

# THEOLOGY AND RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

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SINCE IT is almost a cliché to characterize our contemporaries (and therefore ourselves) as devotees of the cult of experience, it is hardly surprising (as even popular magazines indicate) that in theological circles religious experience is (again) a focal concern.<sup>1</sup> In this article I undertake a modest exploration of the relationship of theology to religious experience.<sup>2</sup>

Writing of a past epoch, Kilian McDonnell suggested their connection in this passage:

The earlier tradition took it quite for granted, both in prayer and in theology, that the experience of God was to be sought. To shift the discussion from personal prayer and religious experience [the concern of McDonnell's article up to this point] to theology and religious experience does not invalidate the argument, because our clear distinction between prayer and theology would be quite foreign to patristic theology. Venerable Bede wrote: "There is one sole theology, that is contemplation." As Jean Leclercq has shown, it was the importance accorded to religious experience which distinguished the patristic theology as found in the monasteries from the theology of the schools. For those pursuing patristic theology, the experience of God was "both the principle and the aim of the quest." It can be said of St. Bernard that his watchword was not *Credo ut intelligam* but *Credo ut experiar*. . . . The important word in Bernard's vocabulary is not *quaeritur* but *desideratur*; not *sciendum* but *experiendum*.<sup>3</sup>

In terms of the theological tradition McDonnell describes, the conclusions appear to be that prayer and theology are one; they arise from and seek religious experience. The latter phrase is employed interchangeably with "experience of God." Whether it is more accurate to speak of experience of God's effects rather than experience of God is another question.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Cf. John Poppy, "Why We Need a New Religion," in a special issue, devoted to the seventies, of *Look*, Jan. 13, 1970, p. 75.

<sup>2</sup> The concluding line of Karl Lehmann's article "Experience," in *Sacramentum mundi* 2 (New York, 1968) 307-9, reads: "The theological use of the notion of experience demands to be radically explored."

<sup>3</sup> Kilian McDonnell, "I Believe That I Might Experience," *Continuum* 5 (1968) 682. Cf. also Kenneth E. Kirk, *The Vision of God: The Christian Doctrine of the Summum Bonum* (New York, 1966).

<sup>4</sup> Christopher Kiesling, O.P., makes some relevant observations on this score. "Quite apart from the epistemological problems presented in the affirmation that faith is the experience of God, I do not find the affirmation a description of my religious experi-

It is interesting to compare the passage just cited with Gordon Wakefield's remarks which proceed from the reigning perspective that prayer and theology are distinct. Having recommended that theology today assume a much more tentative character than formerly, Wakefield observes: "Indeed much Western theology has killed the spiritual life because it has not done more than pay lip service to the divine mystery. It has claimed the key of knowledge, the map of the whole universe, the explanation of everything from the Eucharist to the end of the world. Henceforth theology itself must be more spiritual, an aid to prayer." Borrowing Ian Ramsey's phrase "cosmic disclosures" (which appears to cover both religious insight and religious experience), Wakefield hastens to add: "But the cosmic disclosures arise out of life. They are not given in pious withdrawal, but in this world of race riots, motorways and juke boxes."<sup>5</sup> Where the first passage cited identified theology and prayer, Wakefield suggests, as a future direction for theology, that it subserve prayer. Prayer itself is not *ipso facto* exhaustive of "cosmic disclosures" (religious experience); the locus of the latter is life.

I would like to offer one more citation, both for its relevance to the history of theology (reminding us how much we share the very positions we react against) and because it testifies to the inescapability of

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ence. I have desired to be a priest since I was in grade school; I have been a religious for twenty years. But I would never say, except in an extended and loose sense, that I have experienced God. I have had experiences which involved memorable affective conditions and striking insights into the meaning of my life and occurrences around me. I attribute these experiences and their content to God, but I would not call them experiences of God. They were experiences of God's effects, but not of God. Some may call experiences of God's effects the experience of God, but that, in my opinion, is stretching the meaning of the word.

"If I say that I experienced *God's effects* rather than nature's or man's or the subconscious', this is because I have faith, that is a personal self-projection of my being toward God through a freely willed affirmation of his reality conceptualized in a proposition by means of which I direct myself toward him. My faith is a leap into the dark, not merely certitude added to the light of experience. Because of this faith, both its self-projection and its conceptual affirmation, I am able to, and in fact do, interpret experience and reality in a way in which I would not interpret them without faith: I interpret them as coming from God and leading to God. Faith is not an experience of God; but given faith, experience is transformed into God's self-manifestation" ("Dewart on Faith," *Chicago Studies* 6 [1967] 127-37, at 135).

<sup>5</sup> Gordon S. Wakefield, *The Life of the Spirit in the World of Today* (New York, 1969) p. 145. On pp. 143-44 Wakefield describes "cosmic disclosures" as situations which have come alive both subjectively and objectively; a normal flat piece of experience takes on a new sense and dimension. They are experiences of transcendence of commonplace existence. In them we are as receivers of a prophet's summons, recipients of a divine revelation.

theology having to do with religious experience. In an essay published in 1939, N. P. Williams, alluding to Barthian theology then in the ascendant, wrote:

This proclaims itself to be a "theocentric" revolt against the whole "empiricist" tendency . . . , a repudiation of Schleiermacher and Ritschl, and a flat denial of the importance hitherto assigned to human "religious experience": it recalls men to a respectful attention to "the Word of God," uttered by a purely transcendent Deity from His solitary height in eternity—to a "Word," that is, message, which is all that man can know or grasp of God, all mystical conceptions of the possibility of man's union with or possession of Him being dismissed as so much presumptuous nonsense. Yet when we enquire, What is this "Word of God" and where is it to be found, we are told that it consists in Scripture interpreted by the inner witness of the Holy Spirit. But this seems to bring us back again to "experience" under another name. The time has not yet come for a complete evaluation of the Barthian reconstruction of the foundations of theology: but the student of *Dogmengeschichte* is not unacquainted with the phenomenon of the theologian, who, setting out to attack a given intellectual position, is unconsciously fascinated by that which he attacks, and ends by holding a position only differentiated from it in name, as in the case of the anti-Gnostic Fathers of Alexandria, Clement and Origen, whose own positions on some points are indistinguishable from the Gnosticism which was the object of their polemic. If the basic concept of Barthianism is judged by future historians of doctrine to be in the last analysis identical with that of Ritschlianism, that would merely be one more instance of history repeating itself.<sup>6</sup>

Like the other two, this citation suggests that theology and religious experience are interdependent. Taking this to be true, I see as the major task at hand the attempt to clarify how theology and religious experience are interrelated.

As a means of sharpening their interconnection, I suggest beginning with the view that theology is the reflective aspect of religion. Religion itself I would see as designating not a collection of ritualistic practices or dogmas *about* life, but as a dimension of depth, of significance, in living. Cult, creed, and church discipline are, indeed, usual associations that "religion" calls to mind, and they can promote and be manifestative of genuine religiousness, but of themselves they do not exhaust what religion is meant to be as a significant quality in believing existence, or as a grounding way of being interested in living.<sup>7</sup> As Buber says:

<sup>6</sup> N. P. Williams, "What is Theology?" in *The Study of Theology*, ed. Kenneth E. Kirk (London, 1939) pp. 3-82, at 76-77.

<sup>7</sup> As José Ortega y Gasset wrote, "Many have observed that people could not live without taking an interest in one thing or another, they concluded that it was really

The realer religion is, so much the more it means its own overcoming. It wills to cease to be the special domain "Religion" and wills to become life. It is concerned in the end not with specific religious acts, but with redemption from all that is specific. Historically and biographically, it strives toward the pure Everyday. Religion is in the religious view the exile of man; his homeland is unarbitrary life "in the face of God." It goes against the realest will of religion to describe it in terms of the special characteristics that it has developed rather than in terms of its life-character. Religion must, of course, be described in such a way that its special characteristics do not evaporate into universality but are instead seen as grounded in the fundamental relation of religion to the whole of life.<sup>8</sup>

While religion is focally concerned with man's personal relationship to God, a prime implicate of this concern (in a Judeo-Christian understanding of the term religion) is that God is interested in our relationship to Him, not as something separate and distinct, but as modifying all our relationships.<sup>9</sup>

Having used these descriptive rather than definitive statements regarding the nature of religion—and in discussing such a primary reality, pointers are all it is possible to provide—I would say that religious experience is not susceptible of definition. Just about any aspect of life is capable, through our affective-knowing responsive potential, of being experienced to its religious depth. If religion has to do with life lived in the concrete, not in talk about existence, nor in reading a thesis into life, nor (conversely) forcing life into preconceived theses, then religious experience is as potentially varied as are the dimensions, nuances, encounters that life encompasses.

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those things which were interesting, and not the fact of being interested" (*The Modern Theme* [New York, 1961] p. 72).

<sup>8</sup> Martin Buber, *The Eclipse of God* (New York, 1957) p. 34. Cf. Meister Eckhart's observation: "The person who is not conscious of God's presence, but who must always be going out to get him from this and that, who has to seek him by special methods, as by means of some activity, person or place—such people have not attained God. It can easily happen that they are disturbed, for they have not God and they do not seek, think, and love only him, and therefore, not only will evil company be to them a stumbling block, but good company as well—not only the street, but the church; not only bad deeds and works, but good ones as well. The difficulty lies within the man for whom God has not yet become everything" (*Meister Eckhart: A Modern Translation*, tr. Raymond B. Blakney [New York, 1941] p. 8).

<sup>9</sup> As Elie Wiesel, author of *The Beggar of Jerusalem*, responded to the question whether the pursuit of the divine was the major element in his work, "ultimately every dialogue between one man and another is a dialogue between man and God; every conflict involving man ultimately involves God. Of course God is present in all of my works but I rarely speak about it. Kafka used to say, 'One does not speak about God. One can only, if at all, speak to Him.' So in my books God is always there" ("Portrait of a Man Reading," in the *Washington Post, Book World* [Feb. 8, 1970] p. 2).

Religious experience as here conceived does not, to be religious experience, have to focus on any specifically "religious" object in the common use of that word—I mean such things as a pious image, the Scriptures—nor is it confined to participating in a liturgical service. Just as genuine, mature religion transcends the stage which distinguishes between sacred objects, times, and places and profane ones, so too religious experience is not to be designated by this sort of a priori categorization, but lies rather in presence in depth to one's experience in living. It is experience revealed in a certain light, in a certain perspective or horizon. We commonly designate this light, perspective, horizon, this receptive openness or availability, as faith. This is, however, another of those primal words so difficult to clarify, so vulnerable to mummification, trivialization, and misunderstanding.

To clarify the drift of what I am saying of religious experience, I would use examples such as these: that the religious man does not believe that the deepest meaning of sacrament is confined to the seven sacraments spoken of in his Roman Catholic theology, nor that these seven are the sole vehicles of grace. Perhaps he started with that view, but he comes to appreciate that all reality is the medium of God's presence; he comes to appreciate the gift character of his particular existence, of his own body, and such deepening appreciation extends to more and more aspects of his particular life and experience.<sup>10</sup> In this instance, sacrament, which is of the family of explicitly religious terms, overcomes itself; it is seen as a clue, a harbinger of deeper import regarding the whole of one's life, an inroad to profundity of appreciation of the concretes of one's own existence. Through it one passes beyond the specific associations of the term as a religious category (indeed, the whole matter of categorizing aspects of life is left behind) and one grows increasingly aware of the revelatory, graced character of his particular everyday living.<sup>11</sup>

It is this kind of appreciation in living that I would designate religious experience. I would also call it lived faith. I would add that religious experience so hinted at (for that is all I deem it possible to do) has a range of intensity, that within the pale of religious experience there exist peak religious experiences (such as might be found among William James's examples in his *Varieties of Religious Experience*—most of which are of the climactic kind—or some of those of the Spanish

<sup>10</sup> Cf. John W. Glaser, S.J., "Man's Existence: Supernatural Partnership," *THEOLOGICAL STUDIES* 30 (1969) 473–88, at 486.

<sup>11</sup> Another example would be the passage from "saying prayers" to prayerful everyday existence. Cf. Karl Rahner, *Happiness through Prayer* (Dublin, 1958) esp. chap. 4: "Prayer in Everyday Life."

mystics) as well as religious experiences which are of less intense pitch and moment.<sup>12</sup>

Assuming that I have offered sufficient indication (for the present) of my conception of religious experience, I might now turn to theology's relation to it. To state it as simply as possible, I would say that, as the reflective aspect of religion, theology is concerned with aiding and fostering lived faith. It does not exist as an end in itself; its purpose is ultimately practical, dealing with possibilities and obstacles encountered in living a life of creative fidelity.<sup>13</sup>

Before dilating upon this, I think it important to point out at this juncture that a consideration of the relation of theology to religious experience impinges (in part, at least) on that large, contested, and variously handled philosophical problematic concerning the relation of reflection to experience. Without entering the details of that imbroglio, I deem it crucial to guard against interpreting experience as pure spontaneity, or as merely a sort of passive recording of impressions—some sort of immaculate perception—and then contrasting this construction of experience as a polarity pitted against reflection. In such a dipolar scheme, the experience pole is usually romantically characterized as warm and vivid, or pure and undefiled, while its polar opposite, reflection, is viewed as a cold bridle on vital impulses, or as illegitimately heavy with interpretation. Reacting against this sort of polarization,

<sup>12</sup> In writing of religious experience, one faces the same sort of limitation Rahner confesses in attempting to answer "What is prayer?" He writes: "We shall see that it is by no means easy to answer this question. When we have said all that is in our minds about prayer, it is inevitably found that we have said a lot *about* prayer and yet very little about what prayer *is*" (*op. cit.*, p. 9). Further on he pertinently observes: "Our love of God and our prayer have one difficulty in common. They will succeed only if we lose the very thought of what we are doing in the thought of Him for Whom we are doing it. . . . We cannot really perform an act and at the same time be preoccupied with the mechanics of doing it. We succeed in prayer and in love only when we lose ourselves in both, and are no longer aware of *how* we are praying or *in what manner* we are loving. Our age is particularly given to introspection and the analysis of motive and action, with the result that we are often deprived of the power to act through sheer preoccupation with how the act is to be done" (p. 31).

<sup>13</sup> "When the great scholastic theologians," writes Roderick A. MacKenzie, S.J., "set out to write their treatises *De Angelis*, with their long discussions of angelic modes of knowledge, of action, of communication, and the like, they were indulging in a form of speculation for speculation's sake, which could delight the contemplative mind, but had no relevance to the life of the Church. On such subjects they made no contribution to forming the judgment of the Church, for the simple reason that the Church felt no urgent problem in that area, had no necessity to formulate a judgment. It is otherwise with the problems which occupied the [Second Vatican] Council, and those which continue to arise in the world of today" ("The Function of Scholars in Forming the Judgment of the Church," in *Renewal of Religious Structures 2* [ed. L. K. Shook; New York, 1968] 118-32, at 125).

though not in the happiest way, Leland Elhard, in the course of commenting on Kierkegaard, writes:

Human experience is at its richest in dialectical polarity between event and symbolism; between the stimulating, distracting disunities and discontinuities of moment by moment experience, and the transcendent unities, continuities, and anticipations of the symbolic framework. Kierkegaard saw that a man could become equally lost in the "finite" or the "infinite." The locus of meaning is neither "in the action" nor above it but in polarity between the two. On the one hand, no identity, no meaning is possible without some sort of continual ideological structuring that gives coherence and predictability to the confusion of immediate experience, and that gives a perspective from which to view the sensing-feeling-thinking landscape. . . . On the other hand, a rigid framework, which loses touch with the energies and realities of experience, also fails to produce an identity with *real* mastery of experience and real unity and continuity *in* the experience. An outgrown ideology, a faith which is "dead," produces not meaning but disgust. It is, indeed, a "faith" which, in its lack of "works," is shown up to be no faith at all. Kierkegaard calls faith an Archimedean point beyond the world by which one can move the world. It is not an escape from the world of experience and its disruptions; it is the point from which one is on top of one's very real experiencing, actually "overcoming the world." Faith, therefore, cannot be separated from vocation, as the realization of one's identity in its unceasing development of unity, continuity, and mystery *in* experience.<sup>14</sup>

This passage, while it intends to counteract the dichotomizing of life, in its main point merely urges that one has to have some kind of ideology as a kind of backdrop against which to view the impressionistic flux of life (which latter continues, in this perspective, to exist apart from reflective activity), only let it not be too rigid an ideology.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Leland Elhard, "Living Faith: Some Contributions of the Concept of Ego-Identity to the Understanding of Faith," in *The Dialogue between Theology and Psychology*, ed. Peter Homans (Chicago, 1968) pp. 135-61, at 155-56.

<sup>15</sup> Incisive as it is, and applicable to theology in some respects, the following passage from Santayana leans in the same direction of sealing off reflective activity from living: "The luminous fog of immediacy has a place in nature; it is a meteorological and optical effect, and often a blessing. But why should immediacy be thought to be absolute or a criterion of reality? The great error of dogmatists, in hypostatizing their conclusions into alleged pre-existent facts, did not lie in believing that facts of some kind pre-existed; the error lay only in framing an inadequate view of those facts and regarding it as adequate. God and matter are not any or all the definitions which philosophers may give of them: they are the realities confronted in action, the mysterious but momentous background, which philosophers and other men mean to describe by their definitions or myths or sensible images. To hypostatize these human symbols, and identify them with matter or with God, is idolatry: but the remedy for idolatry is not iconoclasm, because the senses, too, or the heart or the pragmatic intellect, can breed only symbols. The remedy is rather to employ the symbols pragmatically, with detachment and hu-

A better way of correcting the fallacious pitting of experience (or life) against reflection is to grasp, with Gabriel Marcel's assistance, that reflection is still a part of experience (or life), that it is one of the ways in which experience (or life) manifests itself, or more profoundly, that it is, in a sense, one of the ways in which experience (or life) rises from one level to another.<sup>16</sup> Marcel writes:

We should notice also that reflection can take many different shapes and that even conversion can be, in the last analysis, a sort of reflective process; consider the hero of Tolstoy's *Resurrection* or even Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment*. We can say therefore that reflection appears alien to life, or opposed to life, only if we are reducing the concept of human life to, as it were, a manifestation of animality. But it must be added that if we do perform this act of reduction, then reflection itself becomes an unintelligible concept; we cannot even conceive by what sort of a miracle reflection could be grafted on mere animality. . . . We would reach similar conclusions about the relations between reflection and experience. . . . If I take experience as merely a sort of passive recording of impressions, I shall never manage to understand how the reflective process could be integrated with experience. On the other hand, the more we grasp the notion of experience in its proper complexity, in its active and I would even dare to say in its dialectical aspects, the better we shall understand how experience cannot fail to transform itself into reflection, and we shall even have the right to say that the more richly it is experience, the more, also, it is reflection.<sup>17</sup>

Marcel distinguishes two kinds of reflection: primary and secondary. Primary reflection, roughly speaking, dichotomizes, thinks in terms of subject and object, sets up antinomies, tends to reify its concepts, and, in so doing, to abstract from existence. In its analytic procedures it tends to isolate objects and to insulate subjects. Where primary reflection

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mour, trusting in the steady dispensations of the substance beyond" ("Dewey's Naturalistic Metaphysics," in *Obiter scripta* [New York, 1936] pp. 213-40, at 240).

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Gabriel Marcel, *The Mystery of Being* 1 (Chicago, 1960) p. 101. In an allied context Martin C. D'Arcy writes: "We are told by certain modern schools of philosophy that we must hold fast to sensible experience and never desert it for empty metaphysics. The truth is that we never have and never will have any knowledge of pure sensible experience, and the belief in it is nothing but a relic of the old faculty psychology. We are never mere sensitive beings; all our acts are human, with one or another of our activities predominating. It is as intelligent human beings that we start and wisely start with experience, but just as we are inclined to see an evolution in the physical and animal kingdoms, so we should be able to detect an ascending series from the inanimate to the living and sensitive and spiritual forms of life, which point on to what may well be the exemplar of what is foreshadowed: power such that it can create constant novelty . . . dominion such that there is no coercion" ("Philosophy of Religion," in *The Study of Theology* [see n. 6 above] pp. 135-36).

<sup>17</sup> Marcel, *op. cit.*, p. 102.



tends to dissolve the unity of experience which is first put before it, the function of secondary reflection is essentially recuperative: it reconquers that unity. It clears illusory beliefs out of the way, strives to keep fresh contact with that immediacy of self-awareness which is (or tends to be) crusted over by habit and by all the structures of an official compartmentalized life.<sup>18</sup> "Secondary reflection re-establishes the immediacy between subject and object and between subject and subject that had been ruptured by the objectifying process of primary reflection. Thus secondary reflection is actually a new level of ontological participation and incarnation, superior to that of sensation in quality and intensity and making use of the very skills and technical fruits produced by primary reflection as instruments to a higher metaphysical communion."<sup>19</sup> In short, secondary reflection cuts through the thicker and thicker screens we habitually interpose between ourselves and existence—that thicket of obstacles which tends to make us bureaucrats (instead of participants) not only in our outward behavior but in relation with ourselves as well.<sup>20</sup>

I have stressed the point that reflection, far from being antipodal to experience, is constitutive of it. Indeed, we can even say that the real *is* experience when we grasp that what reflection tries to understand is not somehow things-in-themselves but precisely their being as elements in our experience, which is to say, our experience of them. This point becomes clearer when we recall that reflection, which varies in kind, is not limited to the facile abstractionism of a detached spectator dealing with life as a set of problems to be solved, but as the exercise of our human potential—an abiding invitation (of an essentially open, active nature) to new starts and fresh undertakings, to the endless invention of new combinations and new connections, with the consequent and continual emergence of original patterns of meaning. Reflection is at its best and deepest in reading the inferences, nuances, and fresh testimonies that genuine participation in existence, appreciative living, yields to us when we grow up into the realization that our own particular existence is a gift—one we do not enjoy solitarily, but a gift shared and meant to be realized in communion.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 103, 112, 116. Cf. Vincent P. Miceli, S.J., *Ascent to Being: Gabriel Marcel's Philosophy of Communion* (New York, 1965) pp. xiv, 99–101.

<sup>19</sup> Miceli, *op. cit.*, p. 100.      <sup>20</sup> Cf. Marcel, *op. cit.*, p. 112.

<sup>21</sup> As Robert O. Johann observes, "An identification of experience and reality is possible only when the term *experience* is given the full range of its significance, only when it is defined as the total life of the self, including all that the life of the self includes. . . . Since the self is active only in reference to what is not itself, only in reference to the Other as constituting its world, it follows that experience as the life of the self includes

Having stressed earlier the impetus of genuine religion to overcome itself (i.e., "religion" as a narrow category) by meshing with life itself, I have given space, though scarcely enough, to the role of reflection *in* life, or experience (as opposed to setting it in diametric opposition to life or experience). With this minimal preparation, more explicit attention can now be paid to the relation of theology (the reflective aspect of religion) to religious experience.

Theology, as a reflective activity, fills out the content of faith. It does so by working out fiducial hypotheses, within a tradition to be sure, but in the light of contemporary awareness and self-understanding of the Christian community. These fiducial hypotheses are calculated to facilitate the living of faith by assisting the community of believers toward growth in fuller, richer understanding, so as to foster deeper Christian fidelity in living. Theology ultimately aims at helping the community of believers improve the way they hold what has been transmitted to them, opening and stimulating them to grasp for themselves the import, extension, and wealth of implication of the Good News, that its transformative power might more easily enrich their living.<sup>22</sup>

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not only the self but also the whole range of the Other with which it deals as well as the whole range and variety of its dealings. . . . When experience is taken in this sense—that is, as the concrete integration of the self and the Other in a dynamically open and all-inclusive synthesis—it is, I suggest, identically the real, the beginning and end of all thinking. Not only does it involve within itself the person of the thinker, so that he does not end up excluded from the object of his quest; it is precisely the realm in which the thinker meets people and so can fulfill himself as a person. Moreover, and just because it does include the person of the thinker—a self that is actively present both to itself in its dealings with the Other and to the Other with which it deals—experience is reality in that state of disclosure which we have seen to be the ground of thought. By encompassing the self within itself, reality becomes, as it were, interior and transparent to itself, and able to embark, in the person of the thinker, on the task of progressive self-articulation and progressive self-possession. For thinking is not something that confronts the real from somewhere outside itself. As an activity of the self it is part and parcel of experience, part and parcel of the real, that indeed by which the developing synthesis which is reality is able to take reflective possession of itself and so come to shape its own future course. Needless to say, if such is the case, any effort to locate the real in some realm beyond experience and to which thought alone gives us access is sheerest folly" ("The Return to Experience," *Review of Metaphysics* 17 [1964] 319–39, at 325–26).

<sup>22</sup> "Neither the worship nor the theology of the Church," writes Nathaniel Micklem, "is intelligible apart from some degree of that which is vaguely termed 'Christian experience.' The Christian faith rests upon the conviction that a momentous event has occurred, for 'God hath visited and hath redeemed His people.' The man whose heart and mind do not in some degree answer to this conviction has not the key to understand theology. Dogmatic theology is, indeed, no mere branch of psychology, as if the theologian were concerned only to explicate the religious states of himself and other people;

The phrase "fiducial hypotheses" intends to stress the tentative character of theology. On the one hand, it proceeds from the ground of faith; on the other, it realizes that it deals with mystery (i.e., marvel, wonder) and never thinks that it can pin down the personal, gracious God, His dealings with men or ours with Him, in verbal bonds. Theology, therefore, studiously eschews dogmatism in its tone. With the great theologians of our tradition, it realizes the need of negative theology, as well as affirmative, that there is a privileged level of awareness known as "learned ignorance" which knows when to keep silent, lest in speaking it babble blasphemously.<sup>23</sup> It realizes that the final positions of wisdom are won only through dialectic, not by deduction or presumptuousness. Theology might well regard itself as John Ciardi does a poem, as "one part against another across a silence." Like a rest in music, the silence is a point of balance between areas of theological discourse, the point at which a disclosure is most likely to happen.

In using the term hypotheses, I do not mean freewheeling speculation, nor do I mean that theology as a reflective activity is unconcerned with the discovery of truth.<sup>24</sup> "Hypotheses" is controlled by its quali-

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on the other hand, it cannot be written or even understood apart from the experience of redemption. In other words, dogmatic theology springs out of the Church's life and has no meaning outside the Church. . . . By the preaching of the Gospel, by the administration of the Sacraments, by the organized life of its fellowship the Church is linked in unbroken succession with the little company to whom the Risen Lord appeared. Its theology is first its own self-explanation of itself to itself; it is only secondarily an explanation of all other things in the light of its own experience" ("The History of Christian Doctrine," in *The Study of Theology* [see n. 6 above] pp. 291-92).

<sup>23</sup> As John Courtney Murray observed in this connection, "There is nothing more disastrous, as someone has said, than a negative theology that begins too soon. . . . The way of man to the knowledge of God is to follow all the scattered scintillae that the Logos has strewn throughout history and across the face of the heavens and the earth until they all fuse in the darkness that is the unapproachable light. Along this way of affirmation and negation all the resources of language, as of thought, must be exploited until they are exhausted. Only then may man confess his ignorance and have recourse to silence. But this ignorance is knowledge, as this silence is itself a language—the language of adoration" (*The Problem of God* [New Haven, 1964] p. 73).

<sup>24</sup> As Elizabeth Sewell trenchantly observes, "Christian theology in its speculative aspect, mythology or poetry, and science are three disciplines of discovery and learning. They differ in their subject matter; they are united in their structure and aim. Thought of in this way, they may all three appear less as a body of knowledge, something you possess, than as a particular activity founded on an appropriate set of beliefs. . . . These three disciplines do not merely have a common structure. They have a common aim. That is truth, taken in its most simple everyday sense. For each of these disciplines, to deny its obligation to truth is to deny its whole existence. It is fatal to say of myth and poetry that it is beautiful but a lie; or to say of religion that it is morally useful even if only symbolic; or of science that its first duty is to practical or political ends and not to

fier "fiducial," of faith. There is a reasonableness, a surety in faith, surety indeed of the highest order. But this surety is not of a noetic relation of thinking subject to neutral object of thought. Rather, it is much more akin to personal knowledge, to mutual contact, the genuinely reciprocal meeting in the fulness of life between one active existence and another.<sup>25</sup> In this kind of reciprocity, the heart of the genuinely religious relationship, we perceive our lives as the unfolding of an existence which is interdependent on others and lent to us by a loving Father who bids us enjoy the fellowship of His triune life. Indwelling in this communion, the source of all meaning, one enjoys that highest certainty which Buber calls "the religious essence in every religion—the certainty that the meaning of existence is open and accessible in the actual lived concrete, not above the struggle with reality but in it."<sup>26</sup> Buber significantly adds: "He who aims at the experience of experience will necessarily miss the meaning, for he destroys the spontaneity of the mystery. Only he reaches the meaning who stands firm, without holding back or reservation, before the whole might of reality and answers it in a living way. He is ready to confirm with his life the meaning which he has attained."<sup>27</sup> Such meaning is to be experienced

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truth. When this is done, beauty and moral expediency and practical usefulness disappear, for they are inseparable from the obligation to truth. . . . The denial of one discipline's truth usually took place because another discipline was claiming truth as its own private monopoly. This meant the loss of the charity in which they are founded and in which Pico and Holderin rooted them. When they fight each other, the whole endeavor of learning is maimed, each discipline is weakened in isolation, and in the end, as we have learned in the last forty years, all three are liable to be laid waste by an external aggressor in the form of a state system which denies freedom to literature, science, and religion alike, and admits no obligation to truth at all. If the three disciplines had not been so busy fighting one another for hundreds of years, they might have seen this danger more clearly. But in this respect our history is one long noisy battle" (*The Orphic Voice* [New Haven, 1960] pp. 66–67).

<sup>25</sup> "Everything in the history of the Christian revelation," writes Jacques Durand, "seems to indicate that God wants to be discovered and gratuitously loved. God alone has the prerogative of making himself known, but once he has done so, and a man comes to love him, an astonishing thing happens: the man begins to need this God who has made himself known, although he never really needed him before. This man finds someone unexpected on his path, someone who speaks his own language and offers him friendship; this man is astonished, and begins to desire the God whom he did not know or need, looking to him with deep love. And this God, who is loved for himself, who is loved gratuitously, then steps forward to bounteously satisfy this man's true desire—the desire for eternity. This is what a man misses in his possession of the world, what he misses in his relationship with others. He misses an unexpected personage who reveals himself, makes himself known, loved, desired, doing this out of friendship and as a gratuitous act" (*Living Questions to Dead Gods* [New York, 1968] p. 88).

<sup>26</sup> Buber, *op. cit.*, p. 35.      <sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

in living—in action and suffering itself. In aiming to foster this kind of living, in analyzing and describing constitutive elements of it, theology, as the reflective aspect of religion, can only hint, intimate, indicate.<sup>28</sup> Its utterances are at the same time valuable but vain attempts to do justice to the meaning of lived fidelity which has been attained; its expressions are only an intimation of its attainment.<sup>29</sup> Which is why theological analysis at some point has to yield to the paradigmatic individual (“the man of faith”) as the full enfleshment of what it is trying to say, as Paul, for example, calls attention to Jesus, to Abraham, or to himself as imitator of Christ.

This is but another way of recalling that theology has to do not with the definition but the recognition of mystery, that supremely positive act of participation in existence which cannot be, strictly speaking, self-conscious and which can grasp itself only through the modes of experience in which its image is reflected and which it lights up by being thus reflected in them. To some this may appear as obscurantism. “Certainly, a form of thinking which takes apart and puts together like a mosaic is clearer and more easily grasped. But it is not more true, that is more replete with reality. A form of knowledge which is faced with the mystery of the unity in multiplicity, of being in appearance, of the whole in the part and the part in the whole, and utters primordial words which are designed precisely to evoke this mystery, is dif-

<sup>28</sup> After theology has worn itself out in delineating the complex nature of faith, it must perforce yield to the personal report of the believer. In Jean Guitton’s view, such a personal report itself strains one’s capacity to verbalize and eventually ends in a solitary, undemonstrable movement. He writes: “When one is living at the centre of Catholic experience, one has an intellectual sense, an intuition which is absolute and confused. . . . Beneath all those elements of the Church which are human, irritating, sometimes mediocre, and more often than not ordinary and commonplace, I find an everyday quality—solid, dull, hard, homely, unflinching, analogous to the quality of *being* which characterizes the things of nature, of history and even certain people. It is a quality that cannot be lost; it is calm, radical and radiant and gives every part of the being peace and stability” (*The Church and the Gospel* [Chicago, 1961] pp. 269–70).

<sup>29</sup> In a passage which I take to be supportive of this view, Karl Rahner writes: “Grace is also the grace of no longer being able to be deceived about the incomprehensibility of God, of no longer being misled into thinking it only provisional. It is the grace of loving the divine darkness without reserves, the divinely given courage to enter this bliss which is authentic and unique, and to enjoy it as the nourishment of the strong. As long as we measure the loftiness of knowledge by its perspicuity, and think that we know what clarity and insight are, though we do not really know them as they truly are; as long as we imagine that analytical, co-ordinating, deductive and masterful reason is more and not less than experience of the divine incomprehensibility; as long as we think that comprehension is greater than being overwhelmed by light inaccessible, which shows itself as inaccessible in the very moment of giving itself: we have understood nothing of the mystery and of the true nature of grace and glory” (*Theological Investigations* 4 [Baltimore, 1966] 56).

ficult to grasp and dark, like the reality itself which gains mastery over us in such words and draws us into its incomprehensible depths."<sup>30</sup> Elizabeth Sewell writes that poetry, naming, truth-telling, and prayer are the four great functions of language.<sup>31</sup> As theology subserves prayerful existence, as it speaks in the service of *the Word*, it deals largely with primordial words (e.g., the biblical meaning of "heart") in which a piece of reality is connoted, in which a door is mysteriously opened into the unfathomable depths of true reality in general; words in which the transition from the individual to the infinite is already part of the content of the words themselves. "How," as Rahner asks, "could such words be unequivocally defined, when they are precisely words of that crossing of borders on which at some stage our very salvation depends?"<sup>32</sup>

"Just because it is the essence of mystery to be recognized or capable of recognition, it may also be ignored and actively denied."<sup>33</sup> Since theology deals reflexively with the elaboration of mystery recognized, or with propaedeutics to the recognition of mystery, it is perpetually in danger of losing its inner substance, of ringing hollow. It is essentially of the nature of a kind of appeal to the listener or reader, of a kind of call upon his resources. Theology so conceived could never be completely embodied in an apodictic exposition of which the listener or reader would merely have to grasp the content. The more deeply theology penetrates its subject matter—human existence in the light of God—the less it is a masterable body of content, a discipline capable of acquisition. Adapting some lines of Marcel, I would say: It is probable, indeed, that the theological enterprise has no other boundaries than those of its own dissatisfactions with any results it can achieve.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations* 3 (Baltimore, 1967) 326.

<sup>31</sup> Sewell, *op. cit.*, p. 164.

<sup>32</sup> Rahner, *Theological Investigations* 3, 326.

<sup>33</sup> Marcel, *op. cit.*, p. 260.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p. 264. Micklethorp (*op. cit.*, p. 314) writes: "Dogmatic theology is the offspring of hope; it can never know finality; we may apply to it the fragment of Gerard Manley Hopkins:

Hope holds to Christ the mind's own mirror out  
To take His lovely likeness more and more.  
It will not well, so she would bring about  
An ever brighter burnish than before  
And turns to wash it from her welling eyes  
And breathes the blots off all with sighs on sighs.  
Her glass is blest but she as good as blind  
Holds till hand aches and wonders what is there;

Where that dissatisfaction disappears and is replaced instead by a sense of being snugly settled, the theological activity has disappeared too. In speaking of God as not altogether unknown and yet a *Deus absconditus*, a God who reveals and conceals Himself as the necessary condition for our enjoying the thrill of discovering Him, a theology that became smug, stagnant, or lacking in a sense of humor would doom itself to irrelevancy—as a set of obsolete responses—and justly so, for having done injustice to God, denying Him the capacity for surprise.

Just as in a philosophic discussion of our knowledge of other persons one fails to find the ways in which the other may assist us to understand him, so too theology omits (because of the incapacity to generalize about them) the special ways God may choose to enter into communion with us, revealing something of Himself in our particular histories. The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of Jesus, is not like a sleeping Endymion or Aristotle's First Mover, indifferent and passive to our love. This keeps open new and vast possibilities which theology, if it cannot generalize about them, must be sensitive to, at which it can only reverently guess.<sup>35</sup>

If there is any truth to the view of theology as subserving lived faith that I have sketched above, it is pivotally important that the theologian reflect deeply on *his* situation, in order to acquire a gradually increasing insight into it. It is only insofar as the theologian participates in life (which is not synonymous with scurrying in search of another cause to picket for), only insofar as he does not remain detached from his own experience in life and of life (distancing himself from it, sitting owl-eyed before it like a spectator psychologist on vacation), that he can touch the religious depth of existence. As Luther wrote, "I did not learn my theology all at once, but I had to search deeper for it, where my temptations took me. A theologian is born by living, nay dying and

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Her glass drinks light, she darkles down behind,  
All of her glorious gainings unaware.

I told you that she turned her mirror dim  
Between whiles, but she sees herself not Him."

<sup>35</sup> "We do not," writes Durandeaux, "prepare for the advent of God; God appears like a flash. And images only prevent us from recognizing him. God alone is capable of giving us true images and ideas of himself. This is the framework in which a Holy Scripture can attain philosophical status. There definitely is philosophic justification for the idea that a Holy Scripture or an Incarnation can be the sole foundation for human discourse on and human images of God. If God is not a product of man, he will appear as the Unanticipated. And any discourse on God, if serious, will presuppose the dawn of revelation" (*op. cit.*, p. 89).

being damned, not by thinking, reading, or speculation."<sup>36</sup> The thrust of this exaggeration is important. Not that thinking, reading, and speculation are dispensable paths to growth as a theologian—Luther's own practice belies this—but that the theologian must not ignore his own self-awareness as a man of a particular country, of a particular people, a particular ethos which he shares with those whom he serves and whom his theology should stimulate.<sup>37</sup> The darkness of his people, their incapacity to appreciate, and their insensitivity to God are his too.<sup>38</sup> He does not speak from Olympus, but in a particular context. The more alive he is to it—and not in the superficial sense of merely accumulating lots of data from "objective studies," but in searching his own heart—the more likely he is to quicken others to God in their lives.<sup>39</sup>

For a still deeper reason, the theologian must be present to his existence in all its particularity, that is, because presence is organically connected with the appreciation and recognition of mystery, the pith of the theological enterprise. Stating the grounds for this connection succinctly, Marcel notes: "in the first place, every presence is mysterious and, in the second place, it is very doubtful whether the word 'mystery' can really be properly used in the case where a presence is not, at the very least, making itself felt."<sup>40</sup> "The mystery" with which the theologian deals, Rahner reminds us, "is of itself no merely provisional element of obscurity in a reality or proposition, to be dissipated in time, but always and essentially determinative of the necessary relationship intervening between the created spirit and God. Man, made for mystery, must be such that this mystery constitutes the relationship between God and man, and hence the fulfilment of human nature is the consummation of its orientation towards the abiding mystery."<sup>41</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Erik Erikson, *Young Man Luther* (New York, 1958) p. 251, cited in Elhard, *op. cit.*, p. 154.

<sup>37</sup> From a similar observation Peter Berger launches a number of caveats at the theologian in *Rumor of Angels* (Garden City, 1970) pp. 8, 22, 23.

<sup>38</sup> What Karl Rahner remarks, in the following passage, regarding pastoral practice, has its application for the theological endeavor as well: "Theology is good, necessary, and we shall never have finished studying it. Yet how second-rate theological subtlety is where real problems are concerned, when compared with the qualities of mind and heart which we will have to rely on to solve the ultimate questions of faith. At this level we priests have no advantage over the laity. Let us be to ourselves and to the layman what we are: men who seek, who ask, who are tempted and are filled with anxiety, just as they are; men who pray: 'Lord I believe; help my unbelief!' Let us not playact steadfastness and serenity of faith if we do not possess them" (*Belief Today* [New York, 1967] p. 57).

<sup>39</sup> Cf. Durandeaux, *op. cit.*, pp. 47–48, on interpretive sciences in this regard, and Bernard Lonergan, "Theology and Man's Future," *Cross Currents* 19 (1969) 452–61, at 457.

<sup>40</sup> Marcel, *op. cit.*, p. 266.

<sup>41</sup> Rahner, *Theological Investigations* 4, 49.



It will not do to hold that the theologian must merely make correct statements about the mystery. The higher the "object" known, the higher is the knowledge, the truth of it; and therefore the more this truth affects and demands existence, the more it demands the thinker's indwelling in it.<sup>42</sup> Though much theology might turn out to be what Barth said of Anselm's ontological argument, just "scouring the cup of faith," it cannot even do that unless it strive for the nuance necessary to speak (from the particularity of human existence as experienced today) of faith understood as the entrance into reciprocity, as binding oneself in relationship with an undemonstrable and unprovable, yet even so, in relationship, knowable Being, from whom all meaning comes.<sup>43</sup>

Theology, since it is ever pursuing the living God, is and must be open thought, engaged in the real and open to continual enrichment from all created reality, which faith holds to be expressive of God. This entails a critical function for theology. "The principal moral benefit of religion," writes Peter Berger, "is that it permits a confrontation with the age in which one lives in a perspective that transcends the age and puts it in proportion."<sup>44</sup> As the reflective aspect of religion, it is particularly incumbent on theology to challenge those assumptions of the times which keep us from contact with our very selves as well as with others, shibboleths which, if accepted, would keep us from experiencing the fulness of life, deaden aspiration, and restrain us from the freedom and heights to which we are called. As Tillich observes:

The criterion of every concrete expression of our ultimate concern is the degree to which the concreteness of the concern is in unity with its ultimacy. It is the danger of every embodiment of the unconditional element, religious and secular, that it elevates something conditioned, a symbol, an institution, a movement as such to ultimacy. This danger was well known to the religious leaders of all types; and the whole work of theology can be summed up in the statement, that it is the permanent guardian of the unconditional against the aspiration of its own religious and secular appearance.<sup>45</sup>

We noted earlier that theology must have a lively sense of its own limits. At the same time, it must be quick and keen in deflating dogmatism in "secular" guise, whether it be in the form of talk of men in terms of computers, or glib generalities about what modern man thinks and feels, or fails to think and feel. It is, in short, one of theology's tasks to fight anything that cheapens and vulgarizes the world of men.

<sup>42</sup> Rahner, *Theological Investigations* 3, 259.      <sup>43</sup> Buber, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

<sup>44</sup> Berger, *op. cit.*, pp. 95-96.

<sup>45</sup> Paul Tillich, *Theology and Culture* (New York, 1964) p. 29.

We can learn from the mistakes of the theology of an earlier Christian era that devaluation of the cosmos goes hand in hand with devaluation of human experience.<sup>46</sup> Both disprizings make it difficult to appreciate the extent of the sacramental principle, and therefore close off avenues to the discovery of God in everyday experience.<sup>47</sup> This may be theology exercising a first-aid function, but it is still a part of theology and always has been to do all in its power to maintain the humanity of human life. As Gerhard Ebeling says in this connection, "We see again and again that men can be blind even to the immediate and evident. It is the business of theology also to care about the immediate and evident if need be, by bringing it to expression as such. The power of faith must show itself precisely in making us free also to such service."<sup>48</sup> Since the primary object of the Christian message is God's epiphany in man and in the human world, it should be evident that God's countenance cannot become visible where humanity and the human face itself are twisted and distorted.<sup>49</sup>

In this connection, one of the prime values of theological tradition may be in providing a critical fulcrum for deflating erroneous assumptions and viewpoints which choke out faith's breathing space. Keeping in touch with the experience of our forebears in the faith should assist the contemporary Christian (through the theologian grounding himself in awareness of that tradition) to be alive to the multidimensional character of lived faith, to the wholeness of it, as opposed to partial representations of it to which every age is liable, given the fact that there is (as a sociology of knowledge would point out) the possibility of losing truth with the advance of time, and that people too readily ac-

<sup>46</sup> Cf. E. R. Dodds, *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety: Some Aspects of Religious Experience from Marcus Aurelius to Constantine* (Cambridge Univ. Press, 1965) p. 37.

<sup>47</sup> "If, therefore, although bound to desacralize the world, early Christianity advocated a systematic refusal of the world instead of affirming it, this may have been because the charismatic quality of the creation's sacramental power had not been aptly taken into account" (Gabriel Vahanian, *No Other God* [New York, 1966] p. 19).

<sup>48</sup> Gerhard Ebeling, "Theology and the Evidentness of the Ethical," *Journal for Theology and Church* 2 (1965) 104. In a similar vein Vahanian observes: "One should not lament the fact that others, such as the state or private foundations, have today assumed the great cultural, political, and social tasks that the Church in the past initiated and accomplished, and from which our civilization benefited before turning its back on Christianity. The essential thing today is that Christianity should not miss its vocation by not assuming even the humblest tasks to which its adherents may be brought in spite of their faithfulness to the Church. As in the parable of the last judgment, could it not be that these were the most urgent and decisive tasks? And could it not be that their style is one that behooves the Church's involvement in the world?" (*op. cit.*, p. 95).

<sup>49</sup> This gathers added significance when it is recalled that God becoming present in man through faith is part of the event of revelation. Cf. Ambroos-Remi Van de Welle, O.P., "How We Meet Christ in the Liturgical Community," *Concilium* 12 (1966) 20.

cept reigning viewpoints as the right ones. Theological tradition could help the recovery and maintenance of completeness in representing the import of God's epiphany in our world, provided that that rich and varied tradition be employed in the service of current needs of the faithful and not flattened into a univocal party line to which all must render unknowing assent. Tradition should serve as a hermeneutical aid to the interpretation and expansion of contemporary Christian awareness—an aftersight to enrich our foresight.<sup>50</sup> Faith depends on being shared if it is to prosper, and that sharing occurs not only among contemporaries, but with the testimony of our forebears in the faith as well, who may have more to offer than we think to supplement the poverty of our own religious insight and experience.<sup>51</sup> Charles Davis once wrote:

When honesty means the dominance of personal reference as a criterion of truth, then the content of Christian tradition is accepted in so far as it is personally meaningful and personally liberating. Ultimately, however, this makes one a prisoner of limited experience. . . . What does not speak to our generation may well become a living voice to the next. . . . The Christian tradition as an external norm is an educative support for our personal development. But it is more than that. It is a sign of what lies beyond our power of personal assimilation, what reveals the limits of our present experience, what will not be surpassed until the reality it manifests is directly grasped.<sup>52</sup>

If some of us have been scarred by a misuse of tradition in our own training, we must not let that misfortune blind us to its rich potential as a means of transcending the limitations of our own experience.

<sup>50</sup> "So far as I am concerned," wrote Kenneth Burke, "I find nothing more 'contemporary' than the records of heresies, sects, and schisms that flourished centuries ago, which are by no means gone with their times, but are *mutatis mutandis* all vigorous today" (*The Philosophy of Literary Form* [New York, 1957] p. x).

<sup>51</sup> Writes Christian Duquoc: "One cannot refute an historic experience. One surmounts it by a more all-embracing experience." He offers the following text from Augustine which, he believes, "describes marvelously well the spiritual situation about to come into being: 'Let those be angry with you who do not know the sighs and tears which the knowledge of the true God, even the most insignificant, exacts. Let them be roused against you who have never been turned aside from their path, as you and I have been. As for me, it is absolutely impossible for me to be angry with you. But so that you may never be vexed with me . . . I must ask you a favor. Let us, you and me, do away with all arrogance. Let neither of us, neither you nor me, pretend to have discovered truth. Let us look for it as something equally unknown to both of us. We can then seek it with love and sincerity when neither of us has the boldness or presumption to believe it already in his possession. And if I cannot ask so much of you, grant me at least the favor of listening to you, of discussing with you, as with beings that I, for my part, do not pretend to know'" ("The Believer and Christian Existence in History," *Concilium* 9 [1965] 139-40).

<sup>52</sup> Charles Davis, in the Preface to Rosemary Haughton's *On Trying to Be Human* (Springfield, Ill., 1966) pp. 11-12.

Tradition is misused most commonly by being forced into a pattern which constricts rather than enlarges our vision. Regarding such misuse of tradition, T. S. Eliot wrote:

... Do not let me hear  
 Of the wisdom of old men, but rather of their folly,  
 Their fear of fear and frenzy, their fear of possession,  
 Of belonging to another, or to others, or to God,  
 The only wisdom we can hope to acquire  
 Is the wisdom of humility: humility is endless. (*East Coker*)

If it aided us in acquiring the wisdom of humility, a grounding in tradition would be profitable. But Eliot's lines are valuable not simply for their stress on the openness of the wisdom of humility, but for pin-pointing fear of belonging—to another, to others, to God. Here we are, I believe, very close to what religion, religious experience, and theology in the service of it are all about. At the heart of Christianity is the conviction that we are all one in Christ. I would view insight into this oneness, being impressed, or better, overcome by it so that it radically alters one's living, as a central and climactic kind of religious experience. Yet desirable as such experience of oneness is, it is the conviction of this oneness, the living out of this faith conviction, that is crucial for Christian living. One could hardly improve on Bonhoeffer's expression of this point:

There is probably no Christian to whom God has not given the uplifting *experience* of genuine Christian community at least once in his life. But in this world such experiences can be no more than a gracious extra beyond the daily bread of Christian community life. We have no claim upon such experiences, and we do not live with other Christians for the sake of acquiring them. It is not the experience of Christian brotherhood, but solid and certain faith in brotherhood that holds us together. That God has acted and wants to act upon us all, this we see in faith as God's greatest gift, this makes us glad and happy, but it also makes us ready to forego all such experiences when God at times does not grant them. We are bound together by faith, not by experience.<sup>53</sup>

Similarly, after a short but illuminating essay on what the actual experience of grace in our lives is like, Rahner writes:

Let each one of us look for the experience of grace in the contemplation of our life, but not so that we can say: there it is, I have it. One cannot "find" it so as to claim it triumphantly as one's own possession. One can only look for it by forgetting oneself; one can only find it by seeking God and by giving oneself to him in a love which forgets self, and without still returning to oneself. But one should now and then ask oneself where one has something like this

<sup>53</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (London, 1965) p. 25.

destructive and, at the same time, vivifying experience, so that one might estimate how much of the road still remains to be covered and how far we are still from the experience of the Holy Ghost in our so-called spiritual life. *Grandis nobis restat via. Venite et gustate quam suavis sit Dominus.* We still have a long way to go. Come and taste how sweet is the Lord.<sup>54</sup>

The following affirmations and considerations will serve to summarize the key points of this essay. Hopefully, they will not be taken as dogmatic dicta, but as pointed summations of a point of view.

1) Theology arises from, and makes sense in, believing community. Theology presupposes faith. An implication of this dictum is that theology presupposes religious experience.

2) Theology is not an end in itself. As the reflective aspect of religion, its aim is to assist lived faith (= religious experience).

3) Religious experience is not an esoteric phenomenon, bearing characteristics so peculiar as to render it capable of a priori determination, but a dimension of depth in one's experience in living.

4) Religious experience must not be confined to peak religious experience, such as sudden conversions or *dramatic* forms of ecstasy.

5) Religious experience must not be treated as on the same level as an ear for music. If a believer (be he anonymous Christian or professed) claims he has no religious experience, it might be that he has too restricted a notion of what religious experience is.

6) As theology is a mode of reflection and genuine religion a mode of living, how one views the interrelation of reflection and experience is of pivotal importance in attempting to understand the relation of theology to religious experience.

7) This essay has held that reflection is still a part of experience, the mode in which life rises from one level to another and hence the mode in which experience is appreciated as experience.

8) In this perspective, which sees reflection within the order of experience, the thinker *in* (and not detached from) the world of relations out of which his reflection emerges, such notions as transcendence are not understood as a leap beyond all experience, but as a movement (an appreciative expansion) in which we enjoy a more encompassing experience. Beyond all experience is nothing. The limits of one's own experience are overcome only by a more encompassing experience.

9) The path to a more encompassing experience is through a fresh look at everyday experience. Theology might assist the enjoyment of more encompassing experience by alerting men (in Berger's phrase) to signals of transcendence in everyday experience, and through its

<sup>54</sup> Rahner, *Theological Investigations* 3, 89-90.

critical function: challenging those contemporary assumptions and attitudes (which we imbibe) which isolate us from our own experience, cause us to misread it, and make it difficult to be present to ourselves, to others, and to God.

10) In doing this, theology's use of tradition might serve as an aid to a more encompassing experience by pointing up the partiality of our own religious experience and calling us beyond the insularity which comes from holding only what happens to be relevant at the moment.

11) The theologian himself must be sensitive to his own experience. Since mystery is the pith of the theological enterprise, and mystery can be appreciated only through presence to it, the theologian must be capable of and alive to wonder if he is to speak knowingly of human existence in the light of God. Our failure to be present may be the biggest reason for prattle about God's absence.

12) Together we are bound to God by faith. To make experience, in a solipsistic sense, the focal aim of one's quest is inherently self-frustrating. We grow in self-awareness and self-consciousness (hence become more alive) as we become increasingly aware of what is not ourselves. Perhaps the context most fraught with possibility of religious experience is a life dedicated to what is bigger, better, and more fascinating than one's self alone.