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# The Modest Science: Christian Theology, the University and the Church

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Before I turn to the subject matter of the first lecture, I should like to introduce the series as a whole. For the past twenty years, my esteemed colleague, Robert Culley, and I have been debating whether the appropriate approach to a graduate dissertation should be the formulation of a *question* that the dissertation would seek to answer, or the articulation of an *hypothesis* or 'thesis' that the dissertation would then attempt to demonstrate. To illustrate how effective this kind of collegial nagging can be when it is pursued with diligence over a period of decades, I, the defender of the thesis approach, will begin these Birks Lectures of 1995 by stating the *question* that I want to address in them. It could be phrased in this way: *Given that the primary task of Christian theology is to serve the community of belief, the church; and given, as well, the commitment of the university to an unbiased quest for truth; is there a place in the university curriculum for Christian theology?*

Now, I trust that you will all have seen, on the basis of *this* question, how limiting such an approach really is; and therefore I shall supplement the question at once with a clear and unambiguous statement of the thesis that I am going to try to defend in these lectures:

*While Christian theology must not be presumptuous about its place in the contemporary university, and while its first responsibility must be the service of the*

*community of belief, both university and church benefit from the pursuit of this discipline within the secular academy. The university benefits because apart from an holistic grasp of Christian belief Western civilization (including the university itself) cannot be profoundly understood, critiqued and (in its better expressions) preserved; the church benefits because without the critical dialogue of the academy belief too easily degenerates into credulity, sentimentality or ideology.*

With both the question *and* the thesis before you, I trust there can be no doubt concerning the topic we are to consider in these three lectures. It remains, by way of introduction, to explain briefly why, when Dean Runnalls gave me free reign to determine my subject matter, I should have chosen this particular topic. There are two reasons, basically, the one more personal, the other contextual.

On the side of the personal, the unexpected invitation to deliver these lectures immediately following my official retirement sparked in me a hasty mental review of my professional career—the sort of thing that happens, they say, to persons facing imminent life-threatening situations. I found myself having to reckon with the plain mathematical (some might say melancholy) fact that of my sixty-seven years, forty-four of them have been spent in institutions of allegedly higher learning. What led me to this particular topic, however, beyond that purely quantitative datum, was the realization that throughout these forty-four years, in a variety of academic settings, I had been *living* with the question that (following Professor Culley's method) I have just announced, namely, the relation of my discipline, Christian systematic theology, to the two institutions, church and university, between which I necessarily moved. Forty-four years, I reflected, represents a fair amount of research. Probably it is high time that I settled down to write the thesis!

In any case, the thesis that I have just now stated, far from being a purely academic exercise, has grown out of long exposure to the question. On the basis of academic experiences that have ranged from teaching my discipline in a strictly ecclesiastical (seminary) context to teaching it in the context of the secular university, I have had to conclude that the *best* situation is one in which the concerns and objectives of both institutions, church and university, are present, together with the tensions thereto pertaining. And I mean "best," not only for the discipline itself, but also for the institutions.

Now, if that sounds like an apologia for the Faculty of Religious Studies in McGill University, so be it! I do not believe that we in Religious Studies have fully attained the potentiality for "excellence" (that favorite McGill word!) that is present for us in this situation; but I do think that such potentiality exists, and that very positive strides have been made towards its realization. And that brings me to the second reason for

choosing this particular topic.

It is disturbing, for one who has occupied the chair of Christian Theology over the past twenty years, to find that this position must now remain unfilled. That may be considered a mere fact of academic (and economic!) life today, comparable to other such facts. But from the perspective of the potential and actual service that the discipline of systematic theology offers to both university and church it can only seem to me a loss. If therefore I have chosen this particular topic, it is both because I wish to exploit (and to some extent recapitulate) my personal experience of the question.

Finally, a word about the order of the three lectures. I begin by elaborating on the question that the whole series addresses: is there a place for Christian Systematic Theology in the curriculum of the contemporary university? This will entail providing at least a brief characterization of what, in my view, Christian theology is; and I shall do this by making use of a phrase employed by Karl Barth in his American lectures of 1962. The title both of the series and of this first lecture contains that phrase: "the modest science."

The second lecture, entitled "From Sovereignty to Service," asks in particular about the relation of Christian theology to the university: how can Christian theology serve the university without sacrificing its essence as "faith seeking understanding"?

The final lecture, which I have entitled, "The Academy as (Friendly?) Critic," explores the other side of the coin, namely, whether this discipline, when it is pursued in the university context, is also able more faithfully to serve the community of belief.

## I. The Modest Science

### I.

Six years prior to his death in 1968, the Swiss thinker Karl Barth, whom no less a figure than Pope Pius X regarded as the greatest Christian theologian since St. Thomas Aquinas, made a rather reluctant if finally (for him) entertaining visit to the land of "unlimited opportunities"—a land whose special symbol, the Statue of Liberty, needed (he suggested) a certain amount of "demythologization." His lectures at the University of Chicago, where I heard them, and at Princeton, were later published under the title—for North Americans a somewhat ambiguous title!—*Evangelical Theology*, "evangelical" being understood in the European rather than the North American sense.

In these lectures, the old Barth, who with the considerable help of his friend and assistant Charlotte von Kirschbaum probably had produced more theological treatises than anyone in the whole history of Christen-

dom, summed up, as it were, his understanding of the nature of Christian theology conceived in the Protestant mode. The core of his definition, it seemed and still seems to me, lay in the phrase that is incorporated in the title of the present lectures:

Evangelical theology is *modest* theology, because it is determined to be so by its object, that is, by [the One] who is its subject....It is [therefore] an eminently *critical* science, for it is continually exposed to judgment and never relieved of the crisis in which it is placed by its object, or, rather to say, by its living subject. (Barth 1963, 7, 10)

That Barth should have classified Christian theology as a 'science' at all seems strange to many Anglo-Saxon ears; for in the English-speaking world we have come to associate the term 'science' so exclusively with the natural sciences that even the social sciences have difficulty appropriating it to their use. Several years ago when the German linguist and lay theologian Dorothee Sölle lectured in this building, she used the adjective 'scientific' several times to qualify the noun 'theology'; and in the discussion that followed her lecture a whole series of questions challenged her for what seemed to the questioners almost an oxymoron. Similarly, Gerhard Ebeling, in an essay from which I shall sometimes quote excerpts in these lectures, writes: "Even if for some reason the theological discipline as a whole were to be expelled from the university, the subject matter of theology and its objectives would always demand the highest and most rigorous *scientific* standards" (1981, 14).

The superficial explanation of the fact that English-speaking persons hear such uses of the term 'science' and its derivatives as jarring is that in German *Wissenschaft* covers not only the natural sciences (*Naturwissenschaften*) but other fields of knowledge, including what we would call the humanities or liberal arts (*Geisteswissenschaften*, literally, spiritual sciences). At a deeper level, I would say that the Anglo-Saxon usage suggests a questionable narrowing of knowledge—and in-deed of rationality—that has dogged the steps of Modernity from the outset, and has been particularly conspicuous in the English-speaking world.

For Karl Barth, as for Ebeling and Sölle, *Wissenschaft* (science) is applicable also to theology. Thus in the same lectures at the University of Chicago, Barth writes:

Theology is one among those human undertakings traditionally described as 'sciences'. Not only the natural sciences are sciences. Humanistic sciences [*Geisteswissenschaften*] also seek to apprehend a specific object and its environment in the manner *directed* by the phenomenon itself; they seek to understand it on its own terms and to speak of it along with all the implications of its *existence*. The word 'theology' seems

to signify a special science, a very special science, whose task is to apprehend, understand, and speak of 'God'. (1963, 3)

But precisely as such, says Barth, theology has to be a very modest science. He would apply the need for modesty to all human science, of course—to every human quest for knowledge (*scientia*); for the reality always transcends our grasp of it. But where theology is concerned there can be no mistaking the gap between our comprehension and the object of our comprehension. Here, modesty is not a virtue but a necessity. For the object in question is a living Subject, and the source of all life.

To assume, therefore, as a theologian, that one's *theology* is as such the truth is to demonstrate a complete misunderstanding of this science. For a school of theology or a church to claim possession of ultimate verity—what Reinhold Niebuhr called “the menace of finality” (Niebuhr 1991, 398)—is in fact to come very close to blasphemy. As I have reminded my classes in this faculty over twenty years, the language of possession—really, of any kind of possession, but especially the possession of ultimate truth—is inappropriate to the tradition of Jerusalem.

It is not only the transcendence and mystery of God (what the early Karl Barth called, following Rudolf Otto, God's “wholly otherness”) that demands modesty on the part of the theological community; it is also and simultaneously God's *livingness*—and not only God's livingness, but the livingness of the creation to which the biblical God is orientated. So in his early writing, as again in this work of his old age, Barth used a similitude that I have always found illuminating: Trying to do theology is like trying to draw a picture of a bird in flight. One stands in danger either of ending with the representation of a bird—yes, obviously enough, a bird; but one that is suspended in mid-air, forever stationary, static, fixed and unmoving (the plight of all orthodoxies)—or else of ending with an abstraction, an “oblong blur,” perhaps vaguely suggestive of movement, but so lacking in definition as to convey nothing in particular or everything in general (the plight of theological liberalism).

Obviously enough, Karl Barth did not let this twofold danger stop him from attempting to draw the flying bird! The same observation could be made about Paul Tillich, whose concept of “the Protestant principle” affirms essentially the same point as Barth's in the material I have cited; or about Martin Luther, who knew that the God who is revealed remains a hidden God (*deus absconditus*), concealed beneath the opposite, the cross; or about Thomas Aquinas, whose mystical experience of the divine made him question his own vast attempts in the *Summae* and to consider them nothing but “straw.” In fact, throughout the history of Christian thought, as I have had again and again to discover in my endeavors to convey that immense subject to undergraduates throughout these years,

what one encounters by way of Christian theology—‘great’ theology, if such a combination of words is allowable!—manifests a clear recognition on the part of the great ones that they understand full well, far better than their followers and schools, the impossibility of what they are about. In all of them—and not only in mystics like Nicholas of Cusa or Theresa of Avila—there exists very close to the surface, only half suppressed, a consciousness of the unwarranted *hubris* and bravado of their undertaking. Perhaps like Jeremiah they would rather not speak of this God, or like Paul they would dissolve, in the face of the depths they sense, into sighs too deep for words. There is in fact an almost exact correlation in this discipline, historically speaking, between depth of insight and the temptation to silence. Only the shallow speak easily of God. If those who are not shallow—those for whom ease of theological expression is a contradiction in which they cannot indulge—if persons like Paul and Augustine and Calvin and Kierkegaard and Simone Weil nevertheless *do* speak, write, and even, sometimes, write volumes, it is because they cannot do otherwise. Like the first disciples, they are conscious of existing under a certain necessity and a certain freedom. Their work is permitted—God permits theology! But it is (as Barth says) “continually exposed to judgement and never relieved of the crisis [*krisis*] in which it is placed by its object, or, rather to say, by its living subject.”

To the casual observer, works like Augustine’s *City of God* or Thomas’ *Summa Theologica* or Barth’s *Church Dogmatics* can seem incredibly and unjustifiably omniscient. How could one know enough about *this* object, rather, this living subject, to write fourteen immense volumes—or even three? But if one delves beneath the surface of such works, one is impressed again and again by their essential modesty—and, indeed, by the courage that is required of those who know the vulnerability of their knowing even to set pen to paper!

## II.

Now, if theology is in this sense above all a *modest* science, why would its presence in the university curriculum disturb anyone? It could even be considered exemplary! It could be thought to emulate the greatest virtue of the wise, in socratic terms: namely, the wisdom of knowing that one is not wise. In an atmosphere that is hardly celebrated for its modesty, the modern university, the modest science could seem almost endearing, surely, if not a reminder to all the other sciences that they, too, are in pursuit of understanding that can only be fragmentary, partial, biased, dated, incomplete—often even misleading and sometimes dangerous! And yet theology (and this applies in particular to what we call systematic theology, though it brushes off on all the other theological disciplines

as well) has provoked a steady stream of criticism whenever it is put forward as a legitimate part of the university curriculum.

That criticism has been particularly stringent in North American universities, and perhaps in Canada especially. McGill University, historically speaking, is no exception. Although, through the efforts of persons of foresight, this university achieved what many others on this continent did not—a Faculty first of Divinity, then of Religious Studies—it did not do so without difficulty; and one fears that it will not without difficulty be sustained. Our late colleague, the church historian Keith Markell, in his history of this Faculty records how in 1913 the then-Principal of McGill, Sir William Peterson, “evidently regarded [the endeavor of the four affiliated theological colleges to establish a Faculty of Divinity] as a subtle attempt to insinuate the Colleges into the University, and [he] let it be known unmistakably that such an offer could not be accepted.” Henry Birks, the chief financial backer and organizer of the idea, wrote: “The Principal stated to me that he was in favor of keeping McGill a non-religious institution; and therefore was not in sympathy with any plan for a Theological Faculty in the University or even a Divinity Hall on its grounds” (Markell 1979, 3–4). While the specifics of this statement undoubtedly reflect inhibitions and concerns of an earlier age, echoes of such sentiments can still be heard in this as in most other secular universities. Religion in general, and Christianity in particular, are regarded with a certain misgiving, and, sometimes, are vehemently castigated by otherwise gentle and generous scholars.

If we ask why this is so, some immediate explanations of course present themselves. Some object to the teaching of Christianity in public institutions because it violates the separation of church and state, subtly infringes on the freedom of individuals in democratic societies to choose their own path religiously speaking, and flies in the face of our multicultural and pluralistic social fabric. There are good reasons why such concerns have been present in our so-called “New World,” and no doubt Principal Peterson had some of those reasons in mind when he expressed reluctance over the proposal to establish a Faculty of Divinity. Yet the teaching of Christianity *as such* need not violate either political or personal religious freedom; it only does so, as I shall argue in a moment, when other factors are present. Moreover, on the positive side, an institution of higher learning that deliberately ignored Christianity—and ignored it, not only as an historical phenomenon but as a system of belief and meaning—would surely have to be questioned with respect to its... “excellence.”

Another familiar objection comes from those who insist that the proper sphere of intellectual investigation at the level of the university must be limited to matters subject to verification—if not to empirical ver-

ification, then at least some semblance of testability; and Christianity—indeed, religion as a whole—defies such a condition. By its own admission, Christianity is founded on divine revelation that is transcendent of human rationality; its criteria of authenticity are located in authoritative texts (the Scriptures); and it is answerable to a community, the church, that is not subject to the governance of the university.

In the face of this type of objection it may be said that Christianity in its most faithful representations of itself has always insisted that human experience and rationality are vital to the whole theological project; that, while this religion presupposes a basis in revelation and faith, it neither courts irrationality nor holds itself aloof from human discourse of every sort. On the contrary, from Paul's sermon on Mars Hill to the present, theology actually seeks out the wise ones of the world, and not for the sake of converting them but for its own inherent need of them. The God who is the object, rather, the living subject, of this 'science' has no interest in a religion that segregates itself self-righteously from all human society and pursues a purely arcane discipline. The God of this tradition, the living subject of theology, is from the outset oriented towards the world—"In the beginning God created...." A God who seeks communion with the world cannot be served by a theology that lives unto itself.

In fact, said Karl Barth in the same work from which I quoted earlier, theology ought properly to be called "theo-anthropology" (Barth 1963, 12), for it is really about the relationship between the Creator and this most difficult yet most crucial among the creatures, this speaking animal, *anthropos*. To be sure, claims concerning the mystery of this relation cannot in the end be subjected to the kinds of verification that came to dominate Modernity. But what relationships *are* capable of such verification, finally? Has not the entire project of Modernity come to an impasse, in fact, over the 'discovery' that the whole of reality is involved with complex, interconnected and largely unpredictable relationships that defy not only human management but even human understanding; that reality can be glimpsed—glimpsed!—only by those who have the courage of faith, *some* faith, to contemplate ultimate mystery?

It belongs to the modesty of this science that it has had to practice its quest for understanding as an exercise of faith. Understanding, in Christian theology that has been faithful to its own sources, has always meant "standing under" that which cannot be possessed or contained; glimpsing from afar, like Moses on the sacred mountain, the promise of unity and meaning, but knowing that these could not be reduced to theories, principles, doctrines, catechisms and creeds, however necessary all such things may be; knowing that even Holy Scripture (no, especially Holy Scripture!) exists, and knowing that it exists under the rule of mod-



esty. And is it not part of what is meant by the elusive term "postmodernity" (the positive part, I should say!) that we are beginning to realize as a civilization that *all* of the systems by which we have thought to capture reality and control nature are being brought to judgement before that same rule?

### III.

There have been and are, then, such objections to the teaching of Christian theology in the secular university. These objections need to be taken seriously, and responded to sympathetically. None of them will ever be silenced, nor should Christians attempt to silence them. They can, however, in most cases be answered in fairly reasonable terms. Those of us who have lived and worked in universities are familiar both with the objections and the answers. But too few of us, I think, have contemplated and come to terms with the *great* objection that informs them all, usually in unspoken or unacknowledged ways.

That great objection is directly related to the chief metaphor of this lecture: modesty. For while in the faithful theologies of the centuries the modesty factor has been clearly present; while their faithfulness in fact lies precisely in their obedience to that inherent law of their subject matter, the institutional forms in which the Christian message has been embodied *have not been modest ones*. To the contrary! With very few exceptions they have been the antithesis of modesty—and I speak in the plural, because it is all too easy for Protestants to imagine that, unlike Rome, their churches have been models of humility. And this is the point: a "modest science" in the hands of an immodest, triumphant and world-conquering institution, such as Western Christendom has in fact been, can rarely communicate its message as a modest one. Even though many of its individual spokespersons may be genuinely modest men and women—such as Dom Helder Camara was, I remember, when he visited this campus some years ago—they cast shadows not their own. They cast the shadow of sixteen centuries of Christendom.

I think that we are only just beginning, in the churches, to recognize dimly what this means; and there is an enormous resistance to this lesson in self-knowledge, especially on the North American continent. I have been speaking about Christian theology and its inherent, necessary modesty. But what does it say about this modest science when its most focal doctrines, especially the Trinity and the twofold nature of the Christ, were devised and hardened into orthodoxy only *after* the establishment of the Christian religion as the official cultus of empire? And what does it say of this modest and self-critical science when it has served, time after time throughout these centuries, to define the boundaries not only of

*ultimate* authenticity (salvation!) but of the penultimate legitimacy of human life and thought here and now; when it has been used to bolster systems of oppression, to justify slavery and racial discrimination, to legitimate hierarchic systems of authority, class and gender; to determine who might and who might not hold property, occupy public office, vote, marry, divorce, or (yes) be admitted to institutions of higher learning; when it has contributed to climates of opinion on whose basis not only individual persons but whole races could be considered inferior and sub-human?

We who have inherited the modest science and are held by its beauty must reckon with the fact that we have inherited, as well, a religious history that has all too little beauty in it, and even less modesty. Fortunately, our own epoch, perhaps beginning with Søren Kierkegaard, has witnessed the emergence *within* Christendom of those who have been graced with the willingness to accept and explore, under God, what the newer Testament calls "the judgement that begins at the household of God." Rosemary Radford Ruether in her first important book, *Faith and Fratricide*, documented chapter and verse the subtle but highly effective *doctrinal* background of Christian antisemitism, especially the supercessionist christology that implanted in the Western mind the notion that being a Jew in a world already messianically redeemed was purely redundant. James Cone and others have demonstrated how Christian ideas in the possession of a white majority have functioned to legitimate slavery and racism. George Tinker and other Christians among the First Peoples of this continent have shown some of the ways in which European theologies paved the way for missions to the indigenous peoples that took no account whatsoever of the possibility that God might have been here before the Europeans arrived. Feminist theologies have exposed the many ways in which Christian doctrinal traditions have served to marginalize women in both church and society. And we could speak in this same connection of the various theologies of liberation—Minjung, the gay and lesbian critique of entrenched doctrinal traditions, ethnic reinterpretations of the faith, and so forth. In all of these movements, insights and principles drawn from the core of the faith are employed to critique the course of Christianity in the world. The relative success of this critique, taken in its overall effect, indicates that a beginning has been made in Christian recognition of the discrepancy between the core of Christian belief and its ecclesiastical embodiment; though, on the other hand, the resistance that is still present in the face of this multifold critique indicates how reluctant the churches are to submit to "the judgement that begins at the household of God."

Even where the protest of specific groups has been absorbed into the

life of the church—as, for instance, feminist concerns have been felt in the structures of most of the liberal and moderate denominations—we have still not grasped at the level of *theological* imagination, I think, the extent to which we are even now attempting to live out of the constantinian model of the church. We still dream of big, successful churches even when we have attained goals that many deem radical. We still turn to the church growth ‘experts’ for solutions to our dwindling congregations and finances. We still clamor for influence in high places, even when we make the causes of the poor or the indigenous peoples our own. Yes, and we still feel that we have an inalienable right to be represented in the educational institutions of the land—or let us say, rather, that we have not yet fully understood that this, where it is given, is a privilege and a responsibility, not a right.

In short, modesty, after a millennium and a half of constantinian triumph, does not commend itself to us, except as a *personal* virtue. It does not yet appear to us as a necessity, a must, that is laid upon us by the very nature of our identification with the One whom the Bible describes as “despised and rejected.” What only minorities among us seem to me to have grasped is that when the Christian religion gave itself to empire, and when it ratified that fourth century decision again and again, giving itself to empire after empire, it opted not only for a different style of life but for a different theology.

For of this we can be certain: empires do not go in for modest theologies. Empires do not choose crucified human beings as their principal emblem and symbol, especially when the empires usually have something to do with the crucifixions. Empires want eagles, not doves. A triumphant civilization such as the West has been requires of its official cultus that it should be doubly triumphant. It must triumph not only in time but in eternity. That is the only reason why such civilizations are—and they usually are—religious. Human triumph alone is never wholly convincing; but when it is backed by mythologies of eternal triumph that enfold nations and peoples within them, then even the mediocre successes of those nations and peoples can seem cosmic, and their failures can be the more readily repressed.

My point is this: behind the university’s lingering suspicion of religion in general and Christianity in particular, I propose, is this history that we call ‘Christendom’. It is in so many ways a history of oppression, and of contradiction. As Hendrikus Berkhof, a learned Dutch theologian of our period, has said: “To a great extent official church history is the story of the defeats of the [Holy] Spirit” (1979, 422). The Holy Spirit has been rightly called by the formulators of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, “the Lord and giver of *life*.” But the general reputation of the

institutional church, I fear, has more to do with the regulation, circumscription and control of life than with its enhancement and blossoming. This reputation is, to be sure, only partly deserved. But that it is there—that in Christendom's decline it is still there—cannot be denied. The university itself, which did indeed emerge out of the life-force that is in this faith, could only come into its own sort of maturity by battling the continual attempts of Christian establishments to predetermine its pursuits. We may say (I think we must) that *some* of the restraints that Christians have wanted to place upon scholarship and research have been wise and good, motivated by human and worldly concern rather than by self-interest. But quite clearly that generalization cannot cover the history in question. The alienation of the community of reason from the community of faith, its parent, has not occurred only because the community of reason, adolescent-like, wished to become completely autonomous; it also occurred because the community of faith allowed itself to become provocatively heteronomous, imposing its will upon the wise, the curious and the doubting from Galileo to John Scopes and beyond. This history of triumphant self-defense is not easily overcome. It casts very long shadows indeed. And to live in the university as a Christian is to live within those shadows.

#### IV.

What is required for the overcoming—or at least the alleviation—of this alienation is rather obvious: the modesty that is inherent in the science of theology when it is pursued in the full knowledge of its object, that is, of its living subject, must become the very *modus operandi* of the Christian movement as such. And let me hasten to say, in case the point has been missed, that I am not speaking about a personality trait or style of life only. Modesty as a virtue of character is often admirable, and in that sense there are many modest Christians—heavens! even whole bands of them! But beneath that modesty there is also very often an implacable determination and a skillful form of manipulation.

When I speak of a correlation between the modest science and the life of the Christian movement, therefore, I mean something else: I mean, for instance, that the Christian movement would begin to be content with being just that, a movement, “as it was in the beginning”; that it would cease indulging in these vain and pompous and finally incongruous endeavors to become a great and powerful institution, as if the power appropriate to the people of the cross were that kind of power. I mean that such a movement would become content to *point* to Truth that infinitely transcends itself—that bird that is itself continuously in movement; and therefore that it would cease promoting itself as though it were

the possessor and dispenser of the Truth. I mean that such a movement, a *communio viatorum*, moving to keep pace with the moving and living Truth, would have as its aim the preservation and enhancement of life—the world's life, the life of the good creation; so that *that* concern would dispel its anxious pursuit of its own preservation and lend it a certain nonchalance in the face of its obvious vulnerability. I mean that such a movement might expect, in that case, to meet along the way other movements and embodiments of life, meaning and hope, in whose no doubt different ways and words the Christians could recognize reminiscences of their own mission, and whom they would not experience as rivals after the manner of every ideology that desires a monopoly on the souls and minds of human beings.

I mean, in short, that for the ideological triumphalism that has plagued Christendom in little ways from its inception, and in grand ways from the point of its political establishment, there would come to be a discipleship of the crucified One, whose emptying, humiliation, *kenosis* was the only means to the authentic glory that was his, and remains the only access to the glory that he intends for his Body, the Church. In the technical language of the tradition, what is needed for the overcoming of the false scandal of a Christianity whose *history* has too often betrayed its gospel is that what Luther named the "*theology of the cross*" must become at last also an ecclesiology of the cross. That—at least in theory—has been understood since the Reformation, and indeed, on the part of largely submerged Christian minorities, throughout Christian history.

What seems to some of us so significant about the present historical moment is that this *theory* that is so vital an aspect of the biblical, Reformation, and protesting traditions of the faith may now at last be entertained seriously as *praxis*. Why? Because the real condition of the Christian faith in the world no longer supports a theoretical, theological triumphalism. Or, to say the same thing in positive terms, the real condition of the Christian faith in the world *necessitates* that Christians acquire a theology that corresponds more nearly to their worldly reality.

For at least two centuries, Christendom has been in decline. I do not speak only quantitatively but also qualitatively. And contrary to some local rumors, I do not speak alone! It would be hard to exist *thoughtfully* in any of the once-mainline churches today and to avoid all knowledge of what the Dutch theologian Albert van den Heuvel called "The Humiliation of the Church." No less a figure than Karl Rahner, perhaps the most serious Catholic theologian of our era, in what I consider one of the best analyses of the Christian situation today (1963, 3ff.), insists that we must prepare ourselves to become a diaspora—confessing minorities in the midst of a vast, amorphous, pluralistic, secular and possibly barba-

rous age, as Jürgen Moltmann has recently said (1994).

Why is such a status to be welcomed by serious Christians? Because authenticity is to true faith more desirable than success in the usual, worldly terms. Because the prospect of a greater correspondence between the gospel and the community that bears witness to the gospel must always be welcomed by faith, even when it is feared by religion. In terms of the metaphor employed in this lecture, because the humiliation of *Christendom* could become the means by which the modesty that belongs to the core of the Christian message might at last more consistently inform the shape, internal life, and mission of the church itself.

The humiliation of the church, I say, *could become* such an agent of reformation. It will not happen automatically. The reduction of Christendom *could* mean nothing more than that—reduction, belittlement, perhaps eventual extinction. And that is what it will mean, I believe, if our only response to this metamorphosis is to try once more to reassemble the Humpty Dumpty of Christendom. If, on the contrary, we can see in this humiliation something of the “logic of the cross”; if we can perceive in this humiliation that is being thrust upon us, not a disaster but a doorway, albeit a narrow one, through which we may learn anew the meaning of Christian modesty; if we can overcome our impulse to be ‘winners’, if we can (as Rahner says) “stop straining every nerve” to baptize, marry and bury *everybody*; and if we can take hold of the process of our disestablishment and give it some direction rather than just allowing it to happen to us, we shall find that it contains possibilities that were denied the imperial church of the ages precisely because it was imperial.

Amongst those possibilities is the possibility of being in the university in a new way: not as proselytizers or insinulators of ecclesiastical concerns; not as the guardians of Christian values and virtues; not, either, as meek and fearful souls on the periphery of the academy, so conscious of the ominous shadows we cast that we avoid every hint of speaking out of our Christian identity. If once the real modesty of our ‘science’ becomes the rule as well of our being, what will characterize our being in *this* world—the microcosmic world of the university—is service and not sovereignty: the theme of the second lecture.

## II. From Sovereignty To Service

My subject in this lecture is how Christian theology may serve the university—how scholarship that is responsible in a primary sense to the community of belief may also exercise an accountable stewardship in and towards the university.

In entitling this lecture “From Sovereignty to Service” I am of course taking a very long historical view of the matter. Although I have indulged

in futile attempts over the years to make my colleagues in the other disciplines of our faculty conscious of the fact that *sacra doctrina* (the medieval designation for systematic theology) really is the "Queen of the Sciences," I am well aware of the fact that the sovereignty of Christian dogmatics belongs to the dim and distant past. As Professor Bruce Trigger observed in an essay from which I shall quote in this lecture, although "[t]he university was a creation of the medieval Christian church, which became the only significant custodian of knowledge following the demise of the Western Roman Empire...[t]oday we are so far removed from this view of universities that it requires an act of anthropological imagination to recapture it" (1994, 27ff.). It is even doubtful that *sacra doctrina* ever occupied the academic throne except nominally. As Gerhard Ebeling writes, "...the medieval university...was not absolutely dominated by theology. In terms of size, the faculty of arts was by far the dominant one. In general, the faculty of jurisprudence, which, incidentally, also included canon law, enjoyed greater attendance than theology, which was not represented at all in some universities" (1981, 9). The sovereignty of theology, such as it was then, apparently, lay in the fact that "sacred doctrine" constituted, so to speak, the most direct and immediate representation within the university of the authority structures of Christendom—in much the same way, I should think, as departments of Marxism-Leninism constituted the chief link between the universities and the political regime within the former Soviet Bloc countries.

The sovereignty that was enjoyed by Christian theology is, therefore, both qualified and, so far as we are concerned today, remote. There may, of course, be some monarchical personalities teaching theology in contemporary universities, but even they are scarcely able today to represent their disciplines in sovereign ways. As for the majority of us, we (for want of better words) 'liberal' or 'moderate' Christian professors of theology certainly do not wish to be thought monarchic. We are nice people! The point of this lecture, however, is to ask (as I have stated it in the preliminary literature): "how, without sacrificing its essence as 'faith seeking understanding', can Christian theology serve the university?"

I want to be as specific as possible in my response to this question; but before exploring—in the second part of the lecture—four aspects of such service, it is important that we should be as clear as possible about what the 'professing' of this discipline, Christian systematic theology, entails.

# I.

The stated question contains, in that connection, what I regard as an indispensable affirmation: namely, that it is of the essence of Christian

theology to be “faith seeking understanding”—the famous phrase of Anselm of Canterbury, *fides quarens intellectum*. So far as the professing of this discipline is concerned (I do not speak of the student but of the teacher), this means that faith is presupposed. And of course it may be asked (it is asked!) whether it is appropriate, in university contexts, that faith, belonging, commitment, belief should inform the profession of this subject—perhaps especially this one!

Without forgetting what I insisted upon in my thesis statement, namely, that Christians must not assume that they have an inalienable right to include their theology in the university curriculum in the first place, I must nevertheless stick by the affirmation in question: if and insofar as it is in fact Christian *theology* that a university desires or allows (and I speak now only for my own discipline, usually called in North America “Systematic Theology”), then belief and even, to some extent, advocacy must be assumed. Otherwise, one would not have theology but something else.

Now, it so happens that ‘something else’ has in our period—especially on the North American continent—become for significant numbers of academic theologians a kind of working alternative to Christian theology, with a methodology, an objective, and an impressive guild of its own. Christian theology is incorporated under the nomenclature of Religious Studies (*Religionswissenschaft*), and one seeks to investigate it objectively and dispassionately, as the belief system of other historic, living persons and communities. As a professor of the discipline, one does not so much profess it as explain how it has been and is being professed by others.

Let me insert here a note of comfort for any of my colleagues who may sense, incorrectly, that I am about to jettison Religious Studies. I am persuaded that there are very good reasons why, especially on this continent, Religious Studies and not (as in Europe) Theology (and certainly not Divinity!) should have come to constitute the umbrella organization for curricula such as ours. Moreover, I am even convinced (and after twenty years of experience in this Faculty more than ever!) that Christian theology is *best* pursued precisely within such a pluralistic academic setting (I shall speak more explicitly of that in the final lecture). Nevertheless, I believe that if and insofar as what is wanted in such a curriculum is Christian *theology*, then the methods and *metier* belonging to the concept of Religious Studies, in its more doctrinaire expressions, will not adequately or faithfully serve this discipline—any more, I should say, than those methods and that *metier* can serve the in-depth profession of any profound system of religious belief. Like all other religious traditions, Christian theology both must and can open itself to the questions and procedures of *Religionswissenschaft*. It has both learned from these and sup-



ported them; as Ebeling reminds us, "the strongest impulse towards general *Religionswissenschaft* came [originally] from [Christian] theology," even though, he adds, "the result was often the turning away from theology and its inner connections with Biblical religion" (1981, 15).

Here, however, a caveat is required: *Religionswissenschaft* received its original thrust from Christian theology, to be sure, but it was from a theology profoundly influenced by the Enlightenment of the 18th century—a theology that attempted, in the face of the critique of religion emanating from the temples of rationality, to bring Christian faith under the microscope and analyze its components, without being affected by its significance.

The interesting thing about the present status of *Religionswissenschaft*, as Francis Schüssler Fiorenza of Harvard argues in a recent paper on "Theology in the University" (1993), is that, in the light of contemporary communications theories and their influence upon "the contemporary practice of the humanities in modern universities," it may be that only in doctrinaire religious studies departments is it possible to find the supposedly 'objective' approach to the whole of higher learning exemplified.

The humanities approach their subject matter interrelating meaning and significance insofar as they raise the validity claims expressed in what is studied. Classics departments do not read *Antigone* merely to discover the mores and conflicts of Sophocles' age. English departments do not read *Hamlet* merely to discover the Renaissance ideas about human nature. Russian departments do not study *Crime and Punishment* as if Dostoevsky had nothing to teach us about how we should understand our human natures. Philosophy departments do not read Kant's *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* merely to discover the ideas of morality prevalent in a small Prussian town of the late eighteenth century. Quite the contrary! Each one of these university departments asks: what claims do these classics have upon our present understanding of ourselves, our relation to the world, and our interaction with our fellow humans in society? (Schüssler Fiorenza 1993, 34f.)

And Schüssler Fiorenza quotes Nietzsche, the enemy of Christianity (possibly because he was a son of the rectory!): "A religion which is intended to be transformed into historical knowledge under the hegemony of pure historical justice, a religion which is intended to be understood through and through as an object of science and learning, will, when this process is at an end, also be found to have been destroyed." Schüssler Fiorenza asks, "Is this the purpose of religious studies, to destroy religion...?"

He does not think so, nor do I. Yet the dissecting approach to any-

thing that lives always at least verges on vivisection. The first requisite of understanding, where Christian theology is concerned, is the one announced by Augustine: *Credo ut intelligam*—"I believe in order to understand." And you will remember that Augustine added, "Indeed, unless I believed I should not understand."

In other words, for those who intend to profess Christian theology, as distinct from analyzing the ways in which other people profess it, what Paul Tillich called the "theological circle" is unavoidable:

The theologian...claims the universal validity of the Christian message in spite of its concrete and special character. He [or she] does not justify this claim by abstracting from the concreteness of the message but by stressing its unrepeatable uniqueness. He [or she] enters the theological circle with a concrete commitment. He [or she] enters it as a member of the Christian church to perform one of the essential functions of the church—its theological self-interpretation. (1951, 10)

This does not imply that there can be no understanding of Christianity whatsoever outside of the "theological circle" (an obviously absurd idea), any more than Augustine's *credo ut intelligam* means that knowledge of the faith is denied to all who cannot manage the "Credo." What is intended, rather, is that apart from the "ultimate concern" (to use Tillich's well-known term) that faith brings to this discipline, its essence remains veiled, for its essence consists in the claim to *significance* that it makes upon life. The very objectivity that is sought by some proponents of the *Religionswissenschaft* approach to Christian theology constitutes the greatest barrier to depth of understanding; for then the object remains object, and does not become what in reality it is—in Barth's phrase, "living Subject."

This insistence upon the theological circle as the necessary condition of the professor of Christian theology presents grave problems for the pursuit of theology within the academy, however, only where the nature of the faith that is assumed by it is misrepresented. Faith does not mean the possession of extraordinary knowledge, nor does it mean a permanent condition of religious certitude. Faith describes a relationship in which, as in all relationships of depth, there is both a positive and a negative component, both assent and dissent, both trust and distrust. Faith—Augustine's "credo," without which profound understanding is denied—is a dialogue, an ongoing conversation, with its antithesis—with doubt. "Lord, I believe, help thou mine unbelief": this is the prayer of faith. Therefore there is no 'theological existence' *inside* the theological circle that is not also existence *outside* the theological circle. To cite again Tillich: "Every theologian is committed *and* alienated; he [she] is always in

faith *and* in doubt.... Sometimes the one side prevails, sometimes the other; and [the theologian] is never certain which side really prevails" (1951, 10).

For this reason, theology, when it is genuine and not merely the explication of doctrine or the exhibition of personal piety, is no stranger to the *critical* questions that must be and are put to it within the academy from the side of unbelief or skepticism. The *greatest* sort of doubt—"existential doubt" (Tillich)—belongs to the life of faith itself. While specific intellectual and psychological doubts and challenges continuously arise from beyond the theological circle, those within it are infinitely more unsettling. Luther, as usual, understood this well when he wrote, "I learned my theology where my temptations took me." That is why, to recall from the first lecture Barth's definition of "the modest science," theology lives continuously under judgement and can never mistake *itself* for the "ultimate," that is, its "ultimate concern." It also explains, as I shall try to say in the final section of this lecture, one of the ways in which that theology may serve the university—namely, as critical thought; for theology is a discipline that is highly practiced in the art of self-criticism.

My object in this first observation, then, has been to establish the point—which I think vital to the whole question of service—that the discipline of which the service is being asked is one that presupposes commitment—commitment to God that is simultaneously and necessarily commitment to God's beloved world. Such an observation is not incidental to the discussion of the ways in which theology can serve the university, because the very impulse to service emanates precisely from this stance of commitment, of faith. For it is not in any sense an abstract commitment to Deity; it is belief in and commitment to a God who is by definition orientated towards the *cosmos*, who is (as we may certainly say) "ultimately concerned" about "the fate of the earth" (J. Schell). To insist, therefore, that the essence of Christian theology is faith seeking understanding, and to assume, accordingly, that those professing this discipline will be persons of faith, is not to threaten the university with an alien presence but to include in its curriculum a 'science' that is inherently prepared to serve it, and to do so, not as a virtue, a *donum superadditum*, but as a dimension of its very essence.

## II.

With this presupposition concerning the nature of its profession established, I wish, in the second and final section of the lecture, to outline briefly four ways in which Christian theology may, should, and sometimes does render service in the contemporary university.

These four ways are all addressed to aspects of the "crisis of the uni-

versity," a crisis of which Sir Walter Moberley wrote in 1949, in a work that inspired many of us for whom part of what university meant, at its best, was experienced through the Student Christian Movement (Moberley 1949). It is more obvious today than it was in 1949 that there *is* a crisis of the university, a manifold crisis that now expresses itself in economic and practical ways that are in many cases the latter-day consequences of deeper problems that were not adequately confronted half a century ago. Obviously enough, no *one* agency, no *one* movement or discipline may resolve this crisis, or single-handedly direct its energies towards good ends. If we speak about the service of Christian theology in the university, we are speaking about a contribution towards such resolution and redirection: let us not turn the idea of service into a new form of sovereignty!

Moreover, as I shall try to state more explicitly in the final lecture, this service is by no means a one-way affair. The university serves theology, too—for instance by recalling it to its larger task and therefore away from narrow or merely fragmented and trendy preoccupations. Indeed, theology will be able really to serve the university only as it recovers its own foundations; for—as I think will become obvious in the four exemplifications of service—what enables Christian theology to be of service to the modern university in crisis is bound up with its own recollection and rethinking of the basic assumptions that caused the university, in the first place, to emerge out of the court and cathedral schools of the middle ages. Insofar as Christian theology is in touch with its own sources and resources, it is in touch with the foundational presuppositions of Western civilization that have been blurred and in many respects altogether supplanted by the pursuits of the technological society. I am amongst those who believe that a major cause of the crisis of our civilization as a whole, of which the crisis of the university is only one aspect, is what the novelist Daniel Quinn has called "cultural amnesia" (1993)—George Steiner would say "planned amnesia" (in a CBC interview, September, 1995). The service that theology can, and sometimes does, render to the university in crisis is perhaps best defined as a service of memory. But it is not for that reason a merely antiquarian service, for as Paul Ricoeur has so insightfully said, "in the last analysis, memory and hope are the same thing."

**1. Integration.** The first way in which I should like to concretize what I mean by the service that Christian theology can render to the contemporary university is bound up with the term "university" itself. The ideational foundation of the university—that original intellectual and spiritual thrust that had to express itself in the coming to be of the medieval schools that are the forerunners of the modern university—was the Christian scholastic and mystical sense of the unity of truth. Truth is one. If something is true, it is necessarily related to everything else of which it

may be said, "It is true." Truth may and indeed must be arrived at through a great variety of means and methods; hence diversity of function is to be assumed. But what made the university possible—and necessary!—was the insistence on the part of the schoolmen that no truth is alien, finally, to the One God who is its ground and source. To claim possession of truth in its fullness is blasphemous; but to *glimpse* that fullness and to be moved by it is the very goal of human creaturehood and the deepest meaning of the term 'reason'.

The crisis of the modern university is most conspicuous just at this point. For, as many have said, despite our rhetoric and our symbols, what we have is not a university but a multiversity—a collectivity of faculties and disciplines that, like the people described in Genesis 11, do not understand one another's language, and alas, in many cases do not care to understand one another's language. Nothing, in my own experience of universities, is more difficult to mount in the contemporary academy than what we call 'interdisciplinary' study and dialogue—a term that, at its best, simply attempts to retrieve the original idea of the university, to recover the "uni" of the university. The phenomenon of specialization, which is certainly a necessary aspect of any attempt to know so diverse and complex a reality as "the universe," has led to an academic Tower of Babel. The Germans, who are famous for inventing words, speak of *Fachidioten*, the literal translation of which would be something like *subject idiots*, but the more sophisticated among us would prefer to think of someone whose brilliance in a very narrow field of expertise is matched only by total incompetence where 99% of life is concerned.

I hasten to say that religion and theology are no exceptions to this limitation. C.P. Snow some four decades ago complained that few in the humanities generally had the slightest notion, even, of the second law of thermodynamics. (When I read his *Two Cultures* as a graduate student, I immediately rushed to the library to discover the meaning of that law, and also of the first. But nobody in my very good theological school helped me to relate it to, say, the doctrine of Creation or Christian anthropology.)

This loss of universality or the integration of knowledge has a long and complex history, but its expression as 'multiversity' seems to me more recent. I have the impression that the university as I experienced it in the late forties and early fifties was still in some sense at least trying to be a *uni*-versity. At least in the Faculty of Arts, students were expected to expose themselves to a considerable variety and breadth of subject matter, even if they were honoring in a particular discipline. Professors did not only write books, they actually *read*—whole books; books that were often tangential to their disciplines. You would go to their studies (not,

please, offices!) and find them reading books. No one (as apparently Principal Shapiro also observed in a recent address in this university) spoke about research, and no one that I knew or heard of expended his or her energies on grantsmanship! One had the feeling, as an undergraduate, that it was one's responsibility to become *knowledgeable*, if not actually to start out on the rocky road to wisdom. I do not want to romanticize the thing, but in reviewing my own limited historical experience of the university, I cannot help being conscious of what George Grant would have called "intimations of deprivation." At least one must say that the corrosive processes of disciplinary segregation have become more conspicuous, or that it is now much more difficult for scholars and teachers in universities to *integrate* the spheres of knowledge.

Does it matter? Certainly it matters! We are living in a world none of whose major crises can be *understood*, even, let alone responsibly addressed, by any *one* discipline or field of expertise. No, it is more excruciating than that: we are living in a world in which aspects of problems, isolated from the whole *problematique*, are responded to by this or that form of reputed expertise, with the frequent result that these responses, being fragmentary, only exacerbate the greater problem. At no time in history, surely, has it been more important for scholarship to achieve communality of dialogue. The partitioning of disciplines and the cacophony of information within the multiversity—the only center from which depth of analysis and appropriateness of response to problems *can* be expected—is not only unfortunate, it is potentially tragic.

Certainly Christian theology cannot avert this potential tragedy; but it can contribute to its aversion. (Once again let me say I am not speaking about virtue or altruism or 'university citizenship'; I am speaking about the discipline itself.) For it belongs to this discipline, and is the very heart of the risk that it must take, to attempt holistic and integrated thought. If God is One, if truth is one, if the reconciliation of all separated and alienated beings is at the center of the Christian message, if hope understood within this faith means the recapitulation and consummation of the unity that is in the mind of the Creator, then theology, which is the attempt to hold all this together in a meaningful way and to help the community of belief to enact it in the world, *must* risk universality. And let us not mistake it: in a world of specialists this *will* be perceived as a risk—and indeed often as utter folly. But the theological fools must rush in where the angelic specialists fear to tread. And if they can do this with a certain modesty, like the fools of Shakespeare's dramas, their testimony to the unity of truth and of life will not, I think, be entirely irrelevant.

**2. Critical thought.** The second way in which Christian theology may, should, and sometimes does, contribute to the university curricu-

lum is closely related to the first, but it is not always apprehended as such. I would call it the capacity for critical thought, and especially for self-criticism.

Now, I readily grant that, as it has been practiced for the most part, Christian theology has all too often sacrificed this critical—if you like deconstructive—dimension of its vocation to a need to build up and construct, a need that has been particularly skewed in North America by the cult of ‘positive thinking’ that has never ceased to plague Christianity in our context. Yet critical theology is a vital branch of systematic theological thought, and, without it, constructive or foundational theology becomes flat and unconvincing to all but the desperate. The great questions by which theology is confronted are the questions that arise within belief itself.

But this self-critical stance is not unique to theology; it is part and parcel of the cultural matrix that is the foundation of our civilization, and was introduced into that foundation by the prophetic and wisdom traditions of Israel and the philosophic traditions of the Hellenic world. The university itself is a child of that cultural spirit that lives between belief and the ongoing critique of what is believed.

However, the cultural amnesia that has overcome Western civilization as a whole, combined with other factors, has tended to rob the university of its vocation to criticism. I do not mean criticism of specific claims, including theological claims; I mean criticism as a continuous vigilance that is born of the need “rightly to divide the word of truth”; I mean the sort of critical awareness that Alexander Solzhenitsyn had in mind when, in his book, *August 1914*, he wrote of a certain school principal in pre-revolutionary Moscow whose aim was to make of her young women students “good citizens”—that is, Solzhenitsyn explains, “persons having an abiding suspicion of all authority.” It must be understood, of course, that the goal is “good citizenship,” responsible humanity; the suspicion, the critical vigilance is only a means to that end. That way of conceiving of the relation of education to society comes very close to what, at its best, Protestantism—*protestantism*—has meant.

And I think that the university, with exceptions, has practically lost that capacity. If it had retained it, or developed it in relation to modern technological society, it would have manifested a far greater resistance to the technologization of life—including its own life—than has been the case. In part, this failure of critical vigilance has been the consequence of a victory of utilitarianism. The motto of my undergraduate *alma mater* is *Veritas et Utilitas*; but it is obvious to anyone who has followed the evolution of that rather prestigious Canadian institution that the real emphasis falls on *utilitas* and not on *veritas*. As Bruce Trigger has written:

It is argued, especially during times of economic stringency, that, if universities are to go on receiving public and private support, they must play a more practical role in relation to the needs of society, which really means in relation to the priorities of governments and business.... The success already achieved in harnessing universities to the short-term exigencies of the economy has resulted in the increasingly stressed and atomistic behaviour of staff and students alike; a situation that contradicts the traditional ideal of the university as a forum where people work together to share and expand knowledge.... The very concept of knowledge as something worthwhile in itself seems threatened with extinction as this emphasis on technical and vocational training promotes the commoditization of university programs and blurs the distinction between vocational training and university education. (1993, 60)

Yet behind this 'utilitarianization' of the university there is, I think, a more insidious force begetting our cultural forgetfulness, and that is the silent capitulation of modern liberalism to the covert nihilism of a secularity that has ceased to look for meaning in any transcendent sense. As George Grant wrote in his still-too-little-studied essay on "The University Curriculum," most people,

have given up not only the two accounts of human excellence in the light of which western [humanity] had understood the purpose of existence (the one given in philosophy, the other in revealed religion), but also the very idea of human existence having a given highest purpose, and therefore an excellence which could be known and in terms of which all activities could be brought into some order. It is now generally assumed that the race has meaning...only on the condition that we view ourselves as purposive and that none of these views are truths concerning the nature of things, but only ideologies which we create to justify our man-made purposes. There is no objective purpose to human or nonhuman nature which men can come to know and in terms of which the various occasions of life can be ordered. Purpose and value are creations of human will in an essentially purposeless world. (1969, 128)

The critical spirit that looks beneath the demands of societies upon universities to produce only what is useful, and entertains a hermeneutic of suspicion in relation to the definitions of usefulness—such a spirit can only emanate from a purposive and purposing vision of what is good, just, beautiful and true. If that vision is absent, or held in a merely rhetorical way, criticism will be limited to penultimate and mainly short-term concerns.

Whether Christian theology has deployed its powers of criticism with anything like imagination may certainly be questioned; but in its most faithful expressions it has exemplified and still exemplifies the spirit of constructive criticism as essential to the gaining of wisdom; and if



these are what inform the task of theology in the university then that discipline can be a source of courage among those in our universities who seek to withstand the pressures of dominant organizations upon the academy to supply only what they deem useful.

**3. The truncation of rationality.** A third way in which Christian theology may, should, and sometimes actually does, contribute to the university curriculum is related to the term that I have just used in passing: wisdom. Much is said today about knowledge—*scientia*. In the first lecture, we applied that category, following Barth, to the ‘science’ of theology itself—“the modest science.” Theology, we affirmed, investigates a body of knowledge, including a very vast literature. But since the ultimate objective of this investigation is to comprehend an object that is no object and cannot be objectified—is in fact wholly distorted if objectified—the purpose of theological investigation is hardly adequately named knowledge, however exalted. What the tradition of Jerusalem is after is not *scientia*, however ‘scientific’ theology must try to be. What the tradition of Jerusalem in both its Jewish and its Christian expressions is desirous of producing in those who pursue it is *sapientia*, wisdom—in Greek, *sophia*. In fact, it is assumed that the only justification for the pursuit of knowledge is the acquisition of wisdom—and (as I shall have to say in the fourth observation) that the only justification for the pursuit of wisdom is the still-greater service called love.

As Professor Trigger and many others have testified, it is difficult to pursue even knowledge, broadly conceived, in the contemporary university. It is even more difficult to consider the aim of university education the acquisition of wisdom, or its beginnings. There are those in our midst who will say outrightly that the purpose of a university is to broker information. Indeed, to many, the concept ‘wisdom’ is an archaic expression whose use ought perhaps to be limited to poetry. That we name ourselves *homo sapiens*, and even *homo sapiens sapiens*, is only, one must guess, part of this poetry! For the paucity of *wisdom* is surely the most conspicuous thing about our technically clever civilization.

On November 10th, 1994, a person to whom I would happily apply the adjective wise appeared in this university and presented the Newman Lecture sponsored by the McGill Chaplaincy, under the title (addressed to the university), “Is Anybody Home?” Ursula Franklin of Massey College in the University of Toronto, an applied scientist and Renaissance person *par excellence*, did not use the word “wisdom” in her lecture, but she used a word that is very close to it: “understanding,” as in the phrase, “faith seeking understanding.” Unfortunately, I cannot quote verbatim from Dr. Franklin’s excellent address, which was wonderfully nuanced, but the essence of it was something like this:

The purpose of education as pursued in universities is growth in knowledge and understanding. There is an unbreakable link between knowledge and understanding. All the knowledge in the world, without understanding, is useless. We drown in a sea of data, of sheer information (and in that connection she spoke about the great god, Internet); without understanding, information overwhelms us. Today, of course, the language of the marketplace dominates everything: it is found in the university, the church, and everywhere. The marketplace does not place a premium on understanding; in fact, it can only be suspicious of it. (Kurt Vonnegut, whose wonderful 1952 novel, *Player Piano*, I have just read once more in my old age, would add: because understanding is potentially and actually dangerous to the marketplace, the very seedbed of dissent.) The university, said Franklin, *ought* to resist the intrusion of the marketplace, which is far more insidious than any authoritarian religion. It should say, "No, our business is to inculcate knowledge and understanding." This it seems wonderfully reluctant to do. In the end, however, she asserted, the preoccupation of our civilization with the marketplace will prove a temporary thing. It will be surpassed by the 'however-clauses' that life is writing, and by the diversity that is present and, in the long run, cannot be repressed. In the future, it may well be, those who want to acquire only skills or collect data will be able to do so electronically, quite apart from the university. And then those of us who remain in these old institutions shall have to discover anew what universities are for. She concluded with the interesting remark that she had read somewhere on a church signboard: "If you were accused of being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?" and she asked: "If you were accused of being a member of a university, would there be enough evidence to convict you?"

I have introduced this *précis* of Ursula Franklin's address to illustrate, in a concrete way, that there are significant voices—little communities of wisdom—within big, contemporary multiversities that are as critical of the reductionism that has impeded the real task of the university as anyone on the outside—and on the whole, more so. It would be splendid to be able to say that Christianity, both inside and outside the universities of this continent, manifests as much concern for the development of wisdom within our society as do these intellectual minorities. But whatever may be said of the institutional Christianity, I know that the *theological* tradition in which we stand is one that requires of all of us, including those Christians who never had the privilege of higher education, that we submit ourselves to the quest for wisdom. Faith, if it is faith and not something else altogether, seeks understanding. If and insofar as that quest informs Christian theology (and it would not be theology apart from this) its presence in the university curriculum can only serve to

make the university a better university.

4. *Service informed by love.* Finally, there is the greatest gift that Christian theology, when it is true to its Source, is able to symbolize in the university context: the habit of service itself, namely, of service informed by love. For the end that governs everything else that I have claimed belongs to this modest science—its sense of the unity and indivisibility of all that is; its capacity for critical vigilance; its quest for wisdom and understanding: the end, I say, that governs all these is that those who teach and who learn this discipline may more fully participate in the love that is the essence of its object, that is, of its living Subject.

This greatest of the three Pauline virtues—faith, hope and love—applies also to the vocation of theology within the university; for the strictest and in that sense most critical aspect of the judgement under which, as faith seeking understanding, Christian theology lives is precisely the one that Paul identified when he wrote, “If I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.” Nothing! (1 Cor. 13:2).

Universities, like states, probably cannot be expected to love—even though one of the mainstays of the classical university curriculum, philosophy, at least announces in its nomenclature that it loves wisdom. Probably the most that one can ask of universities is that they seek the unity that is in truth, the wisdom that may come with depth of knowledge, and the justice that cannot be brushed aside by those who pursue such truth and such wisdom. But at least one must ask *about* universities, as indeed about all human institutions, whether or not they promote an atmosphere in which love may be experienced—or at very least, where that experience is not impeded. I do not mean only erotic love, which is obviously well-represented in universities; and I do not even mean only philanthropic love, which is sometimes present in universities. I mean rather *agapeic* love, which I would like to translate, following John 3:16, as love of the world. (And I am also thinking of the biography of another wise woman of our epoch, Hannah Arendt, which is called just that—*To Love the World*.) This is a love born of the greater proximity and, I should say, the greater *compassion* that true knowledge of beings evokes in us—of all beings, all creatures and processes, all life. If I were conducting the annual survey of Canadian universities by *McLean's* magazine, the question I would consider the most decisive would be: Does the curriculum of this university in any way reflect the desirability of loving that which one is caused to understand?

I cannot forget a sentence that I read years ago in a book entitled *The History of Nature*. Its author, whom I once had the privilege of meeting, is a great German physicist and lay theologian, Carl-Friedrich von

Weizsäcker, and this is the sentence: "The scientific and technical world of modern man is the result of his daring enterprise, knowledge without love." And the next sentence links all this with the topic of service: "Such knowledge is in itself neither good nor bad. Its worth depends on what power it serves" (1949, 190).

Once again, one must honestly and humbly acknowledge, as a Christian, that empirical Christianity stands as much under judgement as any academy when it comes to love of the world, perhaps more; for we Christians ought to have known that love is of the very essence of our object, that is, of our living subject. The concrete consequences of the absence of this love in our *Christian* knowing confront us everywhere today!—for instance, our culpability at the level of thought and deed in relation to the natural environment. But at least of this discipline of theology at its best one may say that it has sometimes exemplified what Simone Weil so beautifully claimed is at the very heart of the faith that seeks understanding: "Faith is the experience that the intelligence is enlightened by love." To the extent that the faith that theology attempts to understand is *that* faith, it has much to contribute to the prospect that the university will be an environment in which not only unity, critical vigilance and wisdom, but also, sometimes, love of the whole, may begin to be experienced.

### III. The University As (Friendly?) Critic

In this final lecture, I want to direct your attention to the last clause of the thesis that I stated in the first lecture, which asserts that the church also benefits from the teaching of Christian theology in the university context—"because [as I put it] without the critical dialogue of the academy, belief too easily degenerates into credulity, sentimentality or ideology." I shall conduct this discussion in two stages. In the first, I want to characterize the positioning of Christian theology in the university as one of *tension*. This tension, which I tried to suggest in the lecture title by the bracketed and interrogative adjective, "friendly?", seems to me the necessary relational background for understanding why the critique that comes from the side of the university ought to be considered beneficial to the community of belief. Having reflected on that tension, I wish then in the second part of the lecture to suggest some of the ways, concretely, that the positioning of theology in the university context benefits the Christian movement at a time in its history when it is particularly in need of precisely what can be brought to it by an atmosphere of critical scholarship.

#### I.

There is tension involved in the location of Christian theology within the secular academy. This tension may be more conspicuous or less, depend-

ing upon historical, personal and other factors in specific situations. It will be felt to some degree in all of the subject areas associated with Christianity, but it will be most evident in the case of Christian systematic or dogmatic theology; for in this discipline Christian scholarship has to go beyond the texts and sources of faith and venture affirmations of the *significance* of the faith for the social context. To do so, as I have already argued, commitment on the part of the teacher must be assumed; and therefore with this discipline the element of subjectivity, and to some extent of advocacy, must be present—qualities which, to the stricter sects of value-free scholarship, are bound to seem questionable. This is the reason why, while secular universities have allowed biblical and historical disciplines associated with the Christian religion to become part of their curricula, they have often been much more reluctant to permit theology such a place; that, I believe, is also a minor motif in the history of this faculty. Theology, for some reasons that are justifiable but for others that are not, has had difficulty shaking off a reputation for indoctrination.

This tension is not always pleasant, and occasionally it can be quite unpleasant—or worse, unproductive. There have been moments during these past twenty years (a few, not many) when it has seemed to me that the barriers to attempting to teach this discipline in a university context were such that it would be better to confine systematic theology to the seminary. In the final analysis, however, I have had to conclude that undertaking this modest science in the university *enhances* both its prospect for depth and its service to the community of belief. And that conclusion has been drawn, not by overlooking or minimizing the tension, but by trying to live consciously within it.

Concerning this tension, I want to make three brief observations: it is inevitable; it contains certain temptations; and it is full of creative potential.

*First*, why is the tension inevitable? Straightforwardly put, it is inevitable because those involved in the teaching of Christian theology in such a context are conscious of their responsibility to two communities of discourse whose methods and priorities are not made easily compatible—the university, which by its nature as a community of open-ended inquiry must maintain a certain skepticism in relation to *all* systems of meaning, and especially those that seem to posit finality; and the church, which at its best is also skeptical of such systems but which cultivates its peculiar openness to mystery through commitment to a specific spiritual-intellectual tradition—a commitment that our immediate predecessors in this discipline named “the scandal of particularity.”

Of course, this tension will not exist if what is pursued instead of Christian theology is a purely historical or phenomenological investiga-

tion of the Christian faith, under the aegis, perhaps, of the history of doctrine or *Religionswissenschaft*; for then the ecclesiastical or 'belonging' side of the teacher's identity is removed and the subject matter can (in theory) be treated in the same detached manner that, according to some, must typify all higher learning. But I have already insisted that when this happens, even if it really *happens* and is not just the appearance of a happening, what is being pursued is not any longer Christian theology. For the belonging or commitment dimension is not incidental to the kind of understanding ("standing under") that this discipline inherently demands. The absence of commitment may indeed render the subject matter of Christian doctrine tension-free, but it will also constitute it a reduction of itself.

Those who aspire to teach Christian theology within the context of the secular university must therefore reckon with the prospect and reality of this tension; and they should not be surprised when the tension occasionally becomes intense.

*Second*, the tension involved in such an arrangement courts typical temptations. No tensions in life are free of temptation, for the temptation arises quite simply from the fact that none of us likes to live within a state of tension. The habit of resolution is endemic with us, and more particularly with those of us who are products of a bourgeois society that puts a premium on control and on comfort—an educational handicap that is as effectively present in universities, almost, as in churches. The tension that inheres in the positioning of a discipline involving commitment within a community that is suspicious of commitment can be and frequently is resolved, falsely, in one of two ways: either one accentuates one's commitment to the academy in such a way as to minimize one's responsibility to the community of faith; or one emphasizes one's belonging to the community of faith so as to avoid existential entanglement with the claims of the university.

A good deal of professional theology today, I believe, has been tempted by the former type of false resolution. There are, in fact, very few amongst the thousands of professional Christian scholars teaching in academic contexts in North America today who undertake their study, research and teaching as if the churches had some kind of claim not only on their personal lives but also on their scholarship. The coming to be of departments of religion in North American universities and colleges in the 1960s and beyond ensured that many young scholars could find work in these, and could do so without taking on the burden of answerability to religious communities. While such persons often maintain personal connections with religious communities, they have been able to pursue their careers in relative independence of the churches, writing articles

and books for their various guilds and assuming, often, that the churches would in any case be incapable of pursuing the faith at their level of inquiry. The result is that the churches have been deprived of this scholarship, and (more regrettably still) have therefore been all the more vulnerable to simpler and frequently simplistic versions of the faith, which have gained a stronger hearing in our society through the mass media. Though it is impossible to calculate such influence precisely, it is by now pretty evident that so-called mainline Protestantism has suffered profoundly by the withdrawal of serious scholarship from its courts and sanctuaries.

The opposite way of resolving the tension in question, namely, by pursuing the kind of loyalty to the religious community that sits lightly to the requirements of reason and the academy, is more conspicuous in theological colleges and undergraduate church colleges than in university departments or faculties of religious studies. In the Canadian situation, which is in this respect different from the independent seminary approach to Christian theology in the United States, theological colleges of the older or, as I have learned from Catherine Keller to call them, once-mainline denominations have almost always been affiliated with universities—meaning, in our context, state-supported institutions. Affiliation *can*, I believe, be something of a viable and even an interesting way of working out this relationship; but in my experience it has more frequently meant, in practice, a formal arrangement that allows each institution—university and seminary—to pursue its own way relatively unimpeded (perhaps even unnoticed!) by the other.

The positioning of Christian theology in the curriculum of the university involves inevitable tension, then; it courts certain temptations through the false resolution of this tension; but, *third*, when it is accepted and entered into consciously, this tension, like most others, can produce certain positive gains that it would be difficult to reproduce in circumstances that lack such a tension—for instance, the independent ecclesiastical seminary.

If for a moment I may be allowed to draw upon the personal experience to which I alluded in the first lecture, I would say that during my years at McGill I have been required, as a Christian theologian, to develop dimensions of contextual awareness that it would have been very difficult to acquire in a seminary—even though, I hasten to add, the seminary in which I did teach for a decade was at the time unusually sensitive to the world by which it was surrounded. I would certainly not claim to have taken full advantage of the potentiality for the development of such contextual awareness that is afforded by a great university like McGill; but even being present in such a setting, being conscious of it, so to speak,

out of the corner of one's eye as one goes about one's specific responsibilities, makes for certain gradual and perhaps imperceptible changes in the way that one practices one's discipline. Having in the first place to represent this discipline faithfully (*faithfully!*) in an atmosphere that entertains an abiding if usually very polite doubt concerning its viability; having to guide doctoral students (themselves, almost invariably, committed Christians) through dissertations that must satisfy the requirements of impartial scholarship; having to introduce undergraduates to the evolution of Christian thought, and to do so with gratitude for this specific religious tradition while, at the same time, maintaining sensitivity towards those agnostic, or Muslim, or Jewish, or Bahá'í students in one's class whose tradition it is not; having to present Christian systematic theology in an ecumenical forum, mainly for students who are candidates for ministry, but doing so in the classrooms of a university many of whose scholars would want to question one's every other sentence; and withal, being part of a faculty where Christian theology had to be *Christian* theology, because there were quite obviously other kinds of theology, represented very concretely in the persons of some of one's colleagues (and besides, nobody in the university would understand the meaning of such an arcane term as 'Systematic Theology'): all such aspects of this experience have profoundly influenced my own theological development. They have caused me to 'do theology' with an awareness of the world that I think I might not have gained in the more enclosed situation of the seminary; an awareness, I repeat, of the world; for with all its contemporary problems and possibilities the university remains a microcosm of our world.

The principle that is at work in the positioning of theology within the academy is, it seems to me, a very familiar one—one that informs most relationships of depth. It is the dialectic of proximity and distance, involvement and detachment, engagement and disengagement. Creative relationships are usually relationships in which there is a certain tension between these two polarities. Too close proximity detracts from the prospect that one will have something to bring to the relationship from beyond its own dynamism. Too great distance runs the risk of lacking the participatory ties that are necessary to communication. When theology is pursued within the community of belief, such as a seminary, the danger (at least potentially speaking) is that the high degree of engagement that this involves will limit the extent to which the belief of the community will be confronted by the world in which it lives. When, on the other hand, theology, or some academic substitute for it, is pursued within a community of learning, the danger is that the high degree of detachment that this entails will circumscribe and reduce the subject by depriving it of the existential commitment that is, we have seen, of its essence.



I can best illustrate my meaning here by describing a specific occurrence. One of the most promising students I have known in these McGill years (and there have been many such!) was an undergraduate in the humanistic studies program, the only program of the university that even attempts to retain the old concept of liberal arts education over against the norm of early specialization. During his undergraduate years, this student, an Acadian, had become greatly interested in theology, and at the end of his studies here he contemplated a vocation in the Roman Catholic priesthood. But he wished to test this vocation by doing Master's work in a situation where he could have, so to speak, the best of both worlds, that of the secular academy and that of the theological school.

Being wholly unbiased in these matters, I recommended that he apply to the joint program in religion offered by Columbia University and Union Theological Seminary. He did this; and when I was in New York a year or two later I sought him out and inquired about his progress. His response to my question about the program offered jointly by these two important centers of learning is one that I have not forgotten: "I appreciate," he said, "the commitment—even the intense commitment—that characterizes the seminary in which I take my morning classes; and I appreciate the academic detachment that characterizes the university in which I take my afternoon classes; but I am glad that I have the simultaneous experience of both institutions, because either one without the other would be insufferable."

An institution that is able to elevate detachment to the degree that this has happened—at least rhetorically—in most contemporary universities has come very far not only from the tradition of Jerusalem but from that of Athens as well. At the same time, an institution that cultivates a high degree of involvement, and even tends to suspect any sort of critical detachment of nefarious intent, runs the risk of substituting passion and piety for understanding. And that, it seems to me, is the danger of theological seminaries and colleges in our historical moment. Against that danger, the positioning of theology (not just the study of religion, but theology) in the university introduces a number of concrete correctives. I will conclude by describing four of these.

## II.

**1. *Faith demands thought.*** The pursuit of theological understanding in the context of the university counteracts the propensity of religious communities to give way to thoughtless or thought-poor forms of belief. For most of my professional life, I have heard Christian educators bemoan the 'anti-intellectualism' of conventional, institutional Christianity—and with reason. It would be more accurate, however, to name this phe-

nomenon capitulation to thoughtlessness or intellectual sloth. The problem, I think, is not that the churches and churchgoers are *against* the rigors of the intellect (in that sense, anti-intellectual); rather, they are insufficiently challenged to *think* the faith. (Let me say that one of the most surprising aspects of the feedback that I have had from my trilogy, especially the first volume, *Thinking the Faith*, has come from journalists and other media people who are apparently taken aback by the association of faith with *thought*. I do not fault the journalists for this; they are only reflecting the religious situation. They are evidently so accustomed to the distinction between believing and thinking that combining these activities, as in my title, seems to them very unusual.)

There are many reasons why this is so. For one thing, the type of Christianity that—due especially to the influence of televangelism—has practically come to *define* Christian belief for the majority of people in our context is *not* a thinking faith, and much of it *is* frankly anti-intellectual. ‘True belief’, born-again religion, regularly caricatures and castigates intellectuals and discourages or even demonizes critical thought. I shall return to that in a later observation.

Where the once-mainline churches are concerned, the situation is more complex. We should realize that, for by far the greater share of its history and by far the greater number of its adherents, the Christian religion has heretofore not depended upon thoughtfulness for its survival. Generation after generation has been swept into the church by the sheer power of convention. With great exceptions, Christian educators, including clergy, have not been trained to assume that thought—sustained and disciplined thinking—is vital to the life of faith, their own or their charges. In particular, they have not been equipped to understand practice and dialogue with *critical* thought, with existential doubt—their own included. Depth of thought only becomes vital to the life of faith in the non-established or post-established situation, where faith and membership in the community of faith is no longer an automatic process but the result of decision—and, as Karl Rahner has said, decision taken not only once but again and again, and in the face of much evidence to the contrary! In the diaspora situation that is the future of all but the most entrenched forms of ecclesiastical authoritarianism, non-thinking and thought-poor forms of faith will not be able to survive. And we have already more than enough evidence of this fact in the denominations that are represented in this room.

Let me reiterate what I already affirmed in the first lecture: faith certainly *transcends* reason. It involves decision and risk, as do all relationships of trust. But if it is reduced to credulity or sentiment or the kind of ‘spirituality’ that disdains thought in favor of feeling, it limits itself to cir-

cles of shared experience (not to say cliques!) isolated from the larger world of human discourse, *which God loves*. And even within those closed and comfortable circles it is ill-equipped to deal with the doubt and dissent that can by no means be kept out. *Fides quarens intellectum*—which, being translated, does not mean that faith has a mild interest in theology but rather, as Karl Barth in his work on Anselm interpreted it, it means “faith’s voracious desire for understanding” (1960, 24).

The struggle against intellectual sloth is therefore a dimension of faith itself. It does not originate with the communities of rationality external to the community of faith; indeed, the university has its origins in this very drive of *authentic faith* to understand what it believes. But the university, when it is true to its own vocation, rekindles the quest for understanding that belongs to faith, and reinforces the efforts of those within the believing community to equip that community for its life and mission in a world that is no longer credulous, and no longer automatically ‘Christian’.

**2. Critique of exclusivity.** The location of Christian theology in the university context obviates the faith-community’s temptation to exclusivity. I regard exclusivity as a temptation, not because I espouse a liberal universalism that fears every kind of particularity, but because exclusivity does a terrible injustice to the *kind* of particularity that is at the core of Christian belief. To be Christian, and to be so intentionally and thoughtfully, is to embrace a particular story, a particular account of reality. There would be no reason to claim this identity apart from such a decision; and, fortunately, we are finally getting beyond the point where other reasons for being Christian (such as its being respectable or useful in keeping families together!) must be seen as patently superfluous. As Paul Tillich wrote, “Christianity is what it is through the affirmation that Jesus of Nazareth, who has been called ‘the Christ’, is actually the Christ, namely, he who brings the new state of things, the New Being” (1957, 97). The particularity of this stance, we observed, has been accurately identified as a *skandalon*—a scandal.

But there are scandals and there are scandals. The question that must be asked about *every* particularity (and there is no faith—religious, quasi-religious, or purely secular—that altogether transcends particularity) is how the particular functions. Some particulars function to exclude: *my* child, *my* father, *my* country—“right or wrong!” And in the most vociferous forms of Christianity on this continent today, one hears about *my* Jesus!—and how *my* faith in *my* Jesus as understood in *my* church is the only salvation; all else is excluded.

But we know that particulars may also function to *include*—and we know that there is no universality that does not pass through *some* partic-

ular. Some of us who are parents of *very, very* particular children, for instance, would testify that our commitment to the future of the world as a whole—to the universal—has been shaped by the fact that the future, for us, is not an abstract thing; it has faces. And some of us would testify to the fact that the scandalous particular identified in the Petrine confession at Caesarea Philippi—"Thou art the Christ"—has caused us to be *far more open to the 'other'* than, on our own initiative, we should ever have been. That particular, Jesus, that "door," as he once named himself, opens into a very large room, in which we meet many others who "are not of this fold."

Yet it is true all the same that that particular, Jesus, continues to function for many and perhaps even most Christians on this continent, not to include but to exclude; and it is true, also, that this is a special temptation for religious communities whose discourse is too closely confined to their own kind. It is easy, it is even usual, for people to indulge in declaration and acts of *a priori* exclusion—that is, in the absence of those living beings who are actually excluded. The most horrendous expressions of anti-Judaism, preparing the way for Auschwitz, were articulated by people (including Martin Luther) who had few if any intimate contacts with Jews; so few, indeed, that they forgot that Jesus himself was a Jew.

Again I would say, therefore, that the fight against exclusivity is inherent in the Christian faith in itself, thoughtfully contemplated, and thoughtfully contemplated, especially, in the multi-religious context. But the temptation to exclusivity remains a dimension of intensive commitment when it is *not* pursued thoughtfully; and in that sense the university as context of Christian theological discourse can reinforce that in the faith which both militates against exclusivity and fosters its inherent drive to include the other without absorbing the other.

I have therefore always regarded it as one of the greatest assets of this Faculty of Religious Studies, where the pursuit of my own discipline as a Christian theologian is concerned, that this community incorporates not only academic studies of non-Christian religions but does so in a manner that affords those religions the same opportunity as it affords Christianity, namely, the opportunity to articulate themselves from the perspective of *belief*, and not merely as religions to be considered in a so-called detached way (which is a contradiction in terms). If there is any way in which the discipline of Christian systematic theology could be enhanced in this Faculty (besides appointing my successor!) it would be, not by the old Christendom route of ensuring its dominance, but by incorporating still other religious perspectives into this community, especially Islam and Judaism, thus creating better opportunities for real dialogue between all of the major faith-traditions.

**3. *The conditional character of religious authority.*** Including Christian theology within the university curriculum and introducing it to candidates for ministry in that context, as do two of our degree-programs, inhibits the religious propensity (I would say the religious *temptation*) to turn penultimate authorities into ultimate authorities. Here, as with the two previous observations, I am not speaking about a theoretical temptation but about a very concrete one, one that is consistently yielded to within Christian circles on this continent.

Biblicism, for example. I am a card-carrying Protestant. I actually believe the Reformation principle *sola scriptura*. I agree entirely with those who say that when Christianity abandons the Bible it abandons the faith; more importantly, it leaves the faith open to co-option by all sorts of world views, ideologies and trends that are far more confining and autocratic and exclusive than the Bible, *thoughtfully* listened to. (I shall say more about these other influences in the final observation.)

As an authoritative text, the Scriptures of Judaism and Christianity are not only indispensable to historically-grounded faith traditions, they are also wonderfully wise. And a key, if not *the* key, to their wisdom is that they never (yes, I think never!) draw our ultimate attention to themselves, but with great consistency they point to an ultimacy that they know they cannot contain. That ultimacy, in the case of the newer Testament, is bound up with the name that we have just considered: Jesus. And we have seen that, on the assumed basis of Scripture, many Christians on this continent speak and act as if they were in possession of the ultimate truth invested in that name. They lend ultimacy to the penultimate authority of the tradition of biblically-based doctrine—to christology. But before christology there was Jesus, the Christ, and the biblical witness to this Person is wonderfully restrained. Modest! There is in it an insistent and sustained resistance against the temptation to covet ultimacy for itself. One of the most touching instances of that modesty, I have always thought, is contained in the gospel to which biblicists regularly turn for confirmation of their biblicism, John, whose account ends with the acknowledgment of its own utter incapacity to contain the truth to which it has wanted to point: "But there are also many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose the world itself could not contain the books that would be written" (21:25).

Because the Reformers of the 16th century understood this scriptural modesty, they did not make the *sola scriptura* the first principle of their theological renewal. It is only the formal or methodological principle in relation to the material or content principle, which comes first: *sola gratia, sola fide, per Christum solum*. Nevertheless, Protestantism, particularly in its so-called New World expressions, has seldom grasped this

nuance of Reformation thought. Protestant conservatism has consistently elevated the Bible to the status of ultimacy; and Protestant liberalism, in reaction, has consistently relativized biblical authority. Neither position has shown itself capable of grasping the subtle but by no means irrational theology of biblical authority in Reformation thought—particularly, I would say, in the thought of Luther. The result, at the level of ecclesiastical authority, is a never-ending battle between conservative biblical absolutism and liberal relativism; and at the level of the laity an abiding confusion that fluctuates between an almost magical reverence for the Book as such, and practical ignorance of or indifference to its actual content.

Once again I would say that the struggle against the false elevation of penultimate authority (and the same point that I have applied to Scripture could be made concerning ecclesiastical authority) is inherent in the core of the faith itself, with its acknowledgment of the sole authority and sovereignty of *God*. But human weakness grasps after authority as its own possession, and in many ways religious communities cater to and, unfortunately, satisfy just that weakness. It is perhaps the essence of *religion*, as distinct from faith, to do precisely that.

The university can and does inhibit that religious temptation, and in doing so the university can only serve the better purposes and traditions of the Christian faith. It inhibits that temptation by insisting upon the conditional character of all authority, and by creating an atmosphere of skepticism, or at least of unsatisfied inquiry, in relation to all claims to ultimacy, whether the ultimacy of sacred texts, or well-established doctrinal traditions, or entrenched forms of institutional authority. It is very interesting that when Martin Luther found himself accused of heresy by his church he asked that his position be examined by the universities of Paris and Cologne. It probably shows the weak side of that argument, I grant, when one recalls that Henry the Eighth turned to Cambridge University against the church when he wanted to change his marriage partner! Nothing is perfect! Nevertheless, the university remains, for a critical faith that is aware of its *deepest* sources of authority, an invaluable resource.

**4. *Informed engagement of the social context.*** And finally, the university context of Christian theology helps to restrain the temptation of religious communities to succumb to powerful and constantly changing influences, trends, spiritualities and ideologies that sweep through society and, often, find eager adherents in religious communities that have become confused or uncertain about their own foundations. Such confusion and uncertainty are conspicuous today as Christendom enters its end-phase, and they are especially noticeable among the liberal and mod-

erate forms of the church that are most directly affected by this metamorphosis. In these circles, the situation is often ripe for the incursion of powerful social influences and the disputes surrounding our various "culture conflicts" (Moltmann); for these can seem to revitalize the spirit of the community and provide engrossing agendas for persons within it who are often its most sensitive and enthusiastic adherents. The problem here is not that such agendas are extraneous to the concerns of faith—in many if not most instances they are, on the contrary, essential areas of reflection and action for any community that claims, as Christians do, to be vigilant for humanity and the good creation. The problem is that, all too often, such agendas are taken up by Christians uncritically, in such a way as to neglect considering them from an informed Christian perspective. Christians, like many others, are regularly caught up in these culture-conflicts, and they are enticed to buy into them on one side of the conflict or the other, depending upon their personal or peer group predispositions. They may invest the ready-made and often simplistic analyses and responses with a nomenclature and symbolism drawn from the Christian vocabulary, but they do not ask whether the Judeo-Christian tradition has something *distinctive* to contribute to the basic understanding of these conflicts. Christian participation in the conflicts, apart from surface differences, thus becomes indistinguishable from the involvement of other groups in society—as conservative as they, as liberal as they, as radical as they. Not that what is important is maintaining Christian distinctiveness; but in fact with all of these culture-conflicts, whether we are thinking of ecological, racial, gender, national, technological or other areas of contemporary concern, Christian theological and ethical traditions have in fact a great deal to contribute.

There is a way in which the agenda of the Christian movement is always being determined by the world, and especially by its conflicts; but when the world is allowed not only to set the agenda but to determine how it shall be addressed then, I would say, the courage, wisdom and imagination has gone out of the Christian movement, and it is likely only to reflect its social context rather than to *engage* it. The extent to which this has happened in the liberal and moderate Protestant churches seems to me alarming.

We cannot expect the university to correct this situation (partly, of course, because the university itself has too consistently capitulated to external pressures in the setting of its agenda). Insofar, however, as the university is able to recover its own traditions of integration and universality, tolerance, and critical inquiry, it can help the Christian movement in its theological and ethical reflection to avoid domination by factions and societal pressures that are less than full and faithful representations

of what the gospel understands by the good. From its tradition of universality, the university will demand of Christian theology that it relate its contextually-based concerns to the perennial questions of being and meaning, of the good, of truth and beauty. From its tradition of tolerance, the university will require of theology that it explain its accusations of wrongdoing and not devolve into enemy-imaging. From its tradition of critical inquiry the university will require Christian theology to justify its ethical choices with a rationality sufficiently accessible to others to avoid the charge of arbitrariness.

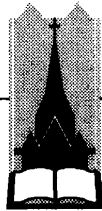
I know, of course, that I am speaking of a rather ideal university! And I have been at some pains, especially in the second lecture, to show that the contemporary university is far from ideal! Clearly, when we think of the contemporary university, as when we think of the contemporary church, we are thinking of institutions that are in both cases in crisis and in existential need. But in both there are also significant minorities who know this about these institutions, and such knowledge is the beginning of the wisdom that is needed for change. Surely the truth is that these two institutions, historically interrelated, historically in many ways estranged, yet both of them seeking in their best representatives new, or old, or at any rate better ways of being responsible for the fate of the earth, may in these difficult times rediscover and affirm one another. And that, in sum, is the most important reason I can think of why Christian theology, in company with many other faith traditions, ought to be undertaken in the midst of the contemporary university.

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