

Introduction to John Webster, “The Church as Theological Community”

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At the time of his death, John Webster was arguably the premier systematic theologian on the English-speaking scene. At the very least, his was rarefied air: he was one among a handful (Rowan Williams, Kathryn Tanner, Sarah Coakley, the late Robert Jenson) whose work, whatever one’s criticisms, commanded an international audience. His premature death came at the outset of a projected five-volume dogmatics. Those of us who eagerly anticipated its publication will always wonder what we missed.

Not that he left us with scraps. Webster was extraordinarily prolific in his career of more than three decades. After studying at Cambridge and a brief stint at an English theological college, he taught at Toronto School of Theology from 1986 to 1997, at which point he moved to Oxford. Toronto was an extraordinarily formative time for him, and decisive for the maturity of his theological thought. He felt that it liberated him from his earlier training in doctrinal criticism and, in a sense, properly oriented him for the first time to the true setting and subject matter of systematic theology: the Christian community’s confession of the God revealed in Jesus Christ. This reorientation tracked with a shift in study of theologians: from Eberhard Jüngel to Karl Barth. Thenceforth Webster was a world-renowned exponent of Barth’s work. Later, in the closing years of his life, he would make another shift, from a Barthian focus on modern theology to patristic, Scholastic (medieval and Protestant), and especially Thomist authorities.

Narrating such shifts is crucial in approaching Webster’s work; indeed, turning to the republished essay below, a person conversant

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with Webster's writing from the last decade or so might not recognize it as written by the same author. Published in the middle of his time at Toronto but originally presented in 1988, it bears all the marks of stretching beyond the bounds of one's given vocabulary, sources, and modes of argumentation, without quite breaking free of them. That philosophers (Ricoeur, Wittgenstein, Taylor) and liberal theologians (Farley, Schillebeeckx, Barr) are his primary interlocutors reveals to whom Webster thinks he is accountable, which fields and names require serious intellectual engagement. His speech is not the first language of Christian dogmatics—metaphysically robust attestation of the Holy Trinity's works of grace in creation and redemption—but rather the secondary, metalanguage of religion, transcendence, and communal language use. In significant measure, Webster left this essay behind him.

So why read it today? First, because it is an excellent essay, in spite of Webster's later trajectory. Not all Christian theological reflection need be confessional in mode; here Webster is tracking with his fellow Anglican priest, Rowan Williams, in translating Christian substance into a capacious variety of philosophical and academic terms—a contribution to Continental reflection on the critical power of religious language in communities of long-standing tradition. Second, the text is a document of its time, and shows us just how different the scene was for academic theology in the 1970s and 1980s: methodologically conscientious, generous in dialogue, wide-angled in disciplinary scope. If theology has awakened from a kind of undogmatic slumber, can it nevertheless retain such intellectual virtues?

Third and finally, Webster never once departed from the heart of this essay: namely, the power of Holy Scripture to convict the church of idolatry and all ungodliness, to speak to it from beyond itself, to bear witness to, as an instrument of, the word of the Lord. Because for all of its alien, unpossessable, threatening authority, the scriptural word is the good news of God's grace. By its incomparable judgment we are acquitted; in its gentle might, we come to rest.

The Church as Theological Community

JOHN WEBSTER*

John Webster explores Tradition and Scripture as they function in the theological life of the Church, especially their significance for Anglicans for whom liturgy is of great importance. He argues that the role of Tradition and Scripture in the theological activity of the Church can enable us to see the critical nature of theology more clearly.

The English Dominican theologian, Cornelius Ernst, once remarked that “ecclesiology should be conceived of as the ontological *a priori* of theology.”¹ His remark might conveniently stand as an epigraph for much contemporary Anglican thinking on the vocation of the theologian in our communion. Anglican theologians often think of their task as one of “communal self-reflection out of a unique liturgical matrix.”² That is to say, the ecclesiological given of Anglican theological reflection and formulation, its context and its primary orientation-point, is the visible life of Anglican public worship. “(I)t is in

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¹ C. Ernst, “The Significance for Ecclesiology of the Declaration on non-Christian Religions and the Decree on Missions of Vatican II” in *Multiple Echo. Explorations in Theology* (London, 1979), p. 139.

² The phrase is Joan O’Donovan’s, and is used in criticism of Stephen Sykes in her “Proposals Regarding the Future of Anglican Theology” in M. D. Bryant, ed., *The Future of Anglican Theology* (Toronto, 1984), p. 144.

corporate worship that Anglicans find the common ground of their profession of faith;” and so theology takes its rise in reflection upon “the fundamental aspects of Christian faith as expressed and celebrated in the forms of Christian prayer.”³

Such statements prompt a very large number of questions for reflection about the interrelationship of prayer and intellectual activity. In what follows, I want to pursue one such question, namely: how may the liturgical matrix of Anglican theology support a mode of reflection which is properly *critical*? I want to suggest that theological activity is not only a means whereby the community represents itself to itself, bringing its primary liturgical identity to explicit definition, but also an occasion for the community to engage in—ruthless—self-appraisal. This critical aspect of theological activity, is, I want to suggest, a corollary of the community’s recognition of the fallibility of its symbolic life and representations of God, and it is conducted chiefly by means of the relation of theology to Holy Scripture.

I. Tradition⁴

All intellectual activity, and therefore all theology, takes place within the tradition of a particular community. A community’s tradition is the ongoing, intersubjective, public process which is implicit in all individual activity. It is only within this process and the activities and institutions of which it is composed that language and thought are possible as meaningful projects. Speaking and thinking, and therefore knowing, are conventional activities, which is to say that they are corporate and situated in history.

Knowledge is corporate because its occurrence depends upon shared resources which an individual does not produce out of him or herself. We are able to move from mere unfocussed observation of the world to meaningful experience because we are endowed by the

³ L. Weil, “The Gospel in Anglicanism” in S. Sykes, J. Booty, ed., *The Study of Anglicanism* (London, 1988), pp. 63, 60.

⁴ My tiny sketch of “tradition” is informed less by theological sources and more by work in philosophy (in both the Anglo-Saxon and Continental traditions) and in the human sciences. It is beyond my scope to refer to the relevant debates and literatures *in extenso*, ranging, as they do, over a large number of fields (realism, reference, convention, incommensurability, truth, the theory-laden character of observation . . .). For only one of a number of possible *entrées* into some of the issues, see H. Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History* (Cambridge, 1981) and his *Realism and Reason. Philosophical Papers 3* (Cambridge, 1983), pp. 184–247.

communities to which we belong with certain basic assumptions about where and how to look, and how to interpret (construe, *make* sense of) what we see. And we are able to articulate and communicate what we see because we participate in a structured set of linguistic representations, which impart to us and train us in certain habitual readings of our experience. Meaningful engagement with reality emerges within and draws upon our participation in the habitual meaning-routines of a particular community. So knowledge always occurs in a determinate historical context. In our apprehension of the world, we do not start *de novo*, unaffected by opinions, prejudices, hints and guesses, puzzles and answers, in the social world beyond ourselves. Rather, we work with the cumulative store of the community's past as it is represented in the present. This historical process is not as it were something to which we do not ultimately belong, at least in our models of intellectual activity. We cannot enter neatly from outside and as easily extract ourselves. The individual knower does not and cannot occupy some absolute, a-historical space abstracted from all that has gone before.

In these ways, then, tradition—the routines, expectations, symbolic life of a community in history—is the essential backcloth of our knowledge. Two qualifying remarks are important, however. First, none of this is intended to suggest that we cannot think or speak in ways not provided for by the communal stock of ideas and language on which we draw. It simply suggests that our apprehension of the world involves not simply knowledge gained by observation, but a complex web of pre-theoretical beliefs and skills which, to a large extent, condition and interpret the kinds of observations which we make. Moreover, it is to suggest that our capacity to discover the new is affected by a structure of assumptions through which “new knowledge” passes into the familiar world.

Second, none of this is intended to suggest that tradition is self-sufficient or self-generating. Our participation in a tradition ought to enable us to *see*: and so the Christian tradition (or some particular strand of that tradition) ought properly to furnish a means of access to that which lies outside itself. Tradition is fruitful in the measure that it is ostensive or transitive; and a Christian tradition is what happens when forms of human life are transfigured by action beyond themselves in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. This, of course, is why a lively tradition, one that is capable of nourishing discovery and growth, is a tradition which is acutely aware of its having been called into being from elsewhere. “If we think of tradition as a means

of access to the generative, creative events at the source of the community's life, an 'orthodox' tradition is one which keeps a community authentically alive to and thus . . . answerable to something above and beyond its own present life: to its source."⁵ But our grasp of such a source beyond ourselves does not bypass the representations of that source in the community to which we belong: we apprehend through the "tradition of effects" which the source evokes.

All of this suggests, then, that we are more likely to make sense of intellectual activity if we see it as part of our natural human history. Intellectual activity does not exist in isolation from the language and life of the wider social world, but in conversation with them. The intellectual is not simply an observer, but rather a reflective practitioner within certain historical forms of life and symbolic structures. And so with the theologian: the typifications and habitual characterizations of the world and God which the community produces—its "orthodoxy"—are not necessarily a source of error or untested opinion which the theologian needs to jettison. They enable the theologian's inquiry to take on focus, to become more than indiscriminating, mistrustful inspection from outside. To envisage the proper exercise of theology as, of necessity, demanding that its practitioners suspend or bracket the community's symbolic world and the self-descriptions to which that world gives rise in its participants, is to inhibit perception. In this sense, theology is a churchly exercise. The theologian is a skilled inhabitant of a particular universe of discourse, one who has internalised its rhythms, one who is agile in displaying the community's *use*.

So far, perhaps, so good. But a couple of quite serious qualifications need to be recorded at this point.

- i. We need to tread very cautiously in thinking about the symbolic activities of a community in terms of *system* or *structure*. Consider, for example, an aspect of George Lindbeck's (extraordinarily fruitful) "cultural-linguistic" definition of a religion in *The Nature of Doctrine*. He defines it as "a kind of cultural and/or linguistic framework or medium that shapes the entirety of life and thought . . . It comprises a vocabulary of discursive and non-discursive symbols together with a

⁵ R. Williams, "What is Catholic Orthodoxy?" in K. Leech, R. Williams, ed., *Essays Catholic and Radical* (London, 1983), p. 14.

distinctive logic or grammar in which this vocabulary can be meaningfully deployed.”⁶ Pressed hard, such analogies—between religion and lexical stock or religion and grammatical regularities—fail to satisfy because they do not quite catch the nature of religions as historically mobile processes of intentional human activity.⁷ The analogies are at their best when deployed to describe religions in their synchronic aspects; but they are less successful in giving an account of change, dissent, discontinuity, in considering, that is, tradition not in terms of structure but in terms of movement.

One consequence here is that any account of intellectual activity within a tradition needs to inquire after the ways in which *change* occurs. How does dissent arise within a commonly-accepted framework? In asking that question, we are not only raising the issue of religions as histories, but also the further question of the *voluntary* nature of our participation (or nonparticipation) in a particular form of life. In *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein comments:

if I were to say “It is my unshakable conviction that etc.,” this means . . . that I have not consciously arrived at the conviction by following a particular line of thought, but that it is anchored in all my questions and answers, so anchored that I cannot touch it.⁸

But can this really serve as an account of what actually takes place in intellectual activity in a determinate, historical tradition? Are certain convictions “untouchable” in the way that grammar or vocabulary may seem to be? Change in a tradition nearly always involves, to a greater or lesser extent, some “touching of the untouchable”, some revision of what was hitherto thought to constitute an unalterable framework of questions and answers. As John Bowker argues in his critique of structural accounts of religion in *The Sense of God*: specifying the conceptual and linguistic frameworks of a “universe of

⁶ G. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine. Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (London, 1984), p. 33.

⁷ In a review of Lindbeck’s book, Nicholas Lash remarks that it contains “little sense of the unmanageable richness of our histories”: *New Blackfriars* 66 (1985), p. 510.

⁸ L. Wittgenstein, *On Certainty* (Oxford, 1969), §103.

meaning” is not of itself enough to yield an exhaustive account of what is taking place in such a universe. For a universe of meaning “is not itself a fully achieved, static concept . . . it is always in the process of construction”:

the structuring process is necessarily conservative, because one particular control of appropriateness must lie in the relation of innovation to the already structured: and yet, at the same time, the structuring process can be constantly creative and innovatory . . . The task of structural theology in relation to the human sense of God is to uncover precisely those transformation rules which have generated, constituted and governed particular theistic universes of meaning. What must always be borne in mind is that no matter how “fixed” certain resources of meaning may be . . . they do not of themselves constitute a final or fixed structure of structures.⁹

Intellectual activity within a religious tradition is thus more than “following a rule”; it is more often a matter of participating in an argument about the rules, for the rules in question are always subject to contestation, change, development. “Criteria have a history.”¹⁰ Nor should intellectual activity necessarily set itself the goal of sponsoring religious agreement or consensus, for a tradition is indeed a tradition of argument.¹¹ Anglican theology, especially when undertaken in official or semi-official contexts, has often seemed curiously reluctant to take the point, despite theories of comprehensiveness. Anglican theology not infrequently falls into the trap of generalising a particular strand of Anglicanism by according it “classic” status (the Caroline divines are often favoured with this kind of treatment). Or, more subtly, the breadth of Anglicanism as a “universe of meaning” can be reduced

⁹ J. Bowker, *The Sense of God. Sociological, Anthropological and Psychological Approaches to the Origin of the Sense of God* (Oxford, 1973), pp. 108f.

¹⁰ A. MacIntyre, “Is Understanding Religion Compatible with Believing?” in J. Hick, ed., *Faith and the Philosophers* (London, 1964), p. 120.

¹¹ Cf. Charles Taylor’s remark in ‘Interpretation and the Sciences of Man’ in *Philosophy and the Human Sciences. Philosophical Papers 2* (Cambridge, 1985), p. 39: “common meanings are quite other than consensus, for they can subsist with a high degree of cleavage; this is what happens when a common meaning comes to be lived and understood differently by different groups in a society . . . Perhaps one might say that a common meaning is very often the cause of the most bitter lack of consensus. It thus must not be confused with convergence of opinion, value, attitude.”

by mapping varieties of usage and interpreting them as different emphases within a single ethos whose unity is preserved, perhaps, by possession of a common liturgical reference point. For reasons of historical honesty, and for reasons of the promotion of genuine debate, Anglicanism has every reason to resist these ways of handling the history of its common life. Such accounts of Anglicanism can easily legitimate or prescribe practice by reference to only a selection of the possibilities which the tradition embodies.

- ii. This leads to a second qualification. The symbolic life of any community is part of a political order. It is sustained by relations of power and, in turn, serves to sustain those relations of power by furnishing legitimations for its exercise. Because of this, the community's symbolic life is always exposed to the threat of ideological distortion.

The language and rituals of any Christian community are regulated. Because its symbolic life is both expressive of and deeply formative of its identity and the identity of its members, a Christian community expends considerable political energy in establishing *normative* symbols and in authorising those who preside over the symbolic life of the community. Christian symbolic life is, indeed, a matter of law—as we are reminded by that little Latin tag “particularly treasured by Anglicans,”¹² *lex orandi—lex credendi*. The “prayer” which shapes belief is not natural, spontaneous utterance. It is, rather, a highly organised body of language, selected by authorised members of the community, and surrounded by complex rules concerning its usage. We would, I think, be hopelessly naive if we thought of liturgy as other than part of the social and political world, produced by and helping to produce the social and political relations which obtain at any given moment in a particular segment of the tradition. This is, of course, a matter of institutional necessity, as true of Cranmer with his committee of bishops and doctors at Chertsey in 1548 as it is of any modern liturgical commission. The symbolism of the Christian community does not arise immediately from the gospel but from a

¹² *The Book of Alternative Services of the Anglican Church of Canada* (Toronto, 1985), p. 10. Which Anglicans? An entire tradition of serious theologians from Cranmer to Goode and Dimock (and beyond) would have been dismayed to see what the principle could be made to undergird.

construal of the gospel. Liturgical texts thereby construct a semantic space within which the gospel is received, understood and transmitted. And—like any other texts—liturgical texts “do not drift aimlessly in history, but rather are transmitted along lines of force which affect their very *sens*.”¹³

My point is not to regret this phenomenon: it is inevitable in any institution which is complex, large-scale and enduring and which shapes significant aspects of its adherents’ identities. Prayer, text, rubric, ecclesiastical office, cannot be disentangled. Nevertheless, the fact that the community’s symbolic life is not immune from the political processes of the construction of meaning ought to alert us to the ideological potential of what is taking place here. I use the term “ideological” in its negative sense. It has become common to use that term to refer to the functions performed by inter-subjective meaning and its symbolic carriers in social integration. Ricoeur, for example, suggests that ideology ought not to be viewed in terms of “the problem of domination” but via “the broader phenomenon of social integration;” on this reading, an ideology is “a grid or code for giving an overall view, not only of the group, but also of history and, ultimately, of the world.”¹⁴ As such, it is “something *in which* men live and think, rather than a conception *that* they pose . . . It operates behind our backs, rather than appearing before our eyes. We think from it rather than about it.”¹⁵ Initially, perhaps, yes. But, as Ricoeur goes on to note, this “non-transparency” of our symbol systems can lead to negative results: typification, marginalisation or intolerance of the exceptional, distortion and dissimulation, “a narrowing of the field in relation to the possibilities of interpretation which characterised the original momentum of the event.”¹⁶

What this entails for the way we think about theological activity is that there exists a constant need for a reflective, critical moment in the community’s management of its own symbolism, and in the individual believer’s appropriation of such symbolism. As David Power has remarked, “[T]here must be modes of devotional expression which make it possible for the Christian person to enter fully

¹³ J. B. Thompson, *Studies in the Theory of Ideology* (Cambridge, 1984), p. 231.

¹⁴ P. Ricoeur, “Science and Ideology” in *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences* (Cambridge, MA, 1981), pp. 223, 226.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 227.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 228.

and personally into the faith experience of communion with God, but there must also be modes of theological enterprise which guide the devotional and make intelligent inquiry possible without the hazards of self-indulgence and sentiment.”¹⁷ Such inquiry is above all necessary because “belonging” is a profoundly ambiguous phenomenon. In the order of knowing, belonging may well be prior to distance (such is my argument above). But belonging is not the only relation we can have to the symbolic universe in and through which we know. Belonging may certainly sharpen our focus and is certainly implicit within any meaningful use of language. But belonging can also make our discourse a matter of routine, rendering it less than capable of articulating the new. So: is there a manner of life in tradition which is indeed a truly historical process of discovery and growth? And is there a form of “belonging” which is not simply passive assent?

Tradition is history, and therefore movement and development. As a stream of life, tradition is not static and not finished. No particular stage of a tradition’s history is ever fully determinate. The tradition does not map out, in a final and incorrigible way, how the generative source of the tradition is to be understood and what sorts of responses and roles it evokes. What the tradition does offer are regularities, patterns, norms which we enter into and make our own. We inhabit tradition; we do not simply inherit it. Certainly, the metaphor of tradition as “inheritance” highlights the need for identifiable continuity. But

a religious and symbolic orthodoxy is “cumulative”: its coherence is shown in a constantly expanding network of narratives, biographies. The more such narratives are seen as illustrations, subordinate to a governing theoretical structure, the more the tradition closes in on itself, offering self-justifying projections rather than the risks of incarnation. The more these stories are seen as fresh statements (new metaphors?) in a common tongue, the more the tradition shows itself to be a living—and therefore an incomplete—thing. To some extent, new classics replace old, new statements make older ones problematic: perhaps we cannot really “talk” like that now. Yet the language remains, carrying with it a history of expressive extension and increasing distinctiveness. There

¹⁷ D. Power, “Two Expressions of Faith: Worship and Theology” in H. Schmidt, D. Power, ed., *Liturgical Experience of Faith* (London, 1973), p. 99.

is no blandly (organically) straight line of development, but there is a background of continuity—not simply the continuity of corresponding ideas, but the continuity of common life, shared behaviour.¹⁸

Traditions go wrong when they begin to lose self-critical adaptability, when they cease to explore new metaphors, preferring instead a tightly established set of symbolic habits. A tradition's transparency can cloud over as it fails to see itself as indeterminate, as a possible and fruitful but not wholly adequate account of how things are. When a tradition assumes some kind of identity between its speech and thought and that which they articulate, it hardens into immobility; it is no longer a stream of life, an historical project both cumulative and corrigible, but an achieved product to be *preserved*.

Traditions to which this happen become preoccupied with their own maintenance, staking out and guarding their borders and mapping their territory with increasing clarity. Frequently their identity is maintained by reference to a particular stage in their own past; and, with increasing conservatism, there comes a resistance to drawing upon sources external to themselves. All this goes along with a decreased sense of their own corrigibility, a certain assurance that the tradition already contains within itself all resources necessary for an adequate representation of reality. Working typifications become required responses; questioning is not an opportunity for growth so much as an attack upon the boundaries of acceptability.

All traditions, all "orthodoxies" are exposed to this, and religious traditions, with their associated power-structures and claims upon the loyalty of their members, are more exposed than most. They easily become what Schillebeeckx calls "a context of compulsion."¹⁹ The presence of this threat is the primary root of critical intellectual activity in the church: the theologian has particular responsibility for "the critique of idolatry."²⁰

Critique is a counterpart of the necessary acknowledgement that no religious tradition is irrevocable or autonomous or immune from change. Criticism is thus part of the way in which a tradition ensures a

¹⁸ R. Williams, "What is Catholic Orthodoxy?", p. 17.

¹⁹ E. Schillebeeckx, *The Understanding of Faith* (London, 1974), p. 131.

²⁰ N. Lash, "Construction or Criticism? The Task of the Theologian" in *Theology on the Way to Emmaus* (London, 1986), p. 9.

continued relation to the truth. I say *part* of the way: prayer, moral action, ritual are also modes of bearing truthful testimony to the reality of God. Theology takes its place in the church as one of the chief ways in which the community retains a sense of its own indeterminacy, and keeps the measure of its own drift into idolatry. As such, it is part of the community's sense of its own finitude and of the incompleteness of its representations of God.

To sum up this first section: Christian symbolic life is part of our natural human history. It is an assemblage of propositions, narratives, prayers, gestures, along with a pattern of social arrangements, through which identity is formed and governed. Because of its very humanity, our symbolic life is a field of idolatry and illusion. As Nietzsche noted, much of what we call telling the truth is simply lying "according to fixed convention."²¹ Critical intellectual engagement with the symbolic life and activity of the Christian community thus exists in order that the community does not fall into the assumption that its language about God is a self-enclosed process, that its symbolic life and laws are their own justification. Theology seeks to remind the community that all the community does and says stands under the judgment of a transcendent order of reality. It issues this reminder not by presiding over the community's symbolic life—the bishop may be a theologian, but the theologian is no bishop!—but rather by providing, in the fulfillment of its own activity, an example of responsible submission to the order of God. And it offers such an example by its relation to Holy Scripture.

II. Scripture

Where the Bible is allowed to be Master, theological existence is present; and where theological existence lives, it is then possible for Church reform to issue from the Church's life. Where there is no theological existence, then, in our own day, as in every age of the Church in which she seeks selfishly to help herself, reform can and will be still-born.²²

²¹ F. Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense" in D. Breazeale, ed., *Philosophy and Truth. Selections from Nietzsche's Notebooks of the Early 1870s* (Atlantic Heights, 1979), p. 84.

²² K. Barth, *Theological Existence Today!* (London, 1933), p. 30.

The production and authorization of Scripture is a community activity. One of the most far-reaching effects of critical biblical scholarship upon our ways of reading the Bible has been that of setting before us the role of the community in the formation of the biblical texts. We are less likely to envisage Scripture as a text imparted through virtually immediate divine authorship, and more likely to be interested in the corporate conditions in which the sacred text was produced. Moreover, the very activity of collecting these originally diverse texts into a canon of "sacred Scripture" presupposes the existence of a people of God. The texts are sacred *for* a group; their authority is not abstract but exercised in a context of corporate decision-making, marking out where a group's most fundamental resources lie and how those resources govern its life. Furthermore, Scripture does not exist apart from its interpretation, and all interpretation in some measure draws upon the resources of the community in which it is practiced. To interpret is not to engage in solipsistic activity, some purely private transaction between ourselves and the text. Meaning is discovered only against the background of the habitual usage of a language-community. "The meaning of a word is its use in the language;"²³ and use is a public affair.

Scripture functions in the community by enabling identity-formation, identity duration, and critique. The first two functions of Scripture can be expounded very simply. Texts are one of the most important ways by which a group can clarify its identity as *this particular* group. All groups need some means of formalizing their identity: particular persons who embody the group's ideals, routines and ritual actions, unwritten traditions. Texts are especially important in this process because of their capacity to objectify, to formalize an account of identity. And texts are much less open to abuse through prejudice, personality or adaptation. The text by its very character as writing is less immediate than other types of communication and therefore inherently more stable.

Texts provide paradigms, authoritative models which state what the community is. They can be used to establish whether certain activities, policies, beliefs or roles are compatible with the community's vision or at variance with its professed goals. In the case of Christian Scripture, the Bible offers "paradigms in which the life of a later time, i.e. future from the viewpoint of the texts themselves, may be

²³ L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford, 1953), §43.

illuminated.”²⁴ Scripture offers, as it were, “classic instances” of the meaning and entailments of certain key terms. Through regular rehearsal of these instances, the community grows in awareness of and sensitivity towards the habits of usage through which its vision is articulated. The familiarity which is gained in this way enables the community to test for the “Christianness” of policies or beliefs by setting them against the store of common meanings which the text defines and illustrates. Because of this, texts also enable groups to persist through time by transmitting their identity to future generations. Texts are what Edward Farley calls a “sedimentation of the paradigm”²⁵ and, as such, they have a vital role in ensuring coherence and continuity.

But what of the role of Scripture in *critique*? To say that Scripture *functions* in the community in the ways just described is not the same as saying that it is a *function* of the community. The community is the locus of its operation, but its authority is not derived from the community in any simple way. Scripture retains its “over-againstness”, its transcendence of the context within which it operates. Precisely by objectifying the Christian paradigm, Scripture enables that paradigm to stand in a critical relation to any particular stage of the developing life of the community. And this critical activity of Scripture is the root of the theologian’s critical activity.

Traditions decay; their symbolic life shrinks and hardens. One of the most important functions of an authoritative text is to de-stabilise the settled habits of discourse. The authoritative text offers a body of language which is potentially free from the current language routines which the community deploys. Such a text can be language which goes against the grain of usage, language which can break open settled habits by intercepting their performance and enabling the community to stand apart from itself and take stock. A lively tradition of public worship will be quick to seize the possibilities of enrichment which are thereby opened to it.

In some of his more recent writing, Paul Ricoeur has argued that the “phenomenon of fixation by writing”, or “inscripturation” affects what he calls “distanciation.”²⁶ When discourse becomes text, it

²⁴ J. Barr, “The Bible as a Document of Believing Communities” in *Explorations in Theology* 7 (London, 1980), pp. 126f.

²⁵ Cf. E. Farley, *Ecclesial Reflection. An Anatomy of Theological Judgement* (Philadelphia, 1982), pp. 267–99.

²⁶ P. Ricoeur, “Hermeneutics and the Critique of Ideology” in *op. cit.*, p. 90.

attains a certain freedom from the author's intention, from the social and cultural conditions of its production, and from its original addressee—in this way, we may speak of “the autonomy of the text.”²⁷ The text achieves this by *rendering a possible world*, by presenting a world or vision of reality which stands in critical relation to our present and which constitutes a showing of what that present might become. The text is the medium for the projection of the new, and thus for the criticism of the actual; it “frees us from the visibility and limitations of situations by opening up a world for us, that is, new dimensions of our being-in-the-world”:²⁸

The world of the text is therefore not the world of everyday language. In this sense, it constitutes a new sort of distancing of the real from itself. It is this distancing which fiction introduces into our apprehension of reality. We said that narratives, folktales and poems are not without a referent; but this referent is discontinuous with that of everyday language. Through fiction and poetry, new possibilities of being-in-the-world are opened up within everyday reality. Fiction and poetry intend being, not under the modality of being-given, but under the modality of power-to-be.²⁹

Because the text projects a new, possible world, it can “subvert the social order and disrupt our sense of ourselves.”³⁰ This “subverting” and “disrupting” of the community by the text is a helpful way of approaching the critical role of Scripture in the community. Sacred Scripture is a body of language which intercepts the community's discourse, mounting a challenge to the community's capacity to reduce the intractable reality of God to a familiar phenomenon, a given cultural object about which we may speak with ease. Lecturing

²⁷ Ibid., p. 91.

²⁸ P. Ricoeur, “The model of the text: meaningful action considered as a text” in *ibid.*, p. 202.

²⁹ P. Ricoeur, “The hermeneutical function of distancing” in *ibid.*, p. 142. The linguistic and ontological dimensions here are explored by Ricoeur in *The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-Disciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language* (London, 1978) and *Time and Narrative* (Chicago, 1984–8). See also his essay “Toward a hermeneutic of the idea of revelation” in *Essays on Biblical Interpretation* (Philadelphia, 1980), pp. 73–118, esp. 98–104.

³⁰ J. B. Thompson, *Studies in the Theory of Ideology*, p. 200.

in Switzerland, in 1916, in the midst of his own astonished rediscovery of the biblical world, Barth told his hearers:

We have found in the Bible a new world, God, God's sovereignty, God's glory, God's incomprehensible love. Not the history of man but the history of God! Not the virtues of men but the virtues of him who hath called us out of darkness into his marvelous light! Not human standpoints but the standpoint of God!³¹

The task of critical theology is, as it were, to ensure that the strange new world *remains* strange and new, and that it is not allowed to become a set of symbols managed by an interest group. The liturgical domestication of Scripture (whether through lectionary rules or through the way in which public worship is structured and staged) is an ever-present danger.

None of this should obscure the fact that the "possible world" or "possible consciousness" which Scripture opens up to us is always mediated through the habits and routines and arrangements (symbolic and political) of a determinate historical community. In this sense, Anglicans have been right to call into question some ways of handling the notion of *sola scriptura*: "To affirm the foundational importance of the canon of the New Testament is to imply that these writings constitute a norm of authentic witness to Christ and his meaning for the people of God. The Church is prior to the Scriptures, which constitute the earliest written Christian testimony."³² But it is imperative that the church find ways of ensuring that the context in which Scripture is read be open to the transcendent. As the report of the Inter-Anglican Theological and Doctrinal Commission puts it:

What is essential . . . in the processes of interpretation by which the church makes judgments is an attitude which is analogous to—and may even be a part of—the repentance which the Lord called for in all his disciples. That the Scriptures speak in a variety of social situations and cultural

³¹ K. Barth, "The Strange New World Within the Bible" in *The Word of God and the Word of Man* (London, 1928), p. 45.

³² H. Chadwick, "The Context of Faith and Theology in Anglicanism" in A. A. Vogel, ed., *Theology in Anglicanism* (Wilton, 1984), p. 18.

contexts is a sign to us that the risen Christ and the Kingdom which he represents are indeed the transcendent horizon of every human society and culture, and that the bias of each particular tradition can bring into focus the meaning of God's Kingdom in a way which requires serious and critical attention. That such contexts not only illuminate but also narrow and distort the scriptural message is a sign that the risen Christ and the Kingdom he represents are indeed, in every context, a transcendent horizon, apprehended only by way of "change of mind", repentance.³³

Such a position is what we intend when we speak of Scripture's authority in terms of its relationship to revelation. The force of linking "Scripture" and "revelation" is to identify the way in which Scripture faces the community with the need to revise its apprehension of the gospel, since what the gospel announces and effects is a transcendent reality, a reality which is inexhaustibly generative. "Revelation" is not primarily about legitimation, still less about immunity from risk: it does not circumvent the human, historical, ecclesial conditions of every venture of speaking about God. Rather, revelation is a "critical comparative": the offer of a new world which intercepts and re-creates ways of thinking about ourselves and God. Scripture testifies to a reality which is more than a dimension of our present experience, more than a *simple* continuation or extension of existing ways of making sense. That to which Scripture bears witness ruptures, enacts judgement, and transforms.

Theological activity takes its rise in such readings of Scripture. What this means for the way in which such activity is pursued might be summed up by Barth again, this time from a lecture of 1934 to the Free Protestant Theological Faculty in Paris: theology exists

in the realm between the Scriptures and their exposition and proclamation. Theology is like all other functions of the Church, uniquely based upon the fact that God has spoken to men and that men may hear his word through grace. Theology is an act of repentant humility . . . This act exists in the fact that in theology the Church seeks again and again

³³ Inter-Anglican Theological and Doctrinal Commission, *For the Sake of the Kingdom. God's Church and the New Creation* (Toronto, 1986), §79.

to examine itself critically as it asks itself what it means and implies to be a Church among men . . . (T)he Church must critically examine itself not according to its own wishes or standards but according to the standard which is identical with its basis of existence, which is God's revelation, which, concretely, is the Holy Scriptures. It is this constant and ever-recurring necessity and demand for self-examination of the Church by the standard of the divine Word which is the peculiar function of theology in the Church.³⁴

III. Conclusion

Christian theology, like all Christian speech, is part of our natural history. But—again, like all Christian speech—it is also an attempt to speak the language of Easter. Easter means that the history of the man Jesus embodies God's utter liberty: at his resurrection, Jesus assumes the limitless creativity of God, and thereby becomes infinitely potent in expanding our human history. The church exists by virtue of that liberty and potency. In them it finds a summons to a way of existing in which our capacity for wickedness and self-destruction is overcome and in which we are enabled to enter anew our human vocation. Do we have language for such freedom and power? Clearly not; all we have is language undergoing the process of conversion. "All language in Christ gains new meaning," so Luther.³⁵ But new meaning emerges slowly, and with many mistakes—as routines are unlearned, as we begin to release language from our institutional grasp. In encouraging, sometimes advising, and occasionally interrupting this process, theology finds its vocation.

³⁴ K. Barth, "Theology" in *God in Action* (Edinburgh, 1936), pp. 44f.

³⁵ M. Luther, *Disputatio de divinitate et humanitate Christi*, WA 39/11.94.17f.

