious community to which subsequently they may be drawn. Thus, the meaning of "normative belief" within the church may need re-interpretation. Every community needs some common confession of a shared perspective in order to be cohesive through the passage of time. But to say this much is not to commit oneself or a community to the thoroughly indefensible proposition that any one confession of faith could possibly present THE TRUTH as such. Rather, a confession reflects one community's best insights into the nature of things, one among many sets of insights deserving consideration also as possible responses to revelation. In its formulation and interpretation of communal perspectives, "church theology" performs an indispensable but by no means exhaustive function.

(2) Theology as the Autobiography of Faith

Whatever may be its responsibility to the church, theology is also an activity engaged in by individuals seeking to clarify what they are about as believers, prospective believers, or even human beings who have lost the possibility of believing. In this form, theology is characterized by a high degree of interiority. It expresses a searching for the faith by which an individual may orient his life in ways unique to his own being, whether or not within the church. While the church may constitute the horizon within which many such will come to theologize, the worth of their theology also must be measured in terms of whether it enhances one's own faith, however far removed its results may be from official church teaching. One individual may come to see the church as the appropriate community for him and another may not. Both, however, may be said genuinely to participate in the theological enterprise.

One aim of theology, therefore, is to facilitate a comprehension of an individual's most fundamental convictions, in order that he may affirm his own style of life alongside the widest range of alternate possibilities. In order to become, and more importantly, to remain a believer, one must be able to affirm his believing posture as a significant possibility over against other possibilities also claiming his interest; faith constitutes only one kind of world-orientation. Theology must seek to clarify what it means to be passionate about God rather than about other possible objects of desire — pleasure, success, justice, or even truth. Engaged in with this end in view, theology is a process of thinking rather than a collection of discoveries firmly fixed and never to be lost, one way in which human beings come to grips with themselves and the worlds which lay claims upon them. In this mode, theologizing is a humanizing venture, enabling an individual's understanding of what it means to be human by clarifying faith as one human possibility.

Because faith does indeed begin and come to completeness in the inner life of the individual, it is tempting to suppose that it has to do merely with inwardness in some inviolable sense. A community of faith cannot believe forever on another's behalf. The church cannot be faithful *for* an individual indefinitely, although it may bear his weaknesses temporarily; sooner or later, it might rightly demand that he come to faith for himself. From such justifiable considerations, it often comes to be held that what counts for religious truth is what the individual is experiencing at the present; the height of theological integrity is to affirm as true only what appears so to the individual from

his deepest recesses. If one's experience is of the absence of God, or is devoid of experience of God, then he must say that God is dead. The radical theologians represented the latest of many theological expressions grounded solely in private experience not subject to assessment by anyone else. What was odd about the "God-is-dead" controversy was that so many who opposed the radical theologians were nevertheless at one with them methodologically: *their* own experience told them that God was alive!

Theology cannot remain content with such solipsism, however, because self-understanding is possible only in situations in which one is responded to genuinely by others; it cannot develop apart from a world of other selves-in-the-making. To become a self requires a community of responsive selves with whom genuine communication is to take place and is to point to a sharing of common endeavors. Theology, therefore, cannot enable an individual's world-orientation except as it forces him to confront the communal side of his destiny. Selfhood especially requires commonly agreed-upon procedures for communication, for speaking and thinking. Only as one speaks, and thinks about his speech, can he come to self-consciousness at all. In this sense, language structures the very possibilities of human existence: projecting oneself to others, and understanding oneself through others' responses, are governed from beginning to end by language. The ways in which each comes to his uique posture are conditioned by his communications with others also seeking to achieve their own individuality.

Since language alone makes this possible, it is appropriate to characterize the process of coming to self-consciousness as one of dialogue rather than inward meditation. However meditative it may be also, therefore, theology cannot be wholly adequate if it does not also enhance the inter-personal dimensions of human experience. To be sure, there can be silent forms of speaking; silence is often the most profound way of continuing in dialogue. But silence takes place between moments of speaking; pauses become pregnant because of their issue when the dialogue resumes. At its best, theological dialogue widens the possibilities for selfhood by widening the arena of reflection for each individual. But for this to occur, the participants already must have given themselves over to those structures which make dialogue possible. However singular an individual may be, his experiences presuppose a wider, prior, and necessary participation in a community of selves structured by language. All of which is to say that theology cannot be exclusively the effervescence of idiosyncrasies. At the autobiographical level, it must address individual world-orientation always by reference to a faithful community.

(3) Theology and Metaphysics

Traditionally, theological thinking also has arisen at the highest moments of man's search for truth and reality. The very word "theology" suggests speech about the ultimate, directed toward that by virtue of which everything both is and is to be understood. Aristotle defined it as a thinking about the foundations of reality: once mind achieved theological vision it could account for all things in the light of its comprehension of the ultimate. Following this suggestion, medieval theologians frequently identified theology as general metaphyics, but at the expense of the more decidedly philosophical side of Greek metaphysics: *theos,* by which the Greeks expressed the metaphysical ultimate, came to refer specifically to God ,the object of religious worship in Jewish, Christian, and Muslim tradition alike. Fusing the Greek metaphysical tradition with these religions transformed that tradition; philosophy as the Greeks knew it became a handmaiden to divine revelation. But many theologians who participated in the transformation nevertheless continued to think of themselves as very much a part of that philosphical tradition, convinced that that search for truth and reality which the speculative mind could not by itself conclude (witness the proliferation of "schools" of thought within ancient Greek philosophy, no one of which capable of achieving the support of its rivals), is fulfilled in divine revelation supplementing man's own discoveries.

There are good reasons for conceiving the theological enterprise primarily, even if not exclusively, in metaphysical terms. In the first place, the theologian always has sought a clear and comprehensive account of his subject matter, whether God or faith; for accomplishing this end, he remains dependent upon the meanings of just such terms as "clarity" and "comprehensiveness," which it has been the task of the Western philosophical traditions to supply. Further, he has sought to assess the adequacy of every expression of faith to the reality which elicits it, and in constructing his procedures for such assessment, he has found it necessary to employ criteria also drawn from philosophy. This latter dependence is crucial. It is not sufficient that theology merely clarify some existential possibility over against others: for example, merely to show what the difference is between being a prophet and a yogi. The critical question arises only once the comparison is made: why should one strive to become the one rather than the other? The theologian must seek an *apologia;* he must present the most convincing argument possible for what faith believes to be true. His fundamental concern must be for the truth of what faith convinces

others to believe, how to work out a defense for the claim that Christian beliefs are true and that the Christian way of life is valid. At this point, theology becomes a species of the philosophical enterprise generally. As it is philosophy which shows what clairity and comprehensiveness mean (even though philosophers themselves often are unclear and maddeningly occasional in their reflections), it is the philosopher who shows how to assess the adequacy of all forms of life in the human economy. Clearly, then, there is much within theology which rightly suggested to theologians through the centuries that the theological enterprise is primarily philosophical in character.

These reasons to the contrary notwithstanding, however, any implied reduction of theology to general metaphysics is fraught with insuperable difficulties. In the first place, the *mood* of theology is vastly different from the mood accompanying the search for truth. Promethean restlessness characterizes the philosophical temper; pioneering philosophical achievements are wrested by earnest intellectual effort alone. To alter the metaphor, the prilosopher understands himself as charting a course through jungles of ignorance to the clearings in which things can appear in their very essence; he alone defines the conditions of the search, what instruments he will use to cut away the tangled brush, and the pace of his trek. Throughout, he presumes that the accolade of mankind rightfully will be his upon reaching the clearing. By contrast, the theologian's mood is one of grateful acknowledgement of something already given and received, which provokes him to conceptualize what has happened to him and to the community of which he is a part. He thinks of his work not as a program self-defined and executed, but as occasioned by the experience of grace which leads to a love of God with the mind also. While commitment in joy rightly qualifies every act of genuinely theological thinking, one would be suspicious of any philosopher who paraded as an apostle of some program or ideology, sent to lead the world into truth; he would be as curious as was Empedocles, whose mission on earth, it is said, ended with his leaping into a volcano.

Secondly, not only is the mood of theologizing different from that accompanying the search for truth as the philosopher conceives it; the content of theological understanding also differs from what speculation alone is able to achieve. As Pascal wrote, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is not the God of the philosophers. This point can be illustrated by looking briefly at one interesting conjunction of theological and philosophical thinking about God, the medieval arguments for divine existence. The "problem" of God's existence arose when those who believed in God also came to hold there is one particular way

of establishing the truth of any belief, that defined by a style of philosophy which reappeared in the West during the last half of the 12th century. For many, that philosophy, bearing some of the characteristics of the ancient Greek thinker Aristotle, summed up the acceptable procedures for establishing the truth of any belief, thereby posing the question of whether or not one could "demonstrate" the truth of sacred doctrine; an interesting test case was the proposition "God exists." To be sure, no theologian who participated in this discussion believed for a moment that the adequacy of the church's faith depended upon the outcome; part of what it *means* to be faithful is not to anguish over supporting one's belief through philosophies whose popularity fluctuates widely. The issue was whether it is *reasonable to believe* that God exists, with "reasonable" defined as conformity with "Aristotelian" procedures for establishing the truth of beliefs generally. The answer given by many theolgians was that the proposition "God exists" can be shown to follow from other claims with which most reasonable persons would agree; it can be understood as a conclusion which other premises entail.

St. Thomas thought it possible to demonstrate the proposition by showing that it is required to explain phenomena such as motion and causality. *Contra* the later Newtonian world-view, St. Thomas presumed that it is unnatural for any physical thing to be in motion; whenever there is motion, something out of the ordinary has occurred which requires accounting for. For St. Thomas, as for Aristotle, things move only if moved by something else, in turn moved by something else, and so on. But the series cannot proceed to infinity, for an infinite series explains nothing. Thus, there must exist a prime and unmoved mover. Another of St. Thomas' arguments began with the observation that things exist in relationships of cause and effect; each thing is the effect of some cause without which it would not be what it is, or at all. But the series of causation, also, cannot proceed to infinity. In order to account for the cause-effect relationships obtaining in the world, one must assert the existence of a prime, uncaused cause as the cause of everything else.

Interesting though this kind of reasoning is from the standpoint of formal logic, valid and based upon plausible if not indubitable premises, the essential difficulty arises when it is asserted that its conclusions point unmistakably to God. While the speculative achievement of discovering an absolute mover and cause is worthy of note in its own right, the assertions following do not bear clear resemblance to faith's primary pronouncement that the creator of all things is a loving, heavenly father who cares even about man's apostasy. The

evidence for the existence of an absolute does not by itself support believing in a supremely conscious and caring sovereign being. And it is difficult to see how mere speculation can bridge the gap conceptually between a metaphysical and a religious notion of God. Only faith can do this, faith which trusts in the benevolence of the one in whose creativity rationality also is sustained: speculative metaphysicians too are creatures for whom Jesus Christ died.

A third reason for avoiding a complete identification of theology with general metaphysics is that the theologian is biased in principle, in a way not permitted the speculative thinker. For the philosopher, a style of life other than Christian is always a genuine possibility, both logically and existentially: he must be prepared to grant, for example, that for some human beings, the quest for personal self-identity and integrity might best be fulfilled through the life of a yogi rather than through that of a prophet. Openness to every phenomenon, a necessary condition for all genuine philosophical thinking, entails that many forms of life can make legitimate claims upon human beings, and that it may not be possible to show that one form has a better claim than another. Contrariwise, the bias of the theologian is that a form of life other than faith *cannot* be a possibility, either logically or existentially, in spite of the seductiveness of many such forms in human experience.

On the surface, it seems odd to say that there are *no* genuine possibilities for living other than that of faith. For theology itself has arisen precisely in situations wherein the church has had to confront a variety of persuasive modes of thought and life both neutral and hostile to the message of Christianity; one of its key aims has been to articulate convincingly the Christian cause over against such alternatives. The issue is not faith against *un*-faith, that is, life-styles which develop only as reactions against faith; these have no meaning except as faith itself is presupposed as their ground. Far more serious are the worlds of *non-faith*, styles of life which neither begin with nor oppose Jesus and Jesus' God, but proceed from other reference points altogether. For example, hedonism: the commitment to pleasure as the highest good for man, usually those pleasure which are most intense and of longest duration. Or, secularism: the commitment to maximizing human possibilities in the present and future through human beings' own decisions considered carefully and rendered responsibly. In the face of these and many other forms of non-faith which claim interest and loyalty, the theologian is committeed in advance to showing that once their implications are thought through, only faith will remain as a worthy life-style. In this sense, faith *alone* is the theologian's subject matter, alone what is to be vindicated. Theology is a venture of faith;

its task is to clarify and defend faith. To every unfriendly critic, this will seem ideological and doctrinaire. And there will be no way for the theologian entirely to avoid the charge, precisely because the fundamental interest of his discipline is in the realities, and only those realities, which make faith possible.

Every theologian knows, however, that theology's perspective is not the only orienting perspective for all human beings, just as faith is not the only actual response to the worlds which human beings inhabit. Saints are especially aware of how many are the alluring alternatives to faith and how arduous it is to remain a steadfast believer. During his lifetime, every thoughtful person will explore seriously the claims both of non-faith and unfaith; and for a time he may even give his loyalty to one or the other. Most move incessantly from viewpoint to viewpoint, unwilling to persist in any one long enough to achieve a coherent outlook upon his entire life. Most are modern-day Fausts, desiring to experience all that is experienceable, as if to subscribe to a single point of view would drastically limit the possibilities for existing. Many are fearful lest they miss out on something.

Clearly, theology must enable understanding of how all such shiftings take place; how the demise as well as the beginning of faith occurs is an inescapable subject for theological investigation. But the theologian cannot suppose, as theologian, that there could ever be any good reason not to be faithful. Though every individual may move freely between faith, unfaith, and non-faith, in many sequences, the theologian must present the faith in such a way that no individual could ever feel justified in turning from it. It is the business of faith and the theological understanding of it to evoke a perennial sense of guilt in individuals who choose to leave the faith.

Why is the philosopher able to concede possibilities that the theologian cannot? Upon what basis does the theologian justify the biased attitude which governs his inquiry? The answers consist in noting that the theolgian is primarily responsible for the content and the context of Christian faith; as such, his procedures must conform to what he understands his subject matter to be, faith: he cannot speak about *procedures* for theologizing without reference to *what* it is he wishes to theologize about. Two essential features of the Christian message require that any theological understanding of faith of necessity will be biased. The first is the universal lordship of Christ: the import of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ for all, his lordship over all mankind having no equal in the history of human society. The theologian, as theologian, cannot entertain the possibility that there could be any other but Jesus Christ who is to be called Lord. The

parochialism of Christian theology consists in the conviction that nothing rightly can withstand the defense of the church's claims about Christ's lordship. Secondly, theology must be biased to the extent that it comprehends the universal sovereignty of God the creator. Since he is the maker of the heavens and the earth, he is signified by any and all phenomena, insofar as both their being and their characteristics have their ground in his all-surpassing creative perfection. Given the message with which he is entrusted, then, the theologian seems obliged to suppose that there are no claims upon human beings which cannot be embraced by the witness to God and his only-begotten, Jesus Christ. If one believes all things to be grounded in a creative, sustaining, redemptive being, then there is nothing that could be said truly about anything which is not in principle compatible with what could be said truly about God.

(4) Conclusion

The essential complexity as well as the value of the theological enterprise will be misunderstood unless one keeps constantly in view *three* contexts within which theology is formulated: the church, the inner life of individuals, and intellectual inquiry into the nature of things generally. Common to these contexts, however, is faith: all genuine theology arises out of faith, as the self-understanding of faith. It is more of an inquiry than a subject, more a process of thinking than a collection of information; to learn theology is more like learning *how* than learning *that*. The theologian's concern is not so much to generate new information, but rather to clairfy the phenomenon whose reception constitutes his and his community's very existence. Theology is not vast erudition resting atop an obscure phenomenon, faith; to the extent that it distracts attention from faith to what is falsely believed to be a more profound kind of subject matter, theology has not performed its proper function. The starting point and reference point for theology is that in which the theologian is already a participant, faith.

His task is to shed light upon the mystery of faith itself. Learned as it must be in relation to the rudimentary understanding which faith encompasses, theology nevertheless can never be a substitute for faith. It can derive only from the recognition of faithful people that their faith has to do with the most profound reality of all and therefore that the adequacy of their responses to that reality always may be subject to question. Theology arises because faith itself needs to be understood.