TRANSFORMING TRADITION: HISTORY, CREATIVITY, AND THE TASK OF THEOLOGY

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We may safely begin with the assumption that, for most people, theology is a question mark at best. Whatever the diversity we represent in this audience, being doubtful about theology's nature and propriety is certain to be one of our near-common denominators. Indeed, if economics is the dismal discipline, perhaps theology should be called the dubious one. But questions about theology, we ought to acknowledge, are a sign of good sense. Theology *is* a puzzling undertaking. On the one hand it seems to seek an answer where, almost by definition, answers are not possible. What sense does it make to begin by insisting that God is unfathomable and then to proceed by attempting to fathom God? On the other hand theology seems to seek an answer where answers are all too plentiful — the differing answers offered by differing religions and their manifold traditions which themselves conflict. It is dubious enough to seek an *answer* where answers are impossible. It is dubious enough to seek *an* answer where answers are so plentiful. What then shall we say about an enterprise like theology which seems bound to do both? That, perhaps, is why the otherwise innocent question, "what do your parents do for a living?" strikes dread in the hearts of two kinds of children — the children of mafia families and the children of theologians!

I shall not try tonight to prove theology's propriety. Proof, Whitehead once said, is frail indeed beside self-evidence. And if I shall no more try to make theology's legitimacy self-evident, I will attempt to seek the next best thing, namely to be clear about theology. For once clear, theology's claim to legitimacy may not become self-evidently valid, but it might at least seem reasonable. Reasonable because, if what some theologians think is true, theology is only doing systematicaly and self-critically what we all do in order simply to live. If that is so, understanding theology is understanding ourselves. Hence, as I say, I shall attempt only to be clear about theology — its nature and its tasks, leaving you to decide what, if anything, this says about theology's appropriateness.

Now at the outset I should be properly academic by saying what I understand theology to be. By "theology" I mean "critical reflection on the meaning and adequacy, logical and empirical, or the fundamental orientations of persons as participants in religious traditions." This fundamental orientation is usually called "faith" in Christianity. Although other terms are more appropriate for other

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religious traditions, I shall retain the term "faith" here since I speak specifically as a Christian theologian. In my view, then, theology is critical reflection of faith and on faith. As such it has three dialectically related phases. The first is hermeneutical; this is the effort to bring to verbal expression the "meaning" of faith. This first stage seeks to articulate the convictions about humans and their worlds which seem to be implicit in the varied dimensions of the religious modes of life that characterize a tradition. The second stage of theology is analytical; this is the examination of the interrelationship of these affirmations, the varied ways they are or might be bound together into a more or less coherent view of things. This is the stage of systematic theological reflection. The third stage of theology is critical; this is the examination of the logical and empirical adequacy of these systematic formulations vis-a-vis the criteria of adequacy defended and defensible in the arena of human discourse generally. Here questions of "truth" are addressed. The fact that the criteria of adequacy are themselves debatable means of course that theology must share in that debate as well as in the discussion of whether faith's affirmations are indeed warranted according to these criteria.

Dominated by questions of evidence and validity in relation to faith, modern theological discussions have tended to focus our attention on what I have characterized as the second and third phases of theological inquiry, systematic analysis and critical assessment. These are extraordinarily important, of course, and I shall say a bit about both at the conclusion of my lecture. But most of our consideration here will be given to theology in its first phase, as "hermeneutics" (to use the term in vogue today) — theology as an attempted reflection of the life of faith. The considerable neglect of theology in this expressive mode, I have come to believe, prompts, or at least prolongs, a distorted consideration of the theological task, with the result that much theologians say about theology is misleading even if it is also true as far as it goes. In particular, ignoring the hermeneutical phase of theology allows for, indeed invites, a neglect of the importance of tradition. This is particularly apparent in liberal theology, it seems to me. So it is the nature of tradition and the relationshp of tradition and theology that I wish to explore on this occasion.

You might have noticed that the title of my lecture, "Transforming Tradititon," has, or can have, a double meaning. It can indicate the activity of altering a tradition, as in the sentence, "this event is transforming our tradition." But the title can also suggest the capacity of a tradition to transform, as in the statement "this religious tradition clearly has transformed our lives." "Transforming Tradition," then, means both "transforming a tradition" and "a transforming tradition." I shall make use of both of these meanings, beginning with the latter — the transformative power of tradition.

I. A Transforming Tradition

A positive consideration of tradition may sound odd to our modern, secularized ears. It may sound almost as odd in the environment of liberal Protestant Christianity. Our neglect of tradition, as liberal Protestants and/or as secular

Westerners, is due largely to the influence on us of a phase of Western cultural history occurring in the 18th century known as the Enlightenment. Therefore, saying something about this period may help us better understand our silence concerning tradition.

The Enlightenment determined to follow reason, to renounce all prejudice and superstition whether fostered by ignorance or by the designs of ecclesiastical authority. "Have the courage to use your own minds," was roughly the injunction of Immanuel Kant, and it nicely states the Enlightenment resolve. This trust in reason was not invented in the 18th century, of course; in a way it was a revival of certain classical Greek ideals, ideals that had managed to co-exist in varying degrees of tranquility with ecclesiastical learning throughout the Middle Ages. But in the 18th century this long detente of rational analysis and ecclesiastical authority ended.

Now since ecclesiastical authority had long embodied and defended the perogatives of tradition, it was natural that advocates of the Enlightenment should view themselves and be viewed by others as opponents of tradition as much as champions of reason. But there is another, more substantive, explanation of the Enlightenment's dismissal of tradition. This was the Enlightenment view of what reason could do. Reason, it was thought, enables the human mind to rise above the bias and prejudice of particular perspectives. Reason can achieve objectivity; it can see things as they are from a universal vantagepoint. So even if tradition had not been the special ally of ecclesiastical authority for centuries, its importance would still have been diminished by the Enlightenment. Being reasonable and standing within a tradition seemed to be antithetical.

History has a habit of playing with our certitudes, however, so we should not be surprised to find subsequent developments dealing mischieviously with the Englightenment's confidence in reason. The critique of reason came innocently enough in the form of an interest in antiquity. It was a romantic fascination at first, driven by the hope of finding a pot of golden wisdom at the beginning of history's rainbow. But it matured over time so that in the next century — the 19th — there emerged something relatively new in human experience, historical science or the disciplined study of history. And this new way of studying history gradually put us where we are today — confronted by one apparently undeniable fact of history, i.e., that humans are indelibly historical creatures. Perhaps the future will treat this certitude playfully as it has so many certitudes of the past, but we cannot be honest to ourselves without confessing the apparent fact that we do and we must have histories. We are historical beings. To say that, however, we must mean something in particular, and much of the 20th century has been devoted to determining what precisely is implied by our historicity.

What does it mean to say that we are historical beings? One thing human historicity seems to mean is that, individually, we are responsible for the lives we lead and, collectively, we are responsible for the world in which we lead those

lives.[1] It was the accomplishment of Existentialism, in particular, to recognize and to explore this facet of historicity. Our destinies are not entirely fixed; our futures can be different and *we* can make the difference. This is a point we shall return to later.

The other thing our historicity seems to mean is that while much is fluid and open to our agency, much, too, is given and in that sense determined for us. This is true, apparently, in ways far more radical than we had previously imagined. No one today denies the influence of biology, but we are coming to realize that our genetic endowments may be even less important than our cultural endowments, the endowments of our particular histories. As Gadamer says, "history does not belong to us, . . . we belong to it."[2] We are constituted by our cultural heritage. Michel Foucault writes:

> The fundamental codes of a culture — those governing its language, its schemes of perception, its exchanges, its techniques, its values, the hierarchy of its practices — establish for every . . . [person] . . . the empirical orders with which he [or she] will be dealing and within which he [or she] will be at home.[3]

And as numerous thinkers are showing, the primary medium of these "cultural codes" is language. If it is true that we speak a language, it is also true that a language speaks us. Language constitutes us. Language, of course, is more than vocabulary, grammar and syntax. It is a systematic set of conventional expression. Language includes verbal expression, but also our rituals, our social practices, our laws, our music and art, our religious performances and systems of thought, our philosphical world views — all of these as they are enacted by us so that we may express ourselves.

Now the point of importance is this: Language is a patterning of possibility, and the selection of one possibility means the exclusion of another. The opening of one door is effectively the closing of many others. It is the same with language. Our language opens some doors to us and closes others. We have all been told by persons for whom English is a second language, when they are frustrated in the attempt to make a subtle point, "well, that's not exactly what I mean; what I mean just cannot be said in English." Because of our inherited verbal conventions we can say some things but not others; because of our ritualized actions and relationships we can feel some things but not others; because of our moral and legal conventions we can have some insights but not others; because of our religious and philosophical visions we can know some things but other things escape our grasp. Through the determination of our cultural codes, our history giveth and our history taketh away.

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[1]I have taken this characterization of "historicity" from David Tracy. *The Achievement of Bernard Longergan* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1970), p. 206f.

[2]Hans-Georgé Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Crossroad, 1975), p. 245.

[3]Michael Foucault, *The Order of Things* (London: Tavistock, 1970), p. xx.

But our histories do *give* as well as take away! If there are some things we cannot say, cannot see, cannot feel, cannot know, there are other apprehensions of reality that appear to be more or less uniquely our own. There are no human beings in general; there are only particular peoples distinguished by their own more or less peculiar histories. We need not assume that there are absolute distinctions between those histories; we need not ignore the diversity within histories; we should not categorically deny all human commonalities; we must not be blind to the interaction and the valuable interdependence of particular histories. We need make none of these mistakes in order to acknowledge, however, the relatively distinct features of being heirs of Western culture, being Christians, being Jews, being liberals, being conservatives, being Americans, being women or minorities, being Methodists — that is, of having histories. If we are Westerners we have a distinctive sense of selfhood; if we are Christians we have particular ways of affirming the presence of the divine in the created order; if we are Jews we have a special appreciation for the structures that enable and sustain a knowledge of who we are; if we are liberals we inherit an inclination to be open to novelty; if we are conservative we continue a commitment to the preservation of achieved values; if we are Americans we harbor a yearning for new frontiers; if we are women or minorities we are uniquely sensitive to the power of majoritarian identities and values to displace our own; if we are Methodists we are heirs to a particular vision of divine grace and human transformation.

In saying these things, I repeat, my point is not to assert absolute distinctions. Even less is it thoroughly to characterize these particular histories, to decide superiorities, or to ignore the tragically closed doors that they also represent. My point is that we do have histories, and that they are the resource for our contribution to the construction of the world. Our history, our culture, our language is the loss of some possibilities, but it is also the gift of others.

I began this section of my lecture by considering the topic of tradition, and yet I proceeded almost immediately to speak of history and historicity instead. But, in fact, I never left the topic of tradition because a tradition is nothing other than the affirmation of a particular history through its symbolic re-enactment. If being human means having a history, then being authentically human means acknowledging that history. If one's history is one's potential for living contemporarily, then being intelligently human means affirming a history. Tradition is the affirmation of a history. Tradition, thus, is essential to being authentically and intelligently human. As we have already seen, our suspicion of tradition derives from the mistaken assumption, growing out of the Enlightenment, that human reason can and should somehow free us from particularity. And as we shall see in a moment, our suspicion also stems from a mistaken assumption that tradition means bondage, an aversion to pluralism, growth and change. For now it is important to see that a history is not only inescapable but also essential as a resource for participating in the world. Therefore, the affirmation of one's history is not only honest; it is also wise. And our traditions are the ways we affirm our histories. A

tradition is the affirmation of a particular history through its symbolic re-enactment.

The term "re-enactment" is important. There is a view that human valuations are transmitted and housed in ideas alone. On this view we are what we think; we value what we enunciate, what we sincerely believe. This, to say the least, seems to be an enormous oversimplification — an intellectualist fallacy of sorts. Ideas are indeed important. Ideas do have consequences. But various approaches to the study of the self indicate that the intellectual dimensions of personal existence are culminations of, and they continue to be grounded in, more basic non-cognitive processes, processes of feeling. We are bodies, too. Indeed, we are bodies first and fundamentally — thinking bodies, if you will, but bodies. And this seems to mean that we affirm with our bodies as well as with our minds.

We have always known that to be true to some extent. Even in the modern, intellectualist period homage has been paid to maxims like "actions speak louder than words." Even then, however, the focus has been upon spontaneous action. But action that is habituated and, especially, action that is ritualized has generally been overlooked by us as a locus of value, a means of transmitting ideals. Various studies of ritual, however, show this to be an extraordinary mistake. Ritual action, whether in a religious or a secular setting, is a powerful and probably essential structuring agent in the mediation of value through the cultural/historical process.[4] Disciplined action like disciplined thought energizes. Ritual action is not a necessity merely for persons who cannot think; it is not a necessity only for persons until they can think. Ritual action is a necessity for persons, for it is in the reciprocity of thought and action that values and visions are created and sustained.

This may be odd talk for a liberal religious tradition, but it is not wholly unprecedented, at least not in those traditions of liberal Christianity that grew out of the Chicago School of theology in earlier decades of this century. Since Iliff is an heir to that theological tradition it is no surprise that our own Harvey H. Potthoff should so succinctly have summarized the point I am making: "Rites there will [always] be," he said in *God and the Celebration of Life*, "for [men and women act out their] vision and values in symbolic forms."[5]

But this has not been the dominant view among religious liberals and it clearly has not been the predominant liberal practice, at least not in liberal Christianity. Truth-seeking has been a matter of the head primarily, secondarily a matter of the heart, i.e., of ethics, but seldom has it been a vocation of the body, of disciplined

[4]The works of Victor Turner, Mary Douglas, and Clifford Geertz are central to the present discussion of this topic. See Sally F. Moore and Barbara G. Myerhoff, eds., *Secular Ritual* (Amsterdam/Assen: Van Gorcum, 1977), esp. ch. 1, for a survey of the current literature and issues. The several writings of Ronald L. Grimes offer excellent entry into the subject as it is developing in the context of religious studies. See his "Ritual Studies: A Comparative Review of Theodor Gaster and Victor Turner," *Religious Studies Review*, 2, 4 (October, 1976), 13-25, and *Beginnings in Ritual Studies* (Washington: University Press of America, 1982).

[5]Harvey H. Potthoff, *God and the Celebration of Life* (New York: Rand McNally, 1969), p. 265.

action and feeling. Traditional Catholics pray their rosaries, observant Jews perform their mitzvot, evangelicals maintain their daily devotions. And liberal Christians? Well . . ., this is the point. Among us, our individual and collective embodiedness has been admitted with suspicion, if at all. That suspicion of tradition has its own history, of course; it is a noble history which even in its shortcomings will be appreciated whenever it is fully understood. But precisely that suspicion has also deprived us of the vitalizing power of a history affirmed through symbolic re-enactment, the transforming power of a tradition.

II. The Transformation of Tradition

One reason for the liberal aversion to tradition, as I noted a moment ago, is the widespread assumption that traditions are inhibitory, restrictive, closed. If I have expressed a genuine appreciation for more conservative religious perspectives because they have recognized the importance of tradition, the fault of conservatism, in my judgment, is its depiction of tradition as changless. The liberal's fault is believing the conservative analysis. Whether traditions *are* in fact fixed in essence, closed to fundamental adaptation, is a purely historical question. Whether traditions *can* possess a changeless essence is a philosophical question. Whether they *ought* to is a theological question.

Historical studies of religious traditions reach quite remarkable agreement. There is no correlation between the viability of a tradition and its reduplication of the past. Indeed, if anything religions seem to be more energetic and effective the more they are creative in their use of a heritage. In his book, *Torah and Canon*, James Sanders describes a telling example of such creative change.[6] Why, Sanders asks, is the Torah, the primary locus of God's revelation to Israel, said to end with Deuteronomy, and not Joshua? That division is not justified in the observable history nor in Israel's earliest interpretation of that history. The explanation, Sanders shows, lies in the new situation of Hebrew religion after the Exile. Removed from the land of their ancestors, perhaps permanently, it no longer quite "fit" to place the occupation of the land of Israel at the heart of the divine revelation, in the Torah. Hence, in the time of the Exile the boundary of Torah was altered by the simple drawing of a line. The covenant now centered upon "Law," not land — by the creative alteration of the past. It is at least gratuitous (and, I think, insulting) to suppose that the Exilic theologians did not realize the novelty of their use of the past. But it is easy to believe that their manipulation of history seemed to them, in their time and place, to be peculiarly appropriate to that past nonetheless. Now, in Exile, they were able to see things in their heritage unseen before. To be faithful to their past they recreated it.

The creative alteration of the past is common in religious traditions. Again and again the past is appropriated through a pious manipulation. The Christian use of Hebrew Scriptures to express the claim that Jesus is the messiah is a splendid

[6]James A. Sanders, *Torah and Canon* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972).

example. The Christian use of Isaiah 53, for instance, is in one sense a clear distortion of the text; on that Jews are and always have been absolutely right. But Christianity's distortion of its Hebraic past was conducted in the name of that past — indeed, compelled by that past as it now was seen anew. The event of Jesus had provoked, for these people, a new vision; in that setting this novel vision could best be expressed in terms of an imaginative re-creation of their heritage as Jews. Rabbinic Judaism has exhibited the same ingenuity. Here creativity has been accommodated in a distinctive way, i.e., by reading back into the Oral Torah every novelty required by the present. But here, too, creativity has been at the heart of the tradition. As a matter of historical fact creativity is always an element of vital religious traditions. The "pious imagination" integrates novelty and continuity.[7] Traditions are living, in fact.

By most theoretical accounts, religious traditions are necessarily dynamic, inescapably adaptive. Sociologists of knowledge such as Peter Berger and theologians such as David Tracy and Gordon Kaufman have noted the central role of the human imagination in the construction of world views in general and God concepts in particular.[8] Common to their analyses is the contention that our views of self, world, and God are in some sense human constructions. Indeed, they are social constructions since humans are indelibly social. It is widely held today that scientific knowledge, too, is grounded in highly imaginative interpretations, interpretive acts that reflect social situations and purposes.[9]

Sometimes the claim that reality is a human constructive — a "fiction" as it is occasionally put — seems to me to be excessive to the point of self-contradiction.[10] But there is a plausible consensus, I should think, that at the very least our understandings of ourselves and our world emerge out of a continual interaction between a dynamic environment and our own creative response to it.

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[7]I have taken the term "pious imagination" from the writings of Leo Baeck, though I cannot locate the source

[8]See Peter Berger, *The Precarious Vision* (New York Doubleday, 1961), *The Social Construction of Reality*, with Thomas Luckmann (New York Doubleday, 1967), and *The Sacred Canopy* (New York Doubleday, 1967), Gordon Kaufman, *An Essay on Theological Method* (Missoula, Mont Scholars Press, 1975, rev 1979), David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination* (New York Crossroad, 1981) Cf , too, the discussions and references in David Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order* (New York Seabury, 1975), p 79, and in Ronald F Thiemann, "Revelation and Imaginative Construction," *The Journal of Religion*, 61, 3 (July, 1981), 242-63

[9]Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago University Chicago Press, 1982, rev 1970), is the best known work defending this thesis, but the writings of P K Feyerabend, Michael Polanyi and Stephen Toulmin are also influential (See Ian Barbour, *Myths, Models, and Paradigms* [New York Harper & Row, 1974], esp chps 2 & 6) A stronger sense of the social and historical dimensions of scientific interpretation is evident in Toumin's analysis of Kuhn in *Human Understanding*, Vol I (Princeton Princeton University Press, 1972), 98-123 For a discussion of this dimension of scientific inquiry as it relates to religion, see Langdon Gilkey, *Religion and the Scientific Future* (New York Harper & Row, 1970), esp ch 2

Whitehead's account of this interaction seems to me to be admirably balanced.[11] The world is itself a complex, dynamic process, constituted by myraids of creative entities generating fluid but real structures and relationships. Our knowledge of the world is really our creative participation in it and our contribution to it. We apprehend a given world, but always selectively, always perspectivally, for no apprehension ever grasps in full that which is given. And that which we do grasp of the world before us, we always order in one way rather than other possible ways. The best example for the moment is your attention (or inattention) to my lecture. If you are listening you are relegating a great deal of the data before you into relative obscurity — the cough of the person behind you, the movement of color to your left, the pressure of the seat upon your body, your dim recollection of what transpired today and what is planned for tomorrow. Of the many ways you could be ordering your world here and now, you are (I flatter myself to think) momentarily constructing a world with my lecture at its center. At every point your world — whether it is centered upon God, a lecture, or a traffic light — is the interaction of a given reality, with its potential for various construals, and your own creative response which makes some of these possible interpretations actual, dismissing others.

If this philosophical interpretation is adequate, the imaginative or creative response which characterizes your experience here is in principle no different from the way we as believers participate in our religious traditions. Traditions do not inhibit creativity; they require it. The re-enactment of history that constitutes a tradition is not, and cannot be, a repetition of history. Re-enactment is always creative response.

Indeed, it is necessary to say that traditions not only tolerate creativity; traditions provoke creativity — create creativity, if you will. Earlier I spoke of ritual as a conserving, sustaining element of tradition. It is that. However, Victor

[10]The equation of "imaginative construction" and "fiction" is not uncommon in literature on this topic, particularly that literature dependent upon Peter Berger (see, esp , Berger's *Precarious Vision* and *Sacred Canopy*, cited above) Such an equation raises the obvious question about the proposal itself — is the claim that reality is a human construction itself a "fiction"? The predilection for this kind of language seems to originate in the tacit assumption that the world is ultimately chaos, disorder, formlessness, and that the human imagination for whatever reasons paints its fictions over this fundamental chaos (Durkheim's theory of religion, for example, appears to presuppose some such "metaphysics of chaos.") In contrast to this there is evidence of another "metaphysics" in social scientific literature which takes "process" as its basic category and the actuality-potentiality polarity, rather than chaos-order, as its basic dialectic Victor Turner's own rootage in Bergson, for example, would allow him to hold that both sides of the polarity — order and disorder, structure and anti-structure — are part of things as they are. (See Turner, *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors* [Ithaca Cornell University Press, 1974], chapter 1) J Z Smith reflects this implicit metaphysics even more consistently, in my judgment; to illustrate, Smith interprets ritual as "a means of performing the way things ought to be in tension to the way things are (in "The Bare Facts of Ritual," *History of Religions*, 20, 1 & 2 [August & November, 1980], p 125) Generalized, the point would be that imaginative constructions are not ipso facto fictions; they are one of the ways the cosmic process at the human level entertains novelty, and often — in various ways and according to various defensible criteria — they are appropriate to the present as well as the future

[11]Alfred North Whitehead's principal writings are *Process and Reality, Adventures of Ideas, Science and the Modern World*, and, in relation to this topic, *The Function of Reason*

Turner in particular has emphasized the transformative, even disruptive function that ritual sometimes serves.[12] Who can deny that this is so? In a world of inequities and divisions based on class, race, sex, etc., participation in the Christian Eucharist, for example, is subtly but effectively an agent of subversion.[13] When we shy away from creative daring, the myths, symbols and rituals of our traditions conspire against our sloth. Living traditions do not sit idly by. Traditions body forth old visions of new futures, creating creativity within us.

Creativity implies neither the transcendence of history nor the transcendence of tradition as such. From history there is no escape; from the affirmation of our history, or histories, there need be none. In fact, we all live in multiple histories and, if we affirm them through re-enactment, we dwell in multiple traditions as well. This contrast of traditions is one contributor to creativity and thus to the life of traditions. But contrasts can mean conflict and vitality must mean risk. Traditions, like all living things, have their limits and risk demise. Traditions are not infinitely flexible. Sometimes a tradition simply cannot accommodate the novel vision before it. Believers are then at a crossroad. Either they recoil, refusing that which is new, or they abandon their primal heritage taking the name of another history, learning to participate in another tradition. The choice is made without guarantee. For traditions and their adherents alike, life involves risk because creativity does, and creativity is the calling of all living things.[14]

III. Theology, Tradition and Transformation

Theology is one of the ways a religious tradition transforms and is transformed. Earlier I noted that theology seeks to reflect, as well as to reflect upon, the life of faith. That reflective process, in both forms, is intrinsic to faith itself. And in so far as it is effective, the reflection of faith is an extension of faith, for by and through theology faith is fructified and transformed. Theology is only one of the ways traditions remain vital; there are other ways because traditions move on many levels, cognitive and non-cognitive. But theology is one agent and object of

[12] See Turner, *The Ritual Process* (Chicago Aldine, 1969), and *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors*, chapter 1 Cf , too, Clifford Geertz, "Religion As A Cultural System," in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York Basic Books, 1973), pp 112f, 119, 122, and Frnde Kerner Furman, "Ritual as Social Mirorr and Agent of Cultural Change," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 20, 3 (September, 1981), pp 228-241

[13] See Jurgen Moltmann, "The Liberating Feast," in Herman Schmidt and David Power, eds , *Politics and Liturgy* (New York Herder, 1974), pp 74-84 (cf , too, the essays by Joan Llopis and David Power in this volume), and John H McKenna, "Liturgy Toward Liberation or Oppression?" *Worship* 56, 4 (July, 1982), pp 291-308

[14] For a Whiteheadian account of the dynamics of a religious tradition, see John B Cobb, Jr , "Trajectories and Historic Routes," *Semeia* 24 (1981-82), 89-98 It is my view, however, that the question of the "essence" of at least some religious traditions is better dealt with along the lines developed by J Z Smith in "Sacred Persistence Towards a Redescription of Canon," Wm S Green, ed , *Approaches to Ancient Judaism* (Missoula, Mont - Scholars Press, 1978), pp 11-28 See my "Struggle Till Daybreak On the Nature of Authority for Theology," *The Journal of Religion* (forthcoming January, 1985)

religious transformation, and just as reason is embedded in history, theology is embedded in tradition. This means that theology does not somehow connect past, present and future as if these three were external to theology to be moved about like inert objects. Theology *is* tradition at work, tradition extending itself. More specifically we may say that theology is the appropriation of a past, in faithfulness to the present, on behalf of some particular future. In concluding this lecture, I want to say something about what this means.

As the appropriation of a past, theology is neither the undisciplined manipulation of tradition nor its passive and servile reception. Past and present are autonomous partners in dialogue — often, in fact, in struggle with each other. The plasticity of the past is grounded in the fact that the past has the genuine potential for multiple understandings. The past is a family of possible construals. The Christian past houses the potential for a liberal Christian mode of life, but an evangelical way of being in the world is also rooted there. Christian tradition is in fact the font of both Catholic and Protestant, as well as both traditional and secularizing perspectives in the present. And there are no doubt within the Christian heritage other possibilities for viewing the world, possibilities as yet unimagined by us.

But to say that a past can be many things is not to say that it can be any and every thing. A family of possibilities is *a* family; it has *a* structure, however controversial its pattern and varied the known alternatives which it embraces. Paul Ricoeur has noted the same thing about religious texts and religious myths. They have a plurivocal structure; they have a patterned spectrum of many voices — sometimes competing, sometimes complementary, never finally discernable.[15] As a consequence, whether a particular interpretation of a text or a myth is appropriate can be discussed rationally even if it cannot be determined with finality. Neither is tradition a pitiable and passive thing, bending dutifully to the theologian's whim. Traditions — like the myths, symbols and rituals of which they are in part composed — are something in themselves. Traditions have voices that speak because they have structures that form. Thus their emerging theological forms can be appraised, partially in terms of the adequacy with which, in some defensible way, they express the past. The canons of adequacy and the ways these canons are to be interpreted and applied are usually debated under the rubric of theological authority. Such concerns develop in the hermeneutical phase of theology and constitute, in part, the analytical phase as well. Their subject is a theology's appropriateness in terms of the past, which does not necessarily imply conformity to that past.[16] Like the evaluation of interpretations of myths, theological appropriations of traditions are seldom appraised with finality, but they can be discussed

[15] Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976), esp. ch. 4.

[16] In "Struggle Till Daybreak" (cited above) I have argued that a theology's authority is that which authors (i.e., is the continual ground of the being and identity of the faith which that theology expresses) rather than which authorizes theology (i.e., that to which the theology must conform in some respect).

reasonably yielding conclusions which do or do not seem warranted. Yet just as the interpretation of symbol is an extension of the symbol,[17] so theological appropriations of tradition, as they stand the test of analysis, become a part of tradition's own development. Theology is part of the dynamic of tradition.

Theology, however, is the appropriation of the past in faithfulness to the present. Theology not only exhibits historical rootedness; it also answers to its contemporary world. In some religious traditions the obligation to contemporaneity is explicit, in some implicit, in some repressed. Faithfulness to the present is almost certain to be an explicit commitment for Christian theology, formed as it is in a primal affirmation of the goodness of the created order, a doctrine of divinity incarnate in the historic process, and an equation of God and Truth. The Christian theologian's predisposition to take the contemporary world seriously seems irrevocable because the tradition itself seems bound to do so. Faithfulness to the present, however, does not mean subservience to the present, for theology any more than it does, say, for science or philosophy. In each case, the final obligation is not to contemporary convention but to the pursuit of truth in terms of which convention itself may be challenged if the evidence requires it. Modern knowledge is the unavoidable arena of theology, but the status quo is not its ruler. Faithfulness to the present means theology's willingness to enter, without claim of privilege, into the realm of modern intellectual discourse.[18] It is a commitment to join without special pleading the present discussion of truth's canons and the application of those canons, and to be subjected to such scrutiny itself. Theology's commitment to the present is its obligation to give good reasons for, and to answer good arguments against, the faith in which it is grounded.

We should not suppose, though, that this debate with the present simply pits the past against modernity, tradition against novelty. A religion's greatest challenges are often posed by alternative traditions ancient in age. And non-religious challenges, such as those emanating from science and some philosophies, are rooted in traditions of their own. More importantly, we should not suppose that the challenges of the present are necessarily threats to the survival of a tradition. Given what we know about the adaptability of religious traditions, challenges are in effect promises of transformation more often than they are threats of defeat. The question of a tradition's believability vis-a-vis the contemporary community of knowledge is not simply or even primarily the question: what should this tradition say that it cannot? Instead the question is: What should this tradition say that it does not but can? What unrealized potential does it possess?

Earlier, in order to spell out my claim that theology is tradition at work, tradition in the process of extending itself, I said that theology is the appropriation of a past in faithfulness to the present, on behalf of some particular future.

[17] Dan Sperber, *Rethinking Symbolism* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1975), p. 48.

[18] For some of the more forceful defenses of the view that theology's criteria of justification must be those defensible in the modern university (Tracy) or in terms of general human experience (Ogden), see David Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order* (New York: Seabury, 1975), pp. 43-87, and Schubert M. Ogden, "The Task of Theology," *The Journal of Religion* 52, 1 (January, 1972), 22-40.

Theologies do not seek simply to understand the world; they seek understanding in order to change the world. Every theology is a particular theology, operating under the duress of a particular ideal. Sometimes the ideal is portrayed as a primordial beginning from which the world has strayed and to which it must return. Sometimes the ideal is said to be unprecedented — a new heaven and earth, so to speak. These variations, however, should not blind us to the considerable commonality: theologies are subversive, at least implicitly, because religions are. They harbor an ideal which represents both a criticism of the present and a fervent invitation to work for its transformation. Religions and therefore theologies are subversive because they are about salvation.

But theologies are notoriously vague on specifics, either about the precise salvation they speak of or the path to its realization. In this respect they are more like the imaginings of the artist than the calculations of the engineer. In defense of this artistic vagueness two things might be said. First, anything that is novel, precisely to the extent that it is genuinely new, must be envisioned rather than described. The concept of the Kingdom of God, for example, must necessarily be a vision, not a blueprint. Talk about such things must always be symbol and myth. What we see of them, we see only through a glass darkly.

The other thing to be said on behalf of theology's artistic imagining is a reminder of the role of the imagination in all of life. Every human response to the environment requires a measure of conceptual creativity. All of life is artistry to some degree, an imaginative response to and a creative transformation of the given world. In that way the world's creation continues. Our religious traditions are one of the ways we join in the antiphony of grace and creativity wherein the world is both given and made. Theology is a part of that antiphony. It is that part of the process which has to do with the ultimate meaning of the process — the significance, the god, that gives our life its worth. Theology, then, is indeed artistry. It is the art that seeks to discern the paths of our transformation.[19]

[19]I am particularly indebted to Sam D. Gill and Sheila Greeve Davaney for their valuable comments on, and occasional challenges to, the argument of this paper.