WHITHER CHRISTIANITY? CHARLES DAVIS AND THE FUTURE OF CHRISTIAN RELIGION

Charles Davis has written a provocative and important book that raises a number of issues that must be faced by contemporary theology.[1] To encourage further discussion of these issues, I will (1) describe the conceptual framework Davis employs, (2) selectively highlight some of Davis' critical judgments in order to help focus some important issues for contemporary theological reflection, and (3) raise some questions for further reflection in order to advance the discussion of these issues.

I

At the heart of Davis' analysis is the thesis that Christianity is not a unitary phenomenon with a singular essence, but rather a matrix of four typologically distinct though related forms or "models," each of which involves an imaginative construction of a common core of symbolic resources into a complex "symbol system" that enables it to mediate and interpret human experience. Coupled with this thesis is an understanding of religious tradition as a dynamic process of historical development and modification, of "deconstruction and reconstruction," whereby the implications of religious praxis lead to transformations within theoretical self-understanding, and vice versa. Christianity thus emerges, in this account, as a multitextured historical reality that is continuously manifesting itself in new and plural ways. (Cardinal John Henry Newman, in this light, barely scratched the surface of the issue of historical development within Christianity.)

The four models are the Mythical, the Pragmatic, the Visionary, and the Mystical. As distinct symbol systems, each of these four models represents a different answer to the question "What is Christianity?" No one of these models, however, is exhaustive of the potentiality of the tradition. This is because human experience is confronted with "contradictory features" ranging from "unmerited suffering" to "the joyful goodness of life" (13). As a consequence, the history of Christian religion has been characterized by "the coexistence and successive dominance of different symbol systems, partly complementary, partly in conflict."[2]

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[1] Charles Davis, *What Is Living, What Is Dead in Christianity Today? Breaking the Liberal-Conservative Deadlock* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986).

[2] In order to avoid potential misunderstanding, it should be noted that none of these models may be exclusively identified with a specific ecclesiastical tradition. Equally importantly, however, two or more of these models may also be found side by side in the same

However, Davis is not concerned simply to describe the four distinct models of Christian religion; his task is the much more ambitious one of appraising them in order to judge their relative merit in light of the contemporary needs not only of Christianity itself but also of humanity at large in its quest for survival in a time of profound crisis.

Mythical Christianity has been, and continues to be, the dominant model of Christianity. Its influence can be tied to its presenting "a comprehensive account of the order of the world, of society, and of the nature and destiny of the individual" (25). Based on a literal and historical reading of Scripture, Mythical Christianity involves a representational interpretation of the Christian story as straightforwardly descriptive of the world in which we live. Language (including its metaphorical use) is thus understood to have an essential and direct relationship with reality, which enables us to uncover patterns of relationship within the world. Religious statements such as "Jesus Christ is the only Son of God" are taken to represent objective states of affairs, i.e. to articulate "things as they are." This further enables a mythical vision to present a comprehensive interpretation of human history as part of a wider cosmic order. The Bible is thus read as a realistic account of the history of salvation from the creation of the world, through the self-disclosure and incarnation of God (and a new principle of existence) in Jesus, to the consummation of God's reality at the eschaton.

This form of Christian religion, however, is not its primitive form (which was rather of the Visionary type), but instead first congealed into coherent form during the period of Christianity's integration into the Roman empire (31).[3] In becoming a comprehensive vision, however, it became the foundation for the late patristic and medieval accent on the Church, with its ritual and sacraments, as part of the divinely established order of the world and of history. Paradoxically, however, this very success planted the seeds of its own fragmentation and indirectly contributed to the development of secularization, which involved a process of disengagement from what was perceived to be a set of petrified religious doctrines that no longer engaged human experience in a constructive way so as to lead to its inner transformation. In other words, the elaborated doctrinal schema had become severed from its original religious roots in the experiences of guilt, suffering, and death. Myth had

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ecclesiastical tradition. Thus, similarities cut across, while differences can be found within, ecclesiastical boundaries.

[3] It could be argued, contra Davis, that this form of Christian religion can be traced at least as far as Irenaeus in the second century A.D., but this would not alter his main contention that the primitive form of Christian religion was of the Visionary type. Cf. the discussion below.

become dogma, but in the process lost contact with concrete human experience, and thus lost the ability to interpret it. This has led to a number of highly creative attempts to mediate the Christian tradition to the modern world while leaving its essential form unchanged.[4] Davis questions, however, whether such a practice is plausible any longer, whether it is not the Mythical model itself that is the problem, and, having lost its plausibility, whether there is not the need for a radically new development within Christianity if it is to respond to the crisis of faith in the modern world and if it is to survive as a constructive force in global human affairs.

Pragmatic Christianity may in part be understood as a response to this inner crisis within Mythical Christianity. The Christian story here no longer functions as a comprehensive account of a cosmic order or as an objective system of salvation. The mythical system has instead been broken up into individual elements, each of which is subjected to critical examination in light of their ability to further the process of "human moral striving" (35). The accent now falls on an individual's personal relationship with God, which is interpreted in terms of the double commandment of love. There is thus an internalization of religion, but this is coupled with its public manifestation in moral practice.

Historically, Davis sees this manifestation of Christianity as having begun in the 15th-century humanistic Renaissance, and thus as having coexisted with the high-medieval form of Mythical Christianity while also preparing the ground for the Protestant Reformation and the later stages of the humanistic Renaissance of the 16th century. These movements are described by Davis as having contributed to the fragmentation of Mythical Christianity, but Davis does not believe that they are the *cause* of its fragmentation.[5] Rather, we should think in terms of highly complex interactions between these two forms of Christian religion, including Pragmatic Christianity's feeding off of the internal problems of Mythical Christianity while maintaining continuity with it by making use of the symbolic resources of the Christian tradition, albeit more selectively and in piecemeal fashion.

[4] Davis numbers as representatives of this kind of mediating theology Drey, Möhler, and the Tübingen school on the Catholic side, and Schleiermacher and his direct theological descendants on the Protestant side. Davis' point is that these so-called liberal theologians, even while vilified by some for their heterodoxy, were essentially engaged in a conservative theological enterprise, and thus have more in common with one another—and with English representatives like Coleridge, Maurice, and Cardinal Newman—than they do with more radical theologians such as F. C. Baur and D. F. Strauss.

[5] This is in contrast to the overly simplistic argument to this effect concerning the Reformation in Thomas N. Munson, *The Challenge of Religion: A Philosophical Appraisal* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University, 1985).

One consequence of this latter approach is that the Christian story is de-emphasized in favor of a focus on Jesus as a moral teacher and exemplar (39). Jesus' death is then seen as a tragedy, his crucifixion becoming the ultimate symbol of the tragic nature of human existence itself. The miraculous element is bracketed, and the Church as an institution and religion as a set of beliefs are de-emphasized in favor of ecclesiastical pluralism and individual moral practice. There is a high degree of doctrinal skepticism, though there is by no means a rejection of reason; reason and doctrine both are seen as being oriented toward the illumination of the ethical dimension of human existence. No longer a system of salvation, religion has instead become a philosophy of life.[6]

Visionary Christianity responds to dimensions of human experience that neither Mythical nor Pragmatic Christianity adequately addresses, in particular "the needs of the oppressed and the marginal elements in human society for deliverance and integration" (46). Thus, it too represents a response to the internal fragmentation of Mythical Christianity— though many of its linguistic assumptions mark it as standing in continuity with Mythical Christianity. More specifically, Visionary Christianity is characterized by a distinction between two worlds that posits the coming of a new world to replace the old. Here Jesus is understood as a romanticized "victorious hero" who is sent by God to conquer the forces of evil through his death and resurrection. This form of Christianity results in a social and ethical radicalism that rejects the forms and norms of "this world" in favor of an ascetic devotion (and practical commitment) to the coming of the kingdom of God on earth. Davis sees primitive Christianity as having originated in such a matrix, and furthermore sees this Visionary form of Christianity as never having been utterly absent, even if it often has been at the fringe. Today, however, Visionary Christianity has moved back toward the center, both in certain forms of fundamentalism and in liberation-theology movements.

Mystical Christianity involves an "unmediated experience" of the Godhead which in fact is a "mediated immediacy" whereby the symbolic resources of the Christian tradition provide transparent (and dispensable) means to experience Ultimate Reality. (Here, even "God" functions as a dispensable symbol.) Mystical Christianity has always had an ambiguous relationship with Christian religion, for it implies that the mediating elements of the tradition are ultimately unimportant in themselves, but are useful insofar as they enable individuals to gain access to the reality that they disclose. Mystical Christianity has thus always

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[6] Davis traces the historical lineage of Pragmatic Christianity from Erasmus to the Arminian-Socinian movements, Locke and the Deists, Voltaire, Lessing and Kant, J. S. Semler, Ritschl, and Harnack.

functioned implicitly as a critique of the ontological pretensions of Mythical Christianity—although this has not always been recognized, or admitted. More practically, Mystical Christianity has also implicitly denied the efficacy of the Christian scheme of salvation, instead positing the sufficiency of contemplation, though understood as the ascesis of the will in its conformity out of love to the Godhead. The epistemological basis of Mystical Christianity is a sense of the inadequacy of all language with respect to the Ultimate. This establishes an important link with Pragmatic Christianity in that both regard the dogmatic content of Christian orthodoxy ultimately to be unimportant.

II

As useful on its own terms as this descriptive schema is—and future discussions of "Christianity" that ignore its multiple manifestations as here described do so at their own risk—Davis' real concern is not descriptive but normative. He therefore is not interested so much in what "the" (sic) Christian religion is, or even in "what is living and what is dead" in Christianity, as he is in the question of what Christianity can become for us today (55). The heart of the book is thus the four chapters devoted to a critical evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of each of these four models of Christianity. Since the Mythical and Pragmatic forms of Christianity are seen by Davis to be the major contemporary protagonists (which is in no way to say that he dismisses the continued relevance of the two other forms), I will focus my remarks and questions on Davis' evaluation of these two forms.

The chapter on "Myth and Metaphysics" raises the foundational question of how far the Christian religion, in its Mythical form, or in its metaphysical extrapolation, can be supposed to provide us either with direct knowledge about objective reality or with a normative, comprehensive order in terms of which Christians can live out their lives. Davis' judgment is that Christianity, in this form, fares very poorly on both counts today. Part of the problem of "ontotheology" in the West, which Davis defines as "the attempt to translate the content of the Christian myth into the theoretical concepts and statements of metaphysical philosophy" (60), is that it has forgotten that these concepts were themselves derived by a process of abstraction from the perceived literal meaning underlying mythological representations. Admittedly, this is not a novel suggestion, but Davis' application of this point of view in a penetrating critique of the foundationalisms of Rahner and Lonergan should provoke much discussion.

While acknowledging Rahner's theology to be "the greatest theological achievement of our time," Davis nonetheless finds it to be a fundamen-

tally flawed achievement. The problem, for Davis, is that Rahner finally fails to respect his own foundational distinction between the transcendental and the categoreal, but instead, when it comes to distinctively Christian claims, "attempts to transfer to the categorical the certitude and universality that properly belong to the transcendental" (57).[7] In short, Rahner takes our unthematic awareness of ourselves in relationship to "the wholeness of being" and attempts to apply this dimension of our experience to "our objective, historical experience of the particular and concrete" in such a way as to attempt to validate the certitude of specific Christian dogmatic claims about God, Jesus, etc. Aside from the serious methodological issues involved, the additional tragedy of this move, for Davis, is that Rahner missed the opportunity offered him by this distinction to overcome Mythical Christianity's tendency toward doctrinal exclusiveness by recognizing that in the nature of the case there cannot be any one privileged way of trying to symbolize our relationship to the Ultimate. Properly understood, Rahner's distinction between the transcendental and the categoreal ought to lead to an acceptance of the pluralism of humanity's religious history and a corresponding suspicion of the supposition that Christianity possesses some privileged access to ultimate truth, since what is distinctively Christian belongs to the categoreal level and therefore lacks the universality proper to the transcendental level of our experience (58).

While Davis here helps us to define a critical issue for contemporary theological reflection, it is Ogden's more systematic treatment of the linguistic dimension of the issue that reveals what is really at stake.[8] Typically, the move from transcendental to categoreal metaphysics is grounded on a theory of analogy. The problem, however, as Ogden has come to judge the matter, in a reversal of his own earlier position, is that all attempts—classical or neoclassical, Thomistic or Hartshornian—to ground the legitimacy of categoreal metaphysical claims on the basis of a distinctive linguistic category of analogy (as distinguished from metaphor) not only have failed historically *but as a matter of principle cannot succeed.* This radical conclusion on the part of a theologian otherwise committed to the neoclassical theological enterprise has led Ogden to argue that the future of metaphysics—and of Christian theology—is dependent upon its successfully distinguishing transcendental from categoreal metaphysics, and limiting itself to the former. Otherwise, Ogden

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[7] Cf. Schubert M. Ogden, "The Experience of God: Critical Reflections on Hartshorne's Theory of Analogy," in *Existence and Analogy: Conversations with Charles Hartshrone,* ed. John B. Cobb, Jr., and Franklin I. Gamwell (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1984), for an analogous critique of Charles Hartshorne.

[8] Cf. ibid.

argues, metaphysics—and Christian theology—will perpetually undercut its own legitimacy, not simply by the contingent implausibility, but more importantly by the strict unverifiability, of its categoreal claims.

At minimum, I think Ogden's analysis shows that the question of analogy is the key to the issue of the viability of categoreal metaphysics. If, additionally, his negative judgment concerning the very possibility of analogy is correct—and the issues here are admittedly quite complex, though Ogden presents a carefully reasoned position—then he is also correct to argue that contemporary theology must face up to the impossibility of continuing the tradition of categoreal metaphysics as a necessary foundation for Christian theology.

To return to Davis' analysis, he sees an analogous problem in Lonergan's theological achievement in that he confuses the absoluteness of faith with the certitude of beliefs, the further point being that the presence of the former does not guarantee the latter. The locus of this problem is to be found, first, in Lonergan's *Insight*, which implausibly posits an invariant cognitional structure of consciousness as an exhaustive account of the elements relevant to human knowledge, and, second, in Lonergan's subsequent failure to recognize how radically this earlier intellectualist framework is transformed (as opposed to being simply modified) by his quite different approach in *Method in Theology*, where the focus shifts to the priority of love to knowledge, and of moral and religious conversion to intellectual conversion. The latter represents, for Davis, a missed opportunity, for in principle it could have led Lonergan to argue that Christianity is not primarily a set of doctrines or a body of objective knowledge, but a principle of transformation based on "the reality of transcendent love" (71). Though Davis does not say so directly, I think one can legitimately draw the inference that Lonergan in his own way fails to respect the distinction between the transcendental and the categoreal.

I think these constitute important critiques of modern Roman Catholic foundationalism (though the implications of Ogden's argument carry over to Hartshorne's categoreal metaphysics as well), and they indirectly help us to see that the fundamental problem with Mythical Christianity has been its implicit but inadequate understanding of language as directly representational, leading to what Paul Ricoeur has characterized as "dogmatic mythology."[9] Dogmatic mythology involves a rationalization of the symbolic language of myth by literalistically extending its primary, literal level of meaning in speculative directions while simultaneously overlooking myth's own implicit second-level meaning that is both the

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[9] Paul Ricoeur, "Hermeneutics of Symbols and Philosophical Reflection: II," in *The Conflict of Interpretations* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University, 1974) 299.

point of a myth and a clue to the negation of its primary, literal meaning. This particular linguistic malady has had greater influence than many have been willing to admit, but analyses like Ricoeur's have begun to provide us with invaluable conceptual resources for overcoming this problem and for opening up new ways of reading the Bible.[10]

It should also be clear from the nature of his critique that Davis himself leans toward some form of Pragmatic Christianity. This is not to say, however, that he regards the inheritance of Pragmatic Christianity as an unmixed blessing. Its strength is that it articulates the Christian tradition as a practical way of life that is understood to be a response to the transcendent reality of love. This is the locus of Christianity's authentic religious content, which has to do with living out one's faith in concrete practice and as love. Pragmatic Christianity, however, has, at least in its earlier historical manifestations, exhibited two significant weaknesses. First, it has tended to lose "the transcendent core" alone in terms of which Christian practice can articulate its own vision. Second, it has hobbled itself with an understanding of language as essentially instrumental in nature, which has weakened its ability to convey the symbolic richness and power of the Christian heritage precisely in the service of its practical aim.[11]

III

Here, however, is where our own questions for further reflection emerge. In response to this second weakness, Davis would retrieve from the Mythical tradition an appreciation of the metaphorical dimension of language. However, Davis is not as clear as he ought to be that what needs to be retrieved is a chastened view of metaphor. To follow Ricoeur, we could describe such a chastened view as involving the recognition that metaphor is not directly representational in that every metaphorical "is" is predicated upon a literal "is not."[12] Mythical Christianity did not deny

[10] For a systematic analysis of Ricoeur's theory of symbolic language and his general hermeneutical theory as applied to narrative, cf. Robert F. Scuka, *The Retrieval of Biblical Narrative: A Constructive Alternative to the Narrative Hermeneutics of Hans Frei* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University doctoral dissertation, 1987) chap. 1. In the fifth chapter I undertake a narrative reading of the Gospel of Mark in light of a theory of narrative elaborated on the basis of Ricoeur's analysis.

[11] On both these points, Davis understands Mystical Christianity to offer an important contribution to a revitalization of the Pragmatic model in that the former can aid the latter in the recovery of a sense of transcendence while also exhibiting a sensitivity toward the inadequacy of all forms of religious language to express transcendence, which in turn would further encourage a less exclusivistic and more pluralistic tolerance of humanity's diverse religious heritage. Cf. 95–97.

[12] Cf. *The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-disciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1977) 212–15.

or overlook metaphor; the problem, however, is that it simply subsumed metaphor under, and regarded it as an extension of, the representational use of literal language by ignoring its literal "is not." If we are not simply to reinstate the problems endemic to Mythical Christianity, then we must be self-conscious about what we mean when we talk about a retrieval of the metaphorical and poetic dimensions of biblical language. At the same time, we need to be clear that between an understanding of religious language as representational, on the one hand, and as instrumental, on the other, there is a third option, namely, an understanding of religious language in symbolic or poetic terms. Unfortunately, Davis' discussion obscures these vital considerations.[13]

With respect to Davis' laudable desire to preserve "the transcendent core" of Christian faith as the necessary point of reference in terms of which Christian practice as love can be lived out, it is not clear either what this transcendent core represents or how he is able to secure its fundamental character as "transcendent *love.*" Not uncharacteristically of our age, Davis is chary of metaphysics, but his own analysis of Rahner suggests an avenue that Davis does not himself take up. If we return to Rahner's distinction between the transcendental and the categoreal, and take up Ogden's suggestion for the need to develop a truly transcendental metaphysics that has liberated itself from the problems and limitations of all forms of categoreal metaphysics, then perhaps such a transcendental metaphysics would be able to overcome the weakness Davis has rightly identified in earlier forms of Pragmatic Christianity without, however, returning us to the insoluble problems of Mythical Christianity and its metaphysical offspring, ontotheology.

Whether, and on what terms, such a transcendental metaphysics would be capable of securing the proposition that "God is love" is perhaps an open question at this time. I think it is clear, however, for the kinds of reasons that Davis identifies, and that Ogden helps us more fully to understand, that contemporary Christian theology is unwise to continue to place its reliance, and its future prospects, upon the tradition of ontotheology and categoreal metaphysics, for if Ogden's analysis of the question of analogy is correct, then that tradition—including its best contemporary (and immediately past) representatives in the persons of Rahner, Lonergan, and Hartshorne—cannot deliver on what it has promised. Of course, even the possibility in principle of carrying out a purely transcendental metaphysics as the uncovering of the presuppositions of our experience of transcendence and of our religious practice of love is still an open question—though Rahner, Lonergan, Ogden, and

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[13] However, Davis does offer a valuable discussion of the difference between a symbolic and an ontotheological interpretation of the doctrine of the Incarnation. Cf. 112–15.

Hans Küng all have made contributions relevant to such an enterprise.[14] However, I would suggest that our collective theological efforts be directed at exploring the possibilities of just such a purely transcendental metaphyics. We have nothing to lose, and everything to gain.

Davis may not himself have addressed these questions in any explicit way, but this book nonetheless makes a contribution toward clearing the ground in order to help create a space in which these questions can be explicitly formulated. Moreover, as Davis himself recognizes, the implications of his analysis for the future of what Christianity can and should become are radical, not the least because his descriptive typology of four distinct but related models of Christian religion explodes the myth that Christianity historically has been a unitary phenomenon. Some respond to the implications of this with fear. Others, however, respond to this with a renewed sense of opportunity and responsibility to help ensure that Christianity has a future as well as a past.

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[14] In addition to the essay cited in n. 7 above, cf. Ogden, "The Reality of God," in *The Reality of God and Other Essays* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966) esp. 21–43, and "The Task of Philosophical Theology," in *On Theology* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986) 69–93. Also, cf. Hans Küng, *Does God Exist?* (New York: Vantage, 1981).