THE HERMENEUTIC OF DOGMA

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THE PURPOSE of this paper is to formulate a hermeneutic of dogma in light of the contemporary German hermeneutical discussion. The philosophical hermeneutic developed in Hans-Georg Gadamer's *Wahrheit und Methode* is the primary basis for my own reflections.[1] Of secondary importance is the work of the post-Bultmannian New Hermeneutic, the closest theological counterpart to Gadamer's thought.[2] Both Gadamer and the Bultmannians have clarified the basic structure of historical understanding. My concern is to explore the implications of this structure of understanding for the interpretation of dogma. Understandably, the limits of the paper prevent a full presentation of the main themes of the German hermeneutical discussion. Footnote references to the primary literature must suffice in indicating the theoretical context for my own analysis.

The distinctive focus of the contemporary hemeneutical discussion, including the work of Gadamer and the Bultmannians, is the impact of the subjectivity of the interpreter upon interpretation. Part of the hermeneutical task is locating the meaning of texts in their original historical setting, but the full scope of understanding and textual meaning is not confined to this level. The historical situation of the interpreter as well as that of the text must be kept in mind. The mediation of past into present, an awareness of the existential significance of tradition, thus becomes an essential function of interpretation. The past can only be fully understood from and by being translated into the horizon of interpretation. Gadamer has described this interpretative movement from past to present as "effective history" (*Wirkungsgeschichte*) and as a "fusion" of the horizons of text and interpreter (*Horizontverschmelzung*).[3] The meaning of texts is located in an ongoing

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[1] *Wahrheit und Methode: Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik* (Tübingen, 1965). Other important essays by Gadamer on hermeneutics are in *Kleine Schriften*, 3 vols. (Tübingen, 1967–).

[2] The key figures in the New Hermeneutic are Gerhard Ebeling and Ernst Fuchs. Among their important statements on hermeneutics are: Ebeling, *Word and Faith* (Philadelphia, 1963) and "Hermeneutik," *RGG* 3 (3rd ed.) 242–62; Fuchs, *Hermeneutik* (3rd ed.; Stuttgart, 1963) and *Marburger Hermeneutik* (Tübingen, 1968). The best commentary on the discussion is James Robinson's introduction to *The New Hermeneutic: New Frontiers in Theology* 2 (New York, 1964).

[3] *Wirkungsgeschichte* (effective history), *wirkungsgeschichtliche* (effective-historical), and *wirkungsgeschichtliche Bewusstsein* (effective-historical consciousness) are terms employed by Gadamer. Their meaning is difficult to render in English and "effective

process of interpretation and is not properly confined to one moment in the historical movement of tradition.

In the context of "effective history" a variety of levels of meaning or tradition can be distinguished: the meaning of the text in its original historical situation, the process of tradition in which text and interpreter are situated, the explicit application of the meaning of a text in the horizon of interpretation. This variety of meaning reflects, to a certain extent, a differentiation of the activities of the interpreter as he uses the techniques of critical history to reach the past meaning of a text, assesses this meaning in the full context of a tradition, applies the meaning in his own situation in time. My objective is to employ this schema of meaning and interpretation in a statement of the specific task of the interpretation of dogma.

THE SITUATION OF DOGMATIC TEXTS

Both the philosophical and theological hermeneutical discussions emphasize the importance of reaching the meaning of texts in their own situation or horizon. One element of historical understanding is the sketch of the past meaning of the text. "Effective-historical" interpretation depends upon a distinct past horizon or situation of meaning which

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history" is at best a faltering attempt. The term points in one sense to the impact or "effect" (*Wirkung*) of texts and historical events as they become part of an ongoing, living tradition. The meaning of such historical sources cannot be restricted to the past. They come into the present as a part of a continuing tradition. Such history is embodied in the culture, institutions, and language in which man exists. It is through this bond of past and present formed by an ongoing tradition that the interpreter has access to the past. A related sense of "effective history" describes the full structure of historical understanding which includes the impact on historical interpretation both of the situation of the text and that of the interpreter. The meaning of historical sources is not confined to the past and recovered by a leap from present into past. The "presuppositionless" effort of nineteenth-century historicism to stay exclusively with the meaning of texts in their original historical settings overlooks the necessary involvement in understanding of the subjectivity of the interpreter and the obligation to translate past meaning into the horizon of interpretation. Historical sources are finally understood when they are mediated into and thus have an "effect" upon the present. The subjective concerns and prejudgments of the interpreter come into play when he seeks to apply the past to the present, discovering not simply history "as it really was" but the truth of the past for modern man. Historical understanding is for Gadamer an encounter of past and present, a "fusion" of the horizons of text and interpreter (*Horizontverschmelzung*). A meaning emerges or comes to expression in historical understanding which reflects both the meaning of the text in its original situation and the present day with its particular needs and concerns. The encounter of the distinct and temporally separated horizons of past and present properly terminates in the merging of these horizons and the discovery of a common tradition in which both past and present have a part.

is encountered by or juxtaposed to the horizon of the interpreter.[4] An attentiveness to the situation of the text, as Gadamer and the Bultmannians preceive it, rests upon no new method of history. The emergence of historical awareness and criticism over the last few centuries has provided a variety of tools of analysis. Philology, literary criticism, an attentiveness to cultural and social differences and their impact on particular authors and texts—these and other techniques have emerged in the effort to interpret historical sources. What is the meaning of a text in its own historical situation for author and for reader? What conscious intentions and implicit meanings does it express? Such questions point to one dimension of historical analysis, an appreciation of the distinctive meaning of the text in its original historical setting. The positive significance of the time difference between interpreter and text is that it makes possible a reflective appreciation of the unique and often quite different horizon of a historical text. The gap between text and interpreter includes possible differences of language, culture, and basic thought-forms, and thus counters any naive attempt to identify past and present. If a "fusion of horizons" does finally occur, it is based upon the encounter of distinct and temporally separated horizons, and not in the dissolution of the gap between present and past.

The gap between the horizons of text and interpreter points to the necessity of locating the past meanings of texts. What does this principle of interpretation mean for the specific problem of the interpretation of dogma? If the focus of interpretation is upon the past meaning of dogma, then a number of possible questions can guide interpretation. My intention is not to provide a comprehensive outline of historical method, but merely to point out some of the relevant questions that can be asked when the level of meaning sought is the meaning of a dogmatic text in its own historical situation.[5]

[4] The time difference between text and interpreter is for Gadamer the chief guarantee of an appreciation of the "otherness" of a historical text, its location in a horizon different from that of the present day. See, e.g., *Wahrheit und Methode*, pp. 275 ff. for a discussion of this time difference. In the New Hermeneutic, the acceptance of critical historical method is a central principle of Protestant faith in its refusal to identify the "letter" of Scripture, its historical meaning, with the "spirit" or gospel. See, e.g., Ebeling's programmatic essay, "The Significance of the Critical-Historical Method for Church and Theology," in *Word and Faith*, pp. 17–61.

[5] The following sketch of some important questions that guide historical interpretation is heavily dependent on Piet Schoonenberg's analysis of principles of interpretation in *Die Interpretation des Dogmas*, ed. Schoonenberg (Düsseldorf, 1969) esp. pp. 65–69. This investigation of the original meaning of dogmatic texts is labeled "commentary" by Schoonenberg and is distinguished by him from "interpretation," in which the interpreter seeks to mediate the meaning of the text into his own horizon. For similar sketches of principles guiding the critical-historical interpretation of dogma, see E. Schlink, "Die

The basic problem facing the historian is the need to understand the language of a dogmatic text and the subject matter to which the words of the text refer, objectives which can lead to an ever-wider context of interpretation. An accepted starting point in interpreting the meaning of dogma, as in interpreting other historical documents, is *fixing the earliest and most authentic version of the text*. In those instances where variant texts and translations exist, one form must be chosen for interpretation.[6] Beyond this formal requirement of fixing the text, the more serious problem of interpretation is a *philological examination of the meaning of the dogmatic terms*. What meaning did the words of a definition have in the original situation in which they were employed? The meaning of words can in fact shift as the historical context in which they are used changes. As Piet Schoonenberg has pointed out, the meaning of *liber* changed as the word was directed first against Pelagian and then against Jansenist positions.[7] Similar shifts in the meaning of *fides* and *haeresis* can be noted.[8] Transformations of the meaning of "person" and of "substance" have produced a gap between contemporary man and the Trinitarian and transubstantiation definitions. Such examples show the importance of fixing as closely as possible the meaning of terms in their original usage. To simply assume the accepted theological meaning of terms or to simply take over the accepted meanings of language in one's own time is to neglect the historical development that can in fact change the meaning of dogmatic language. The determination of the precise historical meaning of dogmatic terms is a task for careful historical analysis of the texts themselves, and not the product of the common-sense presuppositions of later theology.

Struktur der dogmatischen Aussage als oekumenisches Problem," *Kerygma und Dogma* 3 (1957) 251–306, esp. 300 ff., and Wolfgang Beinert, "Ewiges und Geschichtliches in der Botschaft der Kirche," *Catholica* 23 (1970) 361–63.

[6] Schoonenberg cites as an example of the need for determining the form of the text those instances when Greek and Latin versions of a council's decrees exist and the interpreter must decide on the best reading of a text in light of both; cf. *Die Interpretation des Dogmas*, p. 66, referring to the Lateran Council of 649 (*DS* 500) and the Third Council of Constantinople (*DS* 552).

[7] *Die Interpretation des Dogmas*, p. 66. Part of such analysis is the determination of the literary form of a dogmatic definition, e.g., the connection between dogmatic definitions concerning original sin and the aetiological form of the biblical accounts of the Fall. Do the dogmatic texts qualify as more than simple extensions of the original literary forms? For further reflection on this point, see M. Lohrer, "Uberlegungen zur Interpretation lehramtlicher Aussagen als Frage des ökumenischen Gesprächs," in *Gott in Welt* 2 (Freiburg, 1964) 521.

[8] Albert Lang has studied these shifts in meaning in "Der Bedeutungswandel der Begriffe 'fides' und 'haeresis' und die dogmatische Wertung der Konzilentscheidungen von Vienne und Trient," *Münchener theologische Zeitschrift* 4 (1953) 133–46.

Investigation of the individual words employed in a definition draws the interpreter necessarily into a consideration of the "sentence" in which they occur—the *dogmatic* statement as a whole. What was the *particular intention* of a given definition? In its historical context, what was the point, the unique contribution, of a dogmatic statement? This level of meaning reflects, above all, the intended meaning in the minds of those formulating a dogma. Such an intended meaning usually emerges, in the case of dogma, in response to a question or set of questions, as an effort to express the true content of faith at a particular moment in history. The question situation prompting a definition most often comes in the form of a heretical movement, and thus the purpose of dogma is more defensive and polemical than constructive. To reach the intended meaning of the definition, it is necessary to understand the question which prompted it, to note the opinion against which the dogma was reacting. The thrust of the transubstantiation statement of Trent, for example, was not a constructive effort to state comprehensively the manner of Christ's presence in the Eucharistic elements; it was a defense of the simple reality of the presence against a purely symbolic interpretation which the Fathers believed to be taught by the Protestant Reformers. The definition, as Karl Rahner has emphasized, was simply a "logical" restatement of the biblical affirmation "This is my body and my blood."[9] Consequently, the question prompting the affirmation of transubstantiation was not a need to resolve the theological disputes over the *manner* of the real presence. No choice was made among the various concepts of substance found in the theological schools of the period or among different concepts of Eucharistic change.

The text of a particular dogmatic statement alone may not reveal its specific meaning; the interpreter may be drawn beyond the text itself to an examination of its *immediate historical setting*. The complete corpus of a council's decrees, the record of conciliar debates, correspondence of the participants, and other historical sources can throw light on a council's intention. Study of the acts of the Council of Trent reveals, for example, that the Fathers were careful not to identify the term "transubstantiation" with the opinion of any particular theological school.[10] Subtle changes in the wording of a definition as it passes through a process of revision in the course of conciliar debate may point

[9] Karl Rahner, "The Presence of Christ in the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper," in *Theological Investigations* 4 (Baltimore, 1966) 300 ff.

[10] For careful historical analysis of the acts of the Council and of the various statements that make this avoidance of the theological debates clear, see E. Gutwenger, "Substanz und Akzidens in der Eucharistielehre," *Zeitschrift für katholische Theologie* 83 (1961) 258, and E. Schillebeeckx, *The Eucharist* (New York, 1968) pp. 25–86.

to the specific intent of a definition as a product of a discussion and of a continuing effort to narrow the focus of the statement. [11] Studying the deliberations of the Fathers at Trent, Geiselmann noted that they had explicitly rejected a formula which located the content of revelation "partly" in Scripture and "partly" in tradition (*partim/partim*) and had retained in the final decree a simple *et*. This change in wording, among other things, led to Geiselmann's conclusion that the "two-source" theory which came to dominate Catholic theology was in fact a departure from the intention of the Tridentine dogma. [12]

If an adequate understanding is impossible either in light of the dogmatic text itself or in light of its immediate historical setting, a still broader horizon of investigation comes into view in order to reach the intent of a dogmatic statement. The *theological, cultural, and social milieu* which a particular dogma reflects can also be of importance. The theological positions characteristic of a particular era which influenced a papal or conciliar decision may need to be considered. The intent of the transubstantiation definition is clarified if the statement is read in light of Protestant Eucharistic doctrine, especially the ideas of those thinkers specifically named in the Tridentine decrees, [13] as well as in light of the Catholic theologies of the Eucharist at the time of the Council. The decrees of Vatican I can only be fully understood when located in the theological climate of the nineteenth century, and especially in the context of the Roman School, the theological outlook which had the greatest impact on the Council's decrees. [14] Beyond the specifically theological milieu of a dogma, the social and cultural setting may throw light on its meaning. The development of a dogmatic tradition emphasiz-

[11] The reference to "intent" should not conceal the complexity of locating a *group* intention, a more difficult enterprise in most situations than the determination of the intent of an individual author.

[12] See, above all, J. R. Geiselmann, *Die Heilige Schrift und die Tradition* (Freiburg, 1962) esp. pp. 91–107 and 277–82. A summary of a number of theologians and historians who have supported Geiselmann's proposal is given by H. Küng in his article "Karl Barths Lehre vom Wort Gottes als Frage an die katholische Theologie," in J. Ratzinger and H. Fries, eds., *Einsicht und Glaube* (Freiburg, 1963) p. 105, n. 25. Geiselmann's thesis has also been opposed. See, e.g., the critique of H. Lennerz, "Scriptura sola," *Gregorianum* 40 (1959) 38–53; "Sine scripto traditiones," *ibid.*, pp. 624–35. For a similar critique from the Protestant side, see Heiko Oberman, "Quo vadis? Tradition from Irenaeus to Humani generis," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 16 (1963) 225–55.

[13] For an example of such a comparison of Trent with the thought of the Reformers, see Josef Ratzinger, "Das Problem des Transsubstantiation," *Theologische Quartalschrift* 147 (1967) esp. 132 ff.

[14] Walter Kasper has carried out an extensive analysis of the points of contact between Vatican I and the Roman school in *Die Lehre von der Tradition in der römischen Schule* (Freiburg, 1962).

ing the authority of the pope, for example, is inextricably tied to the long history of the political rivalry of Church and state. Yves Congar has pointed out the importance of the general concern with political and social authority in the nineteenth century in setting the tone of the Vatican affirmations of papal authority. [15] Such instances show how a familiarity with the cultural, social, and political structures of an era can elucidate the mind-set of those formulating a dogmatic statement, whether they were consciously aware of these influences or not.

Beyond the immediate historical context of a dogma, a still broader horizon for investigation is the historical *tradition of faith* which has a direct impact on the formulators of dogma. Dogmas are often conscious efforts to repeat or change earlier traditions, scriptural and dogmatic. Comparison of texts is one device for noting such a continuity. Such a comparison reveals, for example, the use of the word *homoousios* in the Creed of Nicaea, not found in the decrees of earlier councils, and the transformation by the same Council of Caesarea's "God from God" into "true God from true God." [16] The development of the Christological formula through the early councils is revealed in large part by the study of such explicit additions or alterations in textual wording, and is one example which indicates the interpretative necessity of moving beyond the dogmatic text and its own immediate horizon in order to examine those traditional texts in whose light a specific dogma was formulated.

One focus of interpretation is the express intent of a dogmatic statement, the meaning of dogma intended by its authors. But the meaning of dogmas, like the meaning of any other historical texts, cannot be restricted to conscious intentions. [17] The meaning of texts transcends the conscious intentions of authors. With his language, man is located in a horizon of which he is only partly aware in a conscious and reflective way. The concepts available in a particular language, the world view it implies, and the basic thought-forms of an age affect the way in which individuals and particular cultures receive and correlate experience. Often as not, such influences are prereflectively important in determining the form of a dogmatic definition. While the Fathers at Trent, for

[15] Yves Congar has noted this interrelationship between the emphasis on authority in the last century and the Vatican decrees in "The Historical Development of Authority in the Church: Points for Christian Reflection," in John Todd, ed., *Problems of Authority* (Baltimore, 1962) pp. 144 ff.

[16] Cf. *DS* 125 with 40; cited and discussed in Schoonenberg, *Die Interpretation des Dogmas*, p. 67.

[17] Gadamer develops this point particularly in his critique of the "canon of the original reader," *Wahrheit und Methode*, pp. 370, 372–73. The implicit, prereflective experience coming to expression in a text and the expansion of textual meaning in the ongoing process of interpretation account for this inability to remain exclusively at the level of conscious intentions.

example, did not opt for any particular theological notion of substance or of Eucharistic change, they did formulate the doctrine with the available theological categories of their era—those of Aristotelian thought. It would be naive to assume that the Tridentine fathers somehow "stepped out" of their linguistic horizon in formulating the definition of transubstantiation.[18] Cultural and historical analysis and comparison can locate the presuppositons of an age in a way that was impossible in the historical situation itself. The nature of such presuppositions appears only to an interpreter approaching a dogmatic text from another historical and cultural setting. This is not to say that one cannot grasp many elements of the horizon in which he stands, especially as he consciously compares his own standpoint to those of other cultures and historical epochs, or that the interpreter ever fully duplicates the richness and depth of the "spirit" of another age. While a reflective articulation of one's horizon can be carried out with a certain measure of success, however, some dimensions of the cultural particularity of an age or author may only appear to later historical interpreters. This is particularly evident in assessing the limits and biases of any given standpoint. Such an analysis is one dimension of interpretation directed at the full meaning of a dogmatic text in its own horizon or situation.[19] Reaching this meaning involves interpretation directed toward a variety of historical concerns: the language of a text, the immediate historical setting of a council or papal decree, the broader social and cultural milieu, those past texts which have a direct bearing on a dogma, and the implicit presuppositions and thought-forms which lie behind a given definition.

Both Gadamer and the Bultmannians point to the hermeneutical importance of reconstructing the meaning of texts in their own historical situations, a concern which applies to the interpretation of dogma as well. This critical historical interpretation of the past extends to the implicit and explicit meaning of texts in their own horizon and to the tradition process, in its past forms, in which a particular text is located. To limit the meaning of historical texts to these past meanings, however, does not do justice to the complete structure of hermeneutic. The interpreter can also ask about the *point of contact between history and*

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[18] Schillebeeckx makes this observation in *The Eucharist*, p. 56. An example of an interpreter making such a distinction between Aristotelian categories and the intention of the fathers at Trent is D. G. Ghysens, "Présence réelle eucharistique et transsubstantiation dans les définitions de l'église catholique," *Irénikon* 32 (1959) 420-35.

[19] How far this critique of the limits of dogma may extend—whether, e.g., to contradiction—is a point which will not be taken up in this paper. In this same connection, the binding or normative character of the language of dogma and of the presuppositions which lie behind it could also be more fully developed.

the present. Understanding is properly a "fusion" of the horizons of interpreter and text, and not simply a reconstruction of past horizons on their own terms. Historical understanding achieves its complete form when an *encounter* with history is felt, when the claim of the text asserts itself, when the truth of the text, in an effective sense, is understood and handed on. It is in the analysis of this dimension of understanding that the German hermeneutical discussion has made its greatest contribution and, I believe, has the greatest implications in the formulation of a hermeneutic of dogma. The critical-historical interpretation of dogma, as of Scripture, has been a continuing concern since the nineteenth century. The distinctive feature of the twentieth-century hermeneutical discussion has been to integrate this dimension of historical meaning with an analysis of the importance of the situation of the interpreter, and it is this dimension of hermeneutic, as it applies to dogma, which now needs to be considered.

THE SITUATION OF THE INTERPRETER OF DOGMA

The Preunderstanding of the Interpreter

Dogmatic texts have not been fully interpreted when the historian has successfully located their meanings in their original historical contexts, nor when he has extended the scope of his investigation to the history of dogma in its past forms. To reach the meaning intended by the fathers at Trent in the definition of transubstantiation does not automatically mediate the meaning of the dogma into the horizon of interpretation. The primary hermeneutical responsibility remains, which is concisely described in Gadamer's notion of "effective history." Only when the hermeneutical task is expanded to include the situation of the interpreter is the structure of historical understanding complete. This is not to say that either the sketch of the meaning of dogma in its own historical context or the description of the history of dogma in a broad sense is "presuppositionless" in the sense of nineteenth-century positivism. The selection of historical data, the questions posed in the analysis of this data, the imaginative capacity to enter the "spirit" of another age, all reveal the impact of the subjectivity of the interpreter. To the extent that the interest of the interpreter is in the past as past, however, his own situation is less involved in hermeneutic than when he explicitly raises the question of the meaning of the past for the present. It is at this point that the hermeneutical importance of the interpreter's situation comes into view.

The involvement of the interpreter, his awareness of the claim of the text, is one essential element in contemporary philosophical and theological hermeneutic. Historical understanding, as Gadamer describes it,

is not complete if the attention of the interpreter is directed exclusively to the past on its own terms. Hermeneutic instead depends upon the location of the common tradition or subject matter which unites past and present and which properly reveals itself or "comes to expression" in the event of interpretation. The fusion of the horizons of text and interpreter makes possible the ongoing movement of the tradition into the future. The dialogical interaction of past and present opens up dimensions of meaning and truth which are not available in the horizon of the text or in the horizon of interpretation taken by themselves. The path to truth characteristic of the humanities is the ongoing anamnesis, or remembrance of the past, in which historical texts speak in ever-new situations of understanding.

Bultmann and his successors place this same emphasis on the involvement of the interpreter in historical understanding. Relying upon Heidegger's analysis, Bultmann has stressed the importance of the "preunderstanding" (*Vorverständnis*) of the biblical exegete, particularly the preunderstanding of the meaning of existence.[20] Scripture emerges as an event in the interpreter's experience when it is related to this preunderstanding, resolving the question of the meaning of life, and is heard as the originating power of authentic human existence. Historical interpretation of Scripture properly points toward proclamation that reasserts the claim of the text, the correlation of its subject matter with the deepest needs and concerns of contemporary man.

Following Bultmann's lead, Ebeling and Fuchs have sketched the proper preunderstanding for the interpretation of Scripture in the form of the "hermeneutical principle" brought to the text.[21] For both men, this principle is fundamentally the questionability of existence. Like Bultmann, the New Hermeneutic theologians define preunderstanding in terms that demand no explicit faith presuppositions. "Man as conscience" (Ebeling) and the "question about ourselves" (Fuchs) are questions given with human existence which open men to a proper hearing of

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[20] For Bultmann's construction of a theological hermeneutic, see especially "Is Exegesis without Presuppositions Possible?" in *Existence and Faith*, ed. Schubert Ogden (Cleveland, 1960) pp. 289–296, and "The Problem of Hermeneutics," in *Essays Philosophical and Theological* (London, 1955) pp. 234–69. "Preunderstanding" is described by Bultmann at one point in the following terms: "A comprehension—an interpretation—is, it follows, constantly oriented to a particular formulation of a question, a particular 'objective.' But included in this, therefore, is the fact that it is never without its own presuppositions; or, to put it more precisely, that it is *governed always by a prior understanding of the subject*, in accordance with which it investigates the text" ("The Problem of Hermeneutics," p. 239). Cf. p. 253 in the same essay, where Bultmann stresses the importance of a preunderstanding of the meaning of existence as an important dimension of hermeneutics.

[21] For the post-Bultmannian discussion of preunderstanding see especially Fuchs, *Hermeneutik*, pp. 118–39, and Ebeling, *Word and Faith*, pp. 422, 429.

the word of God. A reflective and explicit description of the gaps of meaning in reality itself and the lack of human self-identity prepare the way for the gospel. Man's awareness of his existence under the "law," in need of grace, is the proper preunderstanding for the proper understanding of the gospel. Scripture and tradition are interpreted effectively when they are related to the problematic state of human existence in the terms appropriate to any given historical epoch. When the "subject matter" of Christian tradition is savingly re-expressed in a way that touches concrete human experience and self-understanding, then the hermeneutical responsibility of Christianity is fulfilled.

In both the philosophical and theological hermeneutical discussions, the situation of the interpreter clearly appears as a hermeneutical problem when two objectives of interpretation are chosen. In the first place, the interpreter is drawn into the event of interpretation when he is asked to read and interpret texts in light of the subject matter or tradition they bring to expression. Interpretation in light of the subject matter identifies the tradition in which both text and interpreter are located which transcends the particular horizon of each considered in itself. The second point at which the situation of the interpreter has a clear impact on historical understanding is in the interpreter's attempt to apply the subject matter of tradition in his own situation. The reformulation of a text in one's own terms mediates tradition not as a past fact but as an existentially significant concern for men today. Interpretation in light of the subject matter and application compels the interpreter to make decisions, draw upon his personal convictions and experience, and appropriate the past in an involved, existential manner that is not so typical of the reconstruction of the meaning of a text in its own historical situation and of the past tradition in which it stands.

In theological terms, the transition here spoken of is from explication of texts (*explicatio*) to the application of texts (*applicatio*) to present needs and concerns, from interpretation *of* the text to being interpreted *by* the text, from the *traditio* to the *actus tradendi*, from historical theology and exegesis to systematic and dogmatic theology, from text to sermon. In all of these transpositions, the interpreter is called upon not merely to determine past historical forms of Christian faith, but to judge what relationship past Christian traditions have to the essential message or tradition of Christianity and to select the proper form of Christian teaching and proclamation in the present.

What are the implications of the interpreter's situation for the hermeneutic of dogma? What is involved in the interpretation of dogmatic texts in light of their subject matter and in the application of dogma in the present? Perhaps the best starting point in answering these

questions is a consideration of the role of preunderstanding or prejudg-
ments in the interpretation of dogma.[22] Gadamer approaches the
problem of preunderstanding from a different perspective than Heideg-
ger in his early writings, Bultmann, and, to a certain extent, the
post-Bultmannians. The tradition uniting text and interpreter, which
forms the interpreter's prejudgments, is more for Gadamer than the
shared "existentials" of world experience. Preunderstanding is not
confined to an understanding generally available in the experience of all
men, open to philosophical analysis, and neutral in regard to the claims
of faith. It is instead grounded in a concrete linguistic tradition in which
both text and interpreter are located. The prejudgments of the inter-
preter come from his tradition and form the point of contact with texts of
the past.[23] Gadamer provides at this point a more adequate model for a
theological hermeneutic than do the Bultmannians. The linguistic
tradition which the Christian theologian reflects is that of Christian
faith, especially, though not exclusively, as mediated by the particular
Christian community to which he belongs. The prejudgments of the
theologian reflect the "dogmatic" assumptions ingrained in the living
experience of the Christian community. This is not to say that these
presuppositions are beyond correction or reformulation; the "openness"
both of text and of interpreter, a point which will be more fully examined
later, counteracts any such inflexibility. The preunderstanding of
theology is not, however, necessarily neutral when it comes to the content
of Christian faith.

The tradition in which the interpreter stands, which takes on her-
meneutical significance in Gadamer's thought, points to still another
dimension of theological prejudgment: the importance and validity of
the *ecclesial context* of Christian theology. The theologian is not an
isolated, autonomous figure in the act of interpretation, but a participant
in an ongoing process of tradition which is coterminous with a concrete
historical community. The interpreter encounters the texts of Scripture
and tradition by taking into account the tradition process which extends
from them to his own period and by balancing his own interpretation
against the full scope of community experience which he shares and
through which he has access to the tradition. Moreover, the application
of the tradition properly takes place in explicit reference to the needs and
sensibilities of the Christian community. Gadamer's hermeneutic pro-
vides for this continuity of individual and community, as well as for the
distinctive presuppositions and subject matter of Christian hermeneutic.

[22] "Prejudgment" is the term which Gadamer prefers to employ; see, e.g., *Wahrheit und
Methode*, pp. 250 ff.
   [23] *Ibid.*, esp. p. 261.

On the other hand, the Bultmannian quest for a "secular" preunderstanding in the interpretation of Christian texts, if it is not accepted as the exclusive model for hermeneutic, does have validity, particularly in two contexts of interpretation. In the first place, the critical-historical interpretation of texts in their past horizons of meaning is, to a certain extent, neutral in regard to faith presuppositions. This judgment must be qualified, because the history written by a believer is likely to differ from that written by a nonbeliever. The questions asked in the most "objective" of interpretations reflect the interests, concerns, and presuppositions of the interpreter. Consequently, the portrait of the past and those features of history chosen for emphasis will vary from historian to historian. If the historian, believer or not, is true to his method, however, the canons of evidence he employs and the verification of his claims will not be dependent upon presuppositions unavailable to another individual who does not share his own tradition. Protestant and Roman Catholic exegetes have drawn together in recent decades because they have adopted a common method of textual analysis which is independent of their specific faith commitments. Joint commentaries on the past meaning of biblical texts can be written, even though disagreement may result over what significance these past meanings have for faith today.

A second point at which a neutral or secular preunderstanding can be justly affirmed and sought is in what might be described as "fundamental" or "empirical" theology. An impressive statement of the need for and form of such a method, in relation to the problem of God, can be found in Langdon Gilkey's *Naming the Whirlwind*.[24] Gilkey maintains that Christian theology in this modern period cannot simply assume the understandability of its basic theological claims, particularly its doctrine of God. The radical this-worldliness of modern man and his suspicion of language describing a transcendent or sacred dimension has challenged the basic presuppositions of Christian theology. The paramount theological need today, Gilkey maintains, is a "prolegomenon" to theology which begins with an analysis of the universal structures of human experience in an effort to reveal to modern man certain dimensions of his experience and self-understanding that can only be thematized and expressed through some form of religious symbols, with some reference to transcendence.[25]

The specific theological task, which is distinguished from the prolegomenon, and that aspect of Gilkey's thought of most value in the construction of a hermeneutic of dogma, is the correlation of the central doctrines and symbols of Christian faith with the contemporary under-

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[24] *Naming the Whirlwind: The Renewal of God-Language* (Indianapolis, 1969).
[25] The prolegomenon is presented on pp. 231–414.

standing of reality.[26] Christian doctrines can be interpreted to discover what light they throw on significant human experiences, how they express and thematize the existential questions that modern man asks as well as answers to these questions.[27] This theological work of correlating Christian symbols and doctrines with human experiences begins with the theologian's own personal insight into the ultimate significance and meaning of a particular set of symbols or a tradition for him. To this extent, theology begins not from the completely secular standpoint of the prolegomenon, but from a standpoint formed in the context of a Christian faith tradition. The distinctive problem of the hermeneutic of dogma, therefore, would occur at this latter level of understanding, in the framework of an individual's insight or faith experience, a position, I believe, which agrees with the hermeneutical stance of Gadamer.

This digression into the possibility of a secular or nonfideistic preunderstanding in the interpretation of dogma has carried us back to the central method of theological interpretation and the hermeneutic of dogma which does reflect the faith presuppositions of the interpreter. The impact of such prejudgments on the hermeneutic of dogma is evident at a number of points. In the first place, the interpreter of dogma begins with the *prejudgment of the importance of dogmatic texts*. This prejudgment is analogous to the acceptance of a canon of scriptural writings. In both instances, the decisive introduction to the task of interpretation is a prejudgment, based on the tradition in which one stands, that certain texts are particularly significant and worthy of interpretation. The dogmatic "canon" is, of course, less clearly demarcated than the canon of Scripture, and is of secondary or less normative significance. But the interpretation of dogma, like the interpretation of Scripture, begins with the understanding that certain texts have achieved "classical" importance in one's tradition and are consequently proper interpretative concerns.

Another role of prejudgments in the interpretation of dogma, more important than the simple location of texts, may also be noted. The interpreter approaches a dogma with a *specific preunderstanding of the meaning of given texts*. Especially in the case of definitions which have achieved a lasting importance in the community of faith, meanings are carried along with individual and community experience. The concepts of transubstantiation, of the humanity and divinity of Christ, or original sin, for example, are not empty and meaningless, but are accompanied by a wealth of associations in the mind of the interpreter. These associations, in the form of reflective and thematized as well as

[26] *Ibid.*, esp. pp. 415–70.
[27] *Ibid.*

prereflective and unthematized experience, emerge from the tradition extending from dogmatic text to interpreter and constitute his avenue to the meaning of the text. Such prejudgments have in Gadamer's thought a positive hermeneutical significance. They represent a legitimate reliance upon authority and tradition, and understanding begins with a presupposition of their importance and truth rather than, in the path of the Enlightenment, a distrust of presuppositions as such.

The Openness of the Interpreter

A reliance on the prejudgments granted by traditions becomes distortive only when prejudgments harden to the point where they are not open to reformulation, criticism, and possible rejection in the act of interpretation itself. Eisegesis results when prejudgments determine the results of interpretation from the outset and when the interpreter proceeds without noting either the distinctiveness and otherness of the text or the changed situation of interpretation. One might expect that such an openness of interpretation might be particularly difficult to realize in the interpretation of dogma. The emphasis on the permanent, unchanging meaning of dogma has in fact carried the risk of freezing the meaning of dogmatic texts in one mold, no longer open to reformulation in light either of the renewed historical encounter with the past or of the changed understanding of reality in a given age. The corrective to such a hardening of prejudgments lies particularly at two levels. The first is a critical and honest process of interpretation of the past meaning of dogma. Such interpretation can point to meanings previously overlooked or read in an incorrect light. The time difference between text and interpreter has a positive significance, because it makes possible an appreciation of the distinctive character of the meaning of a text in its own horizon, an awareness which can alter the presuppositions of the interpreter. The lively discussion of the relationship of Scripture and tradition in recent Catholic theology, for example, emerged in large part because of a reinterpretation of the decrees of the Council of Trent.[28] Following Geiselmann's investigations, it was no longer self-evident that Trent had recognized tradition as an independent expression of the apostolic witness alongside the text of Scripture. As Geiselmann reconstructed the Fathers' intention, the Tridentine decree on the relationship of Scripture and tradition seemed instead to be much closer to the Protestant principle of *sola scriptura* than was previously thought; tradition is properly conceived as a means of interpreting and explicating Scripture. Other reassessments of dogma through a renewed process of historical interpretation could be noted: e.g., Küng's interpretation of

[28] Cf. n.12 above.

the Catholic doctrine of justification and his suggestion that the Catholic understanding is completely compatible with the theology of Karl Barth.[29] Such examples point to the importance of a continuing activity of historical interpretation of tradition. Historical judgments do in fact change, as the shifting patterns of historiography make clear. The portrait of the past, including the past of dogma, is never completed— among other reasons, because the presuppositions of the interpreter and the concerns guiding historical interpretation change from age to age and from interpreter to interpreter. New insights into the past intentions of dogmatic texts act as a constant corrective to any given set of dogmatic presuppositions. This continuing relevance of the original intention of a dogmatic text is one element of its "normativeness." The authority of texts of dogmatic tradition rests in the continuing obligation to remember such texts in historical interpretation. They cannot properly be left behind and finally forgotten in the ongoing movement of theology and of the community of faith.

The second point at which the openness of the interpreter is apparent is in his awareness of the changed situation of understanding. The meaning of texts emerges as questions are posed from the standpoint of interpretation. Understanding is caught up in a dialectic of question and answer. Prejudgments are open to change because the needs, concerns, and presuppositions of what is real and important change from age to age. The questions operative today may not have been the questions operative in the original horizon of a dogmatic text. Interpretation of dogma properly begins, therefore, not merely with the accepted prejudgments of the community of faith, formed in its past, but with questions and presuppositions appropriate in the situation of the interpreter in a broad sense. The quest for a neutral or secular starting point for hermeneutic, for example, reflects prejudgments fitting the needs of secular man at this particular point in time. Bultmann's fruitful use of Heideggerian categories as a preunderstanding for the interpretation of Scripture, a technique equally possible, as Hans Jonas has demonstrated, in the interpretation of dogma,[30] is still another instance of interpretation open to the prejudgments appropriate in the context of understanding characteristic of the modern period. To tie the openness of the interpreter in this way to an appreciation of the living questions of a given era is simply to restate in the framework of a hermeneutic of dogma Gadamer's conviction that appropriate prejudgments are worked out in the encounter with a text. The "question" guiding interpretation must fit both the situation of the text and that of interpretation.

[29] Hans Küng, *Justification: The Doctrine of Karl Barth and a Catholic Reflection* (New York, 1964).

[30] Hans Jonas, *Augustin und das paulinische Freiheitsproblem* (Göttingen, 1965).

The Openness of the Text

The openness of the interpreter is paralleled in hermeneutic by an openness of the text. This is so because of the already mentioned possibility of new insights into the historical meaning of texts. The historical reappropriation of dogma is a never-ending responsibility. But the openness of texts lies at other levels as well. Both Gadamer and the Bultmannians have pointed out that interpretation has to do not only with texts but with the *subject matter that comes to expression in texts*. Such a transcendence of meaning lies, in particular, at two levels: (1) Language carries not only explicit intentions but a realm of meaning which is only implicit or carried along with (*mitgesagt*) the language of the text. The full experiential reality which comes to expression in texts may overflow the boundaries of what can be consciously and reflectively affirmed. (2) Written language, in particular, has a certain "ideality" of meaning as it is interpreted and applied in changing historical situations. Specific texts can be set by the interpreter in the process of tradition which led to their production and which extends from them down to the situation of interpretation. Both the implicit meaning of a text and its place in the "effective history" of a tradition become necessary objects of concern in historical interpretation. The sketch of the past meaning of texts extends beyond the intentions of an author to the full historical reality in which authors and texts stand. The "effective-historical" interpretation of texts emerges at that point, however, where this full context of textual meaning is not only reconstructed but interpreted and criticized to find the one tradition or content which joins interpreter and text. The historical situation of the interpreter takes on special importance when he seeks not only the course of history but the significance and truth of history for the present. What do all of these observations entail for the interpretation of dogma?

In the first place, the full meaning of a dogma transcends the explicit intentions of a particular council or pope. A realm of meaning is carried along with the language of dogma which extends beyond the limits of the explicitly affirmed content of a given dogmatic statement. This characteristic of dogmatic texts is especially evident when one looks at the *experience* dogmas are meant to express—the subjective act lying behind their formulation—and at the *object or subject matter* with which dogmas are primarily concerned—the mystery of God's revelation. Dogmas are properly interpreted not as formulations of abstract truths but as expressions of the lived experience of faith. As Karl Rahner has noted, dogmatic statements spring from faith and are directed to faith (*ex fide ad fidem*).[31] Their purpose is not merely to speak theoretically

[31] Karl Rahner and Karl Lehmann, *Kerzgma and Dogma* (New York, 1969) pp. 88–90, 96–97.

"about" some reality, but to communicate the reality and make it present. They are statements "leading into" the mystery of revelation:

If it is correct to say that the dogmatic statement, even where it is already real theology, is and remains a statement of faith not merely with regard to its object but also in the subjective act as such, then the dogmatic statement is determined by all the theological characteristics of the *fides qua creditur*. . . . The dogmatic statement leads towards the historical event of salvation, in spite of all its conceptual reflection. It renders this event present by confessing that it is brought about by it. It does not merely speak "about" this event but tries to bring man into a real relationship with it. And despite all its abstractness and theoretical, reflective nature, it is essentially dependent on the fact that this not merely theoretical but also existential and supernatural relationship of the whole man to the historical event of salvation—and not merely to some proposition about it—is really preserved and that the theological statement, even in its theoretical-reflex character, is *ex fide ad fidem*.[32]

Because dogma springs from a fulness of experience, reflecting the whole man and not merely the speculative intellect, and because it is concerned intrinsically with a mystery of revelation, its meaning necessarily is more than that which can be encapsulated in a propositional affirmation.[33]

To point in this fashion to the gap between the language of dogma and the experiential reality it expresses seems to reassert a distinction of "form" and "content." The expression of dogma in new terms, commonly recognized as a necessary task of theology, implies that the content of dogma is not bound inextricably to its original linguistic form but can be re-expressed in new terms and categories. Such an ongoing process of translation implies further that the experiential reality to which dogma refers and from which it springs is the continuing and permanent feature of dogmatic tradition, and not the language in which a definition is encased. The recent controversy over the dogma of transubstantiation, for example, reflects in part an awareness that there is a continuity in the experiential reality of the Eucharistic encounter with Christ which extends from Trent to the present day, but that this experience is inadequately expressed now, if not threatened, by an outdated means of expression. The search for a new theological description like "transignification" is an effort to bring the linguistic "form" for expressing the significance of the Eucharistic presence into closer conjunction with the "content" of the dogma—the mystery of Christ's presence as apprehended in the lived experience of the faith community.

[32] Rahner, "What Is a Dogmatic Statement?" in *Theological Investigations* 5 (Baltimore, 1966) 50–51.
[33] For a discussion of this gap between experience and proposition, see Eberhard Simons, "Die Bedeutung der Hermeneutik für die katholische Theologie," *Catholica* 21 (1967) 193.

The ambiguity with such a form-content schema is that it carries the impression that the content of dogma can be neatly separated from all linguistic forms. What in fact happens in the hermeneutic of dogma is that the reality to which dogma refers is re-expressed in another linguistic form, from another concrete situation of understanding. The "content" of dogma is never located apart from a concrete linguistic "form." Moreover, the original meaning of dogmas, which continues to be of significance to theology, is only accessible through the language of the dogmatic text. In his interpretation of the Tridentine transubstantiation decree, Schillebeeckx criticizes those interpreters who have tried to separate the intended meaning of the text from the theological conceptuality in which the Fathers thought and through which they expressed their understanding of the Eucharist.[34] The fathers at Trent, as all men, were located in a concrete linguistic horizon, with certain limitations and possibilities of expression, and it is only from within that horizon that the original meaning of the definition can be perceived. Finally, it would be a mistake to radically separate the experience of faith from the tensions and anachronisms that can affect the language of faith. A crisis of faith language can produce a crisis of faith. While the experience of faith can sustain itself in the absence of an adequate means of expression, a radical gap between experience and language is neither healthy nor, I would maintain, can it be sustained over a long period of time. A connection between the lived experience of faith, on the one hand, and the linguistic means of expressing this faith, on the other—whether it be everyday, common-sense means of expression or the more reflective terms of theology—is the necessary framework for faith and for the ongoing movement of tradition.

The hermeneutical problem asserts itself particularly at those points where the language of tradition, including dogma, does not "carry" the lived experience of faith into the situation of interpretation. As Ebeling has pointed out, the "translation" of meaning required in such instances can vary from simple philological study to an investigation of those basic conditions which make understanding possible.[35] Similarly, the lack of understanding which produces the hermeneutical problem can extend from a gap between language and the continuing experience of faith to a situation in which not only the language of tradition is problematic, but the experience as well. Gilkey is right in asserting that this latter language failure is increasingly common in the modern period and extends even to language about God. The hermeneutical implications of such a gap between tradition and the situation of interpretation have

[34] Cf. n.18.
[35] Ebeling, "The Word of God and Hermeneutics," in *Word and Faith*, pp. 318–20.

already been noted. What may be required in such instances is an analysis of the basic structures of human experience to find points of contact between traditional affirmations and the understanding of reality in a given age. The openness of the text, in its reference to a realm of lived experience never fully encapsulated in the explicit affirmation, is here reasserted in an anthropological context. The experiential fulness implied in Christian revelation which is carried along with the language of a dogmatic text can be interpreted in reference not only to Christian revelation and the horizon of faith but to generally shared, constitutive elements of human experience as well.

The second point at which the openness of dogmatic texts appears is in their relationship to the process of tradition in which they stand. As both the outcome and the initiation of an ongoing process of interpretation, the meaning of dogma extends beyond the confines of the explicit affirmation at the time of its formulation. The implication of this extension of meaning for the formulation of a hermeneutic of dogma points to two interpretative tasks: (1) Dogma can be read in light of the process of tradition which extends from it to the situation of interpretation. The amplification of the original meaning of a dogmatic text is not an arbitrary and extrinsic addition of content, but part of its "effective history" as the text is handed on and reinterpreted in changing historical situations. A given dogmatic statement can be balanced against this fulness of tradition embodied in its own specific future as well as against the movement of tradition in a broad sense, involving even the byways and detours of theological thought and undefined as well as defined traditional affirmations. The reference of dogma beyond a merely propositional assertion to the fulness of revelation suggests the legitimacy of assessing the place of a given dogma in the whole complex of Christian tradition. This location of dogma in the historical context of Christian faith repeats the medieval concern not to focus on individual articles of faith but to place such propositions in the total complex of Christian truth.[36] (2) A further dimension of the "effective history" of dogmatic texts is their past, particularly their point of contact with Scripture. Dogma is properly interpreted in light of Scripture, for it represents one aspect of the future of the biblical texts themselves. The postbiblical tradition, including dogma, constitutes the ongoing process of the interpretation of scriptural texts. An interpreter, consequently,

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[36] The location of particular propositions of faith in the total complex of all other propositions was a part of the medieval understanding of the *articulus fidei*. For reflection on this point, see Walter Kasper, *Dogma unter dem Wort Gottes* (Mainz, 1965) pp. 38–41, and L. Hödl, "Articulus fidei," in *Einsicht und Glaube: Festschrift für Gottlieb Söhngen* (Freiburg, 1962) p. 374.

can look for the continuity and discontinuity between later phases of Christian tradition and the origins of the tradition in the apostolic witness. Gadamer's critical assessment of the canon of the original reader suggests, however, that such a dependence of dogma on Scripture will not be in the form of a simple repetition of the original meaning of the biblical texts. As Heinrich Schlier has noted, the interpreter of dogma who recognizes the normativeness of Scripture is not bound to a literalistic vision of the Bible's meaning, but works in the area of experience "opened up" by Scripture; he seeks the "subject matter" (*Sache*) of Christian tradition itself in light of Scripture and the ongoing movement of tradition. His objective, for example, is to understand God's justice not just as Paul understood it, but rather "what it in actual fact means in the light of the experience and reflection of the Church, which, starting from this source, has been at work for a considerable time." [37]

Dogmas emerge at decisive points in the movement of tradition when the thinking-out process culminates in judgments of important aspects of faith which then in turn become the source for renewed reflection. "Dogma does not signal the end of reflection, but, rather, raises what has been thought out to an agreed level where further thought is the only worthy course of action." [38] Interpretation of dogma in light of Scripture does not, therefore, rest on an understanding of the "sufficiency" of Scripture which echoes the hermeneutically questionable "canon of the orginal reader." The meaning of dogmatic as well as scriptural texts is instead caught up in an ongoing process of interpretation and amplification. The perspective of one stage of interpretation can balance the perspective of another, pointing to dimensions of the content of Christian tradition perhaps not readily perceived in a single horizon of interpretation. This broader perspective reached through the fusion of horizons becomes particularly important in the case of dogma; for, by its very nature, dogma presents a narrow, polemically determined perspective on the subject matter of faith. A particular dogmatic statement is properly balanced against all other defined dogmas as well as against important aspects of faith which have not been formally defined. Particular dogmas should be interpreted in light of the whole tradition of faith, both to identify its limits and to note its distinctive contributions.

The interpretation of dogma in its relationship to tradition, including its relationship to the norm of Scripture, can take the form of the simple reconstruction of patterns and discontinuities in history, as earlier

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[37] Heinrich Schlier, "Biblical and Dogmatic Theology," in *The Bible in a New Age*, ed. L. Klein (New York, 1969) p. 123.

[38] *Ibid.*, p. 124.

considered, or it can involve a "fusion" of the horizons of text and interpreter in the proper sense of the word. In this latter instance of interpretation, the hermeneutical objective is not simply an analysis of past traditions but a decision as to the truth of tradition, an identification of the subject matter or the "tradition" within the manifold "traditions" of Christian history. A critical interpretative function is introduced which is one more indication of the involvement of the interpreter and of the impact of his subjectivity on interpretation. It is the interpreter finally who notes in the encounter with a given text the tradition uniting this text and the horizon of interpretation. *Sachkritik* (criticism in light of the subject matter) becomes an explicit theological concern when the interpreter seeks the effective truth of the tradition for the present.

The Relativity of Dogma

The criticism of dogma in light of the subject matter of Christian faith carries the implication of the relativity of dogma. Dogma is a limited attempt, in a concrete historical situation, to reflectively express a particular aspect of the truth of Christian faith. The partial and relative character of dogma can be traced, in the first case, to the *polemical* context in which it arises. No dogma is an attempt to present a comprehensive account of the content of Christian faith. Dogma emerges, on the contrary, as a defensive effort to preserve the integrity of one dimension of Christian truth in the face of a specific threat. Only a limited presentation of the tradition of faith is intended, and this limited meaning, as already indicated, is properly balanced against and interpreted in light of a much wider framework of Christian tradition. Dogma is relative, secondly, because it reflects a *concrete linguistic, cultural, and historical horizon*, with all the circumscribed possibilities of experience and expression this entails. The proper avenue to truth is finally not through a single horizon, whether it be that of dogma or of Scripture, but through an ever-wider fusion of horizons in which the limitations of any given horizon can, at least in part, be overcome. This historical character of dogma is for Karl Rahner a sign that dogma can bear the "signature of sinful man." While it may be true in a technical sense, dogma can also be formulated in such a way as to block more than it assists the perception of the truth of Christian revelation.[39] The truth of dogma is limited, in

[39] Rahner, "What Is a Dogmatic Statement?" pp. 45–46, describes this limitation on dogma in this way: "One need only ask oneself whether a statement though in itself to be qualified as true cannot also be rash and presumptuous. Can it not betray the historical perspective of a man in such a way that this perspective reveals itself as an historically guilty one? Cannot even a truth be dangerous, equivocal, seductive, forward—can it not manoeuvre a person into a position where he must make a decision for which he is not

the third place, in its relationship to the *central meaning of Christian faith*. Some dogmas reflect the "tradition" of faith more directly than do others.

It is this third aspect of the relativity of dogma which has produced in Catholic tradition a recognition that dogma, as other statements of faith, can be properly located in and interpreted in light of a *hierarchy of Christian truth*.[40] Some dogmatic statements reflect the fundamental subject matter of faith more directly than do others. One of the ambiguities produced by a notion of the infallibility of dogma has been a tendency to level out the importance of dogmatic statements, without regard to their specific content. The experience of faith, however, points in another direction. Some dogmatic definitions have been accepted as centrally important statements of faith, while others have failed to achieve this status. It is possible, as Schoonenberg has suggested, to differentiate dogmas in light of their relationship to the foundation of Christian belief.[41] The dogmas of infallibility or of the Assumption do not stand so close to the central meaning of the Christian kerygma as do the definitions concerning Christ's humanity or divine sonship. In a similar vein, Richard Boeckler has observed that something is wrong with theology when a greater literature is produced on Mariology or the Petrine office than on soteriology.[42] Beginning from the standpoint of the basic Christian kerygma, it is possible, Schoonenberg maintains, to distinguish "central" or "fundamental" from "peripheral" dogmatic truths.[43] The former express in an explicit way the central affirmations of faith which concern, above all, God in His salvific relationship to man, and thus include topics such as Christology, salvation, grace, creation, etc. The "peripheral" dogmas take up topics of secondary importance, which stand in a less direct relationship to the center of faith: Mariology, the Church, moral teaching, etc. The point of such a differentiation is not an attempt to simply enumerate those propositions most important to faith, but to show a concern to ponder and criticize all doctrines in light of the fundamental Christian kerygma. The theological anamnesis of the

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fitted? If such and similar questions which could be asked are not to be rejected from the outset, then it becomes clear that even within the truth of the Church and of dogmatically correct statements it is absolutely possible to speak sinfully, with a sinfulness which may be either individual, or of humanity in general or of a particular period."

[40] An extensive historical and systematic study of the notion of "hierarchy of truths" may be found in Ulrich Valeske, *Hierarchia veritatum* (Munich, 1968); cf. Schoonenberg, *Die Interpretation des Dogmas*, pp. 80 ff., and Richard Boeckler, "Grenzen der Lehraussage im römisch-katholischen Ökumenismus," *Kerygma und Dogma* 15 (1969) 340–53.

[41] Schoonenberg, *Die Interpretation des Dogmas*, pp. 80 ff.

[42] Boeckler, *art. cit.*, 346.

[43] Schoonenberg, *Die Interpretation des Dogmas*, pp. 80 ff.

texts of tradition is not simply a collection of the many witnesses to Christian faith, but, as Bernhard Welte has noted, a qualitative assessment of these in light of the one subject matter of Christian faith. The task of theology is to judge the continuity of phases of tradition with the central content of faith and to note as well instances of forgetfulness and distortion.[44]

The hermeneutic of dogma, as it embraces the situation of the interpreter and the critical reassessment of his own presuppositions as well as of the text in light of the subject matter or tradition of faith, reflects the concern forcefully stated by Ebeling to interpret all texts of tradition in light of the gospel or Word of God.[45] This hermeneutical task is not so uniquely Protestant as Ebeling believes; it reflects an insight of Catholicism as well. One of its implications, already noted, is a need to read and criticize dogma in light of the normative expression of the gospel, the Scriptures, with the awareness that the normativeness of Scripture is not tied to a simple repetition of its original meaning. The gospel or Word of God is not simply given with the text of Scripture or dogma. The tradition or subject matter of biblical and postbiblical tradition, as Ebeling emphasizes, is not a particular complex of biblical or dogmatic truths, but the living, effective power of the Word of God as it comes to expression in changing horizons of interpretation. The hermeneutical problem is to locate that interpretation which will permit scriptural or dogmatic texts to emerge in a given situation of interpretation as existentially significant statements of the salvific meaning of Christian faith. Gadamer's concern with an "effective-historical" mediation of tradition—one involving a fusion of horizons and application—and the Bultmannian focus on the "word-event" in which the past is mediated into the present, both point to this awareness. Dogmas are meant to be interpreted not as abstract truths but as expressions, in reflective language, of a reality which has salvific significance for men today. The *application* of dogma is finally the communication of the truth of dogma in a way which points to the Christian kerygma, in terms meaningful to modern man, reaching his deepest needs and concerns. The circle of linguisticality noted in the Bultmannian movement from scriptural text to proclamation is reasserted in a dogmatic context; dogmatic interpretation moves from texts to an effective expression of the meaning of the texts in the present. It is in the framework of this total hermeneutical process that the meaning of dogma is discerned.

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[44] Bernhard Welte, "Ein Vorschlag zur Methode der Theologie heute, "in *Auf der Spur des Ewigen* (Freiburg, 1965) pp. 414–15, 419–21.
[45] Ebeling, *Word of God and Tradition* (Philadelphia, 1968) p. 179.

CONCLUSION

My primary purpose has been to clarify the structure of understanding involved in the interpretation of dogmatic statements. My method has been to apply some of the key insights of the German hermeneutical discussion in the formulation of a hermeneutic of dogma. If the preceding analysis has thrown light on the distinctive "fusion of horizons" which occurs in the interpretation of dogma, then the chief intention of my study has been realized. The most important implications of the hermeneutic of dogma which has emerged might now be noted.

German hermeneutics has emphasized the dialogical character of historical understanding, the interaction or fusion of the horizons of text and interpreter. This emphasis on dialogue is important, because it preserves the hermeneutical significance both of the situation of the text and that of interpretation. Applied to interpretation of dogma, this awareness prevents a division between critical-historical interpretation and "faith" or "theological" interpretation. It is such a severance of methods that has troubled post-Reformation Catholic theology and became explicit in the Modernist controversy. The Modernists identified the authentic meaning of the texts of Scripture and tradition with that meaning found in their original historical contexts and recovered in critical-historical interpretation. Historical method provided a way out of the "distortions" of the dogmatic appropriation of the past. The reaction of the Church and Catholic theology to the Modernists introduced a gap between the interpretation of dogma based on faith, authority, or the *sensus fidei* of the Christian community and the work of the historian. As Walter Kasper has noted, the severance of theological and historical methods has by no means been adequately resolved; Catholic theology is in an early stage of formulation of a theological method fully compatible with historical awareness.[46] One thesis of this paper is that a dichotomy of historical and theological methods is based on an inadequate understanding of hermeneutic. By locating the object of interpretation exclusively at the level of the past meaning of the text, the Modernists, as Blondel observed, overlooked the historical situation and involvement of the interpreter and the hermeneutical significance of tradition. In reaction to the Modernists, Catholic theology emphasized the interpretative function of the magisterium or of the *sensus fidei* of the Christian community to the detriment of critical-historical interpretation. A key advantage of the German hermeneutical discussion is that it has concerned itself with the continuity of both of these interpretative dimensions—the situation of the text and that of interpretation.

A second implication of the hermeneutic of dogma developed in this

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[46] Kasper, *Die Methoden der Dogmatik* (Munich, 1966) esp. pp. 26 ff. and 47 ff.

paper is a critique of a search for a permanent or infallible meaning of dogmatic texts. There is a tendency in Catholic dogmatic theology to freeze the meaning of dogma in a particular form. Even in quite recent Catholic notions of the irreformable meaning of dogma, the model of tradition chosen seems to be the movement of a single unchanging "content" of faith through a multitude of historical "forms." The task of interpretation in such schemes seems to be the search for the conscious intention of those formulating a dogma, with an awareness of differences of language, culture, conceptuality, etc., and then the "translation" of this inner content into new terms. What is sought is an ahistorical core or essence of revealed truth, propositionally expressible, which lies behind or within the historical process of tradition. One of the ambiguities in Hans Küng's *Infallible? An Inquiry* is that he has defined infallibility in terms of infallible propositions, clear and distinct ideas, and thus has employed an unhistorical concept of dogmatic meaning.[47] It is not surprising that a number of Küng's critics have found a gap between his definition of dogma and that which guides contemporary Catholic theology, which is more attuned to the implications of historical awareness than was the theology of the Schools. What is missing in the infallibility debate, I believe, is an explicit confrontation with the hermeneutical problem.

The thrust of the hermeneutical position I have adopted is a concern to locate the "meaning" of dogma not in a single "moment" of the tradition but in the *total tradition process of Christian faith*. The identification of the revealed truth of dogma with a single meaning or intention of a text does not do justice to the necessary unity of text and interpretation. The "content" of faith is always available in particular interpretations, formed in concrete situations of understanding. The essence is never supplied purely and directly, but is always present in an interpretation determined in and directed to a particular historical moment of the tradition of Christian faith. The full scope of this interpretative process includes an awareness not only of the horizon of the author but of the tradition process as a whole and of the problem of "application" of the effective meaning now. A full grasp of historical meaning, whether it is the meaning of Scripture or of dogma, includes an application to the changing situation of faith. Understanding is a fusion of past and present horizons, not simply a repristination of the past on its own terms. To isolate the "content" of faith from this "effective-historical" process of understanding is to overlook the impact of the subjectivity of the interpreter upon understanding. The identification of the revealed truth of dogma with a single meaning or intention of a text does not do justice

[47] *Infallible? An Inquiry* (New York, 1971).

to the necessary unity of text and interpretation in the movement of tradition.

The belief that dogma is "irreformably" true refers less to a fixed content than to the conviction that dogmas can emerge as "effective" expressions of the subject matter of Christian faith when interpreted from changing historical horizons. Dogmas are of normative or classical importance in the context of Catholic tradition and thus legitimate objects of a renewed interpretative concern. The permanent responsibility to "recover" dogma by way of interpretation is, I would suggest, what the "formal" authority of dogma entails. Whatever decision is taken on the hypothetical possibility of a contradiction of particular dogmatic statements is a question of secondary importance. The key issue in the modern era is not the formal truth of dogma or the formal possibility of contradiction, but the question what dogmas mean and their effective truth. The hermeneutical problem emerges in the awareness that dogma seems today to be more often a hindrance than an aid to faith. Perhaps some of this difficulty is a product of an inadequate discussion of the structure of understanding involved in the interpretation of dogmatic statements. If an approach to the hermeneutical problem of dogma through German hermeneutics has furthered this discussion, then the purpose of this study has been realized.

ATLASerials