



The Architecture of Theology: Structure, System, and Ratio

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CHAPTER

2 Warrants and Norms

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Abstract

The traditional theological warrants are surveyed (scripture, tradition, reason). None of these function in theological arguments in quite the way it has often been suggested they do. Scripture, while certainly holding the place of prime warrant, is in fact not independent of the others, and certainly not the sole warrant, as has been sometimes claimed. The canon of scripture is a determination of tradition; the interpretation of scripture is indebted to both tradition and reason. Tradition is also not freestanding: it has overwhelmingly been the history of communal interpretation of scripture. Theological arguments have rarely, if ever, appealed to reason as a warrant; rather, reason functions as a tool in the interpretation of scripture and tradition. The significance of figurative language in theology's chief norm, the Bible, is considered. Its plurivocity suggests scripture cannot function in relation to theological arguments as foundational premises do in relation to foundationalist structures.

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Christian reflection on the structures of theological reasoning has often focused on the legitimate sources of theological claims, what are called theological warrants or norms. While there has been some discussion of the structure of arguments developed from these sources of reflection or authoritative teaching, the focus—in terms of both sheer quantity and of intensity—has been on the relative merits of these sources as warrants, and to a lesser extent, their relation to each other. It is not clear exactly when what are now regarded as the four possible warrants (scripture, tradition, reason, and experience) became a settled list, although each has a history of usage stretching back to the very beginning of Christian theology. Equally, the problems associated with appeal to each manifested themselves early on and debate ensued concerning not only the legitimacy of appeal to the norm *qua* norm, but also over *how* the norm might underwrite a theological argument.

Scripture

Of the four now acknowledged as possible theological warrants, scripture occupies a unique place, inasmuch as no one contests its right to such status. That is, no one denies the propriety of theological appeal to scripture. The disputes surrounding scripture's theological usage concerned rather what counted as scripture and what counted as legitimate interpretation of scripture and why. Those were the initial spheres of debate, followed at a much later stage by debates over how the data of scripture were to be understood in relation to the apparently conflicting witness of other warrants (the current debate over sexual ethics being a case in point), debates which showed some to be ready to set aside scriptural testimony in some instances. However, even those today who consider that scripture is corrigible, indeed wrong, on certain points, do not contest its usage in theological reasoning on other points. Charging the Bible with sexism or homophobia does not seem to preclude appeal to its upholding of the claims of the poor and the oppressed. Likewise, ↵ those who point to the Bible's injunctions to women to obey their husbands do not seem greatly exercised about the Bible's condemnation of usury. This status of scripture as both normative and contestable (or even ignoble) raises questions of its own, of course, namely how one is to determine which portions of the text are normative and which are, *qua* culturally conditioned, no longer so. Issues of normativity, which are related to those concerning what counts as a warrant, are thus intrinsically connected to questions of the interpretation of warrant, though this point has often not been acknowledged in discussions of theological method.

The privileged position of scripture, as the sole warrant which is universally accepted as having the status of a warrant, might be taken as indicating its chronological priority over other warrants: scripture was there first, before there was any appeal to tradition, reason, or experience, so the argument has gone in scarcely less naive fashion. One of the vexatious issues relating to scripture's normativity, however, is its origin and the relation of that origin to the community holding it to be normative. Scripture's unique status among the warrants is conventionally related to its divine origin: it is because scripture is considered the Word of *God* that it, to one degree or another, escapes the charge of being merely human and on that ground suspect, even dismissible, as all the other warrants have been accused of being by at least some in the Christian tradition.¹ However, Christian accounts of the exact nature of that origin differ markedly. No major Christian theologian has espoused a direct dictation theory of scriptural inspiration, but there are Christian models of scriptural inspiration so strong that they may have virtually the same effect as a dictation theory. That is, while the claim is not made that the authors of the Biblical texts heard voices and transcribed their utterances, views which insist on the sacredness and incorrigibility of the actual words of the text end up in a position which is markedly similar: precisely these words, rather than equivalents or near-equivalents, are normative. At the opposite end of the spectrum stand views of inspiration which hold merely that the text has some unspecified origin in God, but which leave a great deal of space for human mediation. That space opens the door to relativizing the authority of the text, since any part of it may be deemed as merely reflecting cultural conditioning, human error, and sin. Without criteria for distinguishing the divine word from the merely human, interpreters are always at risk of assigning to God views approximating their own and dismissing as merely human those positions they themselves dislike.

From the earliest days of the church, long before the New Testament canon had settled into place,² these interpretative issues raised their head. The questions concerned, first, what counted as scripture, and who had the authority to make determinations of communally normative interpretation of scripture, as well as the more obvious questions that may always arise out of the interpretation of this or that particular portion of the text.³ If the Bible is theologically normative, then one must ask the questions of what counts as belonging to 'the Bible' and why it would count as such. In the debates over theological method those wanting to insist strongly on scripture's status as the norm *par excellence* often want to insist on its being unconditioned—*norma normans non normata*—precisely so as to locate its authority somewhere other than in the human sphere. John Webster's view might be taken as a contemporary example of this position: the church simply does not have the

competence to confer authority on scripture (2003: 53). This position leaves unanswered the question of what stipulates the parameters of both the text itself and its legitimate interpretation, however. Whether or not the church has the competence to *confer* authority, the church is what has in fact recognized the authority of scripture, and it is within the church that the parameters of its legitimate interpretation for theology have been debated.

In determining the answer to the first question (concerning the text's parameters), we are hampered by a lack of data pertaining to the formation of the Biblical canon, the canon of the Old Testament as well as of the New. Although we know of some disputes over the inclusion of particular books, we know virtually nothing of the processes by which the canon as a whole was formed, let alone the reasons for the inclusion or exclusion of most books. On the basis of a strong pneumatology and ecclesiology, one could claim that the mind of the church was formed by the Holy Spirit and hence that ecclesial decisions are in fact divine, but the question of exactly how this formation occurred would still remain. Bruce Metzger formulates the issue well: it turns on whether the canon is 'a collection of authoritative books or an authoritative collection of books' (1987: 1).

p. 82 The first position locates authority in the books themselves, presumably viewing each of them individually as inspired, an inspiration recognized by the arbiters of the canon. The second locates authority in the collection as a whole and affords greater opportunity for asserting inspiration on the part of the church as the presumed compiler of the canon. As Metzger acknowledges, the silence of early Christian authors regarding the development of the ↵ canon means that some questions simply cannot be answered (1987: 1).⁴ In the absence of adequate historical information, any view of the canon's authority in relation to that of the church is a matter of sheer a priori principle. In this instance, it means that theological principle determines the position on canonicity and the canon affirmed by this principle then shapes the rest of the theology that follows from any appeal to scripture. The grounding hypothesis is not only an hypothesis and nothing more, but equally, an hypothesis that cannot be derived from scripture itself. That circularity does not necessarily invalidate Christian theology, but it does sit ill with a doctrine of *sola scriptura*.

The absence of historical information better serves the cause of those wanting to assert direct divine inspiration of the canon, but since the evidence is merely negative, the point still remains a matter of sheer assertion on theological grounds. The basis on which one claims the Bible to be authoritative—whether one roots this claim in divine inspiration or communal decision—can be no more than a matter of conviction based on theological principle, and as such, scripture can only be said to function in relation to theology as a postulate.⁵ That is, what scripture may be said to secure depends on an a priori determination regarding its authority, a determination that cannot be grounded in more than brute assertion. As Plantinga notes: 'I don't know of an argument for Christian belief that seems very likely to convince one who doesn't already accept its conclusion' (2000: 201); he does not see this limitation of persuasive power as a weakness, however.

p. 83 The relation of the postulate to the claims derived from it is moreover circular. On the basis of theological principle one determines the functioning of the postulate in relation to the claims that follow, even though these are normatively underwritten by appeal to the postulate.⁶ That circularity need ↵ not be a weakness of the argument, provided that the point of citing the starting claim was not to secure the indubitability of the claims extending beyond it. Now in a sense, of course, the theologian of *sola scriptura* proclivities wishes to do just that: only scripture, being the record of divine self-disclosure, can ground true theological assertions and presumably to the extent that these assertions merely render divine self-disclosure in other language, they are indubitable. Nevertheless, proponents of a *sola scriptura* approach tend also to have a high doctrine of faith: we do not know doctrines to be correct because they have been reached by a process of correct argumentation; rather, we know teachings to be true because we have faith and in faith need holy scripture, trusting it to be the word of God.⁷ Faith gives assurance, but not the epistemic certitude of a proof, since the assurance of faith is precisely a form of trust. At the other end of the spectrum, the liberal who emphasizes the Bible's historical conditioning and human mediation is certainly not well positioned to maintain the indubitability of claims following from a basis that may be no more than erroneous human supposition, although in practice, Biblical

injunctions to care for the poor, for example, tend not to get questioned with the alacrity with which are statements about sexual ethics.

Tradition

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Whatever one's view of the inspiration and normativity of scripture, virtually any scriptural text that is to underwrite a theological claim will require interpretation, and the process of interpreting the text necessitates the use of reason, as well as entailing a set of hermeneutical assumptions. Theology is, as Jenson points out, an act of interpretation (1997: 14). The first debates over scriptural interpretation in the church concerned not simply the reading of particular passages, but the basis on which right readings could be determined; they were, therefore, debates over hermeneutics proper and not solely over exegesis. A large part of the Irenaean corpus could be described as such. The hermeneutical issues were parsed in various ways, depending on who the disputants were. Nevertheless, many of the debates concerned the relation of texts and their interpretation to communities. The Marcionite controversy, for example, can be understood as a debate over the relation of Israel to the church, and so ultimately over the identity of the Christian community. Similarly, in his arguments with various gnostics, Irenaeus appealed to the authority of the community, and specifically its bishops, as grounds for the rectitude of interpretations of scripture: what made this reading superior to that was not its intrinsically greater plausibility (though he offered arguments that were essentially textual), but the acceptance of this interpretation by the church in the past and in the present. Irenaeus is sometimes taken as the first advocate of theological appeal to tradition, but he was articulating what he took to be already well established by his time.⁸

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The writings of the New Testament themselves, with their exhortation to the fidelity to the apostles' teaching (Acts 2:42), the foundation of the apostles and the prophets (Eph. 2:20), and the commandment given through the apostles (2 Pet. 3:2), already assume something like a tradition. These references by no means amount to a full-scale doctrine of tradition, or a methodological grounding for tradition as a warrant, but they do indicate that in the scriptural account itself, there is already a sense of both an authoritative community and a *traditio*, a handing on of teaching whose ultimate source is Christ. To oppose scripture and tradition therefore sits ill with scripture itself, whose authors seem to assume a community of authoritative teachers and interpreters of teachings. Tradition in this instance is, of course, not being taken as a source of knowledge or doctrine existing independently of scripture, but rather as existing in a relation of necessary dependence to it: if tradition constitutes a communally normative interpretation of writings that are open to multiple interpretations, then it is by definition not the peer, but the servant, of scripture (an image which was used at Vatican II to express the relation of *magisterium* to scripture⁹).

This position was already articulated by the Fathers of the early church. Georges Florovsky cites Vincent of Lérins as an example of someone who appealed to the authority of scripture and tradition, not as if there were two sources of doctrine, but because the authority of the church was invoked to counter the divergent interpretations of individuals. Tradition, for Vincent, was 'Scripture rightly understood' (Florovsky 1972: 75). Florovsky attributes a similar view to Tertullian: scripture and tradition were 'indivisibly intertwined [sic.], 'The Apostolic Tradition was the indispensable guide in the understanding of Scripture and the ultimate warrant of right interpretation' (1972: 76–7). Florovsky finds the same kind of attitude in Augustine, who once wrote 'I should not have believed the gospel if the authority of the catholic church had not moved me.' On Florovsky's reading, Augustine does not hereby subordinate scripture to the church, but rather stresses that the gospel must always be received in the church and cannot be separated from the church. 'The witness of the Scripture is ultimately "self-evident", but only...for those who have achieved a certain "spiritual maturity"—and this is only possible within the Church' (1972: 92). Whether or not he is correct regarding self-evidentiality, the notion that right interpretation of scripture correlates with sanctification will be important, as we shall see.

The willingness to accept as relevant data evidence that is not strictly doctrinal varies, however. Neither Harnack nor Barth, for example, was willing to acknowledge liturgy as relevant to doctrinal development and both dismissed what they called mysticism (Pelikan 1971: 65–6). One could query these views, first on the grounds that key agents in doctrinal development themselves pointed to liturgical practice: Gregory Nazianzen, for example, in making the case for the then novel idea of the Spirit's consubstantiality with the Father, leans heavily on the practices of worship (Oration 31.12, 14, and 28). Second, discounting 'mysticism' is merely a way of invalidating texts and authors one finds uncongenial or inconvenient, for the term is notoriously difficult to define, especially in any way that would allow one to draw clear lines separating 'mysticism' from 'theology' in the first millennium-and-a-half of the church.

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Although communally regulated interpretations—those which read the New Testament as attesting to the divinity of Jesus of Nazareth, for example—are by no means uncontested, neither are they reached arbitrarily. Those whose views were deemed to lie beyond the parameters of orthodoxy could ↪ point to passages in the gospels and epistles that challenge the interpretations now considered standard Christian belief, but the Great Church had as much textual evidence on its side and could proof-text as adeptly as its opponents. Neither side found that the writings of what is now called the New Testament provided unambiguous or unequivocal support for the views they wished to champion. The church argued not only for its accepted readings of the texts, but to them, only gradually coming to the realization of their implications; lights break upon us gradually, as Nazianzen notes (Oration 31.27). The story of the development of doctrine, which is tradition's own story, shows key doctrines developing in significant part as the weight of traditional interpretation builds. For example, the shadowy ambiguity of references to the Spirit in the New Testament—some texts speaking of the spirit of Christ, others of the spirit of God, still others of a holy spirit, with the relation among these left unclear—created the space in which doctrinal debates flourished into the late fourth century. Scripture did not make the Spirit's identity clear and one cannot construct any coherent pneumatology solely on the basis of the scriptural record, because that record is itself so variegated. Those who wish to resort to the plain word of scripture and insist upon its transparency have to explain the fact that Nazianzen's advocacy of the Spirit's full divinity was a radical position *within* the Church: even those who did not deem the Spirit a creature did not go so far as to call the Spirit 'God'.¹⁰ Gregory Nazianzen argued for the Spirit's divinity in large part because it would make no sense to baptize in the triune name if the third of those names were of a different status from the first two (Oration 31.28; cp. Oration 41.8).

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In this argument, scripture, tradition, and reason each plays a role. The command to baptize in the name of the Father, Son and Spirit (Matt. 28:19) ultimately derives from scripture (though the text may reflect already established communal practice based on oral tradition). However, it seems that the gospel injunction itself was not sufficient to prompt the church to assert the Spirit's divinity, nor was its developed practice of baptism apparently sufficient for the purpose. The Spirit's fully divine status only became a settled point of belief in the church after much theological debate, which is to say, reasoned arguments being offered on both sides. Nazianzen's argument represents a reasoning *between* scripture and tradition; he points to the anomaly of baptizing in the threefold name, as scripture enjoins and as had been the church's practice, if the writings of the New Testament are not taken as attesting the Spirit's divinity. Scripture alone was insufficient to establish the point, since some of those who held it to be authoritative nevertheless ↪ reached other conclusions about its pneumatological implications. The church's practice was equally insufficient to establish the point, since those who were reluctant to rank the Spirit with the Father and the Son were nevertheless content to baptize and bless in the triune name. The position that came ultimately to prevail was not simply that of a community or that expressed in sacred texts or oral traditions or practices of worship, but of a community reasoning about the relation of all these.

Reason

Because scripture is susceptible to multiple interpretations, even by those who hold it to be authoritative, theological reasoning is inseparable from scripture, even though reason, like tradition, is logically dependent on scripture.¹¹ That status—of the indispensable servant—is rather different from the role reason is assumed to play in theology, on the conventional accounts of method. When scripture, tradition, reason, and experience are discussed as potential candidates for theological warrants, the tacit assumption seems to be that they would each function in relation to a theological argument or conclusion in comparable ways. That is, scripture grounds claim X while reason grounds claim Y. The oddity of this assumption emerges when one begins to seek examples of reason's deliverances: exactly where has a Christian doctrine been asserted on the basis of reason alone?¹² One could take the classic arguments for the existence of God this way, but those are not really warrants for a theological position so much as arguments offered to show how it could be considered plausible. As Stout notes, no one in the Middle Ages expected people would become theists because of the testimony of miracles; they were theists as a matter of course. The same principle applies to arguments for the existence of God. An apologist looking for a medieval atheist whom ↵ theologians intended to clobber with a proof would have had a hard time finding one. Anselm's ontological argument supposedly addresses the fool who says in his heart 'There is no God', but given that he begins the treatise in which the argument is set out by noting its writing was prompted by his monastic brethren, it is scarcely plausible to interpret the argument as offered to convince the unbeliever. The fool, moreover, is the fool of the Psalms (14:1/Vulgate 13:1; 53:1/Vulgate 52:1), as any monastic who chanted the psalter would know. This dolt (*stultus*) is not so much a cultured despiser as simply dissolute. He is marked not so much by an intellectual position expressed by professing or rejecting particular beliefs as by his *wrongdoing*, a life lived in disregard of divine judgement.

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More importantly, proofs of God's existence play a minor role even in the work of theologians who cite or use them. Aquinas, to take a notable example, rattles off the Five Ways at the beginning of the larger *Summa*—quite casually, given that the point he is supposedly proving is rather large—but thereafter makes very little reference to them. Pannenberg is therefore correct in holding that medieval scholasticism, along with older Protestant theology, accorded the principles of reason in theology only limited validity. However, he asserts that Protestant theology, in contrast to Scholasticism, favoured an instrumental, rather than normative, use for scripture (1991: 20), though he offers no evidence for this claim. Aquinas's notions of philosophy as the dispensable servant of theology (*Summa theologiae* I.1, 5 ad 2) and of reason as a clarificatory, rather than probative, device (*Summa theologiae* I.1, 8 ad 2) call this judgement into question.

Pannenberg misses the mark also in claiming that dogmatics does not make the truth claim of Christian doctrine one of its questions, but simply accepts it (1991: 49). There is a middle position which he overlooks: one may assume the truth of Christian teaching, yet ask the question *how* it can be true. This middle position is that of the Fathers and the medievals. This position is what Anselm indicates in the preface to the *Monologion*: in response to the wishes of his monastic brethren, he offers a meditation in which nothing in scripture is urged on the authority of scripture itself. This position does not entail advocating for positions not found in scripture, but rather assuming the rationality of what scripture proclaims and seeking to probe its *ratio*. So Pannenberg is misguided to hold that argumentation aiming merely at rational plausibility is impossible if faith is made a premise (1991: 51). The prime premise of Christian faith is a Trinity whose nature is wisdom, logos, *ratio*, and of Three Persons who endow human beings with the capacities for knowledge and love. To begin from that premise is to assume the faith that describes God and the world will be plausible and intelligible to rational creatures.

The suspicion of reason tends to be associated either with its supposed misuse in scholasticism or in Greek thought, the latter often curiously being ↵ taken as somehow intrinsically opposed to what is authentically Christian. The use of reason is besmirched by an imputation of guilt by association. On the basis of the questionable assumption that Greek thought and scholasticism are fundamentally misguided, and the equally

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questionable assumption that the use of reason is somehow particularly associated with them, reason is deemed suspect. There are traces of such an attitude even in some defences of reason: ‘what must not continue is only the Enlightenment’s elevation of the Greek element of our own thinking to be unilateral judge of the whole, or a practice of theological that consciously or unconsciously accepts that elevation’ (Jenson 1997: 9). On this account, the use of reason is acceptable as long as it is not the Enlightenment’s use or that of a ‘Greek element’. How these differ from any use of reason whatsoever is not clear.

In other arguments, reason’s role is portrayed not so much as a source as an interpretative tool. The rise in the nineteenth century of interpretations of Genesis which did not assert its literal historicity occurred in part because the literalist reading sat ill with advances in scientific knowledge. Nevertheless, the church had by no means always read Genesis literally: the Fathers who proposed allegorical readings did so because many elements in the text could not be reconciled with each other, if taken literally, and patristic interpreters in any case saw internal inconsistencies—how could there be days and nights, for example, before the sun was created?¹³ Patristic interpreters, ever close and questioning readers of Biblical texts, were well aware that two quite different creation narratives stood side by side in scripture.¹⁴ In the case of both liberal nineteenth-century and patristic exegetes, the need to interpret Biblical text in a way that promoted consistency—consistency of the Biblical witness with what is known of the natural world and consistency among the Biblical texts themselves—necessarily implies a role for reason, though once again, that role is as a subordinate and adjutant, a helper towards the truth of the texts, rather than an alternative to them. Reason’s interpretative role may also be conceived in even more fundamental fashion. As Austin Farrer asks, ‘unless I have some mental machinery for thinking the bare notion of God, could I recognise His revelatory action as that of God?’ (1943: 2).

Experience

p. 90 Like reason, the fourth of the standard quartet of warrants has also suffered from misinterpretation. It is sometimes maintained that experience entered the lists as a candidate for warrant with Wesley. Wesley himself might have been surprised to hear this, for his knowledge of the Fathers would certainly have made him well aware of the appeals in theological texts to practices of the church, such as baptism and prayer. If Wesley inaugurates theological appeal to experience, then the term ‘experience’ must be being used in a quite specific sense. Herein lies a difficulty peculiarly attendant on this warrant. Much more so than even tradition (which in turn has less certain boundaries of reference than scripture), it is far from clear what ‘experience’ encompasses precisely. In interpreting the role it has played in theological arguments, much depends on what exactly one takes ‘experience’ to mean: is it the report of events or states of affairs in the lives of individuals, such as hearing voices or a feeling of inner assurance? Is it communal experience, expressed in set forms of worship, for example? Is it the testimony of the natural world, encompassing advances in the natural sciences? All of these might fall under the rubric of experience, but each would have markedly different implications if employed as a warrant. At one level, of course, to deny the role of experience would be no more than a form of self-deception; as Thomas Torrance points out, theology can never operate outside an historical situation and cannot but be conditioned by the ‘notions and tools it uses from age to age’ (1971: 4). Knowledge of God, he notes, takes place not only within rational structures, but also within personal and social structures (1971: 188); and those structures embody personal and communal experience of being touched by the divine.

Another immediate problem with appeal to individual experience is that of discernment: put bluntly, how are we to know whether the experience in question is really of God and not merely the self-deceived fabrication of an unhinged hallucinator? The writings of the fourteenth-century Flemish mystical theologian, Jan van Ruusbroec, indicate the theological problems that may arise when those claiming to have religious experiences also attempt to claim some broader validity for them. The uncompromising sharpness of Ruusbroec’s rejection of the various self-appointed gurus of his time is especially significant given the intensity of his own spiritual life, which one might surmise included experiences one might call mystical, though he does not describe these

or directly allude to them. His corrective to the claimants of extraordinary personal experience of his time was to appeal to the community and its shared practices: he insists not only on the teaching authority of the church, but its sacramental life as the context of theological reflection and religious formation. His theology illustrates how one kind of appeal to experience (to that of the church as a whole) can actually counter a different kind of appeal (namely, to the experience of the individual).

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While it might seem that this approach contrasts that of Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment thinkers, the gap is really not so wide. Despite Wesley's clash with ecclesial authority over the necessity for episcopal ordination, he certainly did not encourage religious solipsism. The origins of the Methodist movement lie in the spiritual formation group (as we would now call it) that ↪ Wesley belonged to and his ministry aimed at the building up of communities within which Christians could grow morally and spiritually. His frustration with the Church of England's slowness to ordain bishops for the American colonies did not spring from a desire to be the founder of a new organization, but to further the *church's* mission. He was pragmatic, not individualistic. Experience does not trump scripture in his theology; rather, religious experience is shaped precisely by encounter with scripture, and scripture read within the parameters of the church's interpretation. Likewise, although Schleiermacher appeals to the feeling of absolute dependence—indeed accords it the status of a systematic principle from which his theology unfolds—he does not thereby claim normative status for the experience of individuals. Far from it: Schleiermacher's argument assumes that the feeling of absolute dependence is universal, precisely its universality making it fit as a formative theological principle. Schleiermacher's 'feeling', moreover, does not designate any particular emotional experience someone has had, so much as an awareness of a key element of the human condition. Where individual experiences are duplicated among members of a community, that is some grounds for seeking these as authoritative in some sense.

Plantinga, for example, cites 'God forgives me' as a statement which can function as properly basic in a theological argument.¹⁵ This awareness of forgiveness is shared by many, and as such is not so much dismissable as merely idiosyncratic. It could, of course, be induced by a culturally taught expectation, but the same could be said of any human experience; the problem is not one specifically related to religious claims. What Murphy views as the central problem of theological liberalism—how can human experience tell us anything of God (1990: 15) misses the point. Human experience of God tells us at least how God deals with us. To feel forgiven by God is to know that God forgives and the predicate 'forgives' does tell us something of the nature of its subject who acts in this way.¹⁶ The possibility of self-deception remains, of course—we might *think* some experience is of God when we have simply manufactured it ourselves—but this is a problem of discernment rather than a fundamental theological objection. To distrust experience of God in principle would be to deny we can have any authentic dealings with God in this life whatsoever.

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The use of data from the human and natural sciences presents quite a different case. To begin with, the data are of limited theological usefulness, since their domain is the created order, and as such cannot address questions lying within the doctrines of God and the Trinity, or even of humanity's ↪ relation to the divine. Second, where the findings of these sciences are theologically relevant, their findings may clash—either apparently or in reality—with the data of other warrants, especially those of the Bible. These clashes are sometimes generated by ways of reading the Biblical text that are in themselves hermeneutically questionable. As noted, one does not need a theory of evolution to prompt the thought that the universe was not created in seven days, since the canonical juxtaposition of two different creation narratives side by side already indicates that the Bible's concern is not with a set of propositions about a sequence of events. The perception of a clash between the Biblical witness and the theories and data of natural science often arises from a tow-headed reading of the Bible, a failure to grasp its literary qualities—the significance of its use of narrative form and metaphor, for example. Most people can see that the parable of the good Samaritan, for instance, is not a story about a particular merchant in history and his adventures in altruism, and can also see that it does not become morally less compelling, and in that sense less true, because it is not the story of 'real' (that is, historical) figures. Likewise, if what the psalms say about the deafness of adders or the habitats of badgers were shown to be

inaccurate by a naturalist, no one would say the message they convey via this poetic language is for that reason any less compelling.

The truth of the image does not rest on the precision or accuracy of its rendition of the natural world, but its power to evoke spiritual truth, precisely the kind of truth that lies beyond the domain of the natural sciences. The apparent clash between scientific accounts of evolution and the Biblical accounts of creation are just that: not differences in the interpretation of particular writings, but differences between an account of natural processes and the exegesis of written texts. The findings of natural science have nothing to say one way or another about the relation of the natural world to God; that is, about the natural world considered as *creation*. The data of experience and of scripture serve differing ends.

Some of the most contested uses of experience do appeal to it as a warrant, however; these fall in the realm of sexual ethics, relations between the sexes, and the role of women. Issues such as homosexuality, heterosexual activity outside marriage, and the equality of women could be settled by appeal to Biblical *dicta*, though the New Testament does not yield a single clear answer to the question of whether women are to be regarded as the equals of men in the home and in church, nor does it acknowledge the issue of sexual orientation, as opposed to sexual activity. Outside conservative Evangelical circles, it is increasingly the tendency not to regard Biblical *dicta* as the sole guide to contemporary attitudes. Even churches whose official position on these matters would count as conservative (the Roman Catholic church, for example) take account of changing societal attitudes, at least to a degree. The Vatican's pronouncements on homosexuality, for example, while uncompromising in their rejection of homosexual acts, recognize the fact of sexual orientation, as the Biblical texts do not, and those on the role of women acknowledge a role for women in the workforce outside the home of which there is only the slightest glimmer in the Bible (Deborah as judge, Lydia as draper).¹⁷

What contemporary disputes over these issues indicate is twofold. First, the differences in the recognition of experience as a factor in Christian reflection does not divide along the lines of the Reformation divisions; the fissure runs between conservative Evangelicals—many of whom are not part of a broader church structure but belong to free-standing 'community churches'—and the rest of Western Christendom. The so-called 'mainline' churches accept higher Biblical criticism, therefore allow for some measure of cultural conditioning of the texts, and thus place at least some limitations on their contemporary applicability. In theory, churches that do not accept the historical critical method as the lens through which the Bible is necessarily read do not limit the Bible's applicability. In practice, the vast majority of these groups ignore its teachings on usury and the New Testament's advocacy of sharing property—or even giving it away entirely. Everyone arguably cuts the Biblical cloth, at least in some respects, to suit the clothes they want to wear, the clothes which have been made comfortable by long cultural practice. Experience shapes most readings of the Bible, but not all readers acknowledge this. Second, although some of the issues relating to women have implications for theology proper, rather than ethics (the ordination of women entails questions of a broader sacramental theology), the issues where experience is most obviously functioning as an informant are not properly speaking theological in the strictest sense, but pertain to the realms of ethics and social roles.

Now it might be objected that various forms of contextual theology do address theology at its heart, and not purely questions of how we should live in this world. Feminist theology has called attention to what it deems the feminine side of divine nature, such as tenderness and mercy (although one could query the assumption that these attributes are in fact 'feminine') as well as the feminine imagery used in the Bible to describe God (e.g. Matt. 23:37 par.). Here, though, experience is not being used by itself as a warrant for theological positions, so much as a spur to a more acute reading of the Biblical text. To the extent that such theologies call attention to features of the Biblical text that might otherwise be overlooked, then far from substituting experience for scripture as a warrant, they simply encourage a broader and deeper reading of the Bible. As the challenge of scientific theory in the nineteenth century prompted the church to a reading of Genesis that is arguably more faithful to the text itself, so some feminist readings of the Bible may prompt a truer reading of the text as a whole. One could, of course, dispute these suggestions on the grounds that the resultant readings of the Bible

are simply wrong, but it is harder to rule out the possibility of the church's continuous learning to read its primary text through the prompting of the Spirit, and theologically amiss on any account to rule out the possibility that the Spirit speaks anew to every generation, reminding it of what it has not yet had ears to hear.

The challenge theology will always face is discerning between the promptings of the Spirit and those of human self-interest, discernment that cannot take place exclusively through appeal to methodological principle, but which must take account of particular cases. One does not need, however, to go so far as Ian Barbour and hold that religious ideas without an experiential basis seem abstract and irrelevant (1974: 1). In the first instance, it is not clear that any human idea could be without some experiential basis, but more importantly, it is not clear why the lack of such a basis would make an idea irrelevant—irrelevant for what purpose and to whom, exactly?

Interpreting the Warrants

What this survey of the terrain indicates is that what have been lumped together and labelled 'theological warrants' do not stand on a par with each other: the claims of tradition, reason, and experience to the status of free-standing warrants are exceedingly weak. They serve as interpreters of scripture, rarely as autonomous alternatives to it. The claim of scripture to be the sole warrant is equally implausible, however, and to the claims of the doctrine of *sola scriptura* that I now return. The first objection to the doctrine is its hermeneutical naïveté: no text can be read apart from readers. There is always a subject making something of an object, always a reader deciding what a text means, and the very act of reading introduces something into the text that exceeds what is on the page. One could counter that scripture remains the sole authoritative *warrant*, yet it still remains that scripture never speaks alone, but only filtered through the creaturely eye and ear. In fact, it is as hard to find a contemporary defender of the *sola scriptura* doctrine as it is to find an interpreter of the Reformation doctrine who takes the Reformers at their word. Robert Jenson, for example, claims the notion of *sola scriptura* is oxymoronic if by it is meant 'apart from creed, teaching office or authoritative liturgy', a view John Webster describes as 'startling' (Webster 2003: 63). Webster is surely correct in this estimation if what he means is that Jenson's interpretation of the Reformation doctrine does not match what the Reformers themselves said. Jenson's view contrasts that of George Lindbeck, who notes that the Reformers reconciled the authority they accorded to the creeds and confessions with their ↵ adherence to the *sola scriptura* principle by simply minimizing the fact that the creeds and confessions *were* developments (1967: 65).¹⁸

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Lindbeck's view was foreshadowed by that of Jaroslav Pelikan, editor of the English edition of Luther's works, who summarized the findings of a World Council of Churches commission on tradition in three theses: first, that the history of theology makes the Reformation rejection of tradition obsolete; second, that historiography makes the Reformation depreciation of tradition untenable; and third, that theological historicism makes the Reformation's affirmation of tradition impossible (World Council of Churches 1961: 36). There are two distinct, but related, issues here. One is whether the *sola scriptura* principle is to be taken as denying the role of tradition; the other is whether such a denial is tenable. Lindbeck and Pelikan concur in finding the denial of tradition's role to be possible only in ignorance of the development of doctrine. Their position on this point implies a position on the first: both assume that *sola scriptura* was indeed intended to assert the separability of scripture from tradition, which is precisely what Jenson denies.

In this instance, the history of theology tends to the same conclusion as hermeneutical principle and experience. On the basis of the latter, one would assert that there is no uninterpreted text, since the very act of reading is an act of interpretation. On the basis of the former, one could show that the Christology and the doctrine of the Trinity that the Reformers took for granted—and which they acknowledged as authoritative via their affirmation of the creeds and Reformation confessions—cannot be taken as the sole plausible reading of the Biblical texts. The church's reading of scripture was authoritative, not because any other interpretation was absurd, but precisely because in the face of the plethora of interpretations that were advocated in the early

centuries, the church had to determine and articulate what would constitute the community's normative understanding of scripture. Nevertheless, the Reformers did not question the traditional doctrines of Christ's person or the Trinity, even as they challenged the authority of tradition.

p. 96 No more does awareness of the plurivocity of the Biblical texts show in the doctrines advocated by the Reformers. The theologies they construct lead from a conviction of the Bible's authority to positions that sometimes flatten its plurivocity, while heightening its systematicity. We could find no more trenchant case in point than the example of Luther himself. Luther would not on most accounts classify as a systematic theologian. His oeuvre is polemical, ad hoc, and though voluminous, comprised of Biblical commentaries and relatively small-scale treatises rather than any extended work resembling a systematic theology. Nevertheless, his work shows a high degree of consistency in the treatment of a small set of key themes, such as justification, grace, and atonement. While his view of justification has attained the status of a non-negotiable item of dogma in many Reformation traditions, it is by no means the sole or self-evident reading the New Testament witness on the subject. The Greek words usually translated as 'justify' and 'justification' (*dikaiō*, and cognates) have to do with right relationality; the verb could also mean 'make righteous'. They do not necessarily mean 'declare righteous' in the forensic sense integral to Luther's doctrine of justification. In fact, Louw and Nida doubt the propriety of such an interpretation (1988: v. 1, 452). Even more contestable is the emphasis Luther places on justification. A few passages in Galatians and Romans furnish the basis of both his doctrine and his claims of its centrality. The pattern of the gospels, in contrast, emphasizes ethics and right living far more heavily than Luther does, and the sayings and discourses of Jesus of Nazareth contain no extended discussion of justification in Luther's sense, being more concerned with righteousness in character and behaviour; proponents of the doctrine of justification must appeal to Jesus's willingness to break the law on occasion (and ignore his saying that not a jot or tittle of it will pass away) or his commending of faith, neither of which necessarily adds up to the doctrine of justification in its Lutheran form. Faced with the conflicting witness of the Epistle of James, Luther derided it and relegated it to the back of his translation of the New Testament. Scripture, the sole doctrinal authority on Luther's account, was evidently not above being edited on the basis of a doctrinal agenda. None of what has just been said necessarily entails Luther's doctrine of justification being wrong, merely that it is not the sole plausible reading of the Biblical texts. To reach a position of Luther's consistency on the basis of a set of texts as diverse in emphasis and as variously interpretable as the writings of the New Testament requires a sharply focused doctrinal lens, and this lens is something added to the text. That lens does not necessarily misrender the text, but the reading offered distils plurivocity into something more straightforward, and in so doing, proffers systematicity.

p. 97 The standard Western doctrine of atonement presents a similar case. Before the second millennium, it would be hard to identify a theologian or Biblical exegete who read the New Testament, and especially its account of the passion and death of Christ, as yielding a doctrine resembling either penal satisfaction or penal substitution. This historical fact leaves open several interpretative possibilities. It is possible that for the first thousand years of Christianity no one rightly understood the significance of Christ's death, a position which entails the view that no one in that period rightly understood the New Testament: no theologian, no exegete, no preacher humble or sophisticated, no monk ruminating for long hours over the text in his cell. That reading of history implies an ecclesiology and a pneumatology, as well as a theological view of the Bible. Pneumatologically, it implies the Spirit did not or could not urge the church towards truth on a highly significant doctrine for a thousand years. Ecclesiologically, it implies that the church could not only be bereft of the Spirit's guidance in this period, but that it could function, pastorally, catechetically, homiletically, and sacramentally, without a correct understanding of redemption. Perhaps more seriously, it implies a muteness of the Biblical text itself: unable to communicate its message to clergy and laity alike, it would appear for a millennium not to have served the very purpose for which it exists. One cannot simply appeal to the supposed theological bankruptcy of the medieval church and insist on its need for reformation to escape this dilemma. Whatever corrupt practices may have arisen in the late medieval church (and no one today defends its methods of fundraising for physical plant), the theology of the Reformers on the issues of grace, justification, and

atonement was overwhelmingly medieval. Luther's doctrine of justification did not correct a faulty medieval theology; it is broadly compatible with Aquinas's theology on this point.¹⁹ What it differs from is pre-medieval theology, the theology of the early church.

Likewise, penal satisfaction is a wholly medieval doctrine; Reformation theology stands in continuity with that of the Middle Ages, and both diverge from patristic theology. The latter was overwhelmingly concerned with the regenerating effects of union with Christ, expressed in doctrines of deification. The Fathers rarely make much of Christ's death as an isolated event; they are concerned with the redemptive and sanctifying effects of the Incarnation as a whole, from the Nativity to the Ascension. If Reformation theology was grounded on the sole foundation of scripture, and that of the schoolmen on a poisonous cocktail of tradition and human reason, it is hard to explain the marked similarities between the theology of the two periods. If the theology of the Reformers was based on the plain sense of scripture, the gospel proclaimed for all who had ears to hear, then it is hard to explain why the key features of this theology never surfaced in the mind of the church for its first thousand years. The Bible yields myriad theologies; there simply is no single 'plain sense' and never has been. The Biblical text spurs multiple readings and doctrinal development highlights possibilities inherent in the texts.

The reports of tradition, reason, and experience are no less subject than the scriptural texts to interpretation through a lens shaped by cultural assumptions, education, and the tendency of interpreters to find what they are seeking. Eastern Orthodox theologians, for example, often assert a patristic pedigree for doctrines found in late Byzantine authors, but less clearly in earlier centuries. The patristic lineage claimed for the Palamite doctrine of a distinction between ↵ divine essence and energies provides an example. Orthodox theologians insist that this distinction was not novel in the late fourteenth century and trace its origins at least as far back as the fourth century, to the works of Basil the Great. While the terms 'essence' and 'energies' appear in his works, usages where the words appear close together are fleeting, and Basil makes no attempt to indicate their precise relation, much less to propose a formal distinction in the doctrine of God.²⁰ The sheer occurrence of terms which become a contrastive pair in later theology is deemed sufficient grounds for asserting a formal distinction in Basil's thought, even though there are few traces of this supposed distinction in patristic theology after Basil.

Maximus the Confessor, for example, writing two hundred years later, seems to confine use of the term 'energies' to Christological contexts, to distinguish between Christ's divine and human modes of operation, rather than using it in the context of the doctrine of God. If a distinction central to the Eastern doctrine of God had been established by a major Greek theologian in the fourth century, it is hard to account for the absence of any trace of it in the seventh. Orthodox interpreters insist on the antiquity of the doctrine; Westerners look at the same evidence and see a process of back-formation, whereby a fourth-century text is read through the lens of a fourteenth-century development. The sheer fact that the evidence can be read in such different ways, and that interpreters divide along ecclesial lines, itself indicates that the texts themselves are not the sole source of the doctrinal conclusions in question. Of course, tendentious reading of evidence, coupled with the unexamined assumptions and brute assertion of unbiased neutrality, is by no means the sole province of theologians: the history of science furnishes some striking examples.

From Warrant to Argument

p. 99 The traditional theological warrants, as we have seen, do not function independently of each other; none of them, not even scripture, is self-sufficient in the sense of providing data for theological argument that by itself yields immediate or assured doctrinal conclusions. These considerations in themselves suggest that the relation of warrants to theological argument is not a straightforward process of reasoning from a proposition to its logical implications: sheer logical inference cannot get from warrant to the claim underwritten by the warrant when the warrant itself is highly interpretable.

Indeed, the process of reasoning from a warrant to a theological argument may sometimes look like a process of straight interpretation of texts, sometimes like a logical deduction, and sometimes like a combination of the two.²¹ Accounts of argumentation tend to stress its deductive or inductive character, as if all arguments involved inference from data that present themselves unambiguously, without need of interpretation. The character of theological warrants indicates that such forms of strictly logical reasoning will most often not be available to the theologian, given the susceptibility of all the warrants to interpretation. To admit this point is not to place theology on a shakier basis than other disciplines. The fact that the chief of all theological warrants—the Bible—is a text means that theology has always had to wrestle with issues of hermeneutics and the practice of interpretation in a way that has at least sometimes led to honest self-scrutiny. The contribution of postmodernism; the recognition of the possibility that data flex according to the interpreter and context; the sheer lack of inevitability about many, if not most, of our determinations about ourselves and the world around us: all these may have dented the self-assurance of some disciplines only recently, but theology has always had to wrestle with these issues. The awareness—even if not always welcome—that theology's surest base, the divine self-disclosure inscribed on the sacred page, cannot lead straightforwardly to doctrinal conclusions given its interpretability, could indicate a sober measure of epistemological modesty.

p. 100 Unlike the structure of thought proposed by classical foundationalism, the starting propositions of theology are not intended to yield certain, but rather trustworthy, knowledge. Faith enters the theological stage not as a substitute for reason—a reason not to reason—but as a trust in the reliability of theology's source, a source from which theologians argue, with certain caveats. That trust does not extend to an in-principle endorsement of every conclusion drawn from the source. Barth makes this point in his discussion of Anselm: 'Not all "speculative" theology says what is true. But even theology which does say what is true is still "speculative" theology. Theology can neither avoid nor ignore the fact of being thus conditioned; nor ought this to make it ashamed' (Barth 1960: 30).²² Theological statements are therefore always contested, 'challenged by the sheer incomparability of their object' (1960: 30). This last claim locates the provisionality of theology not in sin, the mind's clouding as a result of the Fall, but in the sheer and fundamental difference between divine and human nature. It is this perennial fact of creation that is also the perennial condition of theology.

What Barth refers to as the speculative quality of theology might equally be described as an argument based on postulates or axioms: that is, one departs from givens whose degree of certitude is bracketed rather than established and which traces the consequences of those givens. The admittedly disputable character of the starting point means that no claim of indubitability is made on behalf of the rest of the argument.²³ Nevertheless, we might consider whether the argument could gather a cumulative force after it sets out from its point of departure. That is, the argument as a whole might commend itself with greater force than one might accord to its starting principles, and the strength of the whole might then lend credibility to the starting principles: if starting from X gets us to Y and Y seems (on whatever grounds) right, then it would seem that X is at least plausible.²⁴ As Rahner comments, the 'relationship to God is expressed completely only in and through the whole of the Christian message' (1989: 75). Nevertheless, if the overall plausibility of an argument lends credibility to its premises, it can only do so because at least some of the premises were correct from the start.

Something is lent to the overall plausibility of the argument by its premises and some plausibility may be lent to the premises by the argument following from them. The relation between the two may well be circular to a considerable degree. A theologian of Barth's persuasions would presumably be unhappy with this suggestion. It might be taken as implying that the truth of the Bible could be at least confirmed, at most proved, by the rationality of a human argument. That objection is valid if the starting point of the argument were the Biblical data themselves, but they rarely would be, since it will almost always be an interpreted version of the Biblical data that is functioning as the starting point for theological reasoning. Not scripture itself is being lent credibility, but a human and therefore corrigible interpretation of the Bible. The same applies, *a fortiori*, to other data from which a theological argument might begin: the determinations of tradition, including credal and conciliar formulations, require interpretation. What does it mean, for instance, to affirm in the twenty-first century that the three Persons of the Trinity are 'of one substance'? ↪ One need not subscribe to the view that such formulations are impossibly outmoded and untenable to acknowledge that they admit of multiple interpretations. In this sense, although theological data may be held in faith to reliably designate what is true, anyone's grasp of the precise content of that truth, including a community's grasp of it, is open to correction. The human language in which propositions are couched can never be fully adequate to the divine truths it represents, nor could the human mind's grasp of those truths ever be complete, even in the next life, when it is free from outright error, but finite nonetheless.

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The provisionality of theology's data therefore resides in the first instance in the human grasp of what the propositions are intended to designate. As Walter Kasper puts it: '[the truth of dogma] lies precisely in that it points beyond itself' (1967: 77). That provisionality does not impugn the reliability of divine self-disclosure or the authority of either scripture or the church's teaching in itself. It does mean that theological arguments rarely, if ever, reason their way forward from an *indubitable* foundation. For two reasons, then, the starting principles of theological arguments cannot yield certain conclusions: first, because being couched in human language they do not absolutely reflect the divine realities they represent and second, because one must reason from them and in the process of so doing, there exists always the possibility of a failure of correct inference or interpretation. The relation of these theological starting points to the arguments following from them both is and is not similar to the relation of axioms or postulates to other kinds of arguments. The similarity lies in the controvertibility of the starting point and the uncertainty it thereby imparts to the argument as a whole. The dissimilarity lies in the theologian's conviction of the utter reliability of what the propositions ultimately designate. The confidence of those who make and attend to theological arguments rests on what is unquestionably reliable, the Trinity. Trust in specific propositions of the Christian faith is more tempered, representing not absolute trust in propositions expressed in human language, but in qualified trust in the capacity of that language to communicate in some measure the truth of divine things.

Two considerations are key here. The first is the point made earlier, that at least to an extent the cogency and plausibility of the whole may lend credibility to individual propositions within it.²⁵ The second is that the point of Christian theology is not to proclaim the indubitability of certain propositions, but to proclaim the immensity of divine love for humankind and to inspire a human response in love and trust. That purpose—the fostering of a personal relation rooted in love and therefore knowledge—differs fundamentally from the purpose of secular systems of knowledge which are ordered, not to personal ↪ relations, but to propositions that can be defended and that can defeat other propositions in the public arena. Christianity's purpose is not to defeat, but to woo. That wooing, nevertheless, is at least in part an activity of rational persuasion. It is, to borrow a phrase of Alasdair MacIntyre, embodied in the practices of rational enquiry (1988: 354) and as such capable of transcending differences between traditions. Although it may appeal to the mystery of the Spirit's movements, it need not do so, as Lindbeck notes, in such a way as to 'terminate the quest for a more mundane kind of intelligibility' (1984: 15).

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Let us return to the first point, regarding the cogency of the whole scheme of Christian theology and the way in which this scheme may sustain the credibility of individual propositions within it. One way of describing such

a view would be to deem it a coherentist epistemology. Unquestionably, the claims made here on behalf of Christian theology bear considerable resemblance to coherentism, but they also differ in important respects. The overall schema of Christian theology—the structure that is lending plausibility to the individual claims within it—is not simply any group of propositions or any body of knowledge whatsoever. It purports to give an account of, literally, God and the world, of the Uncreated as well as the relations among creatures, and between creatures and their creator. It claims that all that is not uncreated has its origin and sustenance in the Uncreated, coupled with the claim that the uncreated Persons of the Trinity are supreme intelligence, Logos, *ratio* and they therefore create with a purpose, the purpose of drawing all creation to themselves.

These claims already suggest that the theological schema functions as a whole: its components are radically interdependent. That is, the propositions of Christian theology are intended to reflect a state of affairs which is itself a coherent whole, a whole comprised of a set of relations with a discernible pattern. Because the broad pattern is significant, the coherence need not be perfect: an imperfect or intermittently disrupted pattern may still be recognizable as a pattern. The coherence of theological propositions would, moreover, not in itself guarantee their truth, for the schema as a whole could make sense internally yet fail, as a whole, to render the schema of the cosmos. However, if the theological schema as a whole made *no* sense, then this might well be an indication that it was failing adequately to reflect that to which it purports to attest.

We will take up this issue more fully later, but here may note briefly one important caveat. There could be two quite distinct grounds for asserting theology's requirement of a structure that is coherent because what it describes is so. The first would argue that because God is thus and the world so, thus-and-so must theology be also. This argument comes close to making an ontological claim: theology resembles the nature of that which it describes.²⁶ ↪ It is possible, however, to make a more modest argument. On this line of reasoning, the structure of a theological argument reflects the character of what it posits. That is: start from this picture of God and creation, and the nature of those *assertions* (rather than what they designate) will impart a certain logic and structure to the whole. The first argument is material and ontological and requires the existence of that which it asserts. The second is merely formal. The first assumes a divine character of theological texts; the second assumes a logical contiguity between assertions and the structures of texts which embody them.

In either case, however, we could assert a specifically theological reason for an argument from coherence, an argument which for all its resemblance to philosophical coherentism, finally differs in important ways. What needs to be noted at this point is that the theological argument for the significance of coherence is not identical to the secular–philosophical one and this difference bears import for the role of reason. If reason is the criterion against which philosophical arguments are measured, then it might seem that to appeal to coherence in a theological argument would necessarily be to subject theology to a purely secular notion of right thinking. Clearly, something counts against such a procedure, if only that the secular notion of rationality is itself less than indubitable, and the secular standard might betray the warped condition of the human mind after the Fall, a condition all the more dangerous for not being recognized as such.

Those who are most suspicious of reason as a theological norm (on specifically theological grounds such as a doctrine of the Fall) ought on the same principle to be chastened by the theological argument in favour of reason, namely that is in the first instance a divine logic, the ordering principle of the cosmos and therefore underlies all creation's relation to God. If humankind was created to know and love God, we were originally endowed with rational capacities at least sufficient to apprehend the divine Logos. Theological views differ over how much of this natural capacity was lost at the Fall, some views holding that something of our original capacities of intellect and will remain, others maintaining that virtually nothing does. It is not clear why the practice of *theology* would be affected by a postlapsarian condition taken at its most dire, however, for its practitioners are presumably precisely those who are the baptized recipients of grace.²⁷ The disorders of nature —however great they are ↪ taken to be—cannot function as constraints on the use of reason in theological argument, unless one refuses to acknowledge the possibility of the mind's transformation by grace. This transformative power has even been linked to the authoritative status of scripture. Kelsey comments that part

of what it means to call a text Christian scripture is that it ‘decisively shapes persons’ identities when it is used in the context of Christian community’ (1975: 91). The godliness of human reason before the Fall can, moreover, be taken as exceeded by its godliness in a state of grace: the Incarnation and the sending of the Spirit leave us better off than we were in our prelapsarian state, at least on some accounts. *Felix culpa*. In fact, our very fallen condition may prompt contemplation. As Calvin notes: ‘The miserable ruin, into which the rebellion of the first man cast us, compels us to look upward’ (*Institutes* I.i.1).

To press the coherence of theological arguments, to ask that there are no internal or logical inconsistencies, to ask that their conclusions concur with what we know of the natural world, and human nature and the complex array of Biblical evidence, is not to impose a secular norm on a divine science, but to require that science to be divine, to accord with a *ratio* that properly belongs to God. To do so is to be true, both to the subject of theology’s discourse and its own methodological principles. Reason, then, serves not as a warrant, nor only as a criterion, but as a structuring principle, one that allows the outward expression of the ‘inscape’ of the divine and creation.

In fact, reason does not function in theological arguments as a warrant at all, in the sense in which ‘warrant’ is used by some philosophers. Alvin Plantinga’s exploration of warrants in his trilogy (1993a, 1993b, 2000) furnishes a good example of the term’s being used in a different sense from the theological one. As Plantinga notes, for the contemporary philosopher operating on internalist suppositions, warrant is really justification (1993b: v). In his own view, a belief has warrant ‘if it is produced by cognitive faculties functioning properly in a cognitive environment congenial to those faculties, according to a design plan successfully aimed at truth’ (1993b: viii-ix). While these definitions would not quite rule out a warrant appealed to solely on the basis of its juridical authority, for example, it seems fairly clear that Plantinga wants more from warrants than that. He wants a warrant to underwrite the truth of a proposition it supports not just *if* the warrant is true, but *because* it is true. Thus, in the final volume of the trilogy, Plantinga recaps: warrant is ‘that property—or better *quantity*—enough of which is what makes the difference between knowledge and mere true belief’ (2000: xi). Although Plantinga says that he is concerned with ‘classical Christian belief’ (2000: vii), this notion of warrant is not one that Christian theologians have employed. If, as Calvin maintains, most of the wisdom we possess is of God and of ourselves (*Institutes* I.i.1), much of this knowledge is precisely a matter of belief, that is, of propositions held by faith. Even those Christian thinkers who have held that the existence and even certain attributes of God could be proved by natural reason have not gone so far as to claim that only those propositions that can be proved constitute knowledge of God. Plantinga’s notion of warrant does not exactly equate to proof, but if warrant secures plausibility, and moreover, plausibility recognizable as such to non-Christians, then warranted belief would need to be held on the basis of more than faith or trust in the reliability of divine authority or ecclesial tradition.

The Christian tradition has not generally been concerned to distinguish between knowledge and belief: beliefs about God can be equated with one kind of knowledge of God (that knowledge which can be expressed propositionally), but the nature of what Christians purport to know indicates that this knowledge cannot be the only kind that is significant. Furthermore, knowledge of ourselves is clearly knowledge of persons and, while certainly including some propositional knowledge (we are embodied; we are plagued by disordered desires, for example), it cannot be confined to propositions, since self-knowledge includes such attitudes as humility and contrition. Knowledge of God even more obviously includes the non-propositional: in a Christian context, someone with little or no ability to articulate propositions about God (for example, by affirming and explicating traditional attributes of God) might be acknowledged as having a deeper knowledge of God than the learned manipulators of propositions: sanctity constitutes a mode of knowing. All forms of Christianity acknowledge and honour those of great faith and spiritual depth whose knowledge of God is of the kind that comes through personal encounter in prayer, for example.²⁸ Christians of all stripes and in every century have held such persons to have true knowledge of God, even if their propositional knowledge seemed scanty or corrigible by

the standards of academic theology. The notion of knowledge which Plantinga contrasts with 'mere' belief is a rather different concept.

The Purpose of Warrants

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The difference between Plantinga's conception of warrant and that tacitly operative in Christian theology turns on Plantinga's conception of a warrant's purpose. While it seems clear enough that the enterprise of turning belief into knowledge cannot describe the role of warrants in Christian theology, ruling out one option still leaves a large range of possible functions. One question that arises is whether theological warrants function as authorities for theology. Does a theologian cite these warrants as a copy-editor appeals to a dictionary for correct orthography, for example? Such a role is scarcely imaginable for experience, at least if the latter includes more than data such as scientific evidence (and scientific evidence could in any case only speak authoritatively with respect to the facts of the natural created order). The religious experience of individuals could not function as warrant for theology authoritatively, but only persuasively, while the data of communal experience (in worship, for example) are likely, once they attain to something approaching authoritative status, to fall under the rubric of tradition (as would, for example, practices of worship, whether formalized liturgically or not). Reason's claim to status as an authority is even more shaky. Granted, a very limited role for authoritative reason could be envisaged, as a guide to sheer logic; so for instance one might appeal to the law of non-contradiction.²⁹ (We may state the latter as the principle that the same entity cannot be both x and not-x at the same time and in the same way. The same principle is also sometimes labelled, confusingly, the law of contradiction.)

In practice, even though Christian theologians have often denied philosophy any authority over theology and have sometimes railed against the use of logic, or stressed the mystery of divine transcendence, they have rarely advocated or tolerated outright logical contradiction. Indeed, key Christian doctrines in their classical formulation represent an attempt to reduce the appearance of such contradiction. Both the classical doctrines of the Trinity and the person of Christ can be viewed as attempts to state apparently mutually contradictory affirmations in a way which shows them not in fact to be contradictory and not therefore to violate the law of non-contradiction. The Trinity is three with respect to persons or hypostases, but one with respect to nature or substance. The same entity can be both x (one) and not-x (three) at the same time, but is not asserted to be so in the same respect, and hence the proposition does not violate the law of non-contradiction. In Christology, the classical formulation seeks to show that Jesus Christ can be two with respect to nature, yet one with respect to person or hypostasis: x and not-x at the same time, but not in the same way. To the extent that classical doctrines exhibit mechanisms for avoiding such contradictions, they could be viewed as acknowledging the authority of classical logic.

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Such an acknowledgment may manifest itself in other ways as well. Although Christian theologians have rarely acknowledged explicitly that this is what they are doing, theological literature (particularly of the patristic and Reformation periods) is littered with scathing attacks on the absurdity of other people's arguments. One can, like Nazianzen and Athanasius, simultaneously declare one's disdain for the arguments of one's opponents and insist upon the limitations of human logic, even though the opponents are being chastized for the absurdity and illogicality of their arguments. Some of this polemic—which might itself be culpable on grounds of self-contradiction, not to mention hypocrisy—is attributable to the intellectual climate of its times. The culture of late antiquity was indebted both to the philosophers who first developed Western logic and to traditions of oratory that did not eschew cheap debaters' tricks to score points off an opponent. However, similar patterns emerge at other critical junctures in the history of the Christian tradition: at times when theology becomes more polemical, so increases the phenomenon of simultaneous attacks on mere human reason and the excoriation of one's opponents for their lapses of logic, the Reformation providing some notable examples.

Calvin, meticulous in his own argumentation, nevertheless attacks the use of logic ('deceitful subtleties') by the scholastics (*Institutes* IV.xvii.13). Even the writings of the mystical tradition furnish examples of sharp rebuke for illogicality, as when Ruusbroec, for example, chastizes the advocates of individualistic experience for errors of their theological reasoning (as well as their lack of virtues).³⁰ Although there is certainly a tension between the use of logic and the railing against it, it is hard to think of examples of enduring theology that are guilty of violating the basic principles of sound reasoning, such as the law of non-contradiction. Bad reasoning tends to yield bad theology and bad theology tends not to withstand the test of time. Nevertheless, few theologians have been willing to acknowledge their adherence to, or even explicit knowledge of, the principles of reasoning.

One of the few to do so was Aquinas, and while he is regarded by some as the example par excellence of a rationalistic theologian sold out to a philosophical system, he in fact envisages a very limited role for logic. In his treatment of natural law, he allows reasoning from very broad first principles established or known by reason alone—the good is what all desire and the law of non-contradiction, for example. These allowances are extremely limited, in the sense that they are purely formal (the first is no more than a definition, so expresses an analytical truth, and the second simply identifies ways in which propositions could contradict themselves). They are, moreover, severely limited in the scope of what they can generate: one could not derive a very large set of ethical precepts and principles from them, which Aquinas himself acknowledges. The limited generative possibilities of the postulates of sheer reason indicate why positive divine law was given and why human beings need such law if they are to live rightly. In natural law, one of the areas in which a supposedly rationalistic theologian is supposedly most confident of the reach of human reason, Aquinas actually gives it a straitened role, and one which is almost entirely regulatory. It would be hard to find an example of any other Christian theologian whose role for reason as a *starting* point for theological reflection would be any greater than this, rather slight, one.³¹

Authority for Theology

As generative principles, then, we are left with scripture and tradition, and as we have seen, the latter is in any case largely dependent on the former. Both could, however, be functioning as authorities in ways it would have been hard to imagine reason or experience doing, and this fact raises the question of the role of authority in Christian theology. Are warrants simply a theological way of talking about brute appeal to authority, that which is to be followed, not because its intrinsic merit commends it and invites assent, but because it is assumed to be right in virtue of its authoritative standing?

This question raises the issue of what is meant by 'authority', for it is not easy to determine what authority is or has been in the Western religious tradition. As Kelsey notes, most doctrines of authority in scripture are misleading with respect to the sense in which scripture is authority precisely for *theology* (1975: 2). The problem is not only theology's: one of the most notable studies of authority in recent decades, Jeffrey Stout's *The Flight from Authority*, declines to give any positive theory of what authority is or was (1981: xi), although he argues that modern thought 'was born in a crisis of authority, took shape in flight from authority, and aspired from the start to autonomy from all traditional influence' (1981: 2–3).

Significantly, Stout's key examples of this stance include not only philosophers whose acceptance of Christian beliefs was minimal at best (Kant, for instance), but also communities of those who adhered to Christian belief, such as Huguenots and Jansenists, whose discursive practices did not appeal to authority (1981: 3). Although both these latter groups got into trouble with the Roman Catholic hierarchy in France and could be said to have challenged its authority, it is a stretch to say that neither group *accepted* authority of any kind (which is a different matter from appealing to it). The Huguenots' interpretation of the Bible and their conviction that its authority was greater than that of the Roman hierarchy was after all what led to their persecution: their rejection of one authority was dictated by their acceptance of another. If the Jansenists fell under suspicion of

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the same hierarchy, they nevertheless accepted the creeds and practices of traditional catholic Christianity, such as its sacraments. Both groups challenged particular authorities of their day, but did not reject outright any form of authority whatsoever. Stout's examples indicate a perennial truth of the Christian tradition: the issue is not whether authority is recognized, but what is deemed authoritative and on what grounds. The history of the Reformation, so often read as a religious form of rebellion against established authority, in fact represented the substitution of one set of authorities for another: the Bible, but more often, the Bible interpreted according to quite specific criteria of a particular tradition, replaced the Roman Catholic *magisterium*. The replacement was held by its proponents ↪ to be no less authoritative than the authority they rejected was held to be by its adherents.³² A Lutheran had as little option of rejecting the doctrine of justification by faith and retaining his claim to be a Lutheran as a Roman Catholic had of rejecting transubstantiation.

In either case, some norm was accorded a privileged status as the starting point of doctrine. Stout charts the shift from the medieval mindset to that of the Enlightenment as a transition from an era in which faith was considered a virtue to one in which it was equated with the vices of gullibility and superstition (1981: 108). This attitudinal shift may be culturally important in some respects, but it does not necessarily reflect a change in attitude towards authority, since after the Enlightenment theories of the natural sciences were sometimes accorded equally authoritative status, with their subsequent revision or outright rejection indicating they were no less provisional than the postulates of theology. The fact that one labels other people's views gullible does not in itself guarantee one's own preservation from credulously dogmatic acceptance of what is in fact questionable.

The real question is whether the Christian tradition ever accorded its warrants and norms the status of authorities in the sense in which Stout uses the term. The earliest centuries of the church were characterized not only by the mystery surrounding the formation of the Biblical canon, the chief of all warrants, but also disputes over the interpretation of writings whose claim to authority was recognized by all parties: various Arians, Apollinarians, and Nestorians argued from the same scriptures as the groups now considered orthodox. As Kelsey notes, appeal to scripture attempts to make the case for theology whose acceptability is actually or potentially in dispute (1975: 3) and it could only be in dispute if scripture admitted of multiple interpretations. Murphy therefore exaggerates in holding that, if scripture has to play the role of foundation, then it must have indubitable or unquestionable character (1994: 200; she makes a parallel claim for experience).

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Even modern foundationalists certainly do not require as much of their starting propositions. In the Christian tradition, disputes over the interpretation of the chief norm were moreover matched by disputes over other norms. So, for example, conciliar decrees which might have been expected to settle disputes often led to further disputes over the precise interpretation of the decrees. Chalcedon, which is commonly taken as having settled the basic parameters of Christology, in fact raised the question of what it meant for Christ to have two natures; the Monothelite controversy turned on precisely ↪ this point, and for over two hundred years after Chalcedon, bitter disputes about the matter raged. Likewise one does not have to be sub-orthodox, on any account, to raise the question of what the ancient language of person, hypostasis, substance, and nature might mean in our time. Such querying may be a form of rejection of authority (for instance, the Monophysite rejection of Chalcedon); or it may represent a request for clarification of authority (such as the questioning of classical terminology by modern theologians), a request which in itself nibbles at authority's normative status by pointing out the ambiguity of its determinations. The authority may still have authoritative status, but its decrees cannot function to regulate belief or settle disputes if they are not themselves clear.

The history of Christianity has always evidenced such uncertainties. The Middle Ages is often simultaneously taken to be the age of credulous faith and unquestioning acceptance of dogma while at the same time contemptuously dismissed for its supposed preoccupation with disputes fuelled by the inadmissibly speculative application of pure reason, such as the numbers of angels dancing on pins. It is hard to see how it could be both: although no one has ever actually identified a medieval text which raises the angels-on-pins

issue, the scholastics debated many other fine points of theology that rest on ultimately hard questions (as the space occupied by immaterial substances does). The mentality and culture which allowed, indeed encouraged, the pursuit of such questions was one which allowed that even if one accepts a particular theological given, it will almost inevitably lead to the raising of further questions. The work often taken as the inauguration of scholastic theology, Abelard's *Sic et Non*, departs from the acknowledgement of conflicting views in patristic theology. If this work does mark the beginning of scholasticism, then medieval theology's root assumption is of the diversity of theological views *within the church*. The patristic legacy of patriarchs, saints, and councils marked the beginning of tradition, not its end³³ because tradition's determinations are never the last word, doctrinally, but open out on new horizons. Theology never rests: the conjectures and solutions of one generation become the questions and disputes of another.³⁴

p. 111 Do then theological warrants function as authorities for theology? If by authority, one means a source which definitively stipulates the parameters of the permissible or a court of final adjudication of disputes, one would have to say that no warrant, including the Bible, has functioned in this way in relation to Christian theology. The Bible has more often given rise to theological ↯ disputes than ended them. There is no single Christian court of appeal on Biblical interpretation. Readings of the scriptural text differ from time to time, tradition to tradition, and considerable variation is often evident within traditions. While some have other norms—the Roman Catholic *magisterium*³⁵ or the Lutheran confessions, for example—these, too, admit of some leeway in interpretation.

What may seem to be watertight may not always be so. The promulgation of papal infallibility, to take a notable case, might seem to have stipulated an incontrovertible authority to adjudicate doctrinal and moral disputes. However, while the dogma makes clear that the Pope is considered infallible when speaking *ex cathedra* on matters of faith and morals, the Roman Catholic Church has never stipulated exactly what statements are included under the *ex cathedra* rubric. Some theologians and canon lawyers take the encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, for instance, to fall under the heading and some do not. Likewise, although the Lutheran confessions are still taken as providing a benchmark against which authentically Lutheran theology may be measured, they fall short of constituting the kind of authoritative regulator of belief that Stout seems to think existed in Christian circles. The Joint Declaration on Justification, signed by representatives of the Lutheran and Roman Catholic churches elicited an outcry from a number of prominent (mostly German) Lutheran theologians, who regarded its theology of justification as inadequate by the standards of Luther and his contemporaries and successors. Other Lutherans viewed its theology as fully in keeping with that of the confessions. Whichever side was right, the fact that both considered themselves as faithful to the confessions indicates the variety of ways in which the documents can be understood.

Theological warrants resist being read as authorities, therefore, if only because all of them are radically interpretable. They function not to provide definitive settlements to disputed questions, but to provide the starting points for theological reflection. The same warrant (a passage of the Bible or a conciliar decree) might ground quite different sorts of arguments, even arguments whose conclusions oppose each other. Their capacity to support quite different arguments does not count against their construal as warrants, but it does seem in significant degree to count against their construal as authorities.

p. 112 Where, then, do norms enter the picture? Is a norm the same as a warrant? Is it the same as an authority? If we take 'warrant' in the sense in which it is used by someone like Plantinga, the question would be harder to answer, for in his view, a warrant is not only that which is cited in support of another view, but that which can in fact give what it supports the status of knowledge rather ↯ than belief. Theological warrants could not function in this way; if the paradigmatic warrant is the Bible, then it can only ground assertions adduced from it in the eyes of those who in any case believe it to be true. There is no point in citing the Bible to someone who believes it is incoherent drivel in the first place. In the context of Christian theology, warrant must have a weaker sense: that which can underwrite a proposition if the warrant itself is taken to be true. 'Norm' has a stronger sense. Norms are regulative, yet always relative. What is normal or normative in one context may not

be normal or normative in another: one would not study the Bible in order to pass the theory test for a driving licence any more than one would consult the road code for guidance on sexual ethics. In a theological context, then, do warrants always function as norms, or vice versa?

In the sense 'warrant' has been used here, there is an immediate difference between the two, inasmuch as a warrant can be any notion cited as grounds for another. In order to provide such support, the warrant must have at least a degree of plausibility in the eyes of the one citing and, to serve any persuasive purpose, also have plausibility in the eyes of those to and for whom the argument is made. Such plausibility may fall far short of normative status, however, for plausibility is a rather subjective criterion. What one person finds plausible, another may find entirely unpersuasive. The normative is not nearly so susceptible to variant status. One may reject a norm as universally valid, but it is generally harder to deny it is one for some community, if that community acknowledges it as such. I may believe it makes greater sense to drive on one side of the road than another, and in that sense, may beg to differ from the conventions of the country in which I am driving. What I cannot do is argue that the convention is other than it is, claim in other words, that it is the norm to drive on the right in Britain or on the left in the United States. The immediate difference between warrants and norms is that norms function as such in relation to communities, whether these are, say, politically defined or are communities of discourse. To be a norm, a standard must be widely acknowledged as such, so that we could say that what is not accepted as a norm is ipso facto not a norm. Warrants, because they are not necessarily regulative of communities, need not have general recognition as such (that is, such general recognition is not constitutive of warrant). Warrants do not require general recognition because they need not bear a relation to the regulation of a community's discourse. To say they do not *require* it does not mean they may not in fact enjoy such recognition, and because both warrants and norms may function to shape a community's discourse, there is an area of overlap between the two terms.

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In the context of Christian theology, what are called warrants may function as both warrants and norms. While a particular argument from a Biblical text may be disputed, it cannot simply be dismissed as irrelevant in a theological dispute. That is, the theologian who disagrees that the text leads to the conclusion claimed would have to provide an alternative reading, and probably also argue that the conclusion was improperly adduced from the evidence purporting to support it. In other cases, a theologian might argue for the superior claim of some other form of evidence in the case in question. Feminist theologians, for example, might dispute the claim of the Old Testament to stipulate the parameters of women's activity in the twenty-first century. To do so is not, however, to deny the Bible the status of a warrant (or even a norm) in a general sense, but either to claim a limit to the extent of its authority (it speaks authoritatively in some areas but not others) or to claim that there is in this case a clash of warrants. That clash could be taken as occurring between the Bible and another warrant, such as experience, or it could be taken as a discrepancy among the Biblical writings themselves: a text or texts commonly cited in favour of a conservative reading of the role of women might be opposed to the New Testament witness, for example, Jesus of Nazareth's recognition of their contribution. In neither case is the Bible being denied the status of a warrant in any general sense.

Neither is it clear that even in these cases, it is being denied the status of a norm, however. A norm indicates what is usual and nothing about the concept requires that norms be applied in any iron-clad fashion, without exception. A police officer directing traffic at the scene of an accident may require a car temporarily to drive on the wrong side of the road, for example. Even those with the strongest doctrines of Biblical authority ignore some of the Bible's own dicta. Christians of all stripes set aside the ceremonial law of the Old Testament; only a tiny minority obey Christ's injunction not to swear oaths; an equally small minority require that women cover their heads in church; and despite the fact that for most of Christian history it was taken for granted that usury was prohibited, modern Christians of virtually every variety are quite happy to take out mortgages and invest in pension plans. While these examples may constitute no more than instances of hypocrisy, some may be more charitably read as indicating the flexible possibilities of an operative norm. The norm indicates what is usual and may stipulate what is required in certain cases, but does not necessarily lose its status as a norm

simply because it does not or cannot legislate in every case. In general, though, a norm represents a stronger form of authority than a warrant, in significant part because of the norm's function within a community and its ability to articulate and stipulate communal beliefs and practices.

p. 114 The distinction between warrants and norms correlates to a degree with that between doctrine (or dogma) and theologoumena. Since norms shape communal discourse and its theological affirmations, they necessarily relate to communal belief, and this we call doctrine, teaching with some claim to official status. Although this term is sometimes used as a synonym for theology, this usage is both inexact and unhelpful. A great deal of Christian theology, both now and in the past, is not doctrine, having no claim to even ↪ quasi-authoritative standing relative to some community. Much Christian theology reflects the distinctive views of a particular thinker. It may be speculative, mystical, polemical, or simply idiosyncratic. The distinction here, it is important to note, is not between orthodoxy and heterodoxy. Orthodoxy encompasses a wide range of views. There is no single orthodox Christology or doctrine of the Trinity: any theology which does not specifically count as heretical is by default orthodox, even though it might differ markedly from other orthodox theologies. It can certainly be orthodox but idiosyncratic. A theology can be orthodox and ill-advised, badly argued, or even incoherent. A theology may have ample and impeccable warrants supporting it and yet not be doctrine. The boundary between theologoumena, and doctrines or dogma may, however, be hard to discern and may be disputable. Technically, a theology becomes doctrine when it attains the status of recognized teaching, but in many cases, the latter category is murkier than one might expect. Many churches do not define what counts for them as official teaching; in many, the earliest ecumenical councils and the two chief Western creeds (the Apostles' and the Nicene) in fact function as dogma and for most Christian thinkers trace the parameters of orthodoxy, though their quietly normative function may not be proclaimed very overtly. That is, denying the divinity of Christ or the three Persons of the Trinity would be taken as sub-orthodox (at the very least), and since these doctrines cannot be retrieved straightforwardly from the New Testament, adherence to them presupposes an authoritative status for the councils of the early church, whether or not that status is explicitly acknowledged.

p. 115 The body of Christian doctrine is in fact quite small, if one takes 'doctrine' to designate what has achieved formulation in some official document or in the work of a theologian acknowledged as central to a community's self-understanding. What counts as the latter varies from one ecclesial tradition to another; while most at least tacitly acknowledge the Christological and trinitarian formulae of the early church, a church may also adhere to formulae which do not enjoy similar official status in other churches (such as the Roman Catholic Marian dogmas of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries); or a doctrine essentially regarded as sound by others may have a special status in one tradition (as it has sometimes been claimed by Lutherans that justification is the *articulus stantis aut cadentis ecclesiae*, not a status accorded it by any other tradition).³⁶ One difficulty in determining the parameters of official teaching is that some doctrines may seem to be taken as definitive of orthodoxy, even though no official document proclaims them as such. The doctrine of atonement in its Western medieval and post-medieval forms may ↪ serve as a prime example. Although it serves as a doctrinal touchstone for many Christians in Reformation traditions, Reformation confessions (for example, the Augsburg, the Westminster, and the Dordrecht) do not actually stipulate a particular version of it, penal satisfaction or penal substitution, for example. Nevertheless, disputing these particular forms of the doctrine can sometimes be met with accusations of heresy, even though these accounts of Christ's saving work are no more inevitable interpretations of the New Testament than the traditional accounts of his person, and unlike the latter, never received conciliar or credal codification. In such cases, it may be hard to determine the parameters of doctrine; it may be that the widespread impression that a certain doctrine is definitive of orthodoxy makes it de facto doctrine for the groups in which this impression has general currency. If so, we would have to adjust the notion of what constitutes a norm.

The Eastern Orthodox tradition has an analogous position with respect to the canonization of saints. Eschewing the formal procedures favoured by the Roman Catholic Church, the Orthodox churches recognize

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saints as holy people who came to be acclaimed as such by communities. Although there are some saints held to be such in every Orthodox tradition (Basil the Great, for example), others are deemed to be saints only within certain national churches, often because they became known for their holiness in a particular locality. Such sainthood by acclamation might serve as an analogy for doctrinal status by popular or general acclamation, but the implications of this method of doctrinal formulation are greater than those of sainthood. To begin with, the consequences of calling a particular person ‘saint’ has less far-reaching consequences than deeming a doctrine constitutive of orthodoxy. Second, Christians of all churches are apt to get muddled about what constitutes official teaching. Surveys of belief among laypeople have shown that even in those traditions known for their doctrinal exactitude and clarity of teaching, a substantial number unwittingly adhere to beliefs at variance with official teaching. One commonly encounters views among Christians of all stripes that evil is a substance or power, or that the devil is evil incarnate, even though these dualist views are entirely at variance with the Christian doctrines of creation and the sovereignty of the good Creator. If one judged the parameters of doctrine by the parameters of acceptance, one would find a number of views would have to be regarded as doctrines which not only fall outside the scope of what has traditionally been considered orthodox, but which are on an outright collision course with key elements of orthodoxy. This latter point marks a crucial difference between doctrine-by-acclamation and sainthood by acclamation. The body of doctrine must be internally coherent, since doctrines individually form part of a structure which reflects the divine purpose for creation, a purpose which is intelligent and intelligible, even to creatures of finite and wounded intellects. The communion of saints is of one accord in its confession and praise, but not coherent, properly speaking. Saints do not necessarily agree with one another and they certainly do not all exhibit holiness in the same forms. Or, to put the matter another way, there is no *ratio* of sanctity the way there is to doctrine. Holiness is personally specific and necessarily idiosyncratic, as doctrine cannot be.

While there might be some grounds for equating that which is widely believed with doctrine, the case against doing so is stronger, and so we will here restrict ‘doctrine’ to the sense of that which has been formally acknowledged as normative teaching for some community. This sense of doctrine provides a clear and helpful contrast to theologoumena (theological views of individual thinkers which do not enjoy official recognition and which may or may not be orthodox), while the term ‘theology’ can be used to cover the whole spectrum from dogma and doctrine to theologoumena. (In principle, it could also include heretical statements, since these are by definition theological claims, albeit ones rejected by a community as constitutive of its identity; however for clarity’s sake I will not use the term in this broadest of senses). We will take ‘warrant’ to mean any assertion that provides grounds for a theological claim. In principle, there could be more warrants than the four usually identified as such, although in practice, what are cited as grounds for theological arguments generally fall into one or another of these categories. We will confine the term ‘norm’ to that which is formally acknowledged as regulating doctrine or dogma for a given community, and favour the term ‘warrant’ for designating a claim that underwrites theological arguments.

Figurative Language

One reason to be cautious about the application of the term ‘norm’ arises from the particular character of theology’s chief warrant, scripture. The term ‘norm’ may connote regulative capacities that are greater than can reasonably be attributed to the kinds of texts in question. The reason for the variability in the regulative capacity of scriptural texts—which some might admit but regard as unfortunate and others might wish vehemently to deny—is their heterogeneous character and the prevalence in them of figurative language.

Because the concern here is with warrants, we are particularly concerned with the question of how assessments of figurative language—what it is and how it works—might affect our estimation of the way in which scriptural texts underwrite theological propositions. Before we turn to the constituent issues, a preliminary point is in order. The Bible’s figurative language is not confined to one trope, but most discussions

of figurative language, whether by literary critics, philosophers, or theologians, are specifically of metaphor. In practice, this limitation has little effect on the issues at hand. Many tropes are actually sub-forms of metaphor (such as synecdoche or metonymy). Other forms, such as the simile, are near relations, and on some accounts not different from metaphor at all (Frye 1957: 123). Some of the narrative forms of the Bible (parables, notably) are actually extended metaphors or similes. So in considering metaphor, despite the apparent narrowness of the category, one in fact covers a great deal of the Bible's tropical terrain.

The reason theology cannot avoid the problem of trope as it weighs and considers its norms is that its *normans* is replete with them. Scriptural texts range from law to chronicles to imaginative narrative to letters and apocalyptic writings and poetry. ('Tradition', similarly, designates texts ranging from conciliar decrees to the creeds and liturgical texts.) Some of these genres are hard to envisage functioning as norms, and appeal to them as such varies. Few modern theologians have attempted to attach theological claims to verses of the psalms or the Song of Songs, for example, although a theological argument may incorporate such texts, weaving them into the fabric of exploration and assertion so richly that it becomes impossible to separate them out of it (as, for example, Augustine does in *Confessions* XIII.13). Such usage nevertheless falls short of appeal to a warrant. It would be hard to explain why the psalter is less doctrinally apt than the letters which Paul wrote, often in haste and certainly in the midst of great turmoil and distraction, yet the Pauline corpus is in practice accorded a normative status that the psalms are not.³⁷ This state of affairs—some books functioning as doctrinal warrants, some tacitly bypassed for such purposes—has been so taken for granted in the post-Enlightenment Christian tradition that it is hard to find examples of its being justified by argument or explanation. That it should not need justification is far from evident, given it effectively creates a canon within a canon. What gets relegated to the doctrinally insignificant canon varies: while the psalms tend to be cited more often for merely pious than doctrinal purposes, the attention accorded the apocalyptic writings varies. In some traditions, these are taken with the utmost seriousness (to the extent of providing for precise dates of events such as the final judgement), while others seem studiously to avoid any mention of them.

One element of commonality between Revelation and the psalter is that both make heavy use of obviously poetic language, and indeed, poetic forms (in Revelation, in the hymnic material interspersed among the prose passages). That it should be the overtly poetic books of the Bible (the Song and Lamentations also fall into this category) that are overlooked for the purposes of theological argumentation might be taken as an indication that the problem is poetry: poetry simply is not suited to serving as a warrant in an academic argument. Although there might be something intuitively persuasive about such a view, it may rest on a questionable assumption about intention: since poems are not composed for the purposes of argument, they ought not to be used in an academic debate. Aside from the problems attending any appeal to intention, its use in arguments about the Bible is particularly odd: in most instances, we know little about the authors of Biblical texts, let alone their intentions. Furthermore many books of the Old Testament, especially, are in any case obviously not the work of a single author; they may be the product of several redactors compiling diverse texts whose authorship is beyond establishment, working over a long period of time: generalizing about those intentions is impossible. Also, the fact that authors may not foresee a particular use for their writings does not in itself render invalid the use of their writings in these unexpected ways. Perhaps most importantly, some clearly hymnic material in the New Testament has been highly significant for doctrinal purposes, the kenotic hymn of Philippians (2:6–11), for example. Moreover, the writers of the New Testament (such as Paul and the author of Hebrews) themselves routinely cite poetry (most often the psalter) to make a doctrinal point. The appeal to intention fails on several grounds, therefore.

The notion that texts can be easily divided into the poetic and the non-poetic is equally questionable. One of the great difficulties in appealing to the Bible as either a warrant or a norm is the prevalence of figurative language throughout the canon. The gospels are full of metaphorical language, including passages commonly cited in theological arguments, the Sermon on the Mount, or the farewell discourses of John, for example. The writings of the prophets of the Old Testament, important for any theological understanding of sin and repentance, as

well as for any social ethic, are also replete with tropes which are not simply rhetorical flourishes that can be edited out of the text, but form part of its warp and weft. If the Bible has the status of either a theological warrant or a norm, its dependence on figurative language must therefore be faced and addressed.

One of the very few theologians to take the problem of Biblical trope seriously was Aquinas, although he is often regarded as a dry philosophizing rationalist. In his treatment of sacred doctrine at the beginning of the *Summa theologiae*, essentially a miniature treatise on theological method, Aquinas considers the structure of theological arguments in relation to other kinds of argument. He notes that some disciplines (*scientiae*) argue from first principles knowable through natural intelligence (he cites geometry as an example), while others begin from a starting point established by another discipline (as music relies on arithmetic and perspective on geometry, *Summa theologiae* I.2, resp.). The starting discipline of sacred doctrine is the knowledge (*scientia*) of God and the blessed. This knowledge is more certain than any other (it is divine self-knowledge and the Trinity's knowledge of creation), but Aquinas acknowledges that we do not have unmediated access to this most certain form of knowledge. In this life, we only know what God and the blessed know via scripture.

p. 119 Aquinas is sometimes taken, by sympathetic interpreters, as claiming a secure scriptural ground for sacred doctrine, and to be sure, he does accord the Bible a unique role in grounding theological arguments, a role which far exceeds what one would expect if one knew medieval theology only from Reformation polemic. Nevertheless, Aquinas does not claim that sacred doctrine is the most secure of all *scientiae* because it rests on the testimony of the Bible, which is the sure deliverer of the knowledge of God and the blessed. It is not the Bible itself which is maximally sure, but divine self-knowledge. The Bible is the medium of this knowledge, and like all media, can be difficult to disentangle from what it conveys.

The tangle of knowledge and medium is distinctly tropical, on Aquinas's account. What is overlooked by the proponents of the picture of Aquinas as Biblical theologian are the last two articles in the first question of the larger *Summa*, which concern metaphor in scripture. These articles are not an afterthought or an omissible appendix, as one might be led to believe, judging from the amount of attention they have received. On the contrary, they provide an essential gloss on the rest of the question. In them, Aquinas considers whether metaphor is necessary to scripture and to sacred doctrine. He argues that metaphor is necessary to both, on theological grounds. That is, he does not content himself with the pragmatic observation that scripture abounds with metaphorical usages and theologians simply have to contend with this language if they wish to ground their thought in the sacred page. Rather, he works from the anthropology he will develop later in the *Summa*: human beings are embodied and this embodiment has far-reaching epistemological consequences.

Embodiment affects the way we make sense of the world around us, reason from the facts of our experience, and express ourselves. The refraction of all our experiences and reflection through the body means that we interpret even the immaterial in bodily terms. The Bible's use of metaphor is therefore not decorative, but the necessary condition through which it is possible to communicate the self-disclosure of an immaterial deity to these particular recipients of that divine gift, those able to understand when the message is communicated in cognate and therefore bodily terms. Richards expresses a similar thought when he calls metaphor 'a transaction between contexts'.³⁸ Although Aquinas does not draw the parallel, we could say, extending his thought just a little, that the suspicion of Biblical metaphor is no less than a form of gnosticism, the notion that the spiritual truths human beings grasp and reflect upon must be stripped of all connection to the material if they are to be truly spiritual. On Aquinas's account, theology follows the Bible's lead, and metaphor is equally necessary to its forms of expression. So indigenous is metaphor to theology that Aquinas deems it more necessary to theology than to poetry.

p. 120 One significance of Aquinas's thought on this point is that he provides an implicit answer to those suspicious of theological reasoning from the Bible's poetry. Far from making reasoning impossibly unstable, figurative language is what renders theological reflection possible at all. Attempted flight from it is futile, since even if the Bible's metaphors were avoided, theologians would still have to use figurative language to write theology.³⁹

Nevertheless, the prevalence of figurative language in the Bible poses some immediate problems for those who wish to view scripture as a theological warrant, and even more so, as a norm.

The chief difficulty in building a theological argument on the foundation of figurative language lies in the richness of trope, a productive ambiguity whose wealth comes with volatility. Exactly how much volatility one acknowledges depends on decisions one takes about what constitutes figurative language and how it operates.⁴⁰ One significant question for theology is whether metaphor is a function of lexis (or even syntax), or a matter of linguistic usage (for some, specifically literary usage). If meaning is a function of lexis, then there can be such a thing as a 'dead' (or frozen, faded, or petrified) metaphor (e.g. Barfield 1928: 41; Leech 1974: 213, 227–8; Levin 1977: 9, 30). That is, usages which have become fossilized or institutionalized, such as one might find in a dictionary, are still counted as metaphors. These could be expressions such as 'the long arm of the law' or even 'arm' used of the side pieces of a chair. Such usages do not demand that the reader or hearer reflect on them or ponder their meaning; their meanings are established, fixed, and do not vary according to the whims of the speaker or the constructions which hearers place upon them. Their lack of ambiguity means they leave little or no room for interpretation. Indeed, many of these 'dead' metaphors are so much standard items of lexis that some would not think of them as metaphors at all. Black states bluntly, 'A so-called dead metaphor is not a metaphor at all, but merely an expression that no longer has a pregnant metaphorical use' (Ortony 1979/1993: 25). In English, for example, there is no other word than 'arm' to denote the side pieces of a chair; 'arm' in this context is not some colourful turn of phrase, but the only word we have to designate the thing in question.⁴¹ However, such considerations do not deter those who see metaphor as a function of lexis.

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The conviction that metaphor can be lexicalized becomes an extensive principle in the theory of Lakoff and Johnson. Not only is the dictionary replete with metaphors, in their view; metaphor is a function of language and evidence of a pervasive conceptual system. Our very thought forms are fundamentally metaphorical (Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 3). Leech's view is similar: 'Metaphor cannot be legitimately separated from a formal account of the conceptual and logical structure of meaning' (1974: 231). Whether one takes the radical approach of Lakoff and Johnson, or the more modest one of Leech, Levin, and Barfield, the notion that metaphors and figurative language are social constructs with readily determinable meanings is a position with immediate hermeneutical consequences. On this account, figurative language is a herd animal: the meanings of many, perhaps most, tropes could be secured by comparing one usage with another. Biblical scholars in fact frequently proceed in this way, ascertaining the meaning of a word in one text by comparing it with its use in another. That procedure rests on the assumption that the writers of the Bible were drawing on vocabulary whose meanings might be various, but nevertheless essentially communal. Where the Bible makes use of figurative language, we can pin down the meaning of these figures with some precision. Such a procedure would not secure the meaning of all Biblical tropes, but it would take care of many, perhaps so many that the rest could be quietly ignored. Exit ambiguity, perhaps.

Ambiguity might well be what a theologian of a certain stripe wishes at all costs to avoid, particularly where Biblical interpretation is concerned. Ambiguity does not in any case arise solely from figurative usages. The ambiguities of tropes do not constitute a special case against reasoning from figurative language. One of the particular properties of figurative language—its tendency to inhabit rhetorically heightened and poetic speech, which resists conversion into the propositional forms characteristic of theology—also characterizes narrative and the Christian tradition has always reasoned from the stories of Israel and the gospels. Perhaps this greater reliance on narrative material could be taken as historical (the history of Israel or the life of Jesus of Nazareth) or moralistic (as in the case of the gospel parables) and therefore not fictional, 'safe', as poetry can never be. That assumption rests in the first instance on a false distinction between fact and fiction. Poetry, if it expresses a truth of the human condition, is neither, properly speaking. Fiction is not necessarily untruthful and a narrative can be factual yet fall short of truthfulness, by leaving out relevant information and giving an impression which is misleading in its overall outline. Moreover, any narrative represents a perspective on a set of events and as such, cannot be straightforwardly equated with the events themselves or the truth of these

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events. The four gospels give different pictures of Jesus of Nazareth, even though they share a great deal of common material, yet their differences do not necessarily mean that one is more truthful than another. As Kelsey notes, the Bible includes a variety of semantic structures (1975: 188) and if so, theology must deal with this variety if it is to be faithful to the Bible and not just a highly selective canon within a canon.

A further difficulty with the attempt to domesticate figurative language by characterizing it as a function of lexis is that no matter how many 'dead' metaphors there might be, the category of metaphor cannot be limited to such usages. The issue is not whether some of what we could label metaphors can be found in the dictionary, but whether *all* can. Obviously, there are metaphors that are idiosyncratic, whether the creations of poets or ordinary speakers, and given to colourful turns of phrase. Even if language is, as Barfield contends, a tissue of dead or petrified metaphors (1928: 41), the tissue retains the plasticity to create new, not yet petrified (I hesitate to say 'un-dead') metaphors. That plasticity is both of the essence of all not-dead/fossilized metaphors and poses a question for the theological interpretation of metaphor. If, as Wheelwright comments, 'Poetic language generally, by reason of its openness, tends toward semantic plenitude rather than toward a cautious semantic economy' (1962: 57), then the metaphorical quality of Biblical language will always provide an expansive ground for theology. That is, one cannot reason deductively from poetry, in the sense of establishing a single valid conclusion from a proposition or set of propositions. Even if metaphor is a function of lexis or syntax, enough of the Bible's figures are idiosyncratic for important questions to be raised. The owl, lonely in the wilderness (Ps 102.6) or the mother hen (Mt 23.37 par.): these have connotations beyond what a dictionary could define, and their connotations are open to dispute. Does the hen, for example, connote femininity, or general solicitude? The answer one gives may revert to a prior assumption about whether solicitude is necessarily or primarily a female trait. If neither image allows us to establish a single, readily determinable meaning, however, that does not mean we cannot reason from such images at all. It simply means that we must do so with an awareness of their potential multiplicity and volatility of meaning.

p. 123 At the other end of the spectrum from views that emphasize metaphor as a phenomenon of lexis are those that see it as some form of decline from communal standards or convention.⁴² MacCormac and Levin, for example, both view metaphor as a departure from norms. The former claims metaphors exploit semantic anomalies (1985: 34); they violate semantic rules (1985: 31), a notion parallel to Black's claim that metaphor is not deducible from a standard lexicon (Ortony 1979/1993: 23) and its producers are 'rule-violating' (1979: 23).⁴³ These views have in common that they view figurative language as a special use of words, rather than words used in their conventional, if secondary, senses. These views correlate with Wheelwright's notion that all writing is perspectival (1962: 16). In other words, common to all these approaches to metaphor is the idea that metaphor is singular, particular to speakers and contexts, not codified or communally sanctioned, and is therefore more than ordinarily open to interpretation. On these accounts, you could not determine the meaning of any particular metaphor by looking it up in a dictionary or by comparing a use in one locus to use in others, in the conviction that the assemblage of usages would establish the meaning of each individual case.

The core issue here is one suggested by Wheelwright. In his view, the perspectival quality of all writing is merely heightened in poetic language (1962: 16, 51). The difference between the clichéd and the factual, and the more radically perceptual is the difference between what has become standardized and perspectives that are fresh and individual (1962: 16). On this view, far from representing a codified, communally agreed interpretation of the world, metaphor distils the particular vision of an individual. It gives us a picture of the world seen through one pair of eyes, allowing us to glimpse the world as they see it. The corollary of this view is that metaphors not only require interpretation, but are in themselves interpretations. Not only is it impossible simply to look them up in a dictionary to determine their meaning; they will have no single meaning, at least, none one could establish with confidence. Although Wheelwright wrote long before the rise of the reader-response school of literary criticism, his perspectival approach to metaphor implies that the meaning of metaphor will be determined both by its fashioners and its interpreters, speakers and hearers, writers and readers, who must make something of the perspectival and richly ambiguous use of language compressed into

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the metaphor, which expresses the speaker's or writer's perspective. As Wheelwright notes, 'Behind every semantic situation there lies the question of "for whom"' (1968: 8). It would also follow that metaphors have no single meaning, but potentially as many meanings as there are readers and hearers, as well as speakers and writers.

Whether one sees metaphor as a communally established phenomenon of lexis or the distillation of individual vision, one can see it as functioning determinatively: the speaker or writer may choose words, but words shape the way we view the world. The view that metaphor is a lens through which we make sense of the world and communicate our picture of it lies close to the notion that metaphor actually determines our views and thought-forms. Hence Black: metaphors 'enable us to see aspects of reality that the metaphor's production helps to constitute' (Ortony 1979/1993: 39), which is a way of asserting that the linguistic forms a speaker uses in turn shape the speaker's perspectives: the lens may have initially been freely chosen, but then becomes the filter of vision.⁴⁴ Likewise, in the view of Lakoff and Johnson, 'metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language, but in thought and action. Our ordinary conceptual system...is fundamentally metaphorical in nature' (1980: 3). They speak of concepts 'governing' thought and 'governing' our everyday functioning, 'down to the most mundane details. Our concepts structure what we perceive, how we get around the world, and how we relate to other people' (1980: 3). Wheelwright's view shares something of these sensibilities; he claims poetic language

partly creates and partly discloses certain hitherto unknown, unguessed aspects of 'What Is'. Every such aspect represents a perspective that is individual...and that is capable of eliciting a fresh response and fresh insight on the part of every attentive hearer or reader. (1962: 51).

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Although the notion that metaphor shapes thought is not universally held, there are reasons for theologians to take it seriously. Whether or not linguistic uses in general do so, there can be no question that the Bible shapes the religious sensibilities and worldview of Christians. The issue here is much broader than the usual discussion of theological warrants and norms might suggest: it is not solely a matter of appealing to specific texts or passages in the Bible to underwrite specific theological propositions. Rather, to one steeped in the Biblical text, its imagery provides a matrix within which all reflection and theological response takes place. Even if the metaphors of the psalms, for example, no longer furnish proof-texts from which theologians argue, they may well supply elements of the framework within which theologians think. Hans Frei's notion of pre-Enlightenment Biblical interpretation as a process of seeing the world through the Biblical text may have vanished from the practice of Biblical scholars, but it is hard to know whether it has so utterly disappeared from the minds of theologians. Precisely because figurative language—along with narrative, allegory, poetry—may function in globally formative, indirect, even subconscious ways, its exact effect on theology is hard to estimate.

David Tracy notes that the study of metaphor may provide a clue to the better understanding of what 'culture calls religion' (Sacks 1978: 104). Metaphor cannot be bypassed, in his view. The relative lack of concern among theologians with Biblical metaphors for God would be justified if metaphors were 'purely and simply defined as decorative substitutions' for literal or ideational meanings (Sacks 1979: 93). However, if it is true (as Tracy implies it is) that every religion's vision of reality is grounded in certain root metaphors, 'then the elimination of the metaphorical character of religious language is effectively the substitution of one set of meanings for another' (Sacks 1978: 104).

Furthermore, whether or not theologians are using metaphor in distinctive ways, it remains that theology ultimately reasons from a trope-laced text. For Ricoeur, metaphor is 'the rhetorical process by which discourse unleashes the power that certain fictions have to redescribe reality' (1977: 7). Many would balk at 'fictions': if this statement is to tell us anything about what happens when we read the Bible, it cannot be on the basis that the Bible is 'fictitious'. Substitute 'fictitious' for 'poetic', however, and there might be a different response. The parable of the Good Samaritan, for example (which in traditional rhetorical terms could be classified as an epic

simile), clearly does not chronicle a sequence of historical events on some dusty Middle Eastern highway. There is no reason to think it is the record of any particular episode that happened to actual people. Equally, though, it describes a situation which any person, of any time, in any society, can recognize as a possible dilemma: what to do with the stranger who obviously needs help, but whose very need makes demands that are worrisome, potentially unreasonable, on the good nature of the passer-by? The story is fictitious in the sense that it does not record a particular historical event, true in the sense that it describes a situation all too recognizable.

p. 126 If metaphor both trades on established linguistic usages, yet extends beyond them in ways that prompt fresh understanding, then the figurative language of the Bible is both embedded in the languages, social world, cultural assumptions, and religious traditions of the ancient Near East and in the distinctive, particular, 'counter, original, spare, strange' perspectives of those to whom we owe scripture's figures, from the owl, lonely in the wilderness, to the Samaritan business traveller. There can be no question, therefore, of domesticating trope ↵ by collapsing it into the established, the communal, and the known, without remainder, any more than we can deny the power of established linguistic usages to shape (even if not finally determine) our patterns of thought. As long as there is a remainder—deviant or impertinent predication, the strangely hued vision—then the theologian must reason from that which is volatile and imperfectly comprehensible. It follows that there can be no single theological conclusion to be extracted from many Biblical passages.

What the differences between narratives indicate and what is indicated by the tropic quality of much Biblical discourse, whether narrative, rhetorical, epistolary, apocalyptic, or poetic, is the provisionality of theology based on the Bible. Aquinas obliquely suggests this provisionality when he reserves sure knowledge to God and to the blessed—that is, to human beings only in a state of glory, when the sureness of their knowledge derives from its participation in God's own self-knowledge. The fact that in this life, theology's surest ground, the Bible, gives us access to this knowledge only through the veil of human language, with its approximations of the immaterial in material images, means all theology in this life is provisional, awaiting both correction and fulfilment in the Age to Come. The provisionality of theology indicates something of its essential character.

Does the admission of this provisionality undermine the Bible's standing as a theological warrant? Does it render all theology fundamentally unreliable? The answer to the first question must be no, because however provisional and open to variant interpretations the Biblical text may be, it still provides the most true and sonorous treatment of the divine we shall have in this life. The second question admits of no equally ready answer, though it does not lack for an answer altogether. If by 'reliable' one means 'accurate in every detail' or 'not susceptible of any form of misuse' (through misinterpretation, for example), then one would have to say that theology cannot be reliable if it is based on the Bible, given the latter's distinctive features, such as its use of figurative language and a variety of literary forms. These glosses of 'reliable' are, however, too stringent: 'reliable' surely designates some threshold lower than 'incorrigible'. For some Christian traditions, it has, of course, been important to claim that the Bible is incorrigible, though mainstream academic theologians have not tended to do so, and a theologian who does will face some immediate difficulties arising from discrepancies in the Biblical text (two creation stories whose details differ considerably, varying accounts of how many were fed with the loaves and fishes, and so on). Those problems can be addressed by one who acknowledges the literary characteristics of the text (such as the significance of its use of narrative, which is necessarily perspectival and whose truthfulness may subsist in some mode other than the historical), but once one admits the Bible is in many parts characterized by a literary approach, one must also admit the possibility that its truthfulness is not always to be equated with historical accuracy. The difficulty with the appeal to the category of ↵ reliability is that one can never be entirely certain when one will run into the reliable entity's limits of reliability. If the Bible is merely reliable, rather than incorrigible, how are we to know *which* details are to be taken as accurate?

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There is no straightforward, reassuring answer to this question, but a beginning of an answer may be sought in the process of counter-testing claims against each other. If the Bible is the record of the supreme Intelligence's dealings with creatures bound for glory and knowledgeable love, then the pattern of the cosmos and salvation

history ought to make sense as a whole.⁴⁵ The interpretation of any one Biblical passage can be probed to determine how far this reading coheres with readings of other passages of the Bible. Another way of putting the last point would be to say that the chief of all theological warrants can be understood to function in relation to theological claims to some extent as a foundationalist structure does and to some extent as a coherentist one does. In both respects, the Bible's reliability and its utility as a theological warrant depends in significant part, not on atomized propositions within it, but on the intelligibility of its patterning. When that pattern is rendered in theology, theology may be seen as logical in its linear reasoning and coherent in the relation of its constituent parts, and therefore, as systematic.

Notes

- 1 This position is the same as that which Pannenberg attributes to Reformation theology: 'For Reformation theology, the authority of holy scripture is based on the fact that scripture is not a human word but God's own Word' (1991: 31). The sheer fact that the divine message is conveyed in the medium of human language indicates that it must be both.
- 2 Here I am concurring with Campenhausen's view that the New Testament canon did not exist in the early centuries, *contra* the opinion that its beginnings can be traced back to the first or early second century (1972: 103).
- 3 For an account of the formation of the canon and the problems attendant on this history, see Campenhausen 1972 and Metzger 1987. For a summary of how these issues bear on theological method and on the relation of scripture to tradition, see Williams 2007b.
- 4 He notes: 'Nothing is more amazing in the annals of the Christian Church than the absence of detailed accounts of so significant a process' (1987: 1).
- 5 I am here using 'postulate' to designate a starting point of a line of reasoning that is neither proven, nor self-evident, nor which will be proved in the course of the argument, a claim taken to be true, not merely for the sake of argument, but on the basis of some authority (because, for example, it is scriptural or credal). As such, my usage differs both from the informal one of everyday language, which uses 'axiom' or 'axiomatic' in roughly this way, and from more formal usages, such as that of Frege, who takes a postulate to be a special case of an axiom, the latter being a claim for which no proof is given or needed, but which is true (see his 1914 essay, 'Logic in Mathematics' in Frege 1997: 311–13). Quine does not distinguish between axioms and postulates even to the extent that Frege does (who considers a postulate to be a particular variety of an axiom). For Quine, axioms, which generate theorems, are the chosen starting point of a theory. Quine seems to require no more of axioms than that they be starting points and that they are independent, that is, not derivable from theorems (1982: 85–6). He does not attribute truth to axioms, as does Frege.
- 6 Plantinga claims it is often said that the coherentist does not object to circular reasoning provided the circle is big enough. The coherentist goes further, on Plantinga's account: 'he *revels* in circular reasoning, for it is precisely in circular chains that he sees warrant as arising' (1993a: 69, emphasis in original).
- 7 Modern proponents of a pure *sola scriptura* position are hard to find, although Geoffrey Bromiley comes close. Bromiley claims that the Fathers of the early church were 'the most vociferous proponents of *sola scriptura*' (1983: 210). This determination seems to follow from his notion that for the Fathers scripture and tradition were two forms of the same thing (208), a position which significantly simplifies the matter. They were regarded as equivalent in the sense that tradition was not meant to convey something other than the true meaning of scripture, but not equivalent in the sense that scripture was seen as yielding only one possible interpretation. The need to appeal to the Rule of Faith, the bishops, and the authority of the community arose from the fact—not merely the possibility—of radically different interpretations. Not scripture alone, but scripture interpreted rightly, was authoritative. Bromiley apparently wishes to foreclose the suggestions that the Fathers regarded tradition as equally authoritative as scripture. He is right that they did not see tradition as something independent of scripture (and from that fact alone, could not have regarded it as different but equal); but wrong in that he fails to see they could regard scripture as uniquely authoritative only *as interpreted by the church*; if scripture alone were normative, the Fathers would have had no case against the gnostics, Arians, and others who cited the same scriptures, and just as avidly as the Fathers did, though to decidedly different doctrinal ends. Bromiley's very appeal to the Fathers moreover suggests that he acknowledges them to have some authority, as he explicitly acknowledges (1983: 212). At other points, he simply ignores historical realities: 'The early church arose in a situation in which Holy Scripture already existed as a fact' (1983: 199) and he holds this position even though on the very next page he acknowledges that the earliest Christian communities did not have a canon. Subsequently he claims that the church had no authority to make its own canon, but only to acknowledge a canon already there (Bromiley 1983: 202). The number of contradictions in this position—both internal and with the available historical evidence—indicates the

- difficulties that are met when one refuses to grapple with the very real problems arising from canonicity, problems that inevitably plague any doctrine of *sola scriptura*.
- 8 Lampe maintains that it was during the fourth century that there was a rapid development of appeal to patristic as well as apostolic tradition and credits this to the prestige of the Fathers of Nicaea, who were broadly viewed as inspired (Dillistone 1935: 48–9). According to Hanson, Clement and Origen insist that the Bible should be interpreted according to the Rule of Faith (1962: 107).
 - 9 Dei Verbum (1967) ch. 2, para. 10, p. 756.
 - 10 Basil the Great wrote a whole treatise on the subject ('On the Holy Spirit') without calling the Spirit 'God' and Nazianzen notes the conspicuous absence of this identification in Basil's work (Epistle 58). Didymus the Blind notes that others, too, took a moderate position, calling the Spirit neither a creature nor God (*De Trinitate* 2.8, pp. 39, 607).
 - 11 This is a point Nancey Murphy seriously underestimates. She maintains, for example, that argument plays a small part in Barth's works and that his style is expository rather than logical. Barth, she claims, typically states a thesis and expounds it, without providing grounds for it (1994: 185). The grounds Barth recognizes as valid are Biblical and while one can contest his interpretation of scripture, it is a gross exaggeration to claim his theology somehow expounds scripture in a way that falls short of reasoning from it. Likewise, although his polemical determinations are often questionable, he certainly reasons in his frequent engagements with figures from the tradition. Murphy links the supposed lack of argument in Barth's dogmatics to his notion that the task of theology is the critical evaluation of the church's language (1994: 186), although how one can evaluate anything critically without reasoning or arguing it is mystifying. Still more puzzling is Murphy's subsequent claim that 'looked at "from a distance", Barth's theology can be seen to fall into the structure of an argument' (1994: 187). Berkoff, whom she cites, points out that Barth brings out the *ratio* and coherence of revelation (Murphy 1994: 187).
 - 12 Here I take a similar position to that of Murphy (1994: 206–8), who holds that reason is in a distinct category from the other three warrants.
 - 13 Augustine, *De Genesi ad litteram* V.2.4.
 - 14 For example, Augustine, *De Genesi ad litteram* V.3.6.
 - 15 Plantinga 1981: 47.
 - 16 Murphy later attributes, with apparent approval, just such reasoning to Jonathan Edwards (1990: 166); it is not clear how she reconciles this position with the sceptical comments she makes earlier about theological liberalism.
 - 17 See the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's 'Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons' (1986), the Catechism of the Catholic Church 2357–9 and the Apostolic Letter 'Mulieris Dignitatem' (1988).
 - 18 Thus Calvin, for example, can defend the use of unscriptural terms such as 'person' even as he derides the Fathers for their terminological differences over hypostasis and the *homoousion* (*Institutes* I.xiii.3 and 5). He can rail against councils, insisting they are not infallible guides to truth and pointing to their inconsistencies (IV.ix.9–10, for example), yet seems to believe that the confirmation by the 'doctors of the church' lends weight to the doctrine of the Trinity (*Institutes* I.xiii.29). His claims that thinkers as early as Justin and Irenaeus articulated the same doctrine he himself undoubtedly represents an overly optimistic estimation of how early doctrine developed.
 - 19 Cp. Pesch 1967. He summarizes his argument on 949–56. Some crucial remarks can be found on 954.
 - 20 Papanikolaou claims 'One cannot overemphasize the importance of this discussion [i.e. of the essence–energies distinction] in contemporary Eastern Orthodox theology, employed by most contemporary Eastern Orthodox theologians' (2006: 25). He goes on to cite Vladimir Lossky's reading of the Eastern tradition, as holding that the distinction was there 'from the very beginning' (2006: 25), without comment. It would appear that Papanikolaou himself shares this view, though he does not, any more than Lossky does, cite texts that unambiguously indicate a distinction, as opposed to the mere use of two terms.
 - 21 Maurice Wiles polarizes the issue unduly. He maintains that if the deposit of faith is thought of as existing in propositions, one could not escape the conclusion that formulations of dogma reached by a process of deductive logic contain an element of novelty (1967: 4). Any interpretation bears the possibility that it adds something new to what it interprets, whether the object of interpretation is expressed propositionally or not, and whether or not the process of interpretation makes use of deduction.
 - 22 Barth, however, reads Anselm as holding that a science of faith that questioned the church's *Credo* would *ipso facto* cease to be either faithful or scientific (1960: 27), and seems to exclude from that category of interim (and therefore corrigible) statements those 'covered' by biblical authority ('*die biblische Autorität gedeckten Aussage*', 1960/1958: 30), whatever that means exactly (1960/1958: 31).
 - 23 David Tracy attributes to Schleiermacher the aphorism 'the theses of faith become the hypotheses of the theologian' (1975: 27); unfortunately, he gives no source for this quotation.
 - 24 As Pannenberg notes, a systematic investigation and presentation entails a specific understanding of truth: truth as

- coherence (1991: 21).
- 25 Kelsey concludes that it is the patterns of scripture, more than its content, that make it normative for theology. He traces this view at least as far back as Athanasius (1975: 193–4; cp. 196).
 - 26 Morse cites Searle's caution against ontological conclusions from linguistic theses (1979: 132). Torrance, in contrast, seems quite content to posit an analogical relation between concepts that can be determined only by a 'co-ordination of whole levels of conceptual relations with one another and through the ultimate co-ordination of their basic concepts with intelligible relations in God' (1971: 25).
 - 27 The complexity of theological responses to this issue is illustrated by Calvin's position. Although he maintains that nothing remains post-Fall other than what is mutilated and diseased (*Institutes* I.xv.4), human happiness consists in being united with God and this union entails the use of our understanding. On this basis, Calvin argues that the more anyone tries to approach God, the more one is endowed with reason (*Institutes* I.xv.6). This position closely resembles that of Aquinas.
 - 28 Pelikan notes that Prosper of Aquitaine appealed to the rule of prayer as indispensable to understanding the rule of faith (1984: 17). Pelikan, however, gives no source to support this claim.
 - 29 Pannenberg, having duly noted the Lutheran insistence on sinfulness, nevertheless acknowledges that no argumentation is possible, in theology or in any other discipline, unless there is basic recognition of the principles of identity or contradiction (1991: 21).
 - 30 Ruusbroec, *The Spiritual Espousals*; see, for example 1985: 139–41.
 - 31 For a summary see Williams 2004.
 - 32 Farley and Hodgson refer to the Lutheran and Reformed confessions as 'an ersatz teaching authority in Protestant dress' which acquired in their traditions 'the character of inspired, inerrant documents' (Farley and Hodgson 1985: 72). They express a position markedly at variance with this last when they later claim 'The positive insight behind the assertion of sola scriptura...was the critical questioning of all authorities' (1985: 72).
 - 33 This may in itself be a development. Florovsky claims that the appeal to tradition in the patristic period was to the mind of the church. In Athanasius's disputes with the Arians, for example, there is no reference to traditions in the plural, but only to *the* tradition; the unity of tradition was the point of the argument (1972: 83).
 - 34 Cp. Rahner: 'The infinite horizon of human questioning is experienced as an horizon which recedes further and further the more answers man can discover' (1989: 32).
 - 35 It is doubtful whether the concept of magisterium is quite the same as that of warrant, but for the sake of argument, I will for the moment consider the possibility that they could be at least roughly equated.
 - 36 The status of the doctrine in Lutheranism is not easy to determine, however. Some Lutheran theologians apparently assume it has this standing within the tradition, but no official document seems to pronounce on this point.
 - 37 As Metzger notes, the writers of the apostolic epistles show no awareness that their words would come to be regarded as a permanent standard of doctrine and life in the church (1987: 4).
 - 38 Cited in Barbour 1974: 13.
 - 39 One could argue—though I am not aware anyone has—that theology should not argue from the trope-dependent or trope-infested—passages of the Bible. This strategy is not feasible, first because determining the boundary between tropical and non-tropical passages would be impossible to determine; second, because it would create a canon-within-a-canon; and third, because it would rule out key sections of the Bible—such as the gospel parables—which have always been central to Christian reasoning.
 - 40 The Bible's figurative language is not confined to one trope, but most of the discussions of figurative language, whether by literary critics, philosophers, or theologians, are specifically of metaphor. In practice, this issue has little effect on the issues at hand. Many tropes are actually specific subforms of metaphor (such as synecdoche or metonymy). Other forms, such as the simile, are near relations, and on some accounts, not actually different from metaphor at all (Frye 1957: 123). Some of the narrative forms of the Bible (parables, for instance) are actually extended metaphors or similes. So in considering metaphor, despite the apparent narrowness of the category, one in fact covers a great deal of the tropical terrain of the Bible.
 - 41 Palmer, whose examples of metaphor are primarily of the lexicalized variety (foot of a mountain, eye of needle), nevertheless claims that metaphor is 'haphazard', on the ground that these usages are specific to a particular language (French needles do not have eyes, for example; 1981: 103).
 - 42 Between the two ends of the spectrum lie views such as those of Palmer (1981) and Ruhl (1989). Ruhl departs from a 'monosemic bias' (3–5, 234–7), the supposition that a word has a single root meaning and all other variants of this meaning harken back to this base. On this theory, metaphors could either be fully lexicalized or not, but idiosyncratic usages would be drawing on a word's standard root meaning. This stance allows for both communally established and individually crafted dimensions to metaphor. Palmer views meaning as a phenomenon of lexis (1981: 105–61), related to polysemy and homonymy, but he locates meaning in sentences, rather than words (1976/1981: 103), a position which implies that metaphors, too, are defined by the context in which they occur. A metaphor represents either a variant

meaning of a word (polysemy) or a meaning which is quite distinct from the word's other meanings (homonymy). While checking a dictionary may be illuminating, the meaning of a metaphor cannot be settled solely by doing so (1976: 67): 'meanings do not seem to be stable but to depend upon speakers, hearers and context' (1981: 7). He is speaking of all meanings, but if he is correct, lexis itself is so plastic one might question whether there are *any* meanings that can be straightforwardly retrieved from dictionaries.

- 43 However, MacCormac also holds that metaphor is a pervasive feature of language: metaphor appears 'so regularly a part of ordinary language that instead of contending that metaphor deviates from a normative grammar, one might better consider that any grammar which cannot account for metaphor is too limited in comprehension to be useful' (1985: 32). MacCormac explicitly rejects the approach of Lakoff and Johnson (57).
- 44 Black also considers that metaphor works by applying to a principal subject 'a system of "associated implications" characteristic of [a] subsidiary subject' (1962/1993: 44).
- 45 I thus concur in this instance with Wiles: 'There is a complexity about the logic of doctrinal statements which means they have their meaning only in relation to a total world-view of God and his relation to the world' (1967: 8). From this point, however, it does not follow, as Wiles claims, that the total view is 'emphatically subject to change in differing ages'. To the extent that the world-view expresses a logic, a *ratio*, then it need not change in its lineaments even if it changes in points of detail.