

SECULAR THEOLOGY AND THE REJECTION OF THE SUPERNATURAL: REFLECTIONS ON RECENT TRENDS

PETER L. BERGER

Rutgers University

UNLESS THEOLOGIANs today do their work within the confines of some sort of religio-cultural ghetto (an increasingly rare luxury), they find themselves under the cognitive pressures brought about by the modern secularization process. Put differently, the theological enterprise takes place in a situation of cognitive dissonance with many definitions of reality taken for granted in its milieu. This milieu confronts the theologian as a socially privileged reference group; broadly speaking, it is that of the intellectual and academic elite of the society. There are different ways by which theologians have sought to deal with these pressures. One of the ways is the cognitive procedure commonly called reductionism. In this procedure the contents of the religious tradition, with which the theologian continues to identify in some manner, are translated *in full* into language that (or so it is intended) will no longer be in cognitive dissonance with the secularized milieu. The ensuing assuagement of pressure, it is important to stress, is internal as well as external: it is not just a matter of the theologian attaining a degree of social acceptability in the milieu that matters to him, but much more importantly it means that he finds a way of reconciling in his own mind the contradiction between different elements of his view of the world.¹

For the past decade the theological scene in this country has been rampant with various forms of reductionism. Some of these have attained a high degree of popularity outside the walls of academia, especially those that have used the languages of contemporary psychotherapy or/and of emancipatory political movements. Inevitably, these forms of reductionism have tended to be hortatory in tone as well as intellectually vulgarized (which has not stopped them from becoming

¹ I have analyzed this situation, in terms of the sociology of knowledge, in my *The Sacred Canopy* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1967) pp. 154 ff., and again in *A Rumor of Angels* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1969) pp. 7 ff. The phrase "in full" in the above definition of reductionism is to set off this procedure from more circumscribed compromises with the claims of a secularized world view. It goes without saying that this definition, of necessity, is ideal-typical. There is a continuum of possible resolutions of this process of cognitive bargaining, and there will always be empirical cases in which the analyst will be uncertain as to the suitability of the category of reductionism. The contention of this paper, of course, is that the category is suitable in the cases at issue.

tenured in a numbers of theological institutions). But there has been another variety—impeccably academic in content, sedate in tone, and on an indisputably high level of intellectual sophistication. A phenomenon with these qualities is less susceptible to popularization, and for this reason perhaps less interesting sociologically (vulgarity, almost by definition, is the proper object of sociological inquiry). In another way, though, this variety of reductionism is *more* interesting. It is, of course, more intriguing intellectually. Beyond this, however, it also reveals the full measure of the contemporary crisis of theology: the cognitive surrender, which is at the core of the reductionist procedure, can be seen more clearly when it is performed in an intellectually respectable manner than when it is done sloppily on a street corner. In other words, it is more interesting to observe the seduction of the virtuous than the sins of those from whom nothing else is to be expected.

The following is a discussion of four books published over the last decade by three American theologians: Schubert Ogden, Langdon Gilkey, and David Tracy. The work of these men is instructive not only because it is eminently characterized by the afore-mentioned qualities of intellectual respectability, but also because it is authentically American in its cultural sensibilities (unlike the work of others inspired by European and, more recently, Latin American thinkers) and because it spans the confessional divide (Ogden and Gilkey are Protestants, Tracy is Roman Catholic). To what extent the three men may be said to constitute a school (if so, one surmises that its center would be the University of Chicago Divinity School) is a question that need not be answered here. There are differences among them, as they themselves point out. Nor can the present discussion pretend to be a comprehensive treatment of what, in each of the three cases, is an opus of broad scope and very impressive erudition. Indeed, it should be emphasized from the outset that nothing in this discussion is meant to denigrate the intellectual excellence of the books in question: these are *good* books—which, precisely, is the reason why they are interesting for the purpose at hand. Rather, the intention here is to focus on one single issue: the way in which the fundamental challenge of modern secularized consciousness to the theological enterprise is understood and dealt with. Whatever else may divide these three theologians, they have in common a theological procedure best subsumed under the category of “disclosure.” This category need not be reductionist of necessity; it is contended that it is so in these instances.

SCHUBERT OGDEN

Schubert Ogden's *The Reality of God* was published in 1966, though, being a volume of essays, it contains some material written somewhat

earlier.² The date is important. The book came out three years after Paul van Buren's *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel* and John Robinson's *Honest to God*, which together (van Buren in academic theology, Robinson on a broad popular level) marked the rather loud inauguration of what came to be known as secular theology on the Anglo-American scene.³ Ogden's book was simultaneous with the climactic radicalization of this type of theology in the so-called "death of God" movement, which, however, arrived too late to be dealt with in the book.⁴ Still, Ogden's treatment of van Buren, Robinson, and others of their orientation may be said to apply a fortiori to their more radical successors. It is the stated intention of Ogden's book to give a secular interpretation of the Christian faith without lapsing into the more extreme forms of secular theology. That is, Ogden's intention is to produce a moderate apologetic.⁵

Borrowing from Friedrich Gogarten, Ogden distinguishes between secularism and secularity.⁶ Under this distinction, secularism is essentially scientism—the restriction of reality to that which can be grasped by the methods of modern science. Both Gogarten and Ogden reject the cognitive claims of this restrictive world view. Secularity, on the other hand, is essentially the affirmation of the ultimate worthwhileness of human life in this world, as against any notion that the latter can only be vindicated by positing another world or another life: "Secularity as such, as distinct from secularism, is simply the emphatic affirmation that man and the world are themselves of ultimate significance."⁷ The import of this secularity is seen most clearly through its opposite, which, for Ogden, is supernaturalism—more specifically, supernaturalistic theism. A secular interpretation of the Christian faith, while rejecting secularism, will also reject supernaturalistic theism; indeed, the reconstruction of theology after the abandonment of supernaturalism is the task at hand.

Why? Supernaturalism is intellectually unacceptable. It is also exist-

² Schubert Ogden, *The Reality of God* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966).

³ Paul van Buren, *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel* (New York: Macmillan, 1963); John Robinson, *Honest to God* (London: SCM, 1963).

⁴ Thomas Altizer and William Hamilton, *Radical Theology and the Death of God* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1966).

⁵ This does not mean that Ogden's work is primarily directed to those outside the community of faith. On the contrary, every one of our three theologians is keenly aware that the apologetic task today is primarily an internal one—the cognitive antagonist is within the religious community and within the mind of every honest religious thinker.

⁶ Friedrich Gogarten, *Verhängnis und Hoffnung der Neuzeit* (Stuttgart: Vorwerk, 1958). For a good discussion of Gogarten's theology, cf. Larry Shiner, *The Secularization of History* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1966).

⁷ Ogden, *op. cit.*, p. 44.

tentially repugnant. In sum, "there is . . . an irreconcilable opposition between the premises of . . . supernaturalistic theism and the whole direction of our experience and reflection as secular men."⁸ Yet, both on the experiential and the reflective level, secularity is presupposed. It is the axiomatic starting point of Ogden's argument and, as such, it remains unquestioned. Secularity, that is, is always criterion, never object of critique: we cannot accept supernaturalism *because* it is contrary to the secular understanding of reality, and we find it repugnant *because* it denies the secular valuation of human life. It seems that we (and that presumably includes anyone who is honestly reflective in the contemporary situation) have no other choice, or at least no intellectually and morally acceptable choice.

For the putative reconstruction of theology, Ogden has recourse to two philosophical traditions: what might be called the moderate wing of Anglo-American language analysis and the process philosophy derived from Alfred North Whitehead.⁹ The details of this philosophical instrumentarium cannot be pursued here. Suffice it to say that it does two jobs for Ogden's argument: to show that there is such a thing as meaningful religious language, and to make clear that the object of this language cannot be the afore-mentioned supernaturalistic theism. All of this comes back to the postulate of secularity with which Ogden begins. Faith in God, and indeed the very notion of God, is confidence in life's ultimate worthwhileness. Such confidence is necessarily given in the human condition.¹⁰ In instilling or grounding this confidence, religion is necessary: "One can only conclude that faith in God as the ground of confidence in life's ultimate meaning is the necessary condition of our existence as selves."¹¹

What kind of God emerges from this perspective? Most important, "God must be conceived as a reality which is genuinely related to our life in the world and to which, therefore, both we ourselves and our various actions all make a difference as to its actual being."¹² In this formulation the postulate of secularity is enriched by the Whiteheadian idea of God in process. This God is supposed to be a "dipolar" one. That is, God is both affected and unaffected by our life in the world, and is thus both

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁹ An important source for the former is Stephen Toulmin, *An Examination of the Place of Reason in Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1950). For the latter cf. Charles Hartshorne, *Reality as Social Process* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1953), and Charles Hartshorne and William Reese, *Philosophers Speak of God* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago, 1953).

¹⁰ In this, incidentally, Ogden is the most optimistic of the three theologians. The other two are more susceptible to existentialistic gloom, and Gilkey, in *Naming the Whirlwind* (see n. 16 below), pp. 353 ff., explicitly criticizes Ogden for his view of this.

¹¹ Ogden, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 47.

relative and absolute. By contrast, supernaturalistic theism is supposed to have been "monopolar": God confronts the world in remote, unchanging majesty.¹³ Such a view of God is unacceptable. Why? By now we should know the answer:

Simply by deciding to be secular, one implicitly repudiates the conception of God whereby that decision is finally robbed of any force. For a time, no doubt, this repudiation need not become explicit and may even seem unnecessary, what with the inconsistencies in which supernaturalism is typically entangled. But sooner or later, the conclusion must be faced that the God conceived by this form of theism cannot be the God of secular man.¹⁴

The argument, if nothing else, has an elegant circularity.

All three of the theologians under discussion have some difficulty moving from their general theory of religion to the specifics of the Christian tradition, notably those of Christology. For Ogden, the difficulty is overcome by yet another enrichment of the original postulate of secularity: faith in Christ is a powerful symbolic affirmation of the final confidence in God. Therefore, faith in Christ is not only reconcilable with secularity but is the latter's compelling, indeed almost necessary, consequence. Ogden becomes eloquent in what surely must be an unusually consistent expression of the notion *anima naturaliter christiana*: "This, I hold, is the promise of faith: that, whatever else may befall us and however long or short may be the span of our lives, either here or hereafter, we are each embraced in every moment within God's boundless love and thereby have the ultimate destiny of endless life in and through him."¹⁵ Lest this Pauline prose should rouse false expectations, Ogden quickly adds, three pages later, that the promise of faith is *not* to be understood as including any kind of personal survival after death. Whatever "hereafter" or "endless life" may mean in the above formulation, they do *not* mean what Christians have hoped for in this department since the beginnings of the faith. Ogden's book actually ends with this anti-immortality note. Secularity has the last word, literally.

LANGDON GILKEY

Langdon Gilkey's *Naming the Whirlwind* appeared in 1969.¹⁶ This, of course, dates it after the climaxing of the "death of God" theology. At

¹³ I am content to leave to historians of dogma the question whether process theology, in its doctrine of God, is but a newfangled version of the venerable heresy of Patripassianism. But Ogden's presentation of traditional Christian theism makes it hard to see how the latter ever came to have a doctrine of the Incarnation.

¹⁴ Ogden, *op. cit.*, pp. 51 f. What with the inconsistencies in which reductionist theology is typically entangled, one may leave hanging the question how secularity, originally described as an inexorable fate, is here taken to be a matter of decision.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 226.

¹⁶ Langdon Gilkey, *Naming the Whirlwind: The Renewal of God-Language* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1969).

least part of Gilkey's intention is to refute the more extravagant propositions of this theological movement. As with Ogden, then, the intention is apologetic, though Gilkey stresses that in the contemporary situation all theology, *au fond*, must be apologetic: "Kerygmatic theology, the theology addressed by the Church to the 'believing' Church, must also be apologetical theology, a theology addressed to the 'doubting' world—for the Church is the world in so much of its spirit."¹⁷ The character of this situation, in which the old distinction between "inside" and "outside" no longer applies, is analyzed in a long chapter in the early part of the book. The conclusion, not surprisingly, is that contemporary culture is marked by the triumph of secularity, a phenomenon understood by Gilkey essentially in the same way as by Ogden. But Gilkey's book, unlike Ogden's, is a highly systematic treatise (it is also about twice as long). Beyond giving an analysis of the contemporary situation and some basic theological "marching orders," it goes a long way toward delineating a theological system that will proceed in dialogue with the spirit of secularity without being uncritically absorbed by it (as the radicalizations of secular theology were, according to Gilkey). In the perspective of the dominant Anglo-American philosophy, this project entails a revindication of God-language.

As with Ogden, the task at hand for Gilkey is the reconstruction of theology upon the foundations of secularity. Indeed, the argument of the book is presented as itself a secular inquiry: "The materials investigated, described and interpreted are parts of secular experience, available to any person immersed in cultural life and aware of that immersion."¹⁸ Or even more sharply, the object of Gilkey's inquiry is "secular experience, the experience common to all of us, not religious experience or special experience of any sort."¹⁹ In other words, the starting point of the theological enterprise is the common experience of secularized men. If that were all, though, the enterprise would not be adequately described as secular; even a Thomist, for example, might be willing to allow a secular starting point. Again as with Ogden, secularity is not only the starting point but the criterion of the enterprise.

This central methodological principle of Gilkey's argument is stated unequivocally and with impressive lucidity:

The symbols of relevant theology must explicate and illumine our ordinary existence in the world, and conversely our experience of being in the world must give meaning and reality to our theological discourse. Here is where we all exist, and where meaning for us arises and is expressed. A creative theology cannot

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 182.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 233.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 234.

point our minds and spirits to *another realm* or use language intelligible only if we enter special religious situations and special religious places. However derived from special experiences the symbols of a relevant theology may ultimately be, still they must in our age be secular enough to function as the symbolic forms by means of which our ordinary life in the world is thematized and made intelligible; they must have a secular use and application, a secular meaning.²⁰

It seems clear that the maxim "no other realm" is the heartpiece of this procedure, setting it off sharply against any form of supernaturalism. Gilkey leaves it somewhat open whether such an "other realm" of religious experience may have some status of reality; the important point is that, even if it has, this cannot be intelligible to us—that is, to us secular men—and therefore it cannot be a theme for a theological enterprise relevant to the secular situation. Once more, then, secularity is the cognitive criterion *a priori*.

This methodological principle is carried through the argument with great consequence, at times brilliantly. It is applied to any and all elements of religious discourse, most emphatically to the very notion of God: "The meaning of a symbol (e.g., God) is to be discovered by relating that symbol to those aspects of common experience which it thematizes, conceptualizes, and so discloses to specific awareness and communication."²¹ Again, this does not necessarily imply that God has no status in reality other than as a symbol disclosive of common human experience; it does imply that the theologian cannot meaningfully say anything about this—not only not to others, but not to himself, since he too must operate cognitively on the postulate of secularity. There is in this, as it were, a quality of cognitive asceticism, a deliberate and in a way remarkable turning away from a vast body of testimonies concerning human religious experience. There is also a quality of abrupt simplification, but it is a simplification of great sophistication, certainly not open to the charge of vulgarization.

The tools of the theological enterprise proposed by Gilkey also rely heavily on the instrumentarium of Anglo-American philosophy, though there is also some influence of phenomenology, particularly as developed by Paul Ricoeur.²² Having clarified his methodology, Gilkey develops in considerable detail his proposition that religious symbols serve to disclose human experience. This centrality of the concept of disclosure also allows him to speak of a theological hermeneutic. Religious symbols specifically disclose the element of ultimacy in human life. Thus they

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 250 f. (my italics).

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 274.

²² A work that apparently influenced Gilkey, as well as Tracy, is Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967).

are particularly relevant in situations where human life is pushed to its limits. These can be experiences of existential *Angst*, of helplessness and moral ambiguity. But equally relevant are experiences of hope and human affirmation in the face of all outer and inner threats. In sum, religious symbols become meaningful whenever we reflect about the fundamental questions as to our being and its grounding.²³ Gilkey is prepared to speak of transcendence in this connection and (unlike Ogden) does not completely exclude the possibility that such transcendence may have a personal significance beyond death.²⁴ The postulate of secularity is not touched by any of these formulations: it is *this* life, *this* world, which are disclosed in their ultimate ground as one approaches the limits of human experience. Whatever transcendence may mean, it does *not* mean an "other realm" of experience.

Gilkey distinguishes very clearly between the question of the meaningfulness and the question of the validity of religious symbols. The former is established by the kind of consideration indicated above, the latter by assessing the "fit" between these elements of human experience and specific elements of religious tradition (here, of course, the Christian tradition). This latter part of the argument is quite similar in logical structure to Paul Tillich's notion of "correlation," but this cannot be pursued here.

In 1975, six years after *Naming the Whirlwind*, Gilkey published *Catholicism Confronts Modernity*.²⁵ The book attracted attention for some reasons that are not relevant to the present discussion — as a well-informed and sympathetic commentary by a Protestant scholar addressing himself to the crisis in the sister confession. The book grew out of lectures given by Gilkey over the preceding years, and this history may have something to do with the character of this book as compared with the earlier one. Yet the reader is impressed by a considerable sharpening in Gilkey's formulations: the second book is more unqualified than the first one, less restrained. This makes it useful for an understanding of the theoretical import of Gilkey's basic position.

The book begins with a very lucid account of the rapid collapse of the old structures of Roman Catholic religiosity in the face of modernity since 1963. After having staunchly resisted modernization for nearly two centuries of intellectual confrontation, Vatican II signaled a hasty dismantling of the Church's battlements. In the space of slightly more than one decade, the ensuing changes in the Roman Catholic community have been cataclysmic. Gilkey sees this decade as a complete

²³ The influence of Paul Tillich is considerable here.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 361.

²⁵ Langdon Gilkey, *Catholicism Confronts Modernity: A Protestant View* (New York: Seabury, 1975).

triumph of the modern spirit over the old (as he calls it) supernatural vision. This is almost certainly an exaggeration, but there can be little doubt about the cataclysm he describes. But, for the present purpose, Gilkey's diagnosis is much less interesting than his prescription. And that is very simple indeed and, after *Naming the Whirlwind*, hardly surprising: "The task for twentieth-century Catholicism calls for the reinterpretation of the transcendent, the sacred, and the divine—the presence of God to men—into the worldly or naturalistic forms of modern experience rather than in the supernaturalistic forms of Hellenic and medieval experience."²⁶

The term "transcendence" is frequently used, but it is now abundantly clear that the term has a strictly this-worldly reference. It is consistently contrasted with supernaturalism, the (allegedly obsolete) view in which man's worldly condition is understood against the background of an "other realm." Gilkey uses a term borrowed from Rudolf Bultmann to describe the mythological perspective of the New Testament: the "two-story universe." It is the latter that, Bultmann claimed, modern man can no longer accept.²⁷ Gilkey, too, describes this condition of "no longer being able to" (*nicht mehr können*) as a cognitive and existential imperative.²⁸

Gilkey then develops a series of propositions that can best be described as secular axioms, as in the following: "*The modern principle affirms that natural reality as a universal system is one dynamic whole, and God is to be conceived not as a changeless reality above it, but as in continual, dynamic relation to it.*"²⁹ The content of these modern affirmations is familiar from the earlier book, but one is struck with the reiteration of the criterion character of the modern world view, a criterion that apparently must remain apodictic and unquestioned: "For us the divine is not conceivable as another realm but solely as the source of created life here and now"; "we all tacitly believe we are called as Christians to fulfill our *humanity*, not to transcend it"; "this is our relevant context, and religion, grace, even God, if they are to be relevant and real to us, must make a difference in this context, in society, in history, and among men"; "most of us affirm this principle at a deep

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

²⁷ Actually, Bultmann speaks of a "three-story universe," but the loss of one *Stockwerk* hardly matters. Cf. Rudolf Bultmann, "Neues Testament und Mythologie," in Hans Werner Bartsch, ed., *Kerygma und Mythos* 1 (Hamburg: Reich & Heidrich, 1948) pp. 15 ff.

²⁸ Anyone sensitive to the subterranean connections of language may think here of Luther's famous "I can do no other." The unbending imperative of Christian conscience has now become the imperative, no less unbending, of the modern spirit. Protestantism is a perilous business.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 63 (my italics).

visceral level."³⁰ The final consequence of all this is very clear indeed, on the level both of theological thought and of the religious life: "The goal of Christian faith, then, is not to transcend this life into another, into a supernatural level characterized by a sharing in the divine life that abrogates or absorbs natural life; for the perfection of nature is the sole value. We have no wish to be *aufgehoben* above our natural humanity, nor do we believe it possible."³¹

The constructive sections of the book do not seem to go much beyond the earlier book. The Whiteheadian elements in the conception of God appear to be more prominent. There also seems to be a stronger emphasis on social and political action as elements of the Christian life, as in the following somewhat startling formulation: "Providence is the work of God that provides new forms and new possibilities of order and participation for the changing social life of men."³² The book concludes with a warm appreciation of Catholic sacramentalism and a call for its adaptation to the requirements of secular existence.

DAVID TRACY

David Tracy's 1975 book *Blessed Rage for Order* may be said to compete with Gilkey's *Naming the Whirlwind* as the most systematic presentation thus far of this type of theology.³³ It too is a comprehensive, erudite, and in places original work of theological reconstruction. These qualities would of themselves entitle the book to serious attention. An additional reason to be attentive is its author's Roman Catholic affiliation. In a very direct way Tracy takes up Gilkey's challenge to contemporary Roman Catholic theology (since the two men have been colleagues at the University of Chicago Divinity School, one may suppose that personal dialogue played a part in this challenge). Tracy establishes beyond any residue of doubt that secular theology is no longer a Protestant exclusive; Roman Catholics are now eligible to be included in the "we" of Ogden's and Gilkey's community of discourse.

The book begins with a very able overview of the current theological situation in America, a situation decisively affected by the forces of modernization and secularization. Then Tracy distinguishes among five basic models of contemporary theology; it is their coexistence that

³⁰ All these formulations are from *ibid.*, pp. 64 f. A truly massive concentration of what reads like pronouncements *ex cathedra*.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 66. I do not know whether Gilkey was aware of a further association of the German word. His sentence may be read not only as a reference to the Hegelian dialectic but as a sharp denial of the Assumption: the Blessed Virgin, in Mariological piety, is precisely "lifted up (*aufgehoben*) above our natural humanity."

³² *Ibid.*, p. 154.

³³ David Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order: The New Pluralism in Theology* (New York: Seabury, 1975). I am indebted in my discussion of this book to its review by Avery Dulles in *THEOLOGICAL STUDIES* 37 (1976) 304-16.

constitutes the pluralism in the situation. These models are the orthodox, the liberal, the neo-orthodox, the radical, and the revisionist. The first four are those conventionally so labeled; the fifth is the one Tracy espouses, and its label requires elucidation. Tracy provides it, with little ambiguity:

The revisionist theologian is committed to what seems clearly to be the central task of contemporary Christian theology: the dramatic confrontation, the mutual illuminations and corrections, the possible basic reconciliation between the principal values, cognitive claims, and existential faiths of both a reinterpreted post-modern consciousness and a reinterpreted Christianity.³⁴

The revisionist model is also described as "a critical correlation." At first glance this definition promises a more even-handed procedure than the one developed by Ogden and Gilkey. This promise is not fulfilled. As Tracy's argument unwinds, it becomes increasingly clear that the "corrections" are hardly mutual. It is Christianity that must be "corrected," and it is the modern spirit that serves as the cognitive instrument for this operation.

Barring some nuances, Tracy's basic methodology is very similar to Gilkey's.³⁵ Once more, the theological task is to explicate in what manner religious symbols disclose the human condition. The centerpiece of the book is an analysis of the religious dimension of common human experience. The key concept here is that of limit. As with Gilkey, for Tracy the religious significance of human life is revealed (more precisely, disclosed) as the latter is pushed to certain boundaries. The limit experiences are not in themselves religious; rather they open up a religious horizon. Religious symbols refer both to the limit experiences themselves and to the transcendent horizon they open up. The former reference is clear; the latter leaves something to be desired — "a dimension which, in my own brief and hazy glimpses, discloses a reality, however named and in whatever manner experienced, which functions as a final, now gracious, now frightening, now trustworthy, now absurd, always uncontrollable limit of the very meaning of existence itself."³⁶

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 32. "Postmodern" in this context, as far as I can tell, implies no more than a consciousness that has undergone modernization.

³⁵ One nuance appears to be a somewhat greater influence of Paul Ricoeur. Another is frequent reference to Bernard Lonergan, about whom Tracy previously published a book, *The Achievement of Bernard Lonergan* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1970). In the later book, however, Tracy clearly distances himself from Lonergan, who, like Karl Rahner, supposedly remains too much in the thrall of the no-longer-possible supernaturalism.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 108. In the same paragraph Tracy refers to himself as "religiously rather 'unmusical'" (a phrase originally applied to himself by Max Weber). This somewhat startling self-definition is not taken up again, nor is the obvious question what this means for Tracy's insistence that religious symbols are rooted in *common* experience.

Whatever this may mean positively, it is made amply clear what it does *not* mean:

Religious language does not present a new, a supernatural world wherein we may escape the only world we know or wish to know. Rather that language represents our always threatened basic confidence and trust in the very meaningfulness of even our most cherished and most noble enterprises, science, morality and culture. That language discloses the reassurance needed that the final reality of our lives is in fact trustworthy.³⁷

Tracy maintains that Christian theology must be based on two sources: the texts that embody the Christian tradition and common human experience and language. The latter part of the book is concerned with this essentially Tillichian correlation. The New Testament is interpreted as presenting some very specific limit experiences, which Tracy calls "a possible mode-of-being-in-the-world."³⁸ Again, the validity of these accounts is established by their putative "fit" with our own experience.

The details of this cannot be pursued here. Throughout, the rejection of supernaturalism is clear and seemingly apodictic. The notion of supernaturalism is used synonymously with "fundamentalism," which is understood as any authoritarian demand for religious assent. Once more we come on the concept of the "dipolar" God, though Tracy expresses some uneasiness with the Whiteheadian formulations. More important than the repudiation of the "monopolar" God appears to be the repudiation of the "monarchical God." Opposed to this is the image of a God of "persuasive, non-coercive love,"³⁹ which supposedly is not only more consonant with the Christian texts but also (and this is decisive) intended "to resonate more fully to the deepest sensitivities of our present multi-dimensional cultural situation."⁴⁰ Very consistently, the language of Christology is reinterpreted (albeit rather briefly) as presenting precisely such an image of God. The book ends with a discussion of the implications of revisionist theology for Christian praxis (the Marxist association of this term is intentional). Here an additional criterion is added for the Christian theologian: he must undertake "critical retrievals, if possible, or critical inventions, if necessary, of various symbol-systems in accordance with their ability both to negate the oppressive forces actually operative in the situation, and to project those images of social humanity to which the authentic human being can commit himself or herself."⁴¹ What this might entail for a specific political agenda is not spelled out, but the reader comes away with the

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 135.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 131.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 190.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 189.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 247.

impression that it is not enough to be modern and secular any more: one must also, it seems, be somewhere on the left politically.

CRITICAL OBSERVATIONS

If the present purpose were an external, sociological critique of this type of theology, two points would have to be made: the description of the contemporary cultural situation by these theologians, in terms of the pervasive influence of secularity, is quite correct; their prescription for Christian theology emerging from their diagnosis, on the other hand, is a recipe for the self-liquidation of the Christian community: it will alienate the minority of those who have not yet been fully secularized, without having the least attraction to those who have been so secularized.⁴² The present purpose, though, is to criticize this theological approach on its own ground, not on the ground of the sociology of knowledge. On this former ground a number of critical observations may be made.

It is quite correct, as the three theologians maintain, that in a situation in which authority in religion has been seriously put in question, there occurs a turning toward experience in theology. Put differently, when the objective certainty of religious definitions of reality can no longer be taken for granted (for whatever sociological and psychological reasons), the individual in quest of some measure of certainty must turn toward subjective sources of verification. In all likelihood this is a phenomenon recurring in history. For example, it probably is to be found in the late Hellenistic period, as the old Greco-Roman gods "died" in the consciousness of people (and, incidentally, this fact probably accounts for the modern-seeming character of that age). It is possible not only to agree with this analysis but to welcome the turning toward experience on philosophical and theological grounds. Philosophically, every *prise de conscience* of the human mind is associated with a credibility loss of erstwhile authorities. Theologically, faith based on some sort of individual decision may be deemed superior to faith supported solely by culturally taken-for-granted authority. On this level, then, the disintegrative effects of modernity on religious authority and the subsequent turning toward experience can be legitimately welcomed by the Christian theologian.⁴³

⁴² I have made these points repeatedly over the last decade, and this is not the place to do so again. For a recent restatement, cf. my essay "For a World with Windows," in Peter Berger and Richard Neuhaus, eds., *Against the World for the World: The Hartford Appeal and the Future of American Religion* (New York: Seabury, 1976).

⁴³ By "authority" is meant here the demand of a religious tradition for unquestioning obedience, even at the cost of a *sacrificium intellectus*. I have elsewhere used the notion of authority, in the Christian community, as a stance of self-confidence; that is another meaning of the word.

But the question is not whether the theologian should turn to experience; the question is *what kind of experience* he should turn to. As far as the modern history of theology is concerned (it can be plausibly shown that there were earlier episodes of such turning), there can be little doubt that Schleiermacher represents the most influential proclamation of the principle of experience as theological criterion par excellence. There can also be little doubt that the experience Schleiermacher had in mind was precisely of that "other realm" which secular theology would deny. For Schleiermacher, the essence of religious experience is the sense of absolute dependence on a God whom he carefully defines as being *outside* any conceivable realm of natural existence. Religious experience, therefore, breaks the limits of natural (or, one might translate, secular) experience: "Towards all the forces of Nature—even, we may say, towards the heavenly bodies—we ourselves do, in the same sense in which they influence us, exercise a counter-influence, however minute. So that our whole self-consciousness in relation to the World or its individual parts remains enclosed within these limits."⁴⁴ Conversely, God is beyond any natural forces, is precisely *other-worldly*, and human experience of God transcends the limits of all mundane or natural experience. And, as if in anticipation of the God of process philosophy, Schleiermacher insists: "The transference of the idea of God to any perceptible object, unless one is all the time conscious that it is a piece of purely arbitrary symbolism, is always a corruption."⁴⁵

The secular theology under discussion here, therefore, *is* in the line of Schleiermacher in its grounding in human experience; it is emphatically *not* in that line in its understanding of what kind of human experience is religiously relevant. Needless to say, Schleiermacher is not cited here as some new source of authority. But it is useful to have a clear picture of the historical lineages as well as ruptures of ideas. The decisive rupture in this instance is precisely at the point where any experience of an "other realm" is rejected a priori. Indeed, it could be argued that *this* is the assertion of a new authority: the authority of the modern spirit, as *it* is now culturally taken for granted in the intellectual elite of the society.

Also important is an ambiguity in the notion of symbolism. Of course, religious language is one of many human symbolic systems, and this fact has all sorts of philosophical implications. Nor is it to be denied, on the basis of what is known today about human religious history, that religious language symbolically represents a great miscellany of social and cultural circumstances (including, Marx knows, circumstances of economic and political power relations). The secular theologians are

⁴⁴ Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith* (Edinburgh: Clark, 1928) p. 15.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

quite right when they say that, once these facts are admitted, orthodoxy (or, for that matter, neo-orthodoxy) is intellectually difficult. Still, the question remains: *What is the finally intended referent of religious language?* If it is solely the human condition, then Feuerbach (not Schleiermacher) was right after all. If it is not the human condition, secular theology bases itself on a fundamental "category mistake," that is, in the words of Gilbert Ryle, "the presentation of facts belonging to one category in the idioms appropriate to another."⁴⁶

Again, it is quite possible to affirm the central concept of disclosure, even in the sense intended by the secular theologians. It is a necessary claim of Christian faith, and indeed of any other religious tradition, that its symbols disclose some hitherto hidden aspects of the human condition. Such disclosure, however, is precisely with reference to a reality that lies outside the human condition. In the same way, it is possible to affirm the concepts of limits and limit language. Religious symbols do indeed become most clearly manifest on the limits of human experience. However, while religious symbols disclose the limits of *this* world, they also adumbrate the limits of *another* world impinging on this one. And this is their unique quality, which distinguishes them from the limit languages of philosophy, science, and the poetic imagination. Within the framework of various philosophical and scientific disciplines (the sociology of knowledge is one of the latter), it is possible to view religious symbols as referring to exclusively mundane experiences. This can be very fruitful in producing insights into the social and psychological functions of religion. The framework of theological understanding, if it is not simply reduced to these other disciplines, must be a different one: it must seek to disclose the extramundane referents "in, with, and under" the mundane ones. In terms of the history of ideas, one might say that such a theological procedure constitutes a reversion from the Feuerbachian dialectic to that of the young Hegel. Be this as it may, it now becomes possible to view the world as *itself a symbol*—a symbol of the reality that lies beyond it. Put differently, the secular theology understands religious language as signals of the human condition; quite another theology is possible, which seeks for the "signals of transcendence" within the human condition—indeed, within common human experience as well.⁴⁷

In this connection another curious aspect of the secular theology should be noted. In the rejection of supernaturalism there is frequent reference to its allegedly unacceptable use of spatial symbolism—the

⁴⁶ Ogden, *op. cit.*, p. 105. The original source is Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (London: Hutchinson, 1949) p. 8.

⁴⁷ In other words, the procedure recommended by the secular theologians is the diametric opposite of the one I suggested in my *A Rumor of Angels*.

"two-story universe" and all that. Insofar as the secular theology uses process concepts, however, it employs all sorts of temporal symbolism. It remains unclarified why temporal symbols have an intrinsically superior status as against spatial symbols.⁴⁸

More crucially, though, the rejection of supernaturalism is a dogmatic act which commands immediate assent and will fail to persuade anyone refusing such assent a priori. Like other dogmatic assertions, it is consistently posited in an apodictic manner, postulated rather than argued. The question remains: Is the world of common human experience the only world? If one assumes, in the spirit of secularity, that the answer must be positive, then the whole enterprise of secular theology makes sense. If one answers negatively, or even has some uncertainty in the matter, the enterprise is profoundly unsatisfactory. It could be argued, of course, whether supernaturalism is an adequate term for what is at issue. The term has various historical associations that are not altogether fortunate. Insofar as the term clearly refers to an "other realm" of experience and reality, to the extraordinary and the extraordinary, it continues to be useful. Let it be said, then, that a supernaturalistic theology not only continues to be possible in the contemporary situation, but that any theology worth doing will have to be supernaturalistic.⁴⁹

If one takes this position, the important next task would be to take up anew the attempt to delineate, as far as possible, the shape of supernaturalistic experience. For this, to be sure, Schleiermacher will be of very limited use. The most promising avenue would appear to be a return to the phenomenology of religion, in the line of Rudolf Otto, Gerardus van der Leeuw, and Mircea Eliade.⁵⁰ Additional conceptual tools could be borrowed from Alfred Schutz's work on the multiple realities of human experience, notably on the relation of the "paramount reality" of everyday life and what he calls the "finite provinces of meaning."⁵¹

There is a curious identification (most clear in the case of Tracy) of

⁴⁸ The same question applies to the various uses of neo-Hegelian or Marxist concepts by other theologians, such as those associated with Latin American liberation theology and its North American derivatives. There too the proposition is "spatial transcendence, *no*; temporal transcendence, *si*." For a discussion of the peculiar uses of eschatological symbolism by liberation theologians, cf. Richard Neuhaus, "Liberation as Program and Promise," *Currents in Theology and Mission*, April and June issues, 1975.

⁴⁹ Other terms are possible, of course, but they too carry the freight of multiple associations. "Transcendence" is an important case in point. If a new term is called for, "polycosmism" might perhaps be tried.

⁵⁰ For an impressive recent contribution to this task, cf. Louis Dupré, *The Other Dimension* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1972).

⁵¹ For a very preliminary statement of this possibility, cf. my article "Some Second Thoughts on Substantive versus Functional Definitions of Religion," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, June 1974.

supernaturalism and authoritarian religion ("fundamentalism"). One can understand the *Sitz im Leben* of this particular identification. To anyone whose biography includes an intellectual emancipation from the narrow confines of either Roman Catholic or Protestant orthodoxy, these two phenomena will indeed seem to be synonymous. To anyone with a different biography, the identification must appear as a confusion. To be sure, supernaturalistic forms of religion and theology have been imposed on people in an authoritarian manner. But so, today, is secularity. Indeed, what one may observe on the cultural scene today is an assertive and arrogant secular "fundamentalism." It should be possible, even for individuals with a painful history of battling religious authorities, to see the continuity between the two brands of "fundamentalism." This consideration leads to further reflection about the "we" being continually invoked by these theologians—the "we" who, supposedly, "can no longer" accept this or that element of the religious traditions. Just who is "we"? The question is susceptible of quite precise answers—that is, the "we" can be sociologically located. Such location immediately weakens the privileged cognitive status implied by the invocation. It suggests that (perhaps inelegant) retort "Speak for yourself, buddy!" Some of "us", no doubt, "no longer can." But some others of "us" still "can"—or "can" again. There is no reason why this latter group, even if it finds itself in a minority in the contemporary world (something, by the way, which is not altogether clear), should be sucked into the magisterial "we" of the secularized consciousness.

There are, in fact, only three basic theological possibilities in our situation: the deductive possibility, of confronting the secular spirit with an autonomous system founded on religious authority; the reductive possibility, which is *au fond* the surrender to the secular spirit; and the inductive possibility, which moves from human experience (common or otherwise) to a renewed confrontation with the religious traditions. Nothing said in the present discussion implies a brief for a deductive or authoritarian approach to religion; in this there is no argument with the three theologians being discussed. Nor is a challenge intended to their proposal for what is, in principle, an inductive procedure. Rather, the intention has been to show that the proposed procedure is, contrary to its own self-definition, yet another variety of reduction. What this type of secular theology represents is the moderate (as against the radical) wing of American theological reductionism. Despite the difference in cultural context and in philosophical instrumentarium, the methodological structure of this theology is very similar to that employed earlier by Rudolf Bultmann and his followers in their program of demythologization. There is the common postulate of the cognitive superiority of secularized consciousness. Despite claims to the contrary, there is the failure to offer a critique of this consciousness.

Secularization has meant that there is a proliferation of people who are "religiously unmusical." It can be a very useful exercise, and not only for apologetic reasons, if the attempt is made to "correlate" religious affirmations with the common experience of those who find themselves in this condition. Such an exercise, though, must be carefully distinguished from a theological method that takes religious deafness as its final cognitive criterion. The type of secular theology that has been discussed here, despite its own stated aims, merits the latter description. When all is said and done, it is a musicology for the deaf.