THE HIERARCHY OF TRUTHS TWENTY YEARS LATER

WILLIAM HENN, O.F.M.CAP.

Capuchin College, Washington, D.C.

T HE 'HIERARCHY OF TRUTHS' is not the most important catchword of Vatican II"—so wrote Karl Rahner.[1] Interestingly enough, however, one finds the phrase conspicuously lurking in the background of two of the more future-oriented writings of his final years.[2] The precise origins of this phrase are shrouded in the not entirely recorded history of the theological developments of the late 1930s.[3] About 30 years later, on November 25, 1963, Archbishop Andrea Pangrazio urged the bishops at the Vatican Council to pay close attention to the "hierarchical order of revealed truths" so as to assess more accurately both the unity which

---

[1] Karl Rahner, "Hierarchie der Wahrheiten," *Diakonia* 13 (1982) 376.

[2] Rahner mentions this phrase twice in the "Epilogue: Brief Creedal Statements" to his *Foundations of Christian Faith* (New York: Crossroad, 1982) 448 and 452, and three times in his commentary on Thesis Two of H. Fries and Karl Rahner, *Unity of the Churches* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985) 33–35.

[3] H. Schützeichel, "Das hierarchische Denken in der Theologie," *Catholica* 35 (1971) 91, states that the word "hierarchy" was first used with regard to truths after the Second World War by C. J. Dumont and Y. Congar. Congar actually wrote of a "hierarchy" in revelation prior to the war, in his "Theologie," *Dictionnaire de théologie catholique* 15/1 (Paris: Letouzey & Ané, 1942) cols. 457–58 (Eng.: *A History of Theology* [New York: Doubleday, 1968] 219–20), the manuscript for which was sent to Msgr. Amann, editor of the *DTC*, on Sept. 2, 1939. During the years 1936 to 1938, R. Draguet, J. Bonnefoy, E. Charlier, and R. Gagnebet wrote about the nature of theological method according to St. Thomas and, in particular, about the way Thomas' method entailed an ordering of the truths of faith. Congar reviewed the works of these four authors, paying close attention to the question of ordering truths, in his "Comptes rendus" which appeared in *Bulletin thomiste* 5 (1937–39) 490–505. In the same period, A. Rademacher's *Die Wiedervereinigung der christlichen Kirchen* (Bonn: Peter Hanstein, 1937) 121–46, a work also known by Congar (see the latter's "Articles fondamentaux" in *Catholicisme* 1 [Paris: Letouzey & Ané, 1948] col. 883), talks of a "Randordnung der Dogmen" and suggests, as an aid in making progress toward doctrinal unity, the distinction between *Grundlehren* and *peripherische Lehren*. The closest approximation to the phrase "hierarchy of truths" at this time, and hence one may say its first use, seems to be found in E. Charlier, *Essai sur le problème théologique* (Thuillies: Bibliothèque Orientations, 1938) 126: "Il y a donc comme une hiérarchie dans les vérités de la foi." Incidentally, this book, along with M. D. Chenu's *Une école de théologie: Le Saulchoir* (Kain: Le Saulchoir, 1937), was placed on the index of forbidden books in 1942 (see *AAS* 34 [1942] 37, 148).

already exists and the diversity which yet remains between Christians.[4] Almost a year after Pangrazio's speech, *Unitatis redintegratio* was approved by the Council bishops, including the following sentence, which had been added at the instigation of Cardinal Koenig: "When comparing doctrines with one another, they [Catholic theologians] should remember that in Catholic doctrine there exists an order or 'hierarchy' of truths, since they vary in their relation to the foundation of the Christian faith."[5]

The hierarchy of truths was hailed with much enthusiasm immediately after Vatican II. In an often-cited comment, Oscar Cullmann went so far as to call it the most revolutionary passage of the entire Council.[6] But it was also clear right from the start that the hierarchy of truths required a good deal more elaboration. To begin with, how is the very word "hierarchy" to be understood? Several spatial images come to mind: linear (the highpoint in a continuum), circular (the center of concentric circles), organic (the heart or kernel enlivening the whole), and structural (the basis or foundation upon which all rests). Moreover, the criterion for ordering truths was said to consist in their diverse connection to the foundation of the Christian faith ("cum diversus sit earum nexus cum fundamento fidei christianae"). Exactly what is this "foundation of the Christian faith"? And how does one show the various ways in which different truths are connected with this foundation? Furthermore, what ecumenical significance devolves from the fact that a particular truth is more or less tightly bound to the foundation? Might less important truths be of insufficient weight to be genuinely Church-divisive? These and other questions stood in need of an answer.[7] The hierarchy of truths, while it resonated well with much in the Christian tradition, was clearly a new expression ("volliges Neuland" according to H. Mühlen) in need of further study and clarification.[8]

---

[4] A. Pangrazio, "The Mystery of the History of the Church," in H. Kung, Y. Congar, and D. O'Hanlon, *Council Speeches of Vatican II* (New York: Paulist, 1964) 191. The original text of this speech can be found in *Acta synodalia Sacrosancti Concilii Oecumenici Vaticani II* 2, Pars 6 (Rome: Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis, 1973) 32–35.

[5] In Austin Flannery, O.P., ed., *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post-Conciliar Documents* (Northport: Costello, 1975) 462. For Cardinal Koenig's connection to this text, see George Tavard, "*Hierarchia veritatum*: A Preliminary Investigation," *TS* 32 (1971) 279.

[6] In "Comments on the Decree on Ecumenism," *Ecumenical Review* 17 (1965) 93–94: "I consider this passage the most revolutionary to be found, not only in the schema de oecumenismo but in any of the schemas of the present council."

[7] The need for further clarification of the hierarchy of truths is mentioned by many writers. J. M. R. Tillard lists several points which pertain specifically to the Roman Catholic estimation of its doctrine in light of the hierarchy of truths, in his "Oecuménisme et Eglise catholique: Les vingt ans du décret sur l'oecuménisme," *NRT* 107 (1985) 56.

[8] H. Muhlen, "Die Lehre des Vaticanum II uber die 'hierarchia veritatum' und ihre Bedeutung fur den okumenischen Dialog," *Theologie und Glaube* 57 (1966) 316.

A number of recent comments, now more than 20 years after the close of the Council, suggest that little progress has been made so far, or at least that much remains to be done. In his review of Roman Catholic ecumenism during the postconciliar period, J. M. R. Tillard called the hierarchy of truths one of the Council's most promising phrases, adding, "However, one is forced to report that, aside from a few articles, the subject has hardly been looked into."[9] In October of the same year (1985), the Joint Working Group of the World Council of Churches and the Roman Catholic Church, "in response to an initiative of the late Dr. Visser't Hooft in conversation with Pope John Paul II," encouraged deeper exploration of this same topic.[10] In 1986, Dr. Emilio Castro, secretary general of the World Council of Churches, reaffirmed the importance of this theme for the current work of Faith and Order toward a "Common Expression of the Apostolic Faith."[11]

Such recent calls for additional exploration of the hierarchy of truths should not obscure the fact that this tantalizing phrase has already generated over 30 titles by theologians during the past 20 years.[12] The aim of the present article is to prepare for future discussion of the hierarchy of truths by reviewing this body of literature. A first section will synopsize these texts so as to provide a sense of each one as an integral and unique contribution. A second section will briefly summarize the principal themes which have so far emerged in the literature about the hierarchy of truths.

SYNOPSIS OF THE LITERATURE

Heribert Mühlen's "Die Lehre des Vaticanum II. über die *Hierarchia veritatum* und ihre Bedeutung für den ökumenischen Dialog" was the first and has remained one of the most influential postconciliar discussions of the hierarchy of truths.[13] Mühlen's 33-page article is divided along three lines. First he considers the expression as it appeared during the Council. Vatican II's teaching is but a further specification of Vatican I's doctrine that the mysteries of the faith are connected with one another

---

[9] Tillard, "Oecuménisme" 56.

[10] See *Information Service* of the Secretariat for the Promotion of Christian Unity, no. 59 (1985 [iii–iv]) 41.

[11] E. Castro, "Le rôle de Foi et Constitution dans la situation oecuménique présente," *Istina* 31 (1986) 142. See also G. Vandervelde, "BEM and the Quest for 'The Common Expression of the Apostolic Faith,'" *Ecumenical Trends* 15 (1986) 173.

[12] The most complete bibliography to appear on this topic is that of Henk Witte, "*Alnaargelang hun band met het fundament van het christelijk geloof verschillend is*": *Wording en verwerking van de uitspraak over de 'hierarchie' van waarheden van Vaticanum II* (Tilburg: Tilburg Univ., 1986) 439–41. See also Y. Congar, *Diversity and Communion* (London: SCM, 1984) 212.

[13] *Theologie und Glaube* 57 (1966) 303–35.

and with the final end of humankind (DS 3016). Archbishop Pangrazio's speech introducing the hierarchy of truths emphasized that truths are not all of the same *weight*, even though they must be believed "with the same divine faith." Mühlen wonders if the difference in weight might not imply a difference in the obligation to believe. He recalls the scholastic distinction between explicit and implicit faith as a precedent that some truths are of such weight that they must be explicitly believed, while an implicit faith suffices for others less weighty.

Mühlen's second section attempts to interpret the hierarchy of truths according to three themes. First, Scripture seems to give various weights to various Christian truths. The Johannine "I am" statements show that the very person of Jesus and the acceptance of that person constitutes the heart of the gospel. How one relates to the person of Jesus Christ is of eternal "life and death" significance. The weight of individual Christian truths varies to the extent that a truth is more or less closely related to the person of Jesus. To this biblical reflection Mühlen adds a consideration of St. Thomas' distinction between articles of faith which are such either *secundum se* or *in ordine ad alia*. The difference between such articles lies not in their respective contents, but rather in that the former is the *veritas prima*, the ungraspable formal horizon which is the condition for the possibility of grasping particular truths. Thus Mühlen interprets the hierarchy of truths in a transcendental fashion. Finally, he uses Karl Rahner's study of the Christian concept of mystery to argue that there are only three basic mysteries: the Trinity, the Incarnation, and grace.[14]

Mühlen's longest and final section elaborates consequences of the hierarchy of truths for ecumenical dialogue. First of all, the hierarchy of truths must be related to several exercises of teaching authority over the past century. When, on the basis of the Orthodox belief about the priesthood and the Eucharist, the bishops at Vatican II opened the possibility of intercommunion with them without requesting a formal, explicit confession of papal infallibility, the bishops implied that truths about the priesthood and the Eucharist are more important than the truth of papal infallibility, at least when it is a question of that common faith necessary for the sharing of the Eucharist. Next Mühlen considers the Mariological doctrines of the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption in light of the hierarchy of truths. It is clear that these Mariological doctrines have more the character of a solemn definition of faith than, for example, *Lumen gentium*'s doctrine of the visible and spiritual nature of the Church. The Immaculate Conception and As-

[14] Karl Rahner, "The Concept of Mystery in Catholic Theology," *Theological Investigations* 4 (Baltimore: Helicon, 1966) 36–73.

sumption are higher in their degree of certainty (*Gewissheitsgrade*) but probably lower on the hierarchy of truths than an ecumenical council's teaching about the nature of the Church (328–29). This highlights the need to expound all Christian truths in terms of the central truths. Furthermore, it can be asked whether it is really of life-and-death importance that a person might not explicitly acknowledge these Marian dogmas. Mühlen suggests that the anathemas might be lifted from these dogmas as an ecumenical gesture which would not in any way deny them but would more clearly indicate their place on the hierarchy of truths.

Mühlen closes with a reflection on the relationship between the hierarchy of truths and the act of faith. Since faith is not just intellectual and voluntary but also affective, it will have grades of intensity depending upon whether it is focused on a more weighty or less weighty truth. True indifferentism consists in treating all truths as if there were no differences between them (335).

Mühlen's article was very well received and was cited often and appreciatively by those studies which were later to appear. His transcendental interpretation of the *veritas prima* seemed to fall by the wayside and indeed does not prove to be particularly helpful, since it makes the most important truth no particular truth at all, but rather the condition for the possibility of grasping any such truth. In other parts of his article, however, Mühlen does order particular truths according to their contents. This "objective" rationale for ordering truths, as well as the impact of such an order upon the subject's act of faith, are among the most important of Mühlen's enduring contributions to the discussion of the hierarchy of truths.

Wolfgang Dietzfelbinger's "Die Hierarchie der Wahrheiten," after quoting the pertinent conciliar texts surrounding this phrase, sees it as the furthest advance so far in the development of ecumenism within the Roman Catholic Church.[15] From a kind yet firm call to "return to the fold," Catholic teaching began to acknowledge elements of grace within the other Churches (620–21). With the hierarchy of truths, the Catholic Church re-evaluates itself, recognizing that all is not of equal weight or importance. The hierarchy of truths has a hermeneutical role to play— its purpose is not to separate nonnegotiable fundamental articles from optional nonfundamental articles of faith. Rather it interprets and brings perspective into the whole body of truths. One should not expect quick unity from this teaching; one should expect, rather, deeper understanding both of the divisions and of the agreements among Christians.

In 1968, the Lutheran pastor Ulrich Valeske published his *Hierarchia*

---

[15] In J. C. Hampe, ed., *Die Autorität der Freiheit* (Munich: Kösel, 1967) 619–25.

veritatum: Theologiegeschichtliche Hintergründe und mögliche Konsequenzen eines Hinweises im Oekumenismusdekret des II. Vaticanischen Konzils zum zwischenkirchlichen Gespräch.[16] This was the first book devoted to the hierarchy of truths. Valeske emphasizes in the Preface that his aim is to give a broad overview of this concept by presenting conciliar and postconciliar comments about it along with its general background in the history of Catholic and Protestant theology. He notes that such a broad overview would need to be complemented by further studies, more restricted in scope and focusing on one or another relevant author or aspect of the topic (11).

Valeske's first chapter outlines the conciliar discussion and postconciliar interpretation of the hierarchy of truths. He presents the thoughts of three Council fathers as relating to the hierarchy of truths (Cardinal Bea, Archbishop Pangrazio, and Cardinal Jaeger) and suggests four theologians as providing the proximate theological background to the teaching (Congar, Dumont, K. Rahner, and Schmaus). In particular, Valeske sees a direct influence of Dumont's "Y a-t-il une hiérarchie de valeur entre les vérités de foi?" upon Pangrazio's speech and upon modus 49, which introduced the hierarchy of truths into *Unitatis redintegratio,* no. 11.[17] Valeske devotes his most extensive treatment in this section, however, to Karl Rahner. While Rahner does not seem to use the precise phrase "hierarchy of truths" until after the Council, the basic idea of concentrating upon the center of the faith is an essential element of his theology, scattered throughout many of his writings. Frequently Rahner repeats the theme that, in the final analysis, Christian faith is directed towards something utterly simple ("nach dem 'ganz Einfachen'" [35]).[18] Consequently, a re-evaluation of Christian dogma must be undertaken so that the many mysteries are considered in light of the one utterly simple Mystery (36–37). Moreover, one must understand the development of dogma not simply as an extensive but also as an intensive development (39–43). Valeske closes his first chapter with a helpful summary of 19 reactions (Old Catholics Aldenhoven and Küppers; Lutherans Nitzschke, Schlink, Katzenback, Kühn, H. Dietzfelbinger, Roux, Bonino, Boegner, Cullmann, Visser't Hooft, and W. Dietzfelbinger; Roman Catholics Betz, Fries, Sartory, McDonagh, Lortz, and Mühlen) to

---

[16] Munich: Claudius, 1968; 208 pages.

[17] Dumont's article is included in his *Les voies de l'unité chrétienne* (Unam sanctam 26; Paris: Cerf, 1954) 157–61.

[18] Valeske lists several texts in which Rahner speaks of the center of Christian faith as "etwas ganz Einfaches": K. Rahner, "Theologie für Heiden," *Sonntagsblatt,* no. 26 (1966) 15; "Über den Versuch eines Aufrisses der Dogmatik," *Schriften zur Theologie* 1 (Einsiedeln: Benziger, 1954) 14; and "Was wurde erreicht?," in Rahner-Cullmann-Fries, ed., *Sind die Erwartungen erfüllt?* (Munich: Hüber, 1966) 31.

the doctrine of the hierarchy of truths at the close of Vatican II. That is the most extensive gathering of such material to be found and gives a good sense for the enthusiasm of the immediate reception of the teaching.

Valeske's second chapter, "The Problem of a Dogmatic Hierarchy of Values among Dogmas in the History of Roman Catholic Theology," searches for precedents of the hierarchy of truths among the Fathers of the Church, scholastic theologians, Catholic humanists, post-Tridentine controversialists, within the censure system of qualifying teachings and errors, in the theology of M. J. Scheeben, and, finally, in view of Pius XI's *Mortalium animos* of 1928. Valeske's research establishes that there is a wide range of traditional material supporting the notion that there exists an order among the truths of the faith. Particularly lengthy is Valeske's discussion of Aquinas and Scheeben. However, the Counter Reformation reaction to Protestantism tended to accent the authoritative aspect of doctrine, an aspect which emphasizes the formal equality of magisterial teachings and therefore downplays an ordering of truths based upon their material content. The hierarchy-of-truths doctrine could help to correct this Counter Reformation tendency.

The third and lengthiest chapter of Valeske's book investigates the notion of "fundamental articles" within the history of the theology of various Christian Churches. What Valeske often calls the "fundamental-articles problematic" refers to the attempt to achieve unity among the splintering Reformation Churches on the basis of a minimum of fundamental articles. While this concept of fundamental articles is not strictly equivalent to the hierarchy of truths, both concern the recognition of degrees of importance among the various truths of the faith. Valeske produces numerous texts showing that Lutheran, Calvinist, and Anglican thought all hold some doctrines to be more fundamental or more necessary than others. Interestingly enough, Valeske's survey of the fate of the idea of fundamental articles turns up several inherent weaknesses with the doctrine. It seems incompatible with an emphasis on the verbal inspiration of Scripture, with an organic view of the doctrines of the faith, or with the formal equivalence of the authority supporting all faith statements (149). In fact, the concept of fundamental articles has by no means gained wholehearted support either among the Reformation Churches or among ecumenists. However, regardless of the difficulties inherent in the traditional doctrine of fundamental articles, the Reformation did tend to stress the importance of the central or fundamental truths of the faith. Vatican II's hierarchy of truths represents a Catholic rapprochement with this Reformation tendency (169).

Valeske's book closes with a chapter entitled "Consequences." The doctrine of the hierarchy of truths represents a shift in approach to

official teaching. The accent passes from the formal to the material aspect of doctrine, from the quantitative to the qualitative, from the relative to the absolute, from the extensive to the intensive, from the centrifugal to the centripetal, from mysteries to mystery, from truths to truth, from the *enuntiabile* to the *res*, from *fides quae creditur* to *fides qua creditur* (171). Christian doctrine is like a treasure in earthen vessels. One should not mistake the treasure for the earthen vessel. Valeske sees a certain vacillation within the postconciliar Catholic Church between a desire for a thorough reform and the willingness to settle for halfway measures, between a historical view of truth and a speculative, timeless understanding of doctrine (172–73). What is needed now is a concentration on the soteriological middle of the Christian faith (179–180). The Roman Catholic Church, moreover, should not require the dogmas of 1854, 1870, and 1950 (which Valeske calls "so profunden Irrlehren") even of its own members, if it wishes to be seen as capable of union ("unionsfähig") with other Churches (184–85). The question of the hierarchy of truths extends beyond the tasks of ecumenical dialogue and Christian unity. It concerns the life question of Christianity—the project of renewing itself on the basis of the center of the gospel, of finding unity within pluriformity and of more perfectly fulfilling its service to the world (187).

While some of Valeske's enthusiastic consequences lack the careful consideration which their topic demands, the bulk of his study provides much valuable data from Vatican II and its immediate aftermath, as well as from the history of theology, which are relevant to the question of the hierarchy of truths. Such a welcome overview is, as Valeske himself noted (11), an invitation for further studies, more refined in scope.

1968 also saw the publication of Piet Schoonenberg's "Historiciteit en interpretatie van het dogma," eight theses about the historicity and interpretation of dogma, the sixth of which is an explanation of the hierarchy of truths.[19] Schoonenberg notes that the hierarchy of truths allows one to distinguish central dogmas from peripheral ones. These differ with respect to content. Central dogmas are "concerned with God in his saving significance for man [and] with man in his relation to God, as this mutual relationship is concentrated in Jesus Christ" (137). Peripheral dogmas fall into three broad categories: Mariological, ecclesiological, and moral. A further distinction differentiates central from peripheral dogmas: "In the central dogmas only the form of expression is historically determined, but in the more peripheral ones, the content is

---

[19] *Tijdschrift voor theologie* 8 (1968) 278–311 (pp. 293–98, on the hierarchy of truths). A condensed English version of this article appears under the title "History and the Interpretation of Dogma," *Theology Digest* 18 (1970) 132–43. Page numbers in the text are taken from the English version.

too." The balance of Schoonenberg's sixth thesis consists in an illustration of the content-relativity of the peripheral dogmas. While not all might endorse his second principle for differentiating central and peripheral dogmas (namely, that they are historically relative with regard to form and content in differing ways), Schoonenberg's article does for the first time highlight an employment of the hierarchy of truths which is not, strictly speaking, ecumenical. The hierarchy of truths is a hermeneutical tool for reinterpreting the body of Christian doctrine.

Aloys Klein's short "Hierarchia veritatum" of the following year reviews Valeske's book, praising it for showing in a convincing way that the hierarchy of truths represents a wide-ranging shift on the part of the Catholic Church toward concentration upon the center of its doctrinal teaching.[20] Such a shift will both help the Catholic Church to be renewed on the basis of the middle of the gospel as well as facilitate the path toward unity with other Christians (424).

1969 also saw the publication of Mühlen's second article on the hierarchy of truths: "Die Bedeutung der Differenz zwischen Zentraldogmen und Randdogmen für den ökumenischen Dialog: Zur Lehre des Zweiten Vatikanischen Konzils von der *hierarchia veritatum*."[21] At the beginning of this text Mühlen states his intention to widen and rework the material he had presented three years earlier (191). Aside from a few new preliminary remarks, this article is much the same in both outline and content as his earlier study.

During the 1970s 19 different titles containing the phrase "hierarchy of truths" were published by theologians. Some of these brought fresh data into the discussion; others summarized earlier contributions. George Tavard's "'Hierarchia veritatum': A Preliminary Investigation" does both.[22] This rich, six-part article was the first to appear in the decade. In treating the Council itself, Tavard produces the modus of Cardinal Koenig which added the sentence "In comparandis doctrinis . . ." to *UR*, no. 11, pointing out in particular several phrases which were eliminated when the modus was integrated into the decree. The omitted phrases more explicitly identified the "fundamentum fidei christianae" as "Jesus Christ the Word Incarnate for our salvation" and stated that some truths pertained to the order of the end, others to the order of the means of salvation. Tavard does not indicate why such phrases were omitted. He does include, however, Koenig's rationale for inserting the sentence about the hierarchy of truths, i.e. that, while all truths are believed with the

[20] A. Klein, "Hierarchia veritatum," *Catholica* 23 (1969) 421–24.

[21] In J. L. Leuba and H. Stirnimann, ed., *Freiheit in der Begegnung: Festgabe Otto Karrer* (Frankfurt: J. Knecht, 1969) 191–227.

[22] *TS* 32 (1971) 278–89.

same divine faith, a truer picture of unity and disunity among Christians will be achieved when truths are weighed and not simply enumerated. For Christian truths have different weights, depending upon their connection with the history of salvation and the mystery of Christ (280).

Next Tavard produces comments made by the Secretariat for the Promotion of Christian Unity about the hierarchy of truths in two documents of 1970: the "Directory concerning Ecumenical Matters: Part Two, Ecumenism in Higher Education," no. 74, and the "Reflections and Suggestions concerning Ecumenical Dialogue," IV, 4, b.[23] While acknowledging that all doctrines "demand a due assent of faith" the "Directory" asserts that not all truths occupy the same principal place in the mystery revealed by Christ and encourages a certain discrimination on the part of students when considering doctrine. The "Reflections" imply not only a hierarchy of teachings but also a lived hierarchy; they furthermore comment on the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception in reference to other doctrines. After recounting the references in the Anglican–Roman Catholic Malta Report (which proposes as a particular matter for dialogue the possible resonance between the hierarchy of truths and traditional Anglican thought about "fundamental articles"), Tavard sketches four major commentaries on *Unitatis redintegratio* (Jaeger, Leeming, Thils, and Feiner) with regard to their treatment of the hierarchy of truths. A brief look into the past then comments on precedents for the hierarchy of truths in Ockham, Luther, Melchior Cano, the Catechism of the Council of Trent, Cardinal Jacques Davy du Perron, and C. Davenport. Finally, Tavard reflects on five perspectives opened up by the hierarchy of truths: the material and formal aspects of doctrine, doctrines pertaining to the end and to the means of salvation, lived hierarchy as distinct from doctrinal hierarchy of truths, the not-formally-defined character of some of the most essential doctrines, and the distinction between the deposit of faith and its historically conditioned expression. Tavard's article is clearly a very rich introduction to this topic, combining conciliar, postconciliar, and historical data with systematic reflections.

In the same year appeared H. Schützeichel's "Das hierarchische Denken in der Theologie," which located three types of "hierarchical thinking" in the course of Christian theology.[24] The first appeared with Pseudo-Dionysius, the *doctor hierarchicus*, who coined the word "hierarchy" to express his soteriological interpretation of reality. A second use of the word "hierarchy" came to the fore in the Late Middle Ages, where the term was used in connection with ecclesial office. Finally, after the Second World War Congar and Dumont used "hierarchy" to describe an

---

[23] These texts may be found in Flannery, *Vatican Council II* 522 and 545, respectively.
[24] *Catholica* 25 (1971) 90–111.

order among the truths of the faith.

Schützeichel's second section presents very many New Testament texts which seem to support the idea of a hierarchy among Christian truths. These range from proclamations of Jesus' death and resurrection (such as 1 Cor 15:3-11 and the speeches in Acts) to Trinitarian formulae, from the declaration that love is the greatest commandment (1 Cor 13; Mk 12:28–34) to statements about what is necessary for salvation (Heb 11:6; Rom 10:9), and many other texts. A final section discusses the hierarchy of truths as a *Gestaltungsprinzip* for all of theology, elaborating how a pattern among truths can be discerned in fundamental, dogmatic, moral, liturgical, and pastoral theology.

Schützeichel's article approaches the hierarchy of truths with fresh material not previously put forth. His application of it to the branches of theology is unique. Finally, his documentation is superb, many footnotes offering short bibliographies of such important topics as postconciliar reactions to the hierarchy of truths (notes 15 and 16) and the related topic of fashioning a short formula of the faith (notes 101 and 103).

Finally in 1971 appeared Dieter Froitzheim's short "Logische Vorüberlegungen zum Thema 'Hierarchie der Wahrheiten.'"[25] This is an attempt to cast the doctrine of the hierarchy of truths into logical terms. Froitzheim puts it this way: For all sentences x and y, if x and y are sentences of Catholic teaching, then either x is higher in rank than y, or y is higher in rank than x, or x and y are equal in rank (423). What criterion determines which sentence is higher? It is the criterion of being more or less tightly bound to the foundation of the Christian faith, which foundation is the person of Jesus Christ himself (424). All Christian statements are either statements strictly concerned with Christ (*JC-Sätze*) or derivative from such statements (*F'JC-Sätze*); in each case there are various grades. Froitzheim thus shows that, logically speaking, the hierarchy of truths is not a matter of demoting some truths, but rather concerns more carefully identifying the exact content of faith statements.

The next year Josef Weismayer opened his contribution to the discussion about the hierarchy of truths by asking whether the New Testament posed such a hierarchy.[26] The answer is yes, according to Weismayer, who discerns within the acclamations, hymns, and baptismal instructions of the New Testament an ultimate focusing on the death and resurrection

---

[25] *Stimmen der Zeit* 188 (1971) 422–25.

[26] "Verkündigung aus der Mitte: Ein Beitrag zur Problematik einer Hierarchie der Wahrheiten," in *Sacerdos et Pastor: Festschrift F. Loidl* (Vienna: Wiener-Dom, 1972) 139–57.

of Christ as the center of all Christian truth. Beyond these, the speeches of Acts as well as the very content of the Gospels represent a kind of hierarchy of truths in that they present against their concrete historical setting (*Heilssituation*) the fundamental deeds (*Heilsgeschehen*) which Christianity claims (*Heilsanspruch*) to be salvific (143).

Weismayer's second section provides the most direct consideration of the hierarchy of truths from the perspective of the development of creeds. He notes a certain pluriformity in symbols during the first centuries of Church life, while the whole rationale for expressing the faith in the form of a creed is a continuation of the scriptural practice of focusing upon the central Christian truths. Weismayer next turns to Vatican II's doctrine of the hierarchy of truths, relating comments about it by Cullmann, Pangrazio, Mühlen, and Valeske as well as relevant texts from Vatican I and from *Mortalium animos*. He points out several mistaken ways of viewing the hierarchy of truths, i.e. as a means of reducing doctrines to a minimum and as a way of separating binding from non-binding doctrines. Instead, the hierarchy of truths should be seen in light of Vatican II's overarching view of revelation and of faith. This conception accents the personal and mysterious nature of revelation: revelation is in the first place not a teaching but the saving act of God in Christ. Weismayer agrees with Rahner's reduction of all Christian mysteries to three, and proposes that each Christian text be submitted to a Christological and eschatological reduction so as to be considered from a truer perspective. The unity of the faith will admit a certain pluralism of expression; a single truth is well known only in light of the whole.

In concluding, Weismayer says that today one must preach out of the *middle* of the Christian truth, a task which is facilitated by the doctrine of the hierarchy of truths. This is in no way to sweep more peripheral doctrines off the table. Weismayer's focus on Scripture, creeds, and Vatican II's view of revelation and faith provides fresh impetus for further progress in elaborating the hierarchy of truths.

Patrick O'Connell's "Hierarchy of Truths," a paper presented to the Jesuit Society of Ecumenists in Dublin in 1972, introduces the topic by noting that it is related both to one's conception of revelation and the development of dogma as well as to the perennial pastoral task of translating traditional theology into contemporary thought-forms.[27] O'Connell's reflections follow three steps. First he surveys post-Vatican II theological writings about the topic, commenting on six authors (Mühlen, Rahner, Valeske, Lindbeck, Schoonenberg, and Richard [88–107]). Most noteworthy here is O'Connell's appreciative summary and

[27] In P. S. de Achutegui, ed., *Cardinal Bea Studies* 2: *The Dublin Papers* (Manila: Ateneo Univ., 1972) 83–117.

evaluation of Mühlen ("the most comprehensive article on the 'hierarchy of truths' to appear since Vatican II" [88]). O'Connell does, however, take exception to Mühlen's distinction "between different kinds of acts of faith, depending on the centrality or distance from the centre of the truth which is affirmed in a particular act of faith" (95). Is not one "totally engaged" in any act of faith? O'Connell's report of Valeske's book focuses on the short final chapter in which Valeske turns aside from the task of recounting the views of others and most clearly speaks his own mind. According to O'Connell, Valeske paints a rather dim picture of the genuineness of Catholic resolve for reform and judges too harshly the Catholic doctrines of 1854, 1870, and 1950 (99). O'Connell's briefer comments about Rahner, Lindbeck, Schoonenberg, and Richard focus more upon the nature of doctrine as such, which he sees as a necessary prolegomenon to a complete working-out of the hierarchy of truths.

The second section of O'Connell's paper moves to a consideration of earlier solutions of similar problems. Of several important possible precedents, two seem particularly important. First, O'Connell looks at those sections from St. Thomas where some articles of faith are said to be so *secundum se* while others are so only *in ordine ad alia*. Both Mühlen and Valeske, as well as many later commentators, use this distinction to enlist Aquinas as a historical support for the contention that there is an order or hierarchy among the truths of the faith. O'Connell examines Aquinas' explicit examples of such *in ordine ad alia* truths, finding them to include such truths as that Abraham had two sons and that the bones of Elisha could raise the dead. Surely, O'Connell surmises, St. Thomas would not put the recent Mariological or papal definitions on the same plane as such biblical incidentals (108). O'Connell concludes: "But our problem of 'hierarchy of truths' is not at the heart of his distinction between truths which demand belief '*per se*' and others which are believed '*in ordine ad alia*.' We may find his distinction and his terminology useful, but he has not considered our modern problem" (108-9).

Secondly, O'Connell reproduces that part of Pius XI's *Mortalium animos* which reflects the distinction between fundamental and nonfundamental articles. Countering Valeske's "harsh" judgment of Pius XI, O'Connell notes that the main point of *Mortalium animos* was to deal with the obligation one has to believe all truths revealed by God. Pius XI, he maintains, would have accepted all that Scheeben had taught in the previous century concerning the ordering of Christian truths in terms of their respective relationships to the central mystery of Christ and the Trinity (111).

In a short concluding section O'Connell notes a general consensus

about the principal mysteries and states that it is the other, less central truths which divide. The hierarchy of truths should be brought to bear upon the life of the Church so as to foster a better sense of perspective and to correct the exaggerated emphasis upon some lesser truths. Ecclesiologically, a certain modesty should consider various truths about papal primacy and infallibility within the perspective of their carefully determined limits and against the broader horizon of the much more fundamental Christological and Trinitarian truths (113). If what already unites Christians in faith is of such greater weight than what divides, perhaps that intercommunion which is already permitted can be widened and serve as a means to yet greater unity (115).

On the whole, O'Connell's article displays a healthy regard for various issues at stake in working out the meaning of the hierarchy of truths, i.e. the meaning of revelation, of doctrine and its development, and so forth. He often refers to the hierarchy of truths as a problematic phrase, not as if it were an unfortunate expression but as a concept which calls for further work (86–87, 97, 107, and 111). Finally, his review of other theologians about this topic is critical, especially in terms of Mühlen's *degrees* of faith intensity, Valeske's presentation of *Mortalium animos*, and the reference to Aquinas by both of these theologians.

In October of 1972 Edmund Schlink delivered a lecture at the Tantur Ecumenical Institute near Jerusalem which would be published the following year under the title "Die 'Hierarchie der Wahrheiten' und die Einigung der Kirchen."[28] Schlink's introduction to this fascinating lecture displays a sense for the many unanswered questions surrounding the hierarchy of truths. It is more a task for future work than a ready-made solution (28). In a first section, Schlink explores the biblical notion of truth. The New Testament view of truth builds upon that of the Old Testament, which connotes more a reality than an expression. It is the reality of God's fidelity, now made definitive in the death and resurrection of Christ. This truth is received on the part of human beings in thanks to God; it is handed on and professed to others.

When one compares Vatican II's "hierarchy of truths" to this New Testament notion of truth, a number of differences come to the fore. *Unitatis redintegratio,* no. 11, speaks of truths; truth in the plural is foreign to the Scriptures. *Unitatis redintegratio* is concerned with teachings; the Scriptures are concerned primarily with the event of the self-revelation of God. Furthermore, the hierarchy of truths is addressing the question of *defined* dogmas, binding upon all believers. Schlink asks: Does the New Testament propose sentences which are binding upon all

[28] In Ecumenical Institute for Advanced Theological Studies, *Yearbook 1972–1973* (Jerusalem: Tantur, 1973) 27–42.

believers? Doubtless it does. But these are mainly acclamations about the central facts of Jesus' life and identity, the *Sitz im Leben* of which is often a liturgical gathering. The New Testament does not contain carefully-formed conceptualizations or fixed expressions, but rather proclamations resting fundamentally upon a Christological confession of faith.

More specified and carefully-conceived dogmas developed because of a shift in perspective away from the proclamatory outlook of the New Testament toward some foreign preoccupation. Thus, for example, the doctrine of grace did not rest at such proclamations of divine and human responsibility which one finds in Phil 2:13. Instead, theologians disputed about the precise divine and human aspects of salvation and sanctification to the extent that the "Molinist-Thomist" controversy was terminated only by a ban on further discussion (37). Furthermore, the Western Church tended to seek unity by means of further binding definitions, with the result that Church divisions of a new nature arose. Unlike the divisions sparked by Arius or Marcion, which had a strictly Christological or Trinitarian character, now Church divisions could be based upon less fundamental truths (38).

Schlink ends his lecture with four conclusions and 12 consequences. His conclusions state that the New Testament conceives of truth fundamentally as a reality—the salvation act of God in Christ—and not as a proposition. Christians are baptized into the mission to proclaim this truth and must have the freedom to express it in a variety of ways. Schlink lists the following among the methodological consequences of his reflections. Dogmas are historical and must be so considered. The dogmas of separated Churches should not be directly compared but should be traced back to the original kerygma and only then be compared as to their expressiveness of that message. Content consequences include the following. The basic Christian truth is God's act of salvation in history. The confession of Christ as that developed into the Christological and Trinitarian dogmas is the middle and center of all faith expressions. Statements which depart from a context of thanking, witnessing, confessing, and administering the sacraments are of lesser rank, as are statements which reduce the rich salvation act to a single biblical or philosophical expression. The more distant from the middle and focused on details a dogma is, the less generally can it claim an overall validity. One should compare the doctrines of various Churches in light of these points. Finally, the consequences this has for Christian unity are the need for pluriformity of expression and the need for proper perspective which does not equate all truths.

Schlink's contrast of biblical truth with the development of a plurality of dogmas provides a good stimulus for rethinking the development of

doctrine within the life of the Church. One might ask whether he betrays a bias against the further precisioning of the faith into detailed conceptualizations. Does the lack of such detail in the New Testament render later questions for precision illegitimate? Schlink's various consequences appear almost as principles for applying the notion of the hierarchy of truths to the body of Christian doctrines. That constitutes a genuine step forward in the discussion of this topic.

Yves Congar's "On the 'Hierarchia veritatum'" of 1973, after quoting the relevant text of *Unitatis redintegratio*, no. 11, begins with an interesting historical note:

Those who might be surprised at this idea, and deem it new or revolutionary, would merely show that they are little familiar with the most traditional Catholic thought. The present paper constitutes the rewriting of a lecture, which I gave on the occasion of the Universal Week of Prayer for Christian Unity on January 24, 1946, with Nuncio Mgr. A. Roncalli presiding. Its title was "The Perspective of Values in Revelation." The purpose and arrangement of the lecture I explained in these words: "I shall try to show (1) that there are ranks, a certain hierarchy of value and importance in Revelation and in Dogma, which expresses it; (2) that one must, however, avoid making these ranks or this hierarchy the basis of factionalism."[29]

Congar points to the Fathers of the Church as supporting a hierarchy of truths in that they approached Christian truth synthetically, that is, always organically relating particular truths to the center of the Christian mystery (411). He goes on to list ten texts where Aquinas differentiates truths of faith which are such *directe, per se* from other derived truths which are truths of the faith *indirecte, in ordine ad alia.* Congar refers to studies by himself and others which demonstrate that St. Thomas firmly supported the idea that there exists a hierarchical order among the truths of the faith (411). Such an order was partially confirmed by Vatican I's suggestion that theologians consider the relationship which Christian mysteries have among themselves and with the ultimate end of humanity.

Congar then presents the principal framework which governs his understanding of the hierarchy of truths, that is, the distinction between the *quod* or material content of a doctrine and the *quo* or formal authority pronouncing that doctrine. From its origin, Reformation theology has tended to emphasize the *quod*, calling for a return in emphasis to what is central and essential to the gospel message. Examples of such an emphasis are discernible in Luther's writings and in the concept of

[29] In D. Neiman and M. Schatkin, ed., *The History of the Early Church: Essays in Honor of G. V. Florovsky* (Orientalia christiana analecta 195; Rome: Pont. Inst. Studiorum Orientalium, 1973) 409–20, at 410.

"fundamental articles." Pius XI's *Mortalium animos* rejected the fundamental-articles idea because it seemed to leave no place either for the development of doctrine or for the legitimate, ongoing role of the living magisterium. However, within the framework of an ecclesiology which would recognize these two values, there is a valid sense in which some doctrines are more fundamental than others, as the long tradition of considering some truths to be "necessary for salvation" attests (415).

Catholic theology since the time of the Reformation, on the other hand, has increasingly emphasized the *quo* of doctrine, the formal authority of the one teaching it. Who said it (*qua auctoritate*) became more important than what was said (*quid dicitur* [416]). There occurred a shift also with regard to the formal motive of faith: from the *veritas prima* of St. Thomas to the *auctoritas Dei revelantis* of more recent theology. From the perspective of the authority supporting revealed doctrines, there is a certain equality; all are equally binding. But considered from the perspective of the *quod* or material content of doctrines, no one can deny that there is a center, what St. Paul calls the "mystery of Christ" (417). For Congar, Christian truth is an organic totality. To cut off any truth is to violate the whole, like amputating a part from a living organism.

Congar considers the hierarchy of truths from the framework of yet another distinction. Truth is grasped about some *object* by some *subject*. He suggests that there may be a hierarchy of truths with regard to the object known and with regard to the knowing subject. The latter hierarchy would seek to account for the differences in perception and expression of Christian truth on the part of different subjects in diverse times and places. The hierarchy of truths is of interest to an ecclesiology of communion which would seek to explain the unity of diverse subjects in terms of a more or less perfect communion in the truth of the faith. Such an ecclesiology of communion is the basis of the ecumenism of Vatican II (419).

Congar closes his presentation by listing various other hierarchies (aside from that among dogmas of the faith) which need to be developed: hierarchies of ethical truths, of writings within Scripture, of traditions, of ecumenical councils, of sacraments, and of ministries. Congar employs his rich sense of Christian tradition to support the notion that there exists a hierarchy of truths. His distinctions between the *quod* and the *quo* of doctrines and between objective and subjective perspectives on the hierarchy of truths point the way toward further clarification of this idea. Also, his discussion of *Mortalium animos* and of the organic unity of Christian truths raises the prospect of, and indeed shows the possibilities for, avoiding some of the difficulties which arose in the case of the notion of fundamental articles.

Also in 1973 Carlos Cardona published his study "La 'Jerarchia de las verdades' segun el Concilio Vatican II y el orden de la real."[30] Cardona begins by outlining the "terms of the problem," that is, the expression itself at the Council, its context (the Church's responsibility to present its whole faith clearly), its precedent (in the writing of C. Dumont), and its application (fraught with the danger of devolving into a false irenicism or a watering down of revealed truth). Cardona proceeds to the second and major section of his article, "An Attempt at an Interpretation." Following several general presuppositions about the indispensable and necessary role of the magisterium in handing on revealed truths, Cardona states that faith is necessary for the grasping of these truths and for recognizing the order inherent among them (149–51). He asserts that revealed truth is never a deduction from what is known through reason. Rather, it is known through an obedient faith to the authority of God. He then relates the truth known in faith to truth as such. Truth is always in a way secondary to reality, insofar as it signifies the intellect's adequation to reality. As such, truth does not admit of being "more" or "less" (154). One either knows reality or one does not. In considering any order among the truths, it is most important to realize that one must accept the *totality* of what God reveals and that one must do so because of the authority of God who reveals.

Cardona seems to worry that the hierarchy of truths could jeopardize what he feels is all-important: the authority of God as underlying revelation. He refers to many official documents, both from Vatican II and especially from 20th-century popes, to contextualize the hierarchy of truths. Most often these documents were against false irenicism. More than any other study to that point in time, Cardona's text seeks to relate the hierarchy of truths to Thomist philosophical conceptions of truth and theological conceptions of revelation and faith. However, one is left with the impression that Cardona mistrusts the teaching on the hierarchy of truths, fearful that it could lead to an antiauthoritarian view of revealed truth.

John Ford's short encyclopedia notice "The Hierarchy of Truths" appeared in the 1974 supplement to the *New Catholic Encyclopedia*.[31] He briefly summarizes the conciliar data along with the later clarifications made by the Secretariat for the Promotion of Christian Unity in 1970. Next Ford notes the emergence of various hierarchies of truth, based upon various criteria for establishing such hierarchies: truth's explicitness in Scripture or Church teaching, its necessity for salvation, its role

---

[30] In *Los movimentos teológicos secularizantes* (Madrid: B.A.C., 1973) 143–63.
[31] *New Catholic Encyclopedia* 16: *Supplement, 1967–1974* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1974) 208.

in the belief system of individual believers, and so forth.

In 1975 Edmund Schlink's Tantur lecture was published for a second time in the more accessible *Kerygma und Dogma.*[32] That same year an article by Vicenzo Benassi appeared with the title "Per una collocazione teologica del dogma mariano: Annotazioni su 'Unitatis redintegratio, 11 c,' " attempting to relate the hierarchy of truths to Marian dogmas.[33] Benassi sees the hierarchy of truths as a common-sense step within Catholic ecumenism. The urgency of unity can justify a postponement of discussion of some less-essential doctrines. Also, Mariological doctrine can be a means toward greater unity, because Marian devotion and teaching manifest in a particularly clear way the visible face of the Catholic Church. Christians from other Churches will see this and be attracted by it. This is a folksy article, using homespun examples for the purpose of assuaging fears that the hierarchy of truths will leave Mary on the outside of Catholic doctrine.

In the following year three more articles focused on Marian doctrines in relation to the hierarchy of truths. Frederick Jelly's "Marian Dogmas within Vatican II's Hierarchy of Truths" begins by noting that the very meaning of this conciliar expression "is far from being precisely determined."[34] Jelly's first major section presents a very fine integration of thoughts from Pangrazio, Feiner, Congar, Rahner, Schillebeeckx, and Mascall relevant to the hierarchy of truths. He nicely summarizes his interpretation in seven points:

1) The "foundation of the Christian faith" is the central mystery of the triune God revealed in the incarnate Word, our Redeemer; 2) these revealed truths or articles of faith are on the level of the goal of our salvation in Christ, those we hope to see in glory; 3) the peripheral truths are no less true or revealed; 4) such revealed truths are on the level of the means toward our perfect salvation in eternal life; 5) they vary in this 'hierarchy' of importance, not by reason of theological notes as defined dogmas, etc., but through the closeness of their connection with the "foundation of the Christian faith"; 6) their main value is in illuminating the central mystery of Christianity as well as being transparent to its depth in daily life; 7) these peripheral truths are dependent upon and derived from the central mystery through a development in the Church's living Tradition of faith, worship, mission etc. which transcends human laws of logic without rejecting the contribution of theological and historical research (28).

The second part of Jelly's study turns to four Marian dogmas: the Theotokos, the virginity of Mary, the Immaculate Conception, and the Assumption. Here Jelly emphasizes the Christological importance of the

---

[32] *Kerygma und Dogma* 21 (1975) 1–12.
[33] *Marianum* 37 (1975) 358–69.
[34] *Marian Studies* 27 (1976) 17–40, at 19.

Theotokos doctrine: to deny it is to commit a Christological error. He goes on to cite R. Laurentin to the effect that the Theotokos doctrine is the most important of the Marian doctrines and that all other Marian doctrines depend upon it (31). He refers to Rahner's discussion of the Immaculate Conception, in which Rahner claims that Marian doctrine is a sign as to how seriously one takes Christological dogmas.

The third and final section of Jelly's article speaks of the ecumenical implications of viewing Marian dogma from within the hierarchy of truths. Here he dialogues with two writers, A. Dulles and E. Yarnold. Dulles proposed that the anathemas to the Marian dogmas of 1854 and 1950 be dropped, partly because it is unthinkable that the Church be divided over relatively obscure and remote doctrines.[35] Jelly responds that, in light of what he had just written in the earlier section, these doctrines should not be thought of as either obscure or remote. They can be shown to be directly dependent upon the most essential doctrines. Yarnold had suggested viewing doctrines from a double perspective, theological and symbolic.[36] The theological level of the dogmas of the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption concerns the efficacy of, and need to co-operate with, God's grace. All must believe this. The question of what actually happened to Jesus' mother pertains to the symbolic level of these dogmas, and here there can be differences of opinion. Jelly suspects that Yarnold's suggestion is reductionistic, reducing these Marian truths to a statement about grace when they actually teach something about the concrete effects of grace in the actual individual who is Jesus' mother.

Jelly's article is helpful for several reasons. It exhibits a sense of the importance of the topic of doctrinal development for an adequate grasp of the hierarchy of truths. A major difficulty with the concept of fundamental articles lay in going back to some idealized, primordial Christianity to locate the fundamentals of the faith, while ignoring the importance of the Church's ongoing penetration into the revealed mystery. Furthermore, discussion of Marian doctrine in terms of the hierarchy of truths often focuses on the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption. By broadening the horizon to include four doctrines, Jelly radically alters the perspective. The Theotokos doctrine, eminently Christological, should provide the framework for an overall view of the place of Marian doctrine in the hierarchy of truths. These, along with Jelly's seven-point summary, are significant contributions to the discussion of this theme.

Later in the same year Jelly offered another article on Mary and the

---

[35] For the statement by A. Dulles, see his "A Proposal To Lift the Anathemas," *Origins* 4/27 (Dec. 26, 1974) 417–21.

[36] See E. J. Yarnold, "Marian Dogmas and Reunion," *Month* 231 (1971) 177–79, at 177.

hierarchy of truths, this time from within the specific context of the theology of St. Thomas Aquinas.[37] After demonstrating the importance of the Theotokos doctrine in St. Thomas' thought, Jelly reflects briefly on Vatican II's hierarchy of truths, noting the double function of the peripheral or less-central truths. Secondary truths shed greater light on, bring to greater clarity, the more central truths. Furthermore, they show the practical application of these central mysteries to our daily existence as believers in the world (226). Finally, Jelly suggests that the hierarchy of truths along with St. Thomas' Mariological orientation points the way for a renewal of systematic Mariology today. Such a renewal will take special care to relate the Marian doctrines both to Christological thought and to the Church as the pilgrim people of God (229).

Finally in 1976 Donald Dietz's "The Hierarchy of Truths about Mary" opens with several reflections about the hierarchy of truths: that it does not concern primarily whether or not a dogma has been formally defined (42), that there may exist both ontological and psychological hierarchies of truths (44), and that parallels to the hierarchy of truths may be found in Aquinas, Luther, Nygren, and Lonergan (46).[38] That Mary is the grace-filled Mother of God is the most important of the Marian doctrines. Dietz devotes the greater part of his article to a presentation of scriptural (49–59) and liturgical (59–63) witnesses to Mary.

Denis Carroll's "Hierarchia veritatum: A Theological and Pastoral Insight of the Second Vatican Council" treats the topic in four steps.[39] First, Carroll recounts the text from Vatican II along with Archbishop Pangrazio's differentiation of truths about the ends and truths about the means of salvation. As Tavard and Ford before him, Carroll includes the references to the hierarchy of truths made in 1970 by the Secretariat for the Promotion of Christian Unity and adds a text from the General Catechetical Directory of 1971. A second section discusses St. Thomas' view of the order among articles of the faith. Carroll includes an often-quoted text from Thomas which states that the act of faith terminates not in a statement but in the reality itself. This serves as a limiting principle on the degree of validity which could pertain to any doctrinal statement about God.

A third step looks into the contemporary significance of the hierarchy of truths, noting its importance for ecumenism, its ability to ground a legitimate pluralism, its usefulness for evangelization, and its herme-

[37] "St. Thomas' Theological Interpretation of the 'Theotokos' and Vatican II's Hierarchy of Truths of Catholic Doctrine," in Tommaso d'Aquino nel suo settimo centenario: Atti del congresso internationale 4 (Naples: D'Auria, 1976) 221–30.
[38] Marian Studies 27 (1976) 41–63.
[39] Irish Theological Quarterly 44 (1977) 125–33.

neutical value for interpreting the faith. Finally, Carroll concludes with some reflections on the need for short formulas of the faith. Following K. Rahner, he notes that a short formula must be easily understandable and existentially engaging. The fact that such a short formula of the faith cannot explicitly confess every truth does not imply that it denies any truth. The hierarchy of truths could help in the development of short formulas of faith, so fulfilling an important contemporary pastoral need. Carroll's study offers a clear, if limited, presentation of the conciliar and scholastic background to the hierarchy of truths, and points out several aspects of its contemporary relevance. As such, it would serve as a fine introduction to the topic.

W. Hryniewicz's 1978 article "La hiérarchie des vérités: Implications d'une idée chrétienne" notes that the hierarchy of truths is basically a hermeneutical principle which, although *Unitatis redintegratio* does not allude to the fact, has deep roots in Scripture and subsequent Church history.[40] After providing a few scriptural and historical precedents behind the notion that there is an order of importance among Christian truths, Hryniewicz moves into a first section exploring the hierarchy of truths as a "principle of ecumenical hermeneutics." Vatican II is correcting the viewpoint that to deny one truth is to reject all truths, states Hryniewicz.[41]

Hryniewicz next presents the *quod/quo* distinction in approaching doctrine, as Congar had earlier done. He also mentions that the hierarchy of truths can avoid the difficulties condemned in *Mortalium animos* and notes Schoonenberg's distinction between the content of a doctrine and its expression. The papacy itself is a good example that the content of doctrines (such as papal primacy) can historically take various forms. There is a hierarchy not only among truths but also among Scriptures, councils, sacraments, and ethical principles. From the subjective, existential side, one neither can nor should believe all doctrines with equal

---

[40] *Irénikon* 51 (1978) 470–91.

[41] If I have understood him correctly, Hryniewicz seems to overstate the point here. It is true that the Council wished to bring greater perspective to the consideration of the body of Christian truths. But Hryniewicz seems to imply that the Council envisioned the denial of some truths. The concern, expressed both in Pangrazio's speech and in the modus introducing the hierarchy of truths into the Decree on Ecumenism, that all truths be accepted "with the same faith" seems to contradict this. This emphasis on the obligation to believe all revealed truths is tied to the nature of revelation as resting upon the authority of God. To reject what God reveals, even a less significant matter, seems inconsistent with the nature of faith as the obedient acceptance of God's gift of self-manifestation. Both Pangrazio (191) and Koenig (see Tavard 279–80) wanted to counteract the suspicion that the hierarchy of truths might mitigate the authority of revelation and the obedience of faith. These were crucial issues in the rejection of fundamental articles by Pius XI in *Mortalium animos* (see Congar, *Diversity and Communion* 118–21).

intensity.

A second section of Hryniewicz's article concerns the hierarchy of truths and the unity of the Church. Doctrine is not a monolithic block. It has a center. Returning to the sources can serve as a corrective process, pruning the tree (to use Scheeben's and Congar's image of doctrine) so that the essential form is not obscured by offshoots. Hryniewicz concludes by noting that the hierarchy of truths initiates a process of reinterpretation. The Church needs a new view of orthodoxy, one that is focused on essentials while at the same time open and dynamic. The accent of Hryniewicz's article lies in viewing the hierarchy of truths as a hermeneutical principle. He expresses a readiness to do away with some doctrines (in employing the image of pruning a tree, which he supports by referring to Urs von Balthasar's *Einfaltungen: Auf Wegen christlicher Einigung*) or to acquiesce in the denial of some doctrines. No other theologian has expressed himself in quite that way. The idea of an open, dynamic orthodoxy invites further development.

The following year Hryniewicz's text was published in Polish in substantially the same form under the title "'Hierarchia Prawd' a Ekumenizm."[42]

The decade of the 70s closed with two short review articles by G. Thils, both of which survey some of the discussion of the hierarchy of truths which had occurred to that point in time. First of all, Thils's " 'Hierarchia veritatum' (Décret sur l'oecuménisme, no. 11)" repeats the relevant conciliar data, underlining the motive for adding the pertinent sentence to *Unitatis redintegratio*, that is, to assess Christian divisions more accurately by evaluating truths and not simply by enumerating them.[43] The lion's share of Thils's article consists in an outline of the works of Valeske, Mühlen, Tavard, Feiner, Cardona, Carroll, and Schlink. Valeske offers a "mine of references" relating to the hierarchy of truths (210); Feiner is its most lively advocate (213); Cardona cannot hide his apprehensiveness about the topic (213); Schlink's analysis is dense and structured (214). Finally, Thils concludes, if the hierarchy of truths is revolutionary, it is so more in a psychological sense than conceptually. It counteracts a Catholic tendency to put all truths on the same plane. As such, it is a development about which one can only rejoice (215).

Thils's second article, "Une colloque sur le thème: la 'hierarchie des vérités' de la foi," reports on a conference about this theme held at Regensburg, March 29–31, 1979.[44] Congar was to have introduced the topic but was prevented by ill health. Of 40 participants, six presented

---

[42] *Collectanea theologica* 49 (1979) 5–21, in Polish with a French summary.
[43] *Revue théologique de Louvain* 10 (1979) 209–15.
[44] Ibid. 245–49.

the views of their respective traditions: Schlink (Lutheran), Zizioulas and Dragas (Orthodox), Thurian (representing the Reformed), Baker (Anglican), and Thils (Roman Catholic). Two errors were universally rejected: equating the fact that a truth is defined with its being a central truth, and reducing Christian truths to a minimum (246). Historical and systematic methods can be employed in searching for the center of the faith. Such a center would support a "permanent dynamic of legitimate pluralism" (247). Of various criteria for determining the hierarchy among truths (Scripture, tradition, creeds, the Fathers, liturgy, official Church teaching, and the *sensus fidelium*), the last two occasioned much discussion. For example, official Catholic teaching has attempted to connect the Marian doctrines with the center of revelation, but not all have found this convincing. The *sensus fidelium*, on the other hand, is notoriously difficult to decipher. Recent studies on the topic of "reception" may be a step in the right direction. Thils reports that the conference was characterized by much consensus about the fundamental truths of the faith, without, however, obscuring the fact that significant differences remain among the Christian Churches represented. He closes wondering how the hierarchy of truths might relate to the new diversities within Christian thought which will inevitably arise when Latin American, African, and Asian reflection is brought to bear upon the Christian mystery.

B. R. Brinkman's "Isn't There a Hierarchy of Truths?" comes out of the unique perspective of trying to apply the hierarchy of truths to the doctrinal controversies within the Catholic Church over the writings of E. Schillebeeckx and H. Küng.[45] His concern is not the specific teachings of these theologians but the general attitudinal change which could be effected by the hierarchy of truths. This latter concept is an old principle, potentially very helpful for assisting the Church in the current task of facing today's cultural breakup and emerging pluralism. In the past the Church imposed the Latin culture upon mission territories; today, to a certain extent it must free itself from any confinement to this Latin heritage. Brinkman finds cause for optimism in such change because it forces Christians back to a God-oriented view of revelation like that of St. Thomas. Revelation is not about any reality whatsoever. It concerns God. And God Himself, not the Church, is the primary agent of revelation. God witnesses to the heart of each individual and makes His message credible to the believer. The Church cannot and need not perfectly present God's word. Brinkman chides the German bishops for asking too much clarity from Hans Küng (238). Unity in faith should follow a model of communion, not a model of uniformity (240). Since all Christians are

---

[45] *Month* 241 (1980) 234–40, 267–74.

in the process of assimilating God's truth, the Church should not be overly suspicious of their motives in expressing the faith, nor should it carry out secret investigations (268). Beginning with Jesus himself, the Christian tradition had long stressed that principal attention be paid to the essential aspects of the faith (270). The hierarchy of truths does not reduce doctrines but brings a better sense of perspective (271–72). Facing the 1980s, the Church should desist from polarization and instead rediscover its primordial mission of reaching out to offer the salvation of Christ to all. Christianity is basically about the salvation of people; it is not fundamentally about authority (273).

For a decade, at least one new article, often more than one, had appeared each year devoted to the hierarchy of truths. 1981 broke this pattern, although continued interest in this topic is witnessed to in the fact that several theological centers were offering courses related to it. The material from one of these courses (that of the Institut Supérieur d'Etudes Oecuméniques de l'Institut Catholique de Paris taught by Yves Congar) was published in 1982 under the title *Diversités et communion.*[46] This book takes up many questions touching upon unity within a framework of legitimate pluralism, focusing consecutively upon testimony drawn from the New Testament, from the Eastern Churches, and from the post-Reformation Western Churches. Within the latter Congar includes a chapter entitled "The 'Hierarchy of Truths.'" Comparison of this text with Congar's earlier article of 1973 shows that the earlier article had been carefully reconsidered and rearranged but that Congar's position is basically the same. Building upon support from the Christian tradition and in light of the *quod/quo* distinction, Congar elaborates a hierarchy of truths from the perspectives of the known object and the knowing subject. One new point is his reaction to K. Rahner's comment that insistence upon "the same faith" for all truths would effectively eliminate any practical significance from the traditional doctrine of *fides implicita,* the question of truths "necessary for salvation," and the hierarchy of truths (133). Congar feels that this may be true for individuals but that it is difficult to see how one could apply these objections to Churches as such.

In the same year appeared K. Rahner's most direct contribution to the discussion of the hierarchy of truths, his "Hierarchie der Wahrheiten."[47] This short article first explains the implications of the statement that

[46] Paris: Cerf, 1982. The facts of publication for the English version of this book are found in n. 12 above. The chapter entitled "The 'Hierarchy of Truths'" is found on pp. 126–33, 212–16.

[47] *Diakonia* 13 (1982) 376–81. An English version of this article appeared as "'Hierarchy' of Truths," *Theology Digest* 30 (1982) 227–29.

all truths must be believed with "the same faith." Revealed or explicitly defined truths cannot be offhandedly rejected or treated with indifference. But the believer's act of faith (*fides qua*) is nevertheless sensitive to the hierarchical structure inherent in the object of faith (*fides quae*). The foundation around which all other truths are ordered consists of those basic truths, each of which evokes the others and cannot be reduced to some other. Here one discerns a connection between Rahner's view of the hierarchy of truths and his celebrated article on "The Concept of Mystery in Catholic Theology."

Rahner argues that there is an objective and an existential hierarchy of truths. The two are related, so that the existential hierarchy of truths on the part of an individual or group needs to be guided and corrected by the objective hierarchy. But there is a difference between the existential and objective hierarchies, a difference which makes possible the history or development of dogma. All of this is of tremendous pastoral importance. The pressing need today is to state the foundation of the Christian faith in a way that is plausible to people. Indeed, the dominant quality of Rahner's article on the hierarchy of truths is its pastoral tone.

Oscar Cullmann, who enthusiastically welcomed Vatican II's doctrine of the hierarchy of truths and who briefly commented upon it several times earlier, finally devoted an article explicitly to it in 1984.[48] The first of four sections is entitled "The Hierarchy of Truths and the Plurality of Charisms." Cullmann attributes diversity and pluralism to the very work of the Holy Spirit; "uniformity," he notes, "is a sin against the Holy Spirit" (357). Unity should not be achieved in spite of diversity but through it and because of it. The remainder of his article attempts to answer three questions. (1) How can recognition of the fundamental truth, which needs to be accepted by all Christians, be achieved? On the basis of the Scriptures and early creeds, Cullmann feels that consensus about nonnegotiable fundamentals is already within the grasp of the Churches. (2) How can remaining differences between the Churches be mutually complementary instead of divisive? The Churches should be expected to have different perspectives on the truths and even different hierarchies of truths. But given a common recognition of fundamentals, differences can be complementary. The Protestant spirit can guard against spurious and superfluous doctrinal developments, but needs to be challenged to recognize the importance of truths only implicitly taught in the Scriptures. The Catholic spirit can guard against a reduction of the faith to only one of its truths or aspects, but needs to be monitored

[48] "Einheit in der Vielfalt im Lichte der 'Hierarchie der Wahrheiten,'" in E. Klinger and K. Wittstadt, ed., *Glaube im Prozess: Christsein nach dem II. Vatikanum* (Freiburg: Herder, 1984) 356–64.

with regard to its proclivity toward syncretism. Isolation of truths is what leads to heresy. When related within a broader framework, diverse perspectives tend to complete one another. (3) What happens when there exists direct opposition between two Churches on some particular truth? As long as a certain foundation of central truths is safeguarded, even direct disagreement about other truths need not divide. Paul's example with regard to food sacrificed to idols serves as a model here. Paul knew that such food could be eaten. However, he did not demand the acceptance of this truth on the part of those whose faith was weak, but focused on the fact that he shared more central and fundamental truths with them.

While Rahner's article focused on the concrete question of presenting the Christian faith to people of today, Cullmann's speaks to the concrete question of Church unity. He envisions a federation of Churches as that model for unity which respects the pluriformity and integrity of the various Christian traditions (258). One wonders whether such a notion might not harmonize well with a communion model of unity, or even whether "communion" might not be a more suitable term than "federation" for what Cullmann has in mind. The idea of direct disagreement about doctrines would need to be more carefully explored in terms of the role of the teaching office within the Church.

Gustav Thils contributed yet another article to the discussion of the hierarchy of truths in 1984.[49] Unlike his earlier pieces, which primarily reviewed the positions of others, this text presents more of his own thought. Commenting on Archbishop Pangrazio's distinction between truths of the end and truths of the means, Thils discerns a relationship between the hierarchy of truths and the intensity of a believer's act of faith. The deepest, most characteristic, and eschatological aspect of the act of faith consists in communion in the life of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Pangrazio's distinction helps to bring this out. Secondly, with regard to official Church teachings, Thils points out the difficulty involved in determining just what has been defined. Such telltale phrases as *anathema sit*, for example, have a history of various uses and meanings. Finally, Thils turns his attention to the integral state of truths of the faith. Beyond the formal authority exercised in defining a truth, there is a spiritual authority which the Holy Spirit contributes and which is also part of the integral state of Christian truths. The authority of God is primary and fundamental; all other mediators of revelation are secondary. Thils proceeds to reflect upon two mediations in particular. One is the mediation of the *sensus fidelium* whereby the faithful are infallible *in credendo*, not out of obedience but by means of the enlightening and

[49] "Hierarchie des vérités de la foi et dialogue oecuménique," *Revue théologique de Louvain* 15 (1984) 147–59.

discerning presence of the Holy Spirit. Another is the mediation of a truth through individuals such that the impact, fecundity, and persistence of a truth is affected by the way a particular individual has proposed it in the course of Church history. A more well-rounded and accurate appraisal of Christian truths requires that one look beyond the formal authority of definitions to the more integral state of doctrines, a state which will include the spiritual authority behind them as well as their various mediations.

Twice in 1985 Oscar Cullmann delivered a lecture entitled "The Ecumenism of Unity in Diversity according to the New Testament," which contained a section addressing the hierarchy of truths and ecumenism.[50] Once again Cullmann discusses both a legitimate, Spirit-inspired diversity with regard to the expression of Christian truths and the concrete task of reunion of the Christian Churches. He concludes with a promise to write an additional article addressing the practical structure needed to realize Christian unity, suggesting the possibility of a "truly ecumenical" council (139). Within this broader context Cullmann again discusses the hierarchy of truths, basically repeating his position of the previous year: (1) A common confession of a certain summit of truths is essential to Christian unity. (2) The Bible and early creeds point the way toward such a common foundation of the Christian faith. (3) Diversities can be complementary and mutually enriching. (4) There can be no unity without concessions to those who are weak in faith, and therefore Christian Churches must tolerate disagreements among themselves concerning less-central matters.

Finally, the last and most ambitious work yet to appear about the hierarchy of truths is Henk Witte's "*Alnaargelang hun band met het fundament van het christelijk geloof verschillend is": Wording en verwerking van de uitspraak over de 'hierarchie' van waarheden van Vaticanum II*.[51] This two-volume work (the notes and bibliography form a second volume) is very impressive in its thoroughness (almost 500 pages and over 1500 notes). After situating the hierarchy of truths within the context of a broader notion of dialogue which seeks not merely to explain current positions to one another but to achieve together a deeper understanding of the unfathomable riches of Christ (chap. 1), Witte offers the most detailed account of the genesis of this doctrine at Vatican II (chap. 2). Witte pinpoints Johannes Feiner as the theologian who influenced Archbishop Pangrazio to introduce the concept at the Council (56–57, 338). He summarizes the speeches of many bishops who spoke of unity

---

[50] "L'Ecumenismo dell'unità nella diversità secondo il Nuovo Testamento," *Protestantesimo* 40 (1985) 129–39.

[51] Tilburg: Tilburg Univ., 1986.

of faith among Christians, thus providing a greatly improved view of the background against which the doctrine of the hierarchy of truths was formulated. Chapter 3 explores the meaning of the phrase "the foundation of the Christian faith," a foundation which is to serve as the criterion for determining the hierarchy of truths according to *Unitatis redintegratio*, no. 11. After examining Vatican II's use of the word "foundation" and equivalent terms, Witte explores the "midpoint of revelation" according to *Dei verbum*, no. 4, the "heart of salvation" according to *Gaudium et spes*, no. 22, and various allusions by Vatican II to the "basis formula" of the World Council of Churches. All of these texts lead to discerning the mystery of Christ in his death and resurrection and in revealing the Trinity as the foundation of Christian faith (184).

A fourth chapter studies the appearance of the hierarchy of truths in official Church pronouncements since the Council. Here Witte includes several statements from the Secretariat for the Promotion of Christian Unity, the General Catechetical Directory, the instruction *Mysterium ecclesiae*, various statements of bilateral dialogues (Anglican–Roman Catholic, Methodist–Roman Catholic, Lutheran–Roman Catholic, and Anglican–Orthodox), and, finally, a statement by the West German Synod of Bishops. Witte sees a significant shift in attitude occurring in *Mysterium ecclesiae* (1973), away from a qualitative approach seeking to assign different weights to the various truths according to their connection to the foundation of the Christian faith, toward a quantitative approach that highlights the formal authority, objective certainty, and relative equality of all truths (222).

Witte's fifth chapter presents the effect that the hierarchy of truths has had upon postconciliar theology. He focuses upon Karl Rahner's distinction between the objective and existential hierarchies of truth (256 ff.). The objective content of the faith cannot be irrelevant to the act of faith. A certain tolerance among believers is necessary, since the existential act of faith will differ according to the various subjects. Witte adds comments of seven other theologians to supplement his discussion of Rahner (Froitzheim and Tillard on the formal authority of faith statements, and Mühlen, Schoonenberg, Kasper, Schlink, and Cullmann on their material content). Finally, Witte's concluding chapter calls for "no reduction, no exaggeration" of the truths of the faith. This can be achieved if balance between the formal, quantitative and the material, qualitative aspects of dogma is maintained. A balanced expression of the truth constitutes part of the very identity of that communion of believers who share that truth.

The scholarship and research represented by Witte's book is very impressive. The vast majority of his text (75%) concerns the conciliar

and postconciliar official documentation surrounding the hierarchy of truths. This provides a very helpful tool for getting a better feel for the *Sitz im Leben* of the doctrine in official teaching. The lengthiest chapter, from which the book takes its title, demonstrates that the hierarchy of truths coheres with Vatican II's overall understanding of revelation as that is expressed in *Dei verbum* and *Gaudium et spes*. The existence of such a hierarchy, therefore, is not an isolated reference of the Decree on Ecumenism, limited to the context of dialogue between Christians. Rather, it is part and parcel of the official, contemporary Roman Catholic understanding of revelation. A further achievement of Witte's third chapter is to show that this Catholic position was influenced by and is congruent with the "basis formula" of the World Council of Churches. While these achievements on Witte's part do not close off further discussion or indeed eliminate the need for further work, particularly on the practical ways in which the hierarchy of truths could be employed to advance Christian unity, nevertheless they reveal a truly significant ecumenical breakthrough of Vatican II, that is, the official Catholic recognition that not all truths are of the same importance and that, regarding many of the most central truths of the faith, Christians are already one.

SYNTHESIS OF PRINCIPAL THEMES

The preceding pages have provided a synopsis of those theological publications since Vatican II which include the phrase "hierarchy of truths" in their titles.[52] Obviously, this does not exhaust what has been written about this topic. Many have commented on the hierarchy of

---

[52] In two cases—Schoonenberg and Cullmann (1985)—the phrase "hierarchy of truths" was the title of a subdivision of a larger article. Benassi's title used the reference of the Council decree ("Unitatis redintegratio, 11 c") instead of the words "hierarchy of truths." Perhaps one further book-length study which is about to be published should be mentioned. In 1987 my own *The Hierarchy of Truths according to Yves Congar, O.P.*, is scheduled to appear as number 246 of the series *Analecta Gregoriana* of the Gregorian University in Rome. It was written out of the conviction that a systematic study of the hierarchy of truths was needed, a study which would treat such a hierarchy against the background of systematic reflections about truth, history, revelation, faith, and dogma. The works of Congar, a figure of major importance in Roman Catholic ecumenism and one who had not only written several times about the topic but was partially responsible for coining the phrase, provided promising ground for such an investigation. Congar's reflections on truth, history, revelation, faith, and dogma—heavily influenced by St. Thomas but, as always with Congar, enriched by his stupendous acquaintance with the whole breadth of Christian tradition—were brought to bear upon his theory of the hierarchy of truths. This resulted in seven principles for understanding and making use of the hierarchy of truths. Thus the study shows how the hierarchy of truths is consistent with some of the fundamental aspects of Christian truth.

truths in works devoted primarily to some other topic.[53]

The 32 publications surveyed above do not submit to a facile synthesis. Yet it is possible and helpful to indicate various principal themes which emerge from these writings. The following brief outline, subdivided into three major categories, is presented in the hope of setting the stage for further discussion of the hierarchy of truths.

The Council and Its Aftermath

Several authors attempt to explain the chain of events leading to the conciliar teaching about the hierarchy of truths in *Unitatis redintegratio*, no. 11, on November 21, 1964. Witte's study of this material is by far the most exhaustive and authoritative. Valeske also treats the Council at some length, but is even better in his listing of immediate postconciliar reactions to the teaching about the hierarchy of truths. Shorter comments on pertinent conciliar data can be found in Mühlen, Dietzfelbinger, Tavard, Schützeichel, Congar, Ford, and Carroll.

Some writers go on to place Vatican II's teaching within the context of other official teachings, i.e. statements about authority (Cardona), Pius XI's *Mortalium animos* (Valeske, O'Connell, and Congar), clarifications by the Secretariat for the Promotion of Christian unity (Tavard, Ford, Carroll, and Witte), and documents from official bilateral dialogues (Tavard and Witte).

Finally, there are a number of short surveys of postconciliar theological writings about the hierarchy of truths (Valeske, Klein, Tavard, O'Connell, Carroll, Thils, and Witte). In addition, Jelly and Hryniewicz synthesize the contributions of several authors in the course of presenting their own views.

Historical Precedents

Various scriptural studies support the recognition of a hierarchy of truths (Mühlen, Schützeichel, Weismayer, Schlink, and Cullmann). As that list of names shows, Protestant thinkers have predominated in developing this theme. A number of authors reflect on the significance of early creeds for the hierarchy of truths (Weismayer, Rahner, and Cullmann).

Valeske holds pride of place in his extensive collection of precedents to the hierarchy of truths in the unfolding history of Christian theology. Others contributing in this area are Tavard, O'Connell, and, especially, Congar. Thomas Aquinas has drawn the most interest as a figure from the tradition whose theological outlook is sympathetic to the notion of

---

[53] Several of these writings are included in the bibliography offered by Witte 439–41.

the hierarchy of truths (Mühlen, Valeske, Tavard, Congar, Jelly, and Carroll, with cautions from O'Connell and Cardona).

Systematic Reflections

Many have written about criteria for determining the order among the truths of the faith. Aside from Witte's extensive discussion of the meaning of the "foundation" of the faith, perhaps the most detailed series of principles for ordering Christian truths is that offered by Schlink's article. Others who address the principles involved in ordering Christian truths are Mühlen, Schoonenberg, Tavard, Congar, Jelly, and Thils.

Several authors distinguish a subjective or existential hierarchy of truths on the part of the believing subject from an objective hierarchy existing within the deposit of the faith itself (Mühlen, Congar, Hryniew-icz, and Rahner). These authors add that the subjective hierarchy is sensitive to the order in the object of the faith.

Some theologians have emphasized the hierarchy of truths as a means toward a Church unity which allows for diversity. Cullmann offers the most finalized expression of this theme. Witte suggests a sophisticated theory of Church identity, employing a sociological account of truth. Pertinent comments about such unity in diversity come also from Mühlen, Schlink, Congar, and O'Connell, with some caveats from Jelly.

The hierarchy of truths functions as a hermeneutical principle for interpreting the body of Christian truths (Dietzfelbinger, Schoonenberg, Weismayer, Carroll, Hryniewicz, and Witte). It can serve as an ordering principle for all of theology (Schützeichel and Jelly).

Contemporary evangelization calls for Christians to express the kernel of their faith in a short plausible way for people of today (Weismayer, Carroll, Brinkman, and Rahner). Thus there is a profoundly pastoral dimension to the hierarchy of truths.

Some have related the hierarchy of truths to a lessening of emphasis upon formal Church authority with regard to Christian truths (Congar, Brinkman, and Thils). It has provided some with the context for reflecting on the nature of Christian dogma (Schlink and Thils). Some state that the obligation to believe cannot be impervious to the objective hierarchy of truths, with the result that the statement that all truths must be believed "with the same faith" must be carefully nuanced (Mühlen, Hryniewicz, and Rahner).

There has been an effort to connect the hierarchy of truths to the overall conception of revelation and faith at Vatican II (Weismayer and Witte). Several have reflected upon Marian doctrines in light of the order among truths (Mühlen, Valeske, Schoonenberg, Benassi, Jelly, and Dietz). The hierarchy of truths has been restated in logical terms

(Froitzheim), applied to inner Roman Catholic theological controversy (Brinkman), and explored in light of Thomist epistemological principles (Cardona).

In conclusion, it is clear that this concept has generated considerable thought among theologians. It not only reflects the general outlook of Vatican II with regard to ecumenism, revelation, and doctrine, but also expresses an approach to Christian truth deeply rooted in the tradition, going back even to the Scriptures. Much is at stake with this notion, a fact evidenced by the list of systematic reflections appearing above. That is why the hierarchy of truths will ultimately need to be elaborated on the basis of such foundational notions as truth, history, revelation, faith, and dogma. Ecumenically speaking, the hierarchy of truths invites one to consider truth as a means of unification rather than of division and separation. It asks whether it might not be possible to reverse an age-old tendency whereby gains in truth are achieved at the price of divisions within the Church. Can one think of truth in such a way that it unifies diverse perspectives without reducing them to uniformity?

Beyond the context of Christian unity, the hierarchy of truths provides a means of interpreting and reappropriating the tradition so as to hand it on again in a fresh and plausible way to people of today. Thus it is a profoundly pastoral notion, potentially of great benefit to the Church's evangelical mission in the world.

"Eye has not seen, ear has not heard, nor has it so much as dawned on man what God has prepared for those who love Him" (1 Cor 2:9; see Isa 64:3). In the opening article of his *Summa theologiae*, St. Thomas quoted this Scripture passage to explain the specific nature of theology (*sacra doctrina*) as a science so audacious that it reaches up to share in the very knowledge of God. After all, knowledge based on revelation always ultimately implies knowing, at least to some extent, as God knows. At this point in the Church's pilgrimage into the unfathomable riches of Christ's truth, one thing is increasingly clear: deeper penetration into the knowledge of God, who is Truth, leads to a relishing contemplation of the hierarchy of truths.