THEOLOGY AS BELIEF-FUL INQUIRY

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All theology begins with some believing community, actual or ideal, as its source and center, and seeks to clarify the constitutive features of the community's origins and destiny. Indeed, there is neither theology nor faith apart from some community which encourages both. Theology is enacted in and for a committed community, usually by those who are participant in such, *and,* for the purpose of demonstrating the worthiness of that community's belief-ful existence for every human being. But how, then, may it presume also to be genuinely *critical* inquiry? This essay seeks a working concept of theology which will allow for both belief-filled and inquiring reflection. The exposition will take the form of proposing and elaborating upon a definition of theology as *critical inquiry into the meaning and truth of a religious community's beliefs and patterned existence.*[1]

(1) EXISTENCE AND BELIEF

Though theology studies the entire patterned existence of religious communities, it does so with particular stress upon their beliefs. Certainly, the heart of religious faith is not mere belief, intellectually contrived and expressed primarily through verbal media. Faith encompasses mind, will and feelings; it is a "form of life," a patterned existence. Unless the theologian somehow can enter its total patterning, he or she cannot hope to comprehend very much of a faith at all. There must be a sufficient empathy to generate at least the notion that it is a possibility worth someone's consideration, if not the theologian's own.

In the Western religious traditions, however, theologians have focused especially intensely upon statements of belief. One important

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[1]It will be noted that the emphasis has fallen deliberately upon communities and churches rather than upon Community and Church, in order to avoid establishing the context for theology at the level of highly abstract verbal formulas, such as "The Church and its Faith." For instance, all Christians believe that "Jesus Christ is Lord," but such a confession rarely if ever functions truly as a unifying principle. The actual history of Christianity, and other religious communities also, is much more the history of diverse groups, each with an inner life and integrity often posited overagainst the others. Though there may be periodic striving for more encompassing unity, verbal formulas remain the prevailing medium of interchange, but *their* meanings are to be discovered only in "lived experience" of the particular communities. Every theology, therefore, from the outset is influenced by the limited and limiting perspectives of the particular traditions which give rise to it. To be fruitful at all, theology must take into itself, consciously and celebratively, that relativism and pluralism which shapes all contemporary thought.

reason why this is so is that believers have tended toward a medium of communication necessitating subsequent preoccupation with just such. The primary mode of communication has been formal testimony, especially through oral discourse: the transmitting of a message. Believers have actively and aggressively sought to deliver messages, especially to those "outside" their purview.

Clearly there was no necessity for religious communities to have adopted this particular style of articulating faith. Gnostic sects made a virtue of a secret wisdom which rarely was verbally articulated. And many religious traditions have continued to emphasize the ineffable character of divine reality, with corresponding commitment to forms of silence, rather than oral discourse, as the appropriate response. Even within the Western religions, verbal testimony was by no means the primary attraction to potential believers. For example, Christian communities won converts more on the strength of their life-styles than on the persuasiveness of their message.

But Christians also preached, taught, and evangelized aggressively, out of their deepest convictions about the universal activity of God's gracious and redemptive presence. It is this conviction which seems to underlie the strategies adopted by the early Christian communities. The legacy such strategies bequeath to Christian theology is responsibility for clarifying the beliefs embodied in Christianity's patterned existence and expressed in Christian witnessing. From the beginning, the consequence has been a persistent threat of intellectualism, which has been overcome, when it has been overcome, only by continuous reference to the concrete actualities of believing communities as the continuing locus for theological reflection.

(2) The meaning of "meaning"

Every theology worthy of the name purports to shed light on the "meaning" of religious data. And in the process, it is readily supposed that what "meaning" itself is remains clear to all. Everyone applauds the pursuit of "meaningful" experiences, relationships, and life preoccupations; it seems evident that there is common consensus on precisely what constitutes the "meaning" in such. But is this the case? Of what, in particular, does one speak in referring to "the meaning of a belief"?

One obvious answer is: the reality which the belief expresses. Upon such a view, for example, the doctrine of the Trinity would "mean" that being who is one essence in three concrete appearances; the meaning of the belief is that to which it refers. From the standpoint of grammar, meaning is denotation; in logic, it is extension.

Philosophical inquiry frequently encourages regarding the meaning of terms, concepts, or even propositions in this way, as *that which is signified.* But upon such an interpretation, meaning cannot be understood without some possibility of direct experience or acquaintance with what is signified by an allegedly meaningful expression. That is, properly to understand the signification/referent of a term, concept, or proposition, one must be able to establish, at least in principle if not in fact, some kind of direct contact with that to which the reference is made.

It is difficult to see how this view could pertain to distinctively religious expressions. In the classic religious utterance, for instance, "No one has seen God at any time," it is plainly stated that the word "God" cannot derive its meaning from its referent. Grammatically, to be sure, beliefs about God resemble all kinds of ordinary beliefs whose meanings are readily understood in terms of what they signify. For instance, the proposition "God will save his people" resembles greatly a proposition such as "The President of the United States will send troop reinforcements to any country victimized by foreign aggression." Though closely akin grammatically, however, these statements are profoundly different logically, primarily in that the latter presupposes direct experiences which the former cannot. Simply put: "God" does not refer in the way that "the President of the United States" refers. And because this is so, the meaning of beliefs about divine reality cannot be understood properly in significatory terms.

But what, then, can their meaning be? Certainly not what they represent, but perhaps the *functions* they perform in believers' lives, such as their assisting people to "make sense" out of experience. Religious beliefs give coherence to one's experience and outlook; each is meaningful as part of a conceptual framework by means of which experiences are interpreted overall. They function to *structure* experience, and their meaning can be explicated in reference to the structuring dynamic they energize. Further, religious beliefs can be said to express an attitude about, and a commitment to, a way of life. For example, "God exists" would mean, among other things, "fear not" or "relate caringly to all things." The meaning of every such religious belief is to be found in the orienting function it serves, within a wider cluster of integrated beliefs. Meaningful beliefs are those which cohere with other beliefs seriously held, together constituting a comprehensive overview which structures experiences and provides criteria for intelligent decision-making.

(3) Meaning and truth in religion

Most religions claim a proprietary role over "THE TRUTH," and

seek to guide potential adherents into a closer relationship with that truth so articulated. Even traditions which maintain tolerance of truth in other religions claim unique insight into *this* truth, namely, that all religions have something of *the* Truth. Every religion exhibits at least some degree of interest in demonstrating as well as in clarifying its truth(s). But, after the fashion of Pontius Pilate, "What *is* 'Truth?' " The Western philosophical tradition provides at least three possible characterizations of truth as such. Aristotelianism speaks of truth as the correspondence of a belief with what genuinely is the case. "Conformity with the facts" would be a contemporary expression of the concept, but one must be open to the possibility that in any given instance "the facts" might be less apparent than one often tends to suppose. By contrast, Platonism tends to characterize truth as consistency between beliefs: tests for self-contradiction and internal consistency are the primary guides to truthful inquiry. Socrates believed that even the best insights into reality yield "plausible hypotheses" only; the truth of each must be determined by placing them, as in mathematics, in a systematic context and winnowing out internal contradictions within the system. A third characterization of truth, found especially in modern utilitarian and pragmatic philosophies, is usefulness for the pursuit of an end or goal. Upon this view, the meaning of a belief has to do with the goal to whose attainment it is an instrument, and its truth is a function of its expediting achievement of the goal. In religious discourse, the truth of a belief such as "All things work together for those who love the Lord" would consist in its giving a sense of worthwhileness to living and confidence about the outcome of earnest effort.

These three characterizations constitute the major options formally developed in the Western philosophical tradition. They do not exhaust the subject matter, however. For prior to the emergence of philosophical thinking, the ancient Greeks had come to a still different understanding of truth, as something like trustworthiness of character. In an economy based upon trade and navigation, it became appropriate to refer to individuals as true who were trustworthy in negotiations. Something like this conception seems to have been basic for the ancient Hebrews, as well as for early Christians who ascribed to Jesus the saying, "I am the way, the truth and the life." Jesus spoke with authority; he displayed a distinctive bearing of unshakable resolve "to the end." These personal characteristics served to confirm his message. In one sense, Jesus himself became the message, as all "quests for the historical Jesus," old and new, have recognized. Earnest preoccupation with the being and bearing of Jesus itself

testifies that the truth of his message is intimately related to his own trustworthiness.

A fifth possible characterization of truth can be expressed in the following terms: as conformity with expectation of any sort, and which fulfills the expectation aroused. Thus, a promise to repay a debt can be said to be true if the debt is indeed paid upon the day promised and expected. Or, a definition of what things are satisfying becomes true if satisfaction is indeed experienced upon associating with the things so defined. According to such an understanding, any phenomenon possesses truth if it "delivers" what it leads one to expect it will deliver.

All of these characterizations suggest possible ways in which "truth" can function in religious discourse, and the apologetic task cannot proceed adequately without prior clarification of the appropriateness and inappropriateness attending each of these characterizations. Such clarification now will be attempted, albeit briefly. In the first place, correspondence theories of truth would seem to have dubious value for theological inquiry, even though something like a correspondence view has been presupposed throughout theology's history. For there simply is no possibility of demonstrating correspondence between beliefs about the Transcendent and "objective reality," except perhaps on the basis of a necessity of thought, as per the ontological argument. Whatever may be meant by revelation, or religious experience, or the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, for instance, none can be appealed to in order to establish the *truth* of a belief about God. Any of these may yield confidence in the message about Christ, but it cannot yield evidence for its truth.[2] This is not to say that there is *no* religious truth of a correspondence sort. Certainly the truth of historical narratives, for instance, Abraham's sojourn in Egypt, consists in their correspondence with actual events. But the so-called "saving truths" of faith clearly are not to be understood according to this analogy. E.g., "Abraham" can express a paradigm for faith whether or not anyone bearing that name ever actually sequestered in Egypt at all.

In its systematizing efforts, theology makes extensive use of truth as coherence. Doctrinal and dogmatic utterances, self-consciously formulated from the less formal and less well-articulated utterances of Christian believers, are tested for truth partly by reference to their consistency both with the primal utterances of faith and in their sys-

[2]In this regard it may be worthwhile to note how doctrines of revelation and inspiration seem to presuppose a correspondence theory of truth, in that both finally affirm that God himself establishes the correspondence between human witnesses to him and his own Word.

tematic coherence with one another. But truth as coherence functions in second-order conceptualization and not in the primal witness. The principle of coherence cannot establish the credibility of the initial utterances, only their consistency with one another. Basic beliefs are "true," if at all, in a different sense than that of mere consistency with one another.

Utilitarian and pragmatic understandings of truth become particularly troublesome in religions. For religious truth has to do much more with the ends of human striving than it does with the adequacy of means to such ends. It seems to be a primary function of basic religious truths to provide ways of ascertaining the appropriateness of any and all striving, and the worthwhileness of any and all kinds of experiences. Thus, even though believing a doctrine might have some desired consequence, experientially speaking, such utility would have no real bearing on the more fundamental question of the worthwhileness of the consequence itself. Granted that believing in divine providence, for example, encourages optimism about the future, ought one to feel jubilant over assumed Transcendent controls in situations which other more perspicuous observers believe call for responsible human determination (e.g., the world population explosion)?

Fourthly, with regard to truth as the trustworthiness of character, there can be no doubt that religious truth is often conceptualized in reference to the person of the founder. And yet, religious traditions also remain preoccupied with the content of their founders' message as well as with the message-bearer. It is also the truth of the message which it is the business of the religious community to transmit. And in what senses that *message* can be "true" requires additional investigation which cannot be turned aside merely by focusing upon the truth of the person proffering the message in the first place.

It is the conception of truth as conformity with expectation which seems to get closest to the primal understanding of truth within religious communities. For instance, such affirmations as "The Kingdom of God is at hand" or "I am the living bread which comes down from heaven" are clarified especially well by examining the kinds of expectations they arouse and the ways in which such expectations are both frustrated and fulfilled in the believing community. It may be asked the sense in which such proclamations could also exhibit *God's* Word. But whatever "Word" might mean in the divine life, expressing God's intention is beyond human knowing; the crucial question is whether or not a divine "Word" can function as a word *for human beings.*

(4) Theology as intellectual discipline and as faith-venture

From the foregoing considerations, is there any possibility of critical inquiry in the service of faith? Properly to deal with the question requires, first, a brief account of what critical inquiry is as such. The presumption is that theology is not a special inquiry with privileged demands, but is a kind of reflection governed by the same criteria operative in every legitimate form of critical inquiry. With all inquiry, therefore, theology is a pattern of thinking which is both *interested* and *maximally open* to unanticipated and unwarranted discoveries.

On the other hand, there is no such thing as purely disinterested inquiry. Every investigation worthy of the name has desired ends in mind, specific expectations, and every inquirer hopes that the evidence will bear out some particular conclusion anticipated in advance of the inquiry itself. Indeed, it would be difficult to sustain any inquiry through difficult terrain without such interests. But, on the other hand, serious inquiry is willing to modify expectations in the light of what the search uncovers, both along the way and at the end. Modification may be painful, and frequently it is resisted, particularly if it has to do with revising a basic principle (e.g., fixed species; axiom of parallels; simultaneity; etc.). But reliable inquirers follow the evidence wherever it may lead. The fact that sometimes they can be subborn and closed-minded in no way undermines the validity of the principle. It is important, however, to keep in mind that inquiry does begin somewhere, and from the outset envisions and pursues goals. It arises out of speciifc concerns and seeks answers to specific questions.

Critical inquiry is not a kind of thinking which merely criticizes everything, a perpetual faultfinding which points out only what is not being done and what ought to be done instead. Nor is it disinterested thinking which exalts suspended belief. Critical inquiry is rooted inquiry which begins with actualities and investigates the conditions of their possibility. The critical question is always of the form, given x, what must also be the case for x to be, and to be what it is? Critical inquiry does not begin by doubting x, but rather by granting x and investigating its supporting conditions. During the course of the investigation, it may turn out that what was believed to have been x may turn out to be something quite different, but one begins with attention to some definite appearance bearing the description x. Thus, in critical inquiry into basic issues such as life and death, beauty, hope and despair, purpose, one does not begin by doubting whether there are such phenomena, but rather, one asks how is it the

case that the phenomena to which such words refer to in fact impinge upon consciousness?

In all critical thinking there is an indispensable linkage between inquiry's openness and rootedness. Willingness to modify expectation in the light of evidence does not reflect an abstract ideal of detachment for its own sake, but rather a concern for the adequacy of one's account to the actualities investigated. The actualities in the light of which one's inquiry begins exercise their controls constantly, provoking the most deep-going concern to do justice to that which impinges. It is that concern which generates the rigorous procedures of inquiry which prevent forcing the investigation to yield what was desired in advance.

In order that the givens not govern the inquiry completely, however, thereby restricting the possibilities for genuine discovery, another principle becomes an important reference: universalizability. Critical inquiry is "sound" if its results can be reproduced by independent investigators, even though they, too, may be motivated by the same, or even the opposite, interests which energized the original study. In some inquiries, the results of an original investigation can be duplicated exactly; disagreements about conclusions can be overcome completely. One can posit an experiment or series of experiments which can settle, in principle, whether results previously obtained do in fact illumine what is the case. Many other genuinely critical inquiries seem to be of a sort which generate disagreement, and yet, in which all of the participants may concede the worthwhileness of the various positions advanced. Such a situation frequently obtains in ethics and jurisprudence, and obviously in religion. Here, the inquiries achieve plausible conclusions, upon premises which themselves have plausibility. But their universalizability pertains more to their process of reasoning rather than to their results. All participants may agree that a particular disputed opinion has been arrived at through a valid and sound process of investigation, even though they may find it necessary to draw different conclusions on the basis of other and equally valid investigations.

In all forms of critical inquiry, however, the conditions to be fulfilled are intellectual alone, and they apply equally to whatever subject matter may be the cause of the inquiry. Nothing else is required; no special experiences, unique temperment, virtues, sensitivity, gifts and graces. Just as one need not be a creative artist to engage in esthetics, or a moral person in order to construct ethical theory, one need not be a believer in order to reflect responsibly about religious matters. Those disciplines concerned with basic human

values can admit of critical inquiry just as fully as do those disciplines which allegedly are value-free. For no matter what the inquiry, one does not have to espouse any particular value in order to reflect upon the range of values represented by the subject matter. One's own values function only to elicit and sustain interest in the inquiry itself; they must not be permitted to govern the course of the inquiry.

Now it should be possible to overcome the seeming contradiction about theology and belief. As has been pointed out, most theologians are in fact believers; their belief has aroused interest in this rather than some other subject-matter. But such belief demands precisely that the ensuing inquiry be adequate to the phenomenon inquired about. Most importantly, conclusions about the beliefs and patterned existence of a religious community must not be based upon any reduction or transformation of the phenomena themselves. Inquiry might conclude that a particular belief or life-stance is inadequate, but it cannot justifiably reach this conclusion without adequately treating in context the belief or stance in question. But in no case is it a necessary condition for critical inquiry about belief that the inquirer himself or herself be a believer. Analyses of meaning and truth, whether by a believer or a non-believer, must be open to assessment by both believers and non-believers alike. For instance, what the Christian community has meant and now means by "the Kingdom of God" must be determinable by procedures open to those outside as well as to those inside the community.

How this conception of theology as belief-ful inquiry can inform the concrete practice of the discipline now will be elaborated, in reference to those procedures through which theologians always have pursued their fundamental aim of securing an understanding of faith.

(6) THE FUNCTION AND GUIDELINES OF CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

Traditionally, Christian theology's task has been to assist the interpretation of Christian churches' beliefs and patterned existence in their cogency for the contemporary situation. In fulfilling their calling, Christian theolgians have made use of several guidelines, that is, procedures designed to create maximum possibilities for reflection within defined limits, indicating the boundaries outside of which one is not to venture. By imposing limits, guidelines expedite determinate movement; merely random inquiry generally arrives nowhere, primarily because there is no way to evaluate its course in the light of previously envisioned aims.

For Christian theology, the guidelines follow from the way in which theology is centered upon the actualities of Christian communities. In order to interpret these communities' beliefs and inner

life, theology first needs guidelines for locating its beliefs and patterned existence in history: scripture and tradition. And in order to exhibit the historic Christian heritage as cogent for the present generation, theology needs guidelines for analyzing ways of experiencing the world dominant in the present: experience and reason, which exhibit the structures of contemporary sensibility. Finally, theology needs a guideline governing the integration of inquiry into the past with analysis of the present: reason alone. Since several uses of reason already have been pointed out during the previous examination of theology as critical inquiry, it would seem appropriate to begin the exposition with further commentary on reason and experience in theology, and then conclude with an account of scripture and tradition.

(a) Reason and theology

It will be recalled that the discussion on meaning and truth incorporated into the very structure of theological inquiry important philosophical analyses drawn from the Western tradition. In one sense, theology is one specific employment of philosophical reasoning, whose concrete indentity derives merely from the subject matter it reasons about: a particular religious community, actual or ideal.

Though reason has an indispensable part to play in the interpretative task of theology, however, it cannot by itself provide "superior insight" into Transcendent Reality. Reason alone will not insure sound theology. Most religious communities feel constrained to speak also about things "above" and "beyond" reason. But reason remains the power which formulates coherent beliefs about God, the totality of which comprising an intelligible account of a believing community witness. It can assist a community's articulation of its self-understanding in the present situation, even if it cannot provide intuitive insights into the Transcendent. The major contribution of reason in theology is its capacity for analyzing the structures of experience in any given epoch, the underlying sets of assumptions shaping people's perceptions of data: their world-view.

In its analysis of experience, reason is properly concerned more with the *how* than with the *what*. That is, the subject for analysis is not *what* people experience. For they encounter the same things men and women have encountered for tens of thousands of years: e.g., sky, clouds, the sun, breezes, joy, despair, etc. But the things encountered have not always been *interpreted* in the same way. How and why people *structure experience* is what requires reasoned analysis: for instance, how and why people once regarded rainbows as signs of a divine covenant, but do so no longer. Such analysis is

crucial for interpreting the contemporary cogency of faith, for unless faith can be related to decidedly contemporary ways of experiencing the world, it will not be heard at all as a saving faith, whatever other interesting possibilities it may suggest.[3]

From the beginning, structures of experiencing have influenced and/or determined how the Gospel is both heard and formulated in particular situations. To appeal to experience is to demand that beliefs be rendered in ways congruent with the general structures of experiencing in the present situation. It is not that beliefs must relate to some specific experience, religious or otherwise. For most people, faith does not arise out of some one experience. It grows, if at all, by coming to permeate all of experience in general. Faith withers when it fails to structure existence as a whole, and the ennui which results when faith is no longer a dominant structuration cannot be overcome by any single experience, or even several in succession.

To be sure, the history of theology is replete with attempts at rooting faith in single experiences. Often, one hears of "conversion," "rebirth," "assurance," "second baptism," or consciousness of oppression as conditions for understanding the Gospel. Rather than concentrate upon single experiences, however, the theologian must remain constantly preoccupied with how a developing faith does or does not integrate with a person's total interpretation of life. This is the crucial question for any genuinely experiential theology.

(b) Scripture and tradition in theology

Reason and experience guide theological inquiry by facilitating analyses of present structures of consciousness within which the historic Christian faith is received. By contrast, scripture and tradition help to clarify what that heritage is, as heritage. The unity of the two is especially evident in early Christian witnessing. Jesus' preaching and teaching about the Kingdom of God took the form of oral discourse which made constant reference to Jewish scriptures which themselves derived from oral traditions in Israel's history. Jesus' followers adopted the same forms of communication. The proliferation of preaching and teaching in Christ's name subsequently created a need for ordering and systematizing which naturally took written form. "Scripture" is the written form of the earlier oral preaching and teaching, the totality comprising the "apostolic tradition." The Christian churches used both the Jewish scriptures and the emerging

[3]As a case in point, neo-orthodox theology gained its initial hearing because people already had begun to restructure their experiences. It became popular because it spoke to a consciousness already in the crisis of having to reject utopianism. It did not provoke the crisis; its subject matter was received *as* crisis only by those already *in* crisis.

documents together, and grasped an indissoluble connection between them and the oral traditions which underlay them all. All, together, were normative.

By the beginning of the second century, the written documents began to assume greater significance, both as the form for transmitting the apostolic tradition and as the rule to which the content of preaching and teaching was to conform. The written documents systematized in brief compass an increasingly complex body of oral traditions, providing needed controls on their transmission, particularly when the latter came to be affected by emerging heresies within the churches. More importantly, the documents facilitated self-identification by Christians excluded from the Jewish communities of which they had been a part. After the destruction of the Temple, Jewish religion exhibited an increasing intolerance of Jewish Christians, which culminated in their expulsion from the synagogues. Since excommunicated Jewish Christians could not claim as theirs the Jewish scriptures which had been accorded canonical status during this same period, they relied more on their own written documents.[4]

Even as written documents became important to the apostolic tradition, however, Christians clearly apprehended the need for other guidelines as well. They knew that scripture merely summarized other sorts of witness, and itself needed interpreting in light of the earlier tradition. Further, they seemed especially aware that the apostolic tradition itself was a venture in interpreting the witness of Jesus in situations often quite different from Jesus' own. For example, when it became apparent that the risen Jesus would not return soon, the churches had to find new significance in what they remembered as his teaching about the coming of the Paraclete. Indeed, from the beginning, Christian communities have employed scripture, tradition, experience and reason together in working out their beliefs and lifestyles. They have celebrated the continuing presence of God's Holy Spirit in their witness, as that Spirit empowers the *interplay* of the four in the concrete endeavors of human interpreters. And it continues to be the inspiration of the interplay which yields the guidelines for interpreting the Christian heritage in the present. The guidelines are not to be separated, with inspiration ascribed to one more than the others; the inspiration of the Spirit is to be found in the conjoining of the four or it is not to be found at all.

[4]But what is crucial is that Christians added their own written witness to the *Old Testament canon*. The ejection of the Marcionites from the Roman congregation in the mid-second century, a watershed in subsequent Christian history, was fully anticipated by earlier events which made plain that Christian self-identity was inextricably bound with Judaism.

In the contemporary situation, the primary importance of scripture must be as a witness to Jesus of Nazareth: to his history, his ministry and his impact. As a witness to Jesus' history, the Old Testament assumes its own indispensable role in Christian theological reflection. The four Gospels are especially crucial as a witness to his ministry. And finally, it is as a witness to the impact of Jesus in the ongoing life of the Christian communities that many of the other materials subsequently collected as part of the New Testament take on their significance. Those books authorized for use in the churches as witnesses in the three senses constitute the canon, a way of measuring the apostolicity of any and all subsequent witnesses to Jesus of Nazareth and his saving message. The contemporary generation has no other access to the historic heritage of Christian faith except through such written documents. Even so, the essence of the canon is not primarily its character as a *rule* but as a *witness* to those events which more truly constitute the Christian community by pointing beyond themselves to God's sovereign activities and purposes. The *authority* of the canon derives from the proximity of its witnesses to the events described. Its *inspiration* derives from the way in which it is interrelated with the witnesses of and in tradition, experience, and reason. But it is the whole scripture which is authoritative, in the sense that anything in the canonical writings can become a vehicle for bearing a true witness to God. There is no "canon within the canon" which somehow is more authoritative, the norm substantiating the rest of the written documents. One lives by the scriptures as a whole, not according to some part of scripture, and not by reference to what lies "behind" the canon in the primitive oral tradition. It is only by reference to the canon that one gains access to any other tradition at all.

In this light, it can be seen that one of the most fundamental confusions in Protestant theological method has been the tendency to posit the authority of the canon as a function of its direct inspiration, independently of the canon's interrelationships with tradition, experience, and reason. Instead, what now is called for is a rethinking of *sola scriptura.* Though scripture is a primary and indispensable guideline for Christian theology, it cannot be the exclusive guideline norming all theological reflection. The normativity of the scriptures remain finally a function of the way in which scriptural study is interwoven with analyses of apostolic tradition as a whole, of which the scriptures constitute only part of the written formulation, and of the way in which analyses of experience are brought to bear upon the

definition of the consciousness within which the cogency of the Gospel is to be appropriated anew.

All of which is to say, in summary, that the nature of the Chistian witness requires for its interpretation accountability to the past and intelligibility in the present, with a fourfold set of guidelines directing the endeavor. Adequate and inspired theology is the outcome of employing the guidelines in interrelationships, never in disjuction; many religious movements have limited value because they overstress some one guideline at the expense of others and of the interrelational context within which all interpretation must proceed. The guidelines, functioning together, encourage a variety of theologies, pointing only to those outer limits beyond which a particiular interpretation cannot proceed except at the expense of historic Christianity. A mode of theological reflection accountable from the outset to these guidelines in interrelationship should be especially appropriate for preaching and teaching in an increasingly relativistic and pluralistic character, open to revision continuously, but without at the same time sacrificing either groundedness in the historic witness of the churches, or cogency as a saving message for the contemporary situation. Such a belief-ful approach to theological reflection should be worthy also of the highest accolade as genuinely critical inquiry.