

HISTORY, DOGMA, AND NATURE: FURTHER REFLECTIONS ON POSTMODERNISM AND THEOLOGY

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CAN POSTMODERNISM be a fit conversation partner for Catholic theology, or does God's Word spoken in Jesus imply a foundationalism and an ontological notion of truth? Does Christian revelation offer an answer to the contemporary debate about the nature of rationality? Thomas Guarino's recent essay in this journal takes up these questions.¹ The major portion of his work offers an admirably clear and accurate account of postmodern thought. In a brief section at the end of the essay Guarino concludes that postmodernism cannot serve theology as an alternative to foundationalism.

The revelation offered in Jesus Christ has established an unshakable Archimedean point which is at the heart of the *mysterium fidei*, a point embracing basic dimensions of material identity, continuity, and presence. The integrity of this *fides*, then, requires a rationality which incorporates, but in the last analysis remains resistant to, the decentering currents of historicity and alterity which dominate much contemporary thought.²

The language above of "foundation" and "Archimedean point" comes from Descartes's quest for certitude.³ This quest defines much of the modern, philosophical project. Beginning with Descartes, modern philosophers sought a secure foundation from which reason could establish a field of certain knowledge about reality. Philosophers sought undoubtable truth, a grasp of how things actually are, knowledge immune from myth, prejudice, culture, and history.

Postmodernism rejects the modern, epistemological quest on the grounds that it mistakes the nature of human knowledge and truth. Postmoderns in both the humanities and philosophy of science stress human historicity. Human beings are creatures of their historical-

¹ Thomas Guarino, "Between Foundationalism and Nihilism: Is *Phronēsis* the *Via Media* for Theology?" *TS* 54 (1993) 37-54. Guarino covers the spectrum of postmodern thought from Derrida and Foucault, through Gadamer, to Habermas. In the present article, I use the term "postmodern" to indicate what is common to these thinkers, i.e. their emphasis on the historicity of knowledge and their consequent rejection of foundationalism.

² *Ibid.* 54.

³ See Descartes's first and second *Meditations*.

cultural-linguistic context. This context is the ground for and is intrinsic to all knowledge. Epistemological efforts to secure some lasting, transhistorical, noetic reference overlook the fact that one's finite historical context is inherent to knowledge. Similarly, the foundationalist project seeks an enduring perspective "outside" history which guarantees both the validity and enduring character of truth claims. Post-moderns insist that such efforts to transcend history neglect the grounds for all noetic claims. There is no human vantage point outside history, no ahistorical foundation, no Archimedean perspective.⁴

The aim of this essay is to think again about Guarino's conclusion that postmodernism is not a viable alternative to foundationalism for Catholic theology. More specifically, I want to consider Guarino's assertion that divine revelation in Jesus Christ provides an epistemological foundation and Archimedean vantage point. Does God's revelation in Jesus have the ontological and epistemological implications Guarino draws? Does it imply a foundationalism and thereby disqualify postmodern thought?

These questions ultimately have to do with the nature of Christianity's truth claim. One reason Guarino offers for rejecting postmodern thought is that "revelation has a noetic dimension" and the Church can "make true statements . . . about various states of affairs."⁵ While recognizing that dogmatic assertions employ historically conditioned categories, their truth claim requires that Christians in every age grasp common references through these common formulas.⁶ The doctrines of the early councils, which gave rise to the dogmatic tradition, employ language and categories from the Greek metaphysical perspectives which formed the intellectual context of the Church's first centuries. Does Christian revelation thereby imply a metaphysical realism?

⁴ Recognition of an unavoidable historicity in the practice of science goes back at least to Charles Sanders Peirce. Thomas Kuhn evoked an ongoing debate on this issue with his landmark work, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2d ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1970). For an account of this debate and its significance for theology, see Steven T. Ostovich, *Reason in History: Theology and Science as Community Activities* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1990). The hermeneutical thought stemming from Heidegger and Gadamer echoes the same point as it relates to the humanities (Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2d ed. [New York: Crossroad, 1991]; Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* [New York: Harper & Row, 1962]). The postmodern perspective, both in philosophy of science and hermeneutics, is well explicated in Richard Bernstein's *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1983). Given the theological character of this paper, my comments on postmodernism will generally refer to hermeneutical theory.

⁵ Guarino 52.

⁶ *Ibid.* 53.

But the significance of postmodern thought goes beyond the rather speculative question of dogmatic truth. In rejecting the notion that human knowledge grasps an independent ontological state of affairs, postmodern thought also negates the grounds for natural-law theory. The remarks which follow begin with the question of dogmatic truth but move beyond this familiar problem to the implications of postmodern thought for natural law.

To address these issues takes us far beyond Guarino's essay. As noted, the bulk of his excellent work summarizes various postmodern perspectives. His theological conclusions are briefly stated at the end of the essay without extensive argument. In this final section Guarino cites the 1989 statement of the International Theological Commission (ITC), "On the Interpretation of Dogmas."⁷ This statement takes up the problem of dogmatic truth and history which Guarino merely mentions. In doing so it argues for what Guarino asserts, namely, that postmodern perspectives (hermeneutical theories) are inconsistent with Christianity's truth claim. I will pursue Guarino's question through a consideration of the Commission's statement.

In brief, I want to suggest that, rather than contradicting Christian revelation, the postmodern perspective of a thinker like Gadamer can help us come to terms with the historical character of Christian truth. It can help us recover possibilities within the tradition which are covered and neglected when one reception of Christian faith is granted an absolute status. Foundationalist thinking legitimates the hegemony of a particular perspective. In doing so, it can mistake a historical perspective, with its inevitable limits and distortions, for the ontological structure of reality. In contrast, a postmodern point of view implies a more modest claim about how much we know. It reminds us that the divine Word spoken into history remains mystery, a mystery only history can disclose.

My treatment will have four parts. After (1) some observations on dogmatic truth, and history, and (2) some reflections on creation and the cross, (3) I will raise several questions about the significance of postmodernism for natural law theory, before (4) concluding with my own proposal.

DOGMATIC TRUTH AND HISTORY

Postmodern thinkers emphasize the historicity of human knowledge. Gadamer, for example, argues that the truth claim of an ancient

⁷ International Theological Commission, "On the Interpretation of Dogmas," trans. Carl Peter, *Origins* 20 (May 17, 1990) 1-14; hereafter cited as "Interpretation of Dogmas."

text is not an original meaning to be reconstructed through methodic research. Rather the truth of a text occurs as it is appropriated in ever new historical contexts. Ancient text and contemporary interpreter reflect different historical-cultural contexts. The interpreter's historical-cultural context constitutes the possibility for interpretation and is, thereby, an intrinsic element of that interpretation. Interpretation is a fusion of the horizon of the text with that of the contemporary interpreter. The notion of an Archimedean vantage point which transcends history mistakes the nature of human knowledge. An interpreter's historical context is not something to be overcome; it is the ground for interpretation. The truth of a text is not a permanent reference but its effective history. This truth occurs in the effects the text has as it is appropriated within the many horizons of history.⁸

Gadamer's account of interpretation, which is rooted in Heidegger's philosophical anthropology, seemingly challenges the Church's dogmatic tradition. Both Guarino and the International Theological Commission reject Gadamer's version of postmodernism as incompatible with dogmatic truth. Dogmas are true statements in that they assert something about an actual (objective-ontological) state of affairs. This truth endures—a common reference identified by a common speech—amid the flux of time and culture. Guarino writes that the dogmatic tradition requires both a permanent, identifiable reference across historical flux and a foundation for this noetic claim. "In order to maintain this material identity of the salvific, revelatory narrative, definitive ecclesial teaching requires a determinate and stable foundation which allows for the reconstructive understanding of that teaching, its integral transmission and its referential nature."⁹

The problematic character of the relationship between dogmatic truth and history is not a new topic. In 1973 the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith addressed this question in *Mysterium ecclesiae*.¹⁰ *Mysterium ecclesiae* cites Vatican I's teaching that the "meaning of sacred dogmas must always be maintained which Holy Mother Church

⁸ Gadamer's hermeneutical theory, presented in Part 2 of *Truth and Method*, is well known and frequently cited. The ontological implications of that theory, presented in Part 3, have received less attention. The postmodern character of Gadamer's thought becomes clear in Part 3. For example, "Being that can be understood is language" (474). "The objectifying procedures of natural science and the concept of being-in-itself, which is intended in all knowledge, proved to be an abstraction when viewed from the medium that language is" (476).

⁹ Guarino 53. Guarino cites Walter Kasper's foundationalism and the transcendental ontologies of Lonergan and Rahner as attempts to meet the requirements of the dogmatic tradition noted above (*ibid.* 39, and n. 9).

¹⁰ *Mysterium ecclesiae*, in *Origins* 3 (19 July 1973) 97–100, 110–12.

declared once and for all, nor should one ever depart from that meaning under the guise of or in the name of a more advanced understanding" (DS 3020). *Mysterium ecclesiae* allows that, at least sometimes, dogmas can be enunciated by the magisterium in terms that "bear traces" of "the changeable conceptions of a given epoch." The meaning and enduring truth are distinct from such traces and "for this reason theologians seek to define exactly the intention of teaching proper to the various formulas." Pope John's statement at the opening of Vatican II is cited: "One thing is the deposit of faith, which consists of the truths contained in sacred doctrine, another thing is the manner of presentation, always however with the same meaning and significance." The pope's statement implies "that we can know the true and unchanging meaning of dogmas."¹¹

Mysterium ecclesiae thus suggests a distinction between lasting meaning (truth) and its mode of expression (dogmatic formula). As Karl Rahner observed, the document has not "completely resisted the temptation to make things easy for itself by making a simple distinction between mode of expression and content (though there can never be content without a certain mode of expression)."¹² The more recent ITC statement "On the Interpretation of Dogmas," while referring to *Mysterium ecclesiae*, retreats a bit from this distinction.

The ITC document is concerned with the relativism it perceives in contemporary hermeneutical theories like those of Gadamer and liberation theologians. According to the Commission, Catholic theology proceeds from two faith convictions about the Church's dogmas. First, dogmas express truth revealed by God. Second, the truth thus transmitted is universally valid and unchangeable in its substance.¹³ But the ITC does not guard the permanence of truth by distinguishing it from historical expression. In other words, truth is not identified with a meaning which somehow transcends historical formulation. Though content is not reducible to expression, "no clear-cut separation can be made between the content and form of the statement. The symbolic system of language is not mere external apparel, but to a certain ex-

¹¹ *Mysterium ecclesiae* 110–111. The late Carl Peter, a member of the Commission when it published its statement on the interpretation of dogma (and translator of the English version cited here), argued that Bernard Lonergan's entire project was guided by Vatican I's doctrine about the permanent meaning of dogmas (Carl Peter, "A Shift to the Human Subject in Roman Catholic Theology," *Communio* 6 [1979] 68–9). For a discussion of other theological efforts to explicate the permanence of dogmatic meaning, see my *Athens and Jerusalem* (New York: Paulist, 1993) 157–72.

¹² Karl Rahner, "Mysterium ecclesiae," in *Theological Investigations* 17, trans. Margaret Kohl (New York: Crossroad, 1981) 151.

¹³ "Interpretation of Dogmas" A.II.1., p. 4.

tent the incarnation of a truth."¹⁴ While using categories from philosophical systems, the Church has created its own language which belongs to its proclamation of the truth. These formulas "are not to be revised if one does not wish to lose sight of the 'reality' manifested in them." That reality can be expressed in new ways and in new cultures, but "the truth of revelation nevertheless remains always the same 'not only in its real substance (content), but also in its decisive linguistic formulations.'"¹⁵

The early and central dogmas of the tradition, about the nature of God and Christ, use metaphysical language from Greek philosophy. The ITC is quick to point out that this use does not bind the faith to any specific philosophical perspective. Moreover, in using philosophical categories the Church transforms them and makes them its own. The Commission notes, for example, how the Church adapted the categories of hypostasis and person in order to express revealed truth about God and Jesus.¹⁶ But these adaptations remain within the framework of classic, realist metaphysics. If the categories used are intrinsic to the meaning intended, as the ITC asserts, then one must conclude that orthodoxy is bound to some form of classic metaphysics.¹⁷ In turn, the adequacy of categories to express revealed truth discloses something about the character of all human truth.

According to its nature, the truth itself can only be the one and therefore universal truth. What was once recognized as truth must therefore be acknowledged as true in an enduringly valid sense. In its proclamation of the one historically revealed gospel, which is nonetheless valid for all peoples and eras, the Church is able to join itself to this historical and universally open nature of human reason. Indeed, the Church can purify that nature and lead it to its deepest fulfillment.¹⁸

This last observation suggests that the intrinsic relationship between dogmatic assertions and revealed truth discloses the nature of human knowledge. The noetic character of revelation implies an on-

¹⁴ Ibid. C.III.3., p. 12.

¹⁵ Ibid. C.III.3., p. 13 (here the Commission seems to return to Pius XII's position in *Humani generis* no. 16).

¹⁶ Ibid. C.III.3., p. 12.

¹⁷ One notes here at least a step away from the Commission's assertion in 1972: "Dogmatic definitions ordinarily use a common language; while they may make use of apparently philosophical terminology, they do not thereby bind the Church to a particular philosophy" (International Theological Commission, "Theological Pluralism," in *Texts and Documents 1969-1985* [San Francisco: Ignatius, 1989] 91).

¹⁸ "Interpretation of Dogmas" A.I.4., p. 4.

tological notion of truth.¹⁹ While the ITC begins its statement on the interpretation of dogmas by granting the historical character of all human knowledge, it insists on the need for a metaphysical hermeneutic that inquires into reality itself. This hermeneutic "takes as a premise that truth reveals itself in and through human reason, so that the truth of reality itself shines in the light of human reason." What is needed is a "renewal of metaphysics and its inquiry into the truth of reality."²⁰ The ITC equates truth with metaphysical realism and specifically affirms the stoic teaching on truth.²¹

Later the Commission states: "The fundamental assertion of Christian faith consists in the confession that the Logos, which shines forth in an anticipatory and fragmentary way in all reality, was concretely promised in the Old Testament and appeared in all its fullness in Jesus Christ in concrete historical form (John 1:3 ff., 14)."²² This choice and formulation of the fundamental assertion of faith reinforces the link between revelation and classical metaphysics. Two related observations about the fundamental assertion indicate why this is so.

First, the subordinate clause introducing the fundamental assertion of faith evokes the Stoic view that reality is permeated by logos, an intelligibility that can be grasped by human reason. In this way the ITC suggests revelatory confirmation of a philosophical perspective which was part of the intellectual context of early dogmatic development.²³ Second, the Commission identifies the Incarnation of the

¹⁹ One can, but need not, draw this conclusion from the teaching of Vatican I that faith "sets reason free and guards it from errors and furnishes it with extensive knowledge" (*Dei Filius*, in DS 3019).

²⁰ "Interpretation of Dogmas" A.I.3., p. 3. The Commission's critique of hermeneutical, liberation, and feminist theologies centers on this point: "In the background stands ultimately the question regarding the theological understanding of truth and reality" (A.II.3., p. 5).

²¹ *Ibid.* A.I.4., p. 3.

²² *Ibid.* B.III.1., p. 8.

²³ The introduction of Stoicism into the heart of the Christian truth claim can be traced back at least to Justin Martyr; see his first *Apology* and *Dialogue with Trypho*. Justin held that natural knowledge, the knowledge of philosophers, is a partial grasp of that Logos incarnate and fully revealed in Christ. In this way Justin and other Apologists presented Christianity as the goal of the philosophical quest, as the true philosophy. Aloys Grillmeier observes that the Apologists "made something special out of the Logos doctrine and gave it a key position in Christian theology. They regarded the Logos: (1) in its cosmological aspect as creative Word; (2) in its noetic aspect as the basis of knowledge and truth; (3) in its moral aspect as the basis and embodiment of the moral law; (4) in its psychological aspect as the original form of thought (*verbum mentis*); (5) in its saving-historical aspect as Word of revelation and mediator of salvation" (Grillmeier, *Christ in Christian Tradition 1: From the Apostolic Age to Chalcedon* [Atlanta: John Knox, 1975] 109.) One recognizes in Grillmeier's summary the profound and enduring

Word, proclaimed in John's prologue, as the core Christian belief. In choosing John 1:14 as core, the Commission reasserts what Aloys Grillmeier calls "the most influential New Testament text in the history of dogma."²⁴

Grillmeier's observation refers to the fact that, to a great extent, it was the appropriation of John 1:14 within the Hellenist world which gave rise to the dogmatic tradition. The intellectual and philosophical perspectives of Hellenist Christians raised questions about the ontological meaning of this text. What is the nature of the Logos, and consequently of God and Jesus? In turn the Church employed and adapted the language and categories of Greek philosophy to answer these questions. The consequent fusion of revelation with classic metaphysics (in the trinitarian and Christological dogmas) came to constitute Christian orthodoxy.

In its fundamental assertion of the faith the commission identifies the core of Christian belief with the text which originally drove the dogmatic appropriation of the faith in metaphysical categories. When combined with its insistence on the "decisive linguistic formulations" of that appropriation, and its presuppositions about the nature of truth, the commission seemingly ties revelation and orthodoxy to the metaphysical realism characteristic of Hellenist thought.

But historical consciousness continues to raise troublesome questions. The truth of divine revelation is expressed in Scripture and in ecclesial doctrine. Yet historical consciousness prevents us from simply accepting these texts as statements of the matter itself. Once we think historically, we wonder what lies behind the texts.²⁵ Jesus is God's revelation. But the Jesus depicted in the Gospels reflects his life, message, and fate as retrieved within different communities of faith. Our only access to Jesus is through his reception by early ecclesial communities. The historical quests for the "real Jesus" who stands behind the tradition has proved futile.²⁶ His truth comes to us only in its multiple and continuing receptions within history. No single recep-

influence of stoic-logos philosophy on Christian doctrine and theology. Christian revelation and classical metaphysics are united.

²⁴ Ibid. 26.

²⁵ The ITC mentions the historical-critical method and its efforts to "get behind" texts. But it treats this as an Enlightenment strategy to attack the development of dogmas as a distortion of an authentic, primordial reality (C.I.2., p. 10). What I am suggesting in this article does not imply such a negative evaluation. Rather Scripture and dogma reflect the effective history of God's revelation within different contexts. This is how truth occurs.

²⁶ See, e.g., the first volume of John Meier's *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus* (New York: Doubleday, 1991) 21–26.

tion, scriptural or dogmatic, can be granted hegemony. The Logos Christology of John's prologue is a canonical, valid, and true retrieval of the Christ event. But it is not exclusively true. It does not grasp the reality of Christian truth to the exclusion of other Christological perspectives. The New Testament is not reducible to John's prologue.²⁷

Similarly the dogmas of the early councils reflect the retrieval of Christian faith within a Hellenistic context. These dogmatic texts are neither beginnings nor ends. That is to say, these texts neither constitute the initial revelatory reality nor do they assert the conclusion of revelation's reception.²⁸ They are canonized moments in transmission of Christ's truth.²⁹ Yet, to use a phrase employed by Guarino, the ITC seems to want to "stop the show" at the reception of Christian faith within the perspective of classic metaphysics.

In order to make the point, let me suggest an alternative fundamental Christian assertion: God raised the crucified Jesus from death. Certainly the proclamation of Jesus' cross and resurrection predates both John's prologue and the dogma of the Incarnation. The earliest level of the Christian tradition proclaims: "God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified" (Acts 2:36). Christianity begins, both temporally and theologically, with the Easter faith that God has raised Jesus and made him the Christ. Jesus' eschatological message, his proclamation that God will raise the dead and establish the kingdom, is confirmed in his own resurrection. Christians wait for Christ's full exercise of lordship when he returns to establish the promised kingdom.

The first believers in Christ's resurrection anticipated his immediate return. The New Testament evidences adjustments in various ecclesial communities to the Lord's delay. Thus, the earliest witnesses to God's revelation in Christ had to adapt their understanding in the face

²⁷ Edward Schillebeeckx, *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology* (New York: Crossroad, 1979) especially 550–58. Schillebeeckx accepts John's Logos Christology and the ensuing dogmatic tradition. But he argues that there are other New Testament Christologies that can be fruitful for contemporary believers. In a similar way Juan Luis Segundo argues that there is a pluralism of sometimes conflicting theological perspectives in Scripture. He suggests that, rather than seeing Scripture and dogma as teaching clear and distinct truths, we ought to think of the tradition as a divine pedagogy, a process of learning (*The Liberation of Dogma* [Maryknoll: Orbis, 1992]). The ITC statement recognizes the pluralism of perspectives in the New Testament. But it does so within the context of an insistence on the unity of truth. There can be no contradiction between perspectives (B.L.3., p. 6). The postmodern perspective I am defending suggests that the unity of truth eludes us within history. Attributing hegemony to one canonical perspective amounts to imposing a premature unity.

²⁸ "Interpretation of Dogmas" C.III.1., p. 12.

²⁹ See my essay "Creatures of Truth," *The Thomist* 56 (1992) 647–68.

of the historically unanticipated. The saving and revelatory work of Christ is incomplete. The final truth of Christian faith remains promise and hope.

The story of the faith's appropriation within the Hellenist world is well known. The fusion of horizons, Christian and Greek, disclosed the truth of Jesus in the ontological categories of Greek philosophy noted above. This is a brilliant, Spirit-guided achievement which remains the enduring dogmatic and theological patrimony of the Church. It is true. But recognizing the Easter proclamation that lies behind it suggests the possibility of thinking about Christian truth in other categories. In other words, while the Church necessarily appropriated Christian truth in the ontological categories of the Hellenist world in which it lived, that appropriation need not bind us to an ontological conception of truth. This is especially the case since the central symbol of Christian faith, the cross, calls into question all that humanity "knows" about God apart from the paschal event. This too is part of the fundamental assertion of faith, that God raised the crucified Jesus from death.

CREATION AND THE CROSS

With clarity and insight Guarino identifies the underlying issue. He concludes that postmodernity's incompatibility with Christian orthodoxy is rooted in the doctrine of creation. "[T]he ultimate and overarching horizon of Being is creation, not history," the creation *ex nihilo* "from which an eternal God began a dialogue of salvation" with humanity. "This final horizon is traceable, therefore, to a particular event rather than to an unending dialectic of givenness and concealedness."³⁰ The ITC similarly insists that the truth of revelation is the truth of being.³¹

Guarino cites Walter Kasper's description of the relationship between classic metaphysics and Christian doctrine. Kasper, a member of the Commission, chaired the subcommission which prepared the statement on the interpretation of dogmas. In *Theology and Church* he argues that Christianity's truth claim requires a metaphysics. The nature of truth had been established by the Greeks and was "essentially deepened by Christian revelation." Aquinas summarized this conception of truth. Ultimately, for Aquinas, truth is based in creation. God grants being to what need not be. The intelligibility (the order, the ratio, the logos) of reality is rooted in the divine design for the created world. When we know what is, being, we grasp the divine mind in a limited way; we grasp in a finite manner the eternal ideas which are

³⁰ Guarino 53.

³¹ "Interpretation of Dogmas" A.II.3., p. 5.

the exemplary cause of creation. Ontological truth created by God thereby grounds humanity's finite grasp of the truth.³²

This metaphysical-epistemological scheme is a cosmic view, an image of reality which includes both God and creation. While it is evoked above in defense of dogmatic truth, it is most clearly and practically at work in the traditional teaching about nature and natural law. Joseph Fuchs summarizes the ontological-epistemological grounds for natural law theory:

The nature in which reason recognizes a natural order is the work of God the Creator. Reason engaged upon the intelligibilities of nature must be seen as God's work. Only he has written the law of nature into man's heart when creating him [sic]. The voice of nature that admonishes, orders and teaches, together with the reason that scans nature and our own hearts, are the true voices of divine reason. This natural law is as certainly a manifestation of God's intellect and will as his positively revealed commandment.³³

This is not a modest scheme. It encompasses the divine mind and will, the relationship between God and creation, an anthropology, and a transhistorical notion of rationality. Postmodern thought suggests a more modest perspective. It does so, in part, by helping us retrieve elements of the tradition which are neglected when the cosmic scheme described above is granted hegemony. The Catholic-Christian tradition, like any tradition, is not a unified whole. As already noted, there are differing and sometimes competing perspectives within Scripture. This is also the case with the postbiblical tradition. The changing contexts of history can disclose various and sometimes neglected possibilities.³⁴

³² Walter Kasper, *Theology and Church* (New York: Crossroad, 1989) 135–36.

³³ Joseph Fuchs, *Natural Law: A Theological Investigation* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1965) 9. In the course of this passage Fuchs cites a series of papal teachings. Among them: Leo XIII, *Libertas*, AAS 20 (1887 ff.) 597; Pius XI, *Casti connubii*, AAS 22 (1930) 539, and *Quadragesimo anno*, AAS 23 (1931) 191; Pius XII, Allocution "Soyez les bienvenus," AAS 45 (1953) 607, and Allocution "La solennità della Pentecoste," AAS 33 (1941) 196.

³⁴ What I have in mind here is well exemplified by Elizabeth A. Johnson's recent book *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992). Johnson's work retrieves possibilities within the tradition which have been neglected because of patriarchal hegemony. The paradigm being created by feminist theological discourse casts new light on the tradition and the divine Mystery it discloses. Johnson's work also indicates the practical and political ramifications of liberating, or failing to liberate, our images of God from patriarchal hegemony. The last section of this article, concerning natural law, returns to this important point. The ITC statement on the interpretation of dogma recognizes that the tradition is constituted by many traditions. It also acknowledges that the Church, in stressing some aspect of the tradition, obscures others. (C.II.2., p. 11).

The ontological-epistemological scheme described above reflects the reception of revelation within Hellenistic categories. But this cosmic picture is not one of untroubled coherence. There lurks within it a surd—physical and moral evil. For, if God is responsible for all that is, whence does evil come? Augustine and Aquinas offer the Catholic tradition's most frequent response to this troubling question: Evil does not exist; evil is not a being but the deprivation of being, the absence of good.³⁵ This deprivation was introduced into creation by the choice of free creatures (angelic and human). Augustine and Aquinas understood Genesis 3 as an accurate narrative of an actual event. But even this understanding could not account for creatures' propensity for evil. In any case, a literal understanding of Genesis 3 is no longer available to us. The physical evil of innocent suffering, e.g. a child's fatal cancer, is not the result of some primeval sin. It is simply the consequence of how nature works. Nature is not only beautiful, it is cruel.

The classic problem of evil presumes that the doctrine of creation offers us a grasp of the relationship between God and the world. We take seriously our notion of God designing and calling into being a well-ordered cosmos. Of course we know that our use of temporal sequence to speak of design and creation does not apply to God. Time is an aspect of creation and not of God who is simple. But still we know a great deal. That is the problem. Our formulation of the problem of evil is rooted in what we already know about God and creation. We know too much. Here is where the revelatory event, coupled with post-modern thought, can help.

I have offered an alternative to the ITC's fundamental assertion of faith: God raised the crucified Jesus from death. In this alternative evil is not a surd challenging the Christian notion of God. Rather, with the cross, evil appears at the very core of revelation. It is the crucified whom God raises from death and makes Lord. The cross is intrinsic to the revelatory event.

The crucifixion of Jesus is one more example from history of moral and physical evil. Here is a good and just man tortured and killed for a crime he did not commit. He is abandoned by most of his friends. Moreover, he seems abandoned by the God whom he said could be trusted to care for us in all things. There is no logos here, no well-ordered universe. The God of philosophy, known from the world's design and beauty, is negated on Calvary. The earliest comments in the tradition on the relationship between Greek philosophy and revelation come from St. Paul. Precisely because of the cross Paul sees not a

³⁵ *Summa theologiae* 1, qq. 48–49. Aquinas admits that the fact of evil falls within divine providence (1, q. 22, a. 2).

complimentarity but contradiction: "Where is the wise one? . . . Has not God made the wisdom of the world foolish?" (1 Cor. 1:20). In the cross of Jesus God negates the philosophical wisdom of the Greeks. In the cross God's self-revelation occurs through an identification not with logos, not with the rational order of the universe, but with the surd of evil. Human wisdom is confounded rather than affirmed. All human expectations of what God should be are negated.

Jon Sobrino's remarks about the cross in *Christology at the Crossroads* make this point with clarity and power.³⁶ He argues that the traditional doctrine of God (and consequently of creation) has neglected the revelatory character of the cross. While the cross stands at the center of Christian faith, the common conception of God does not derive from it.³⁷ "The Greek metaphysical conception of God's being and perfection renders any theology of the cross impossible. . . . The death of Jesus had no positive impact on the formulations about God and Jesus that were elaborated in the first few centuries of the Church's existence."³⁸

The cross has been domesticated in order to fit it into the grand ontological scheme. An example, cited by Sobrino, is Anselm's *Cur Deus Homo*. Anselm explains why the incarnate Son had to die so that creation might be restored to its proper relationship with God. The cross is thereby given a logical role within the grand scheme. Anselm's well-known version of cosmic order reflects the feudal structure of the society in which he lived.³⁹ He mistook a social system for the order of creation. In doing so he gave that political and social system divine confirmation. In all of this Anselm simply knows too much. The scandal of the cross is suppressed by placing Jesus' death into a preexisting theological schema. Anselm is but an example of those who seek "to arrive at knowledge of the cross on the basis of some previously held conception of God, when in fact one should try to arrive at God on the basis of Jesus' cross."⁴⁰ "We cannot explain the cross logically by appealing to God, who supposedly is known already, because the first thing the cross does here is raise questions about God himself and the authentic reality of the deity."⁴¹

The cross thereby calls into question the philosophical perspective which the Theological Commission and Guarino presume. The Greek metaphysical and epistemological tradition makes it "impossible to

³⁶ Jon Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1978). Sobrino's theology of the cross is profoundly influenced by Jürgen Moltmann's *The Crucified God* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974).

³⁷ *Ibid.* 191.

³⁸ *Ibid.* 195.

³⁹ Walter Kasper, *Jesus the Christ* (New York: Paulist, 1977) 219–21.

⁴⁰ Sobrino, *Christology* 193.

⁴¹ *Ibid.* 188.

recognize God in the cross of Jesus."⁴² Rather than beginning with what the metaphysical tradition knows about God from reason and wonder, Sobrino (in a move typical of liberation theologians) begins with the fact of human suffering.

My suggestion is that postmodern thought can help us understand what I have described thus far. These observations are not aimed at overturning the dogmatic tradition or a Logos Christology. These retain their enduring truth claim. What is at stake is the nature of that claim. To repeat Guarino's phrase, the dogmas of the Church's early centuries do not "stop the show" as if they grasped the reality itself. The Christian tradition is not the simple progress of one reception of the Christ event. It is not reducible to the metaphysical categories of the Hellenistic reception.⁴³

The fundamental assertions of Christian faith mentioned here are but two possibilities. In postmodern terms, they are paradigmatic windows into the Christian mystery. They constitute paradigmatic contexts which, while disclosing elements of truth, do not exhaust that truth. They are incommensurate, in that they are not reducible to one another. In this they exemplify a central insight of postmodernism. Human knowledge is intrinsically related to historical-cultural context. No single paradigm can claim hegemony.

This approach to the tradition suggests humility to all interpreters and prevents the ontologizing of a moment in the tradition. Without such a perspective Christians will continue to repeat Anselm's error mistaking historical context for the ontological order of reality. This perspective also suggests the need to think again about natural law.

NATURAL LAW

Theological discussion about the usefulness and appropriateness of postmodern thought has generally centered around foundational and hermeneutical issues. In this last section I want to raise some questions about the significance of postmodernism for natural law theory. My goal is to raise questions, not resolve them.

Natural law theory is not a unified system. But within the Catholic tradition it usually involves three interrelated elements. First, the created universe is ordered according to a divine design. The order of nature reflects God's will for creation. Second, humanity is created in

⁴² *Ibid.* 198.

⁴³ The complex play of perspectives within the tradition is exemplified in the irony that Nietzsche first heard of God's death from the centurion in Mark's Gospel (15:39) and from the doctrinal tradition (DS 263). But, as Nietzsche observed, it takes time (history) for the news to arrive.

the divine image. Human reason is a finite reflection of the divine intellect. When we know the order of nature we grasp, at least in part, God's design and, therefore, the divine will. Third, there is within humanity a universal and natural inclination to the good. The good person attends to this natural inclination and, following it, grows in well-being and happiness through the choice of specific goods.⁴⁴

Each of these three elements is problematic within a postmodern perspective. For some this will be one more reason why Catholic theology must eschew postmodernism. My earlier argument suggests that the tradition is too complex for such a simple response. The Trojan horse of history has been within the city walls from the beginning. We ought at least consider the questions raised by postmodernism about the basic elements of natural-law theory.

First, postmodern thought, in both the humanities and natural sciences, argues that all human knowledge is historically conditioned. Historical context is the ground for and intrinsic to knowledge. The notion of truth as correspondence of mind with an ontological, trans-historical state of affairs mistakes the nature of human knowledge. Theologically this means that we ought not identify an understanding of nature with the eternal will of God. Such a move amounts to ontologizing what is historical and transitory. Above we noted Anselm's cosmic scheme. Anselm's scheme reflects the order of feudal society. Based on that order, Anselm determines how God chooses to save humanity. In this Anselm's theory exemplifies how ontological systems mistake a historically conditioned perspective for God's design and eternal will.

In passing it must be noted that this kind of "ontologizing" has profound practical and political implications. The identification of a historical context with God's will grants that context the highest possible validation. God can thereby be used to justify the unjust structures of a social system. History is strewn with victims of the "natural order." Women, people of color, and homosexuals have been exploited, abused, and treated as chattel because this seemed nature's way. The natural superiority of males, white males, appeared an obvious given in nature. Homosexuality seems to contradict God's eternal design for nature, i.e. the objective order. How does the "unnatural" occur in the midst of nature? No one knows.⁴⁵ But, since homosexuals contradict

⁴⁴ *Summa theologiae* 1-2, q. 91, a. 2; and q. 94. See Joseph Fuchs, *Natural Law* 9.

⁴⁵ Under the influence of Augustine the tradition has long associated sexual desire with concupiscence and concupiscence with original sin. Both Augustine and Aquinas thought lust, especially sexual desire not ordered to procreation within marriage, to be the result of original sin (*The City of God* 14.26; *Summa theologiae* 1, q. 98) They had no

"the objective order of nature," they seem fair game for discrimination.⁴⁶ Natural law can be ideology.

In contrast, God's identification, on the cross, with history's victims can be heard as a divine protest against the natural order of things. At the very least these considerations must give pause, suggesting that what is called nature might be the projection of a distorted social system. We ought to be as subtle and cautious in speaking about God's eternal design and will as we are about describing the divine nature.⁴⁷

Second, natural law is, ultimately, the intelligent and free participation of rational creatures in the eternal laws of God.⁴⁸ The assertion of permanent, natural moral laws (rooted in eternal law) requires, as its necessary condition, that reason have a permanent structure. In order that the laws which reason identifies may be lasting, what constitutes human rationality must also be lasting.

One of the reasons for the emergence of postmodern thought has been the realization that what constitutes rationality changes with

notion of homosexuality as a condition and presumed homosexual acts were performed by heterosexuals. The question in the text about the origin of homosexuality implies recent awareness of sexual orientation; see John McNeill, S.J., *The Church and Homosexuality* (New York: Pocket Books, 1976) 99–108.

⁴⁶ The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith defends some discrimination against homosexuals in the revised text, "Responding to Legislative Proposals on Discrimination against Homosexuals" (*Origins* 22 [1992] 173–77; see esp. no. 11). The CDF seems to think that, if individuals would just keep quiet about their homosexuality, all would be well (no. 14). Is the CDF recommending denial? Is this an instance of ecclesial dysfunction in order to maintain the illusion of nature? The CDF quotes its earlier Letter on the Pastoral Care of Homosexuals which deplors violence against homosexuals (no. 7). But it suggests that such violence is understandable in the face of efforts to claim homosexuality is not disordered. "When such a claim is made and when homosexual activity is consequently condoned, or when civil legislation is introduced to protect behavior to which no one has any conceivable right, neither the Church nor society at large should be surprised when other distorted notions and practices gain ground, and irrational and violent reactions increase" ("Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons," in *The Vatican and Homosexuality*, ed. Jeannine Gramick and Pat Furey [New York: Crossroad, 1988] 6). In other words, by challenging the natural order, homosexuals become responsible for the violence directed against them. This position reflects an almost angry tenor of the CDF's documents on homosexuality. As Mary Jo Weaver observes, "the vehemence of the language . . . and the idea that the Church is under attack from deceitful enemies" is reminiscent of Pius X's *Pascendi* ("In Defense of Omnipotence: The Case against Dialogue," in *The Vatican and Homosexuality* 173).

⁴⁷ Given the doctrine of divine simplicity, speech about God's intellect and will is speech about God's being. The Fourth Lateran Council's well-known axiom should be kept in mind: No similarity between Creator and creation can be expressed without implying an even greater dissimilarity between them (DS 806).

⁴⁸ *ST* 1–2, q. 91, a. 2.

historical context. What counts as a rational argument differs with the topic, time, place, and paradigm. The practice of science, for example, is not fixed by permanent principles and procedures. Rather, science is defined by what scientists do, by how they argue, by what they accept as rational warrants for validation. Richard Bernstein makes the point clearly when he approvingly summarizes Richard Rorty's position that "it is an illusion to think that there is a permanent set of ahistorical standards of rationality which the 'philosopher' or epistemologist can discover and which will unambiguously tell us who is rational and who is not."⁴⁹

In the history of science and philosophy the historical character of reason is manifest in the fact that once-persuasive arguments may cease to convince. This seems to be what is occurring in contemporary Catholic moral debates. Natural-law arguments rarely convince people outside the Church; their ability to convince wanes within the Church. Pope Paul VI recognized this when, in *Humanae vitae*, he counseled priests: "For you know that you are bound by such submission not more for those reasons that have been brought forth than because of the light of the Holy Spirit which shepherds of the Church especially enjoy in explaining the truth."⁵⁰ Even though the rational arguments for the pope's teaching may not convince, priests should submit to the teaching on the basis of faith that the Spirit guides the Church's magisterium. That a teaching based in rational argument must be accepted on faith in authority exemplifies the difficult position of natural-law theory. It is a rational system which is more and more defended on the basis of ecclesial authority. Why? One reason is that its arguments no longer convince.

One might hold that the magisterium has privileged access to the nature of human reason. This could be an implication of the ITC's assertion that the Church can purify the nature of human reason "and lead it to its deepest fulfillment"⁵¹ Pope Paul's remark noted just above can be interpreted to mean that the guardians of revealed truth (the magisterium) are also the guardians of authentic human reason.

This leaves one in the rather odd position of grounding the nature and character of reason in an act of faith. It risks isolating the theological notion of reason from the wider intellectual conversation. The

⁴⁹ Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism* 67. See also Ostovich, *Reason in History* 162-73.

⁵⁰ *Humanae vitae* no. 28. This is the literal translation of a rather awkward sentence: "Etenim nostis tali vos obsequio devinciri non potius illis de causis, quae allatae sunt, quam ob Sancti Spiritus lumen, quo praecipue Ecclesiae Pastores in explananda veritate fruuntur."

⁵¹ "Interpretation of Dogmas" A.I.4, p. 4.

reciprocal relationship between faith and reason is subsumed under the hegemony of the ontological scheme. Theology's conversation between faith and reason must stop with classic metaphysics. The postmodern discussion about the nature of rationality is thereby excluded from theological discourse. My suggestion is that we not be too hasty in reaching such conclusions.

Third, natural-law theory generally holds that there is in humanity a natural inclination to the good. For example, St. Thomas taught that there is a natural conscience, *synderesis*, an intellectual habit which possesses the first precepts of natural law.⁵²

In contrast, postmodern thought looks to history and culture as the sources of individual conscience.⁵³ The common argument against universal conscience is that the dictates of natural law and natural rights are, in fact, not universal. Were they universal they would appear in every society. This is manifestly not the case. It is for this reason that Leo Strauss, in his attempt to save natural right from historicism, rejects Aquinas as an ally. The appeal to universal conscience undermines Strauss's argument for a universal natural law.⁵⁴ For our purposes it is enough to observe that the postmodern emphasis on human historicity leads to a rejection of the notion of universal, natural conscience.

Again, my aim in this section is simply to indicate the profound challenge postmodern thought presents to natural law theory. Guarino's excellent essay and the ITC's statement exemplify a developing conversation within theology about postmodernism. Their interest is dogmatic truth. My suggestion is that this conversation include the implications of postmodernism for natural-law theory and moral theology.⁵⁵

A PROPOSAL

Let me conclude by offering a modest proposal for approaching these volatile questions. In his comments on the Galileo case, Pope John

⁵² *ST* 1, q. 79, aa. 11–12; 1–2, q. 94, a. 1. See Douglas Kries, "On Leo Strauss's Understanding of the Natural Law Theory of St. Thomas," *The Thomist* 57 (1993) 218.

⁵³ For example, Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1979) 178; *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1982) 166.

⁵⁴ Kries "On Leo Strauss's Understanding" 215–21. Strauss's critique of Thomas occurs in *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1953) 129–30, 157–58.

⁵⁵ Two recent essays treat the significance of postmodern thought for moral theology: Lisa Sowle Cahill, "Feminist Ethics and the Challenge of Cultures," *Proceedings of The Catholic Theological Society of America* 48 (1993) 65–83; and Thomas R. Kopfensteiner, "Globalization and Autonomy of Moral Reasoning: An Essay in Fundamental Moral Theology," *TS* 54 (1993) 485–511.

Paul II observes that the new science "obliged theologians to examine their own criteria of scriptural interpretation. Most of them did not know how to do so." This crisis ultimately led to epistemological reflection on biblical science and to the modern exegetical methods which received approval in the Vatican II constitution *Dei verbum*. The pope admits that these methods had a hard time within the Church. At the end of the last century and the beginning of this one, "certain people, in their concern to defend the faith, thought it necessary to reject firmly based historical conclusions. This was a hasty and unhappy decision."⁵⁶

The pope's remarks suggest ecclesial modesty and humility in the face of new problems. The Galileo case raised questions about science and Scripture which people at that time were unable to answer. The questions were new, they required both more research and new theoretical paradigms. One road to resolution was recognition of the historically conditioned character of Scripture. As the pope observes, this recognition was controversial well into this century. Mistakes were made by overhasty judgments.

Postmodern thought reflects the West's continuing struggle to come to terms with human historicity. The meaning and implications of historicity remain unresolved. Theologians should not rush to judgment. As the pope indicates, suppression of historical work among scripture scholars at the beginning of this century did not solve the serious theological problems raised by historical consciousness. Suppression simply delayed and exasperated the problem. We can learn from that experience. We should take a patient and modest attitude toward efforts by theologians to address the profound insights and challenges postmodern thought presents to both the dogmatic and natural law traditions. The conclusions of Guarino and the 1989 statement of the International Theological Commission are, I think, premature.

⁵⁶ "Lessons of the Galileo Case," *Origins* 22 (12 November 1992) 372. Most significant among these "certain people" was, of course, Pius X.