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THE NEW TESTAMENT AND HERMENEUTICS

In the twenty-seven writings of the New Testament the Christian Church possesses a collection of documents from the first hundred years or so of its existence, which it uses alongside some older, mostly pre-Christian writings as its Scripture. In this context hermeneutics concerns the interpretation of these documents within this religious community. Although the Church has never used the New Testament in isolation from the Old, the question of its interpretation can be treated separately provided one remembers that for Christians its central subject-matter is the God of Israel who is held to have decisively intervened in and on behalf of his world in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

This preliminary emphasis upon the meaning of the texts for a particular community contains the germ of 'the hermeneutical problem' which has become acute in Western Christianity over the past two hundred years. In a secular culture where perceptions of reality and truth are no longer much shaped by religious traditions a tension has developed between modern historical *methods* of study and traditional Christian views about the divine *subject-matter* of the Bible.

For any legal, religious or literary texts to function as guides for a community's life they have to be understood and applied, not merely venerated. Interpretation forms a bridge by which the wisdom of the past may be seen to answer to the needs of the present. But the ways in which this understanding takes place have not usually in the past constituted a problem. Hermeneutics has traditionally clarified the rules by which texts are interpreted. It has neither created the methods nor defined the subject-matter. How the authoritative texts are to be read has usually been taken for granted within the culture or society in which they are used. Its shared assumptions have provided both agreement about the methods by which they are to be elucidated,

and also the parameters within which rational discussion of their meaning is possible. The Christian tradition does contain some profound discussion of the theory of interpretation from Origin onwards, but for most of Christian history it has not seemed necessary to formalize the rules.

Not even contradictions, obscurities and apparent absurdities have demanded elucidation of the means by which these can be met, though the inherent instability of allegorical interpretation has sometimes provoked disagreement and controls. But generally all that has been needed is an argument that particular supposed discrepancies are unreal and that a difficult text does not mean what it seems to say. The tradition of interpretation which determines how the texts are read is usually able to cope with such difficulties without recourse to methodological discussions.

Theory of interpretation becomes necessary when the context of shared meanings within which the texts are read is broken. The dam provided by a tradition of interpretation occasionally bursts under the pressure of some new religious experience or social, intellectual or political change. A split in the religious community may then take place, and this results in two or more competing groups, close enough to be aware of each other, using the same scriptures but understanding them differently. The question of the right interpretation is then posed more sharply, and may provoke some discussion of the rules by which it is to be found.

The Jewish-Christian argument over the Hebrew Bible and its Greek translations is an example as old as the Christian mission itself. The hermeneutical problem became especially clear in the second century when the division between the two sides had taken place. As always, each group construed its scripture in the light of what was constitutive for its own existence,¹ and this dispute about the true meaning of the texts turned on the different keys to their interpretation. It was essentially a disagreement over what the Law and the Prophets and the writings are about: the revelation of God as understood by Christians, or as understood by Jews. Such disputes over the *subject-matter* are more fundamental than any disagreement over the *methods* used. In fact, the prior decision about subject-matter partly deter-

1. On this see especially David Kelsey, *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology*, SCM Press, London, 1975.

mined the choice of methods, as the second-century Church's allegorical interpretation of the Old Testament makes plain. When this method collapsed under the pressure of modern rationalism the reason was that a new intellectual world had brought about a new definition of the biblical subject-matter: man and his religion (which could be studied historically), rather than the Christian revelation of God, as formerly understood. Even here a decision about subject-matter preceded method; it was not a case of new methods causing a new view of the subject-matter.

The Catholic-gnostic disputes over the interpretation of the emerging New Testament canon in the second century² provide another example of some of the same texts being used by competing groups. Though Catholics and Valentians both claimed to be Christians their very different interpretations of Paul and John stemmed from different apprehensions of the revelation these apostles were supposed by both sides to mediate. The shared moral and intellectual assumptions of the day provided some basis for argument, but did not determine the fundamental orientation by which each side read the texts.³ What is plausible, or counts as true in a particular culture, provides some rational control over the methods used and the plurality of possible meanings, but the interpreter himself brings to the texts a prior decision about their subject-matter and this decides the standpoint from which he applies his methods. It is not often that what his methods reveal will alter his whole perspective on the texts.

Not often - but it can happen. In the nineteenth century the shock of the new 'higher criticism' of the Bible destroyed the doctrinal convictions of some whose beliefs about its divine subject-matter had been too closely wedded to untenable views about its inspired character.⁴ Further back, it is at least probable that Marcion's religious reorientation was caused above all by his intuitive grasp of what he saw to be central in Paul's epistles, especially Galatians. Luther's 'tower experience' and break-through to a new (or not so new) understanding

2. See H. von Campenhausen, *The Formation of the Christian Bible*, Eng. tr. A & C Black, London, 1972.

3. Evidence for both these assertions is provided by the Valentinian Ptolemy's 'Letter to Flora', conveniently accessible in English translation in J. Stevenson *A New Eusebius*, SPCK, London, 1960, pp. 91-5.

4. Mrs. Humphrey Ward's novel *Robert Elsmere* (1888) provides the best presentation and excuses the observer from impertinent comment about the faith of actual historical individuals.

of 'the righteousness of God' is another case of the close study of canonical texts sparking a revolution. In these last two inner-Christian examples there is some continuity, however tenuous in the case of Marcion, with the fundamental Christian apprehension of the revelation of God in Jesus. They therefore raise a further question which always accompanies a community's search for binding interpretation: who, within the community of faith, is to say what Scripture means? Even where there is fundamental agreement about subject-matter and methods, there may still be disagreement over results. What is the right balance between private and corporate judgment, and between prophetic spirit and ecclesiastical order? This problem is perhaps reflected within the New Testament itself, at 2 Pt 1: 20.

Discussion of this dilemma has suffered from a failure to distinguish two different questions in 'What does Scripture mean?' There is the question of what it means 'as a whole', which is the question of its essential subject-matter; and there is the problem of uncertainty with respect to particular exegetical results.⁵ The former question is the crucial one in a culture where the lack of shared religious assumptions and the use of historical methods make a non-theological reading of the Bible the most natural one.

The latter question of individual exegetical conclusions is only a problem for those who allow (or claim to allow) their whole understanding of Christianity to hinge upon their understanding of particular texts. This may have been so on occasion for individuals; certainly particular texts (e.g. Rom 1: 17) have occasionally been levers effecting a theological re-orientation. But despite the traditional use of proof-texts like bullets in doctrinal argument Christian theology has rarely in fact operated on this basis. Believers think and argue from the basis of their current understanding of Christianity, and this derives from a wide range of tradition. They nourish and test it through constant interaction with elements of this tradition in their personal and corporate experience. The Scripture is and always has been a catalyst of the Church's on-going life, proving itself to be a source of religious knowledge through being *used*. It is not a repository of religious knowledge, to be dug out without reference to the life of Church.

5. This ambiguity surfaced in the dispute between Luther & Erasmus. See *De servo arbitrio* on 'the clarity of scripture', i.e., the clarity of its subject-matter, despite individual exegetical obscurities (WA 18, 606f.).

Interpretation, or the use of Scripture, is a part of the Church's life. It generates complex and loose-knit patterns formed from a large degree of selection, judgments about what is central and what peripheral, and a host of individual exegetical decisions, several of which can be altered without substantially altering the shape of the whole. Christian thought does not, therefore, depend on 'getting out exegesis right' in each individual case, because theological justification is not based on isolated appeal to particular texts. Rather, decisions about what is Christian to-day emerge out of the ongoing argument between myriads of sometimes conflicting interpretations which are part and parcel of the life of a Church that is open to new experience in a constantly changing world. This responsibility of the Christian Church in every generation for discovering what is and what is not Christian in the doctrinal and ethical questionings of their own day is assisted by close attention to a set of texts deemed in some sense normative. The Bible is a resource which sustains the life of the Church, not a collection of oracles which provides instant doctrinal or ethical decisions. Only living Christians can make these decisions—though the reference to Scripture and claim to continuity with the past is a necessary part of justifying them as Christian.

This double appeal to past tradition and contemporary experience is found in all Christian theology and cannot be excluded from any discussion of the subject-matter of Scripture. 'Contemporary experience' includes using the rational methods of the day to understand the inherited texts, because without these the believer would be vulnerable to rational criticism. But there is no reason why he should allow these to dictate his understanding of the subject-matter of Scripture. The believer believes they are about God; the unbeliever does not. There is nothing new there. The reason for the modern 'problem' is that the rational methods by which knowledge is gained to-day make no reference to God. Anyone who finds in these an exhaustive account of the truth of the Bible is therefore at odds with Christian belief. The believer's problem is to retain his grasp of the divine subject-matter of Scripture while using the secular methods of the day, and this is only one aspect of the wider problem of belief in God in a post-religious culture. Whether the two issues are best tackled together will be considered next; for the moment we note that the believer's starting-point is a presupposition that the Bible talks of a reality with which his membership of the Church makes him familiar.

II

The gradual collapse of a unified Christian culture in the West has transformed the methods of every academic discipline. In theology the transformation has been fundamental because the destruction of classical Western metaphysics contributed to a new climate of thought which called in question its very subject-matter and therefore even its right to be considered a serious pursuit of truth. However, in Schleiermacher the intellectual crisis of theology in the modern Western world found a man who not only kept it on the map of human studies but contributed to redrawing this map itself. He took theological hermeneutics out of the specialized ghetto of 'sacred hermeneutics', into the field of general hermeneutics. Much modern German theology and philosophy has followed further in the tracks of Schleiermacher and Dilthey and broadened the scope of hermeneutics from the consideration of rules for interpreting written texts to theories of language and understanding as such.

Twentieth-century discussions of hermeneutics are thus engaged in fundamental intellectual and cultural reconstruction. The involvement of theology in this enterprise has seemed to some to provide new possibilities for 'natural theology', or the attempts to justify rationally the meaningfulness of talk about God in the modern world. It was especially tempting for neo-Lutheran theologians oriented to the proclamation of the Word of God (e.g., Ebeling), and neo-liberal ones who consider history the horizon of God's self-revelation (e.g., Pannenberg) to have seen in hermeneutics a discipline which would at once make God-talk meaningful and give to the Bible its traditionally central role in Christian theology. But neither of the current trends towards finding revelation in language (in some cases with the help of Heidegger) or in history (with the help of Hegel, basically) has gained widespread acceptance, and it is therefore wise to distinguish these bold systematic ventures from the problem itself, about which there is more agreement. Instead of attempting to fulfil the tasks of natural theology and biblical interpretation in one move as seemed appropriate in the heyday of hermeneutics (the 1960s), an approach which holds these apart seems more promising to-day, if only because it leaves open more possibilities. Now that the old liberal 'science of religion'⁶ has established itself

6. E.g. E. Troeltsch 'Religion & the Science of Religion' (1906). Eng. tr. in *Ernst Troeltsch: Writings on Theology and Religion*. Duckworth, London, 1977.

on a solid basis 'Religious Studies' will probably offer the best prospects for tomorrow's natural theology.

The methods by which ancient texts are studied to-day leads to a tension with religious communities' understandings of their scriptures because historical study seeks to reconstruct a human past and makes no claim to speak of God or the gods. The tension is most acute in gospel criticism where traditional Christian assertions about Jesus as truly God, truly man confront the results of methods which can only deliver a human figure. The history of modern Christology focuses on this difficulty, and some of the main areas of middle and late nineteenth century controversy were directly related to it : *E.g.*, the problem of miracle, the historicity or otherwise of the Johannine discourses, the question of Jesus' apparent ignorance or even error, and the question of his messianic self-consciousness. These issues cause little anxiety to-day because theologians have learned to distinguish historical and theological questions more clearly. But the substantive issue lurking in them all is the propriety of calling Jesus God incarnate, and that involves the deeper problem of talking of God at all.

It was the failure to grapple with this deeper issue which made the recent English discussion of the incarnation⁷ seem rather anachronistic—an echo of an older liberalism which had no trouble with belief in God but found traditional christological language hard to swallow. Yet it is the question of God which has forced the best twentieth-century theology to place christology to the fore and to formulate Christian belief in God in the closest possible association with this distinctively Christian material.⁸ The less we know about God by unaided reason, the more closely our reflexion will be tied to concrete religious traditions. The alleged incarnation of God cannot be discussed *a priori*, but the Christian tradition challenges Christian theologians to understand and express this religious belief and practice in terms which make sense to-day.

This task goes against the grain of modern historical study of the gospels. Historians (whether or not they are Christians) naturally

7. J. Hick, (ed.) *The Myth of God Incarnate* (SCM Press, London, 1977) and M. Goulder (ed.) *Incarnation and Myth : The Debate Continued* (SCM Press, London, 1979).

8. This is true of such different theologians as Barth, Pannenberg, Moltmann, Jüngel and Schillebeeckx,

distinguish between what can be said about Jesus on the basis of their own rational methods, and the various religious evaluations of him made by the disciples and their successors after the crucifixion. Whatever the uncertainties about how far the gospel data are to be attributed to Jesus, and how far to the creativity of the early churches, this distinguishing two kinds of material within the gospels undercut the traditional undifferentiated appeal to the gospel picture of Jesus. Once questions were raised about the historical reliability of the gospel records the divinity of Christ could no longer be demonstrated by reference to the Bible. Rather, the traditional dogmatic christology appeared to be broken by the claim that the gospels reflected beliefs about Jesus which arose after his death.

This was the impression made as far back as 1835 by D. F. Strauss in his critical analysis of the gospels. The impression was reinforced by his personal choice of a christology based upon the 'idea' of Christ and his separation of this from the historical figure of Jesus. Even though this proposal found no followers at the time his *Life of Jesus* continues to pose an important challenge to any modern christology which seeks to affirm the New Testament and subsequent catholic tradition. It is no longer possible simply to presuppose the validity of Christian evaluation of Jesus. Rather, anyone wishing to defend orthodox belief that Christian claims constitute the best interpretation of the historical figure, has to analyse the historical data and see how far this will bear the weight of such claims.

It is hard to see how this historical research could ever directly demonstrate the legitimacy of traditional christological predication, because any gospel material used in this way would be challenged as itself the product of early Christian belief. But that does not mean that the undemonstrable Christian claim is false, nor that historical reasoning has no place in the argument. On the contrary, it is plain that historical work might render the claim implausible by showing that Jesus was quite different from what Christians asserted. This line of attack was developed in the European Enlightenment of the eighteenth century and is still alive.⁹ It necessitated and in part justifies theologians' engagement with the historical issues. This is necessary self-defence even if it can never on its own yield an orthodox 'christology' because it cannot speak of God. But more positively, any

9. A most profound analysis of this whole development is provided by H. Frei, *The Eclipse of the Biblical Narrative*, Yale University Press 1974,

assertion that christology is 'true to' Jesus will involve some historical data (since Jesus is a person, not merely a cipher), and that means that making sense of the relation between Jesus and christology will include an element of historical argument as well as the wider philosophical and theological considerations necessary in christology.

This problem of the relation between faith and history stands at the centre of modern christology and of New Testament interpretation. It is here that the new rationalistic methods destroyed many of the old dogmatic forms of argument. For those who identified the christological dogma with the theological vessels which had for centuries contained it, the destruction of the vessels implied the abolition of the dogma. Albert Schweitzer, for example, stressed the negative aspect of historical criticism. It 'cleared the sight for a new edifice of religious thought' and so 'laid down the conditions and determined the course of the religious thinking of the future'.¹⁰

But the theme of Schweitzer's great and outrageous book was that the new edifice would not stand up; and certainly the modern Jesus pictures are more popular in the market-place than in the scholars' studies. (Perhaps it was ever so). But the reason for this professional reticence was not correctly identified by Schweitzer, whose own apocalyptic Jesus is as improbable as the rest. The reason for modern scholarship's reticence lies rather in the historical scepticism of Wrede and Wellhausen which has been broadly vindicated by subsequent form and redaction criticism. Yet the vindication of Schweitzer's antipode William Wrede, above all by Rudolf Bultmann in the 1920s,¹¹ did not signify what Wrede would have wished: the removal of theological interests from 'scientific' historical research on the New Testament. Quite the opposite. It co-incided with a recovery of a strong theological interest in these texts and a fresh chapter in New Testament and hermeneutics.¹²

At its best the New Testament scholarship of Bultmann and his followers achieved a remarkable synthesis between historical criticism of these early Christian documents and a Christian theological inter-

10. *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, Eng. tr., London, 1910, p. 1.

11. Prior to *The History of the Synoptic Tradition* (1921, Eng. tr. 1963) see this essay 'Die Frage nach dem messianischen Bewusstsein Jesu und das Petrus-Bekenntnis' ZNW 19, 1919-20.

12. See J. M. Robinson, 'Hermeneutic since Barth' in *The New Hermeneutic* ed. J. M. Robinson & J. B. Cobb Jr. Harper, New York, 1964,

pretation of (a part of) their Scripture. It abandoned none of the historical rigour of the best liberal scholarship, continuing the work of Bultmann's teachers in the history of religions school. But it combined with this inevitable 'secularisation' at the level of method (*i.e.*, studying the New Testament by the same historical, literary and linguistic methods applicable to any ancient text), a thorough-going and sophisticated theological interest in these texts.

Bultmann developed a 'theological exegesis' in which historical research and theological exegesis would 'co-incide'.¹³ He broadened the conception of history (under Dilthey's influence) to embrace human existence as such, and narrowed the scope of theology to this same terrain. Language reflecting the traditional cosmic horizons of theology would later be labelled 'myth' and cut down to anthropological size by existentialist interpretation, *i.e.*, brought down to earth by being referred to human existence.

This negative attitude to 'myth' is one indicator of the Enlightenment roots and rationalistic bent of Bultmann's theology.¹⁴ For all his debt to the Reformers he shares this much with Strauss. But the apologetic value of this restriction in a post-Kantian world ought not to be underrated. All theological statements do have an existential aspect, and by highlighting this in a one-sided way Bultmann achieved brilliant new insights in the interpretation of Paul and especially John. If the great majority of Christians have not recognized all that is most important to them in this restatement of Christian faith it is because Bultmann's apologetic reduction of Christianity for a secular world cut out much that they do in fact find meaningful. The option of a 'secular' or 'religionless' Christianity looked attractive for a time to theologians with strong roots in the tradition and an equally strong sense of the unintelligibility of much religious discourse in a rapidly changing world. Moreover, the dialectic between 'religion' and 'the gospel' on which it was partly based is a permanent resource for any form of Christianity which takes Paul seriously. But the rationalist lens through which the texts were viewed was inimical to all but the personal moral dimension of religion. To anyone from a Christian tradition which lays more emphasis upon sacramental

13. See especially 'The Problem of a Theological Exegesis of the New Testament' (1925), reprinted in *The Beginnings of Dialectical Theology*, Eng. tr. ed. J. M. Robinson, John Knox, Virginia, 1968.

14. See R. W. Johnson, *The Origins of Demythologizing*, Brill, Leiden, 1974.

worship it seems to lead at best to an impoverished version of Christianity, and at worst to a gnostic heretical one which fails to take seriously the Creator's world.

It is unnecessary to rehearse the theological objections which have been raised against Bultmann's programme. They mostly relate to his narrowing the scope of the Christian message to the individual who hears the kerygma and in accepting it reaches a new self-understanding. More important for our theme is the way in which some of his followers, notably Käsemann, have criticized this existentialist theology through an attack on the New Testament (especially Pauline) interpretation to which it appeals and through which it has been expressed.¹⁵ Modern interpretations of Christianity have been and are at stake in these exegetical arguments about the meaning of the New Testament. Not all 'New Testament theology' is implicated in such modern controversies, but the phenomenon is common enough in German scholarship to draw from it some suggestions about the methods of interpreting the New Testament theologically, and the place of historical critical exegesis in this enterprise.

Both Bultmann and his critics have tried to make their historical and their theological interpretation coincide. What they say Paul meant is usually what they think is essential in Christianity to-day. This style of 'theology as scriptural interpretation' (to borrow the title of a collection of essays by Conzelmann) has the merit of strengthening the modern theologian's claim to continuity with the classical documents of the Christian tradition, as well as providing serious theological thought in a form that is directly relevant for Christian proclamation. Such a theology is not necessarily bound to agree with all the biblical authors or conceptions. Its New Testament interpretation may include 'critical interpretation' (*Sachkritik*) which rejects tendencies or individual writers within the New Testament.¹⁶ But whether positively or negatively the intention is to 'do theology', and that involves speaking of *God*, however inseparably connected this must always be with talk of man and the world.

15. This critique pervades all Käsemann's writings on the historical Jesus, Pauline and Johannine interpretations, and early Christian apocalyptic. See for example *Essays on New Testament Themes*, SCM Press, London, 1969.

16. I have discussed this in *The Nature of New Testament Theology*, pp. 42-52, SCM Press, London, 1973.

Bultmann's formula for articulating the theological subject-matter of the New Testament within the compass of a historical presentation of the development of early Christian thought corresponded to his view of revelation as an event which happened to the individual who heard and obeyed the word preached. Such a 'word and faith' oriented view of Christianity is naturally congenial to Lutherans and catches centrally important emphases in Paul and John. But admirers from a very different corner of the Christian world may well wonder whether this model for theological interpretation of the New Testament cannot perhaps be broadened in a way which will make it fruitful for other understandings of the gospel. There is no reason why historical construction and theological interpretation should precisely 'concede'. If this requirement is abandoned the theological interpreter can be set free to try out whatever lines of thought might illuminate the subject-matter of his text, provided that it does not do violence to the historical character of the document. In other words, an interpretation which is true to these theological texts must respect their historical character but may (like a piece of literary criticism) go beyond the historian's brief.

The element of construction in Bultmann's New Testament theology can scarcely be denied, and it goes beyond what is normal in historical interpretation. In order to express the theological dimension of these texts Bultmann not only takes over a clarified philosophical conceptuality (Heidegger's analysis of human existence) but also presupposes an understanding of Christianity and the way in which revelation takes place. Far from this necessarily involving a distortion of the witness of the texts, it is (as Bultmann insists) necessary if their meaning is to be grasped, and legitimate, provided that any such pre-understanding is open to correction in the light of the texts themselves. In Bultmann's own practice it can be argued that premature criticism of the texts for failing to deal adequately with their subject-matter sometimes prevents this correction from taking place; but as his principles allow for it this is not a defect of the theory. Others have been able to criticise him by providing more plausible readings of the historical evidence.

17. Bultmann's failure fully to achieve this 'co-incidence' was in effect noted by N. A. Dahl in his outstanding review of *The Theology of the New Testament*, in *Theologische Rundschau* 22, 1954, Eng. tr. in *The Crucified Messiah* Augsburg, Minneapolis, 1974.

What seems to be happening here is that theological interpreters bring their own understandings of the subject-matter to the texts and produce readings which aim to combine a plausible historical reconstruction with their own grasp of the subject-matter. These readings can be attacked and defended by historical and exegetical arguments because they are constructed by means of the rational methods used in the study of any ancient texts. There is nothing private about the methods of interpreting religious texts, though some apprehensions of their subject-matter do better justice to them than others. But there is more than historical and linguistic method involved here; there is a presupposition about the subject-matter. Whether one Christian presupposition is better than another, or better than (say) a projectionist account of religion, cannot be decided on a basis of New Testament interpretation alone. This can only hope to say which is historically more true to the author being interpreted—and even this is often uncertain. Many interpretations can be ruled out by historical research as quite implausible, but many others may be adjudged more or less equally possible.

This diversity of possible interpretations will only disturb those who look to the New Testament for the right answer, as though it were a uniform doctrinal norm. Such biblicist views have in any case been undercut by the recognition of theological diversity within the New Testament, and (appearances notwithstanding) never gave a true picture of how the Christian Church has in fact used its scriptures. Rather, these have nourished the on-going life of the community, providing a rash of images and symbols which have constantly been combined in new ways and yielded new insights when viewed from the ever-changing perspective of Christian history and experience. The unifying function of these texts has consisted far more in the fact of an agreed canon being constantly heard afresh than in a normative interpretation being imposed. Even where this has played a role it has not been historical research that has provided the doctrinal norm.

If this sketch is correct, then the way in which some modern theologians do theology as scriptural interpretation is not very different from what has always happened in the Christian Church. The texts are interpreted with the help of the best rational methods of the day, but the interpretation is guided by a prior decision about their subject-matter. As modern gospel criticism shows, the new methods of a rationalist age have subjected traditional theological formulations

to severe criticism and necessitated drastic restatement of Christianity. But they have not destroyed the believer's presupposition that his religious tradition, including these classical texts, is somehow concerned with God.

How this belief is to be justified in the modern world is another question. It is hard to doubt that 'anthropology' or human existence must provide the starting point, and the study of religion marks out an area in which the scientific study of man confronts the workings of actual religious traditions. The interpretation of the New Testament may engage in this task of fundamental theology, but if need not. A philosophically creative interpreter may define its subject-matter in a way that involves him directly in debates about the nature of man, the world and history. Another may simply presuppose the tradition in which he stands and allow doctrinal and philosophical theologians to do the systematic groundwork for him. His attempts to relate this to his own historical and exegetical work are also theologically significant. They are in fact more directly relevant to the church's internal witness, rooted as this is in the hearing, reading, marking, learning and inwardly digesting of the canonical texts, than other parts of the curriculum.

The pattern of interaction between an interpreter's theological perspective and the checks and controls provided by critical historical research adumbrated in this essay allow a theological role to historical criticism, but also subordinate this to the constructive task of developing new interpretations which will illuminate both the texts and contemporary experience. It implies that theological interpreters will be theologians as well as historical critics, but it does not pre-determine what kinds of theologies they will hold. The historical exercises inseparable from a truthful and intellectually responsible reading of the New Testament will preclude pre-critical theologies, but a diversity of post-critical theologies reflecting the diversity of contemporary experience can be expected.

The understanding of God with which some will read the New Testament may be expressed in quite traditional forms. Since most theologians' sense of God is nourished by the practice of religion, and the modern science of religion provides a forum or clearing-house in which the various humane and social scientific disciplines engaged with and analyse religious belief and practice, the next few years will continue to see a resumption of the older liberal concern for this universal human phenomenon. On this basis it should prove possible

to generate new interpretations of the New Testament which respect the historical givenness of the texts, but also speak to the various political and social circumstances in which Christians using their scriptures find themselves. Provided the historical checks are operating to rule out arbitrary interpretations, theologians can bring a variety of hermeneutical keys to this resource and allow it to disclose dimensions of meaning which might not occur to a more narrowly historical approach to these texts. Psycho-analytic interpretation of the biblical symbols, for example, may be a way of penetrating the deep human dimensions of this literature and restoring the link between intellectual wrestling with the text and the pastoral and therapeutic tasks of the Christian community. Again, materialistic interpretation of the Bible is open to obvious abuse, but provided historians are available to rule out manipulation of the texts, even this may be one way in which the liberating power of the gospel is heard in certain political situations, such as in Latin America to-day.

Christians stand on the brink of exciting new developments in biblical interpretation, including new forms of rapprochement with other religious traditions. The future perhaps lies with those parts of the world where religion and liberation are not seen as alternatives. But if there is one lesson that the biblical criticism which grew out of European rationalistic Enlightenment can offer to the neo-conservatives in Europe and the neo-radicals elsewhere it is this: That the negative, critical function of historical research, as this was developed in the west during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, still has its uses in exposing fantasy and keeping the Christian community in touch with the intellectual currents of the real world which it still hopes to influence and transform. *The Bible in Human Transformation*¹⁸ need not signify an unholy alliance between revolutionaries and reactionaries proclaiming *Das Ende der historischkritische Methode*.¹⁹

18. The title of a stimulating programme by W. Wink, Fortress, Philadelphia, 1973.

19. The title of a pietist protest by G. Maier Brockhans, 1975.