The "Literal Reading" of Biblical Narrative in the Christian Tradition: Does It Stretch or Will It Break?

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An outsider to the lively, cacophonous discussion among contemporary theorists of literature is bound to wonder whether the very term "narrative tradition" isn't one more among the hypostatized constants, like the "canon" of literature or the notion of "literariness," which some of the discussants want to consign to dissolution. As a Christian theologian rather than a literary or biblical scholar, I shall not try to position the Bible in relation to this putative tradition; instead, I will comment on what I perceive to be a wide, though of course not unanimous, traditional consensus among Christians in the West on the primacy of the literal reading of the Bible, on its connection with narrative, on its present status and future outlook.

Much of the essay will be taken up with "hermeneutics," the theory of the interpretation of texts and of the character of understanding going into that activity. The exposition will be complex because both the theory itself and the criticisms often mounted against it today are complex, not to say esoteric. But the reason for the exercise is as simple as the exercise itself is difficult: In the midst of a mounting crescendo of dissent from thematic readings of narratives, including scriptural stories, as normative guides for living and believing as well as reading, hermeneutical theory is the most prominent contemporary champion of the embattled tradition. So if one comes to the conclusion that the value of this sustained and subtle effort is in the end questionable, one had best go through the paces of arguing the negative case. In sum, I believe that the tradition of the *sensus literalis* is the closest one can come to a consensus reading of the Bible as the sacred text in the Christian church and that current hermeneutical theory defends a revised form of it; but I also believe that the defense is a failure, so that, in the words of the essay's title, the literal reading will break apart under its ministrations. One may well hope that the *sensus literalis,* a much more supple notion than one might at first suspect, has a future. If it does, there will be good reason to explain what it is about with a far more modest theory—more modest both in its claims about what counts as valid interpretation and in the scope of the material on which it may pertinently comment.

This essay is therefore a strictly second-order affair, commenting on theories pertinent to the past as well as present and future *conditions* for the literal reading as a religious enterprise; it is neither an exercise within that traditional enterprise, nor even an argument in behalf of its continued viability. That viability, if any, will follow excellently from the actual, fruitful use religious people continue to make of it in ways that enhance their own and other people's lives, without the obscurantist features so often and unhappily associated with it. And even if, as may be expected, there is a continuing decline of the felt pertinence of this way of reading among those who do not make a direct religious use of it, this in no way alters the case for its viability in principle to Christian people, no matter how distressing it is bound to be to them as an actual cultural fact.

The association of narrative with religion generally and Christianity in particular has always been close, although the self-consciously systematic use of the concept "narrative" in Christian theology is a modern invention. Reference to "the sacred story" or "sacred" or "salvation history" as a category to describe what was taken to be the dominant content of the Bible did not arise until the seventeenth century.

Most, if not all, religions contain tales of creation, loss, quest, and restoration which symbolize reality and allow the readers or listeners access to the common identifying patterns making up that symbolized world, and to the communal ways of inhabiting it. It is generally assumed that such tales are originally oral in character, with no particular author, and that they are per-

petuated by a tradition of authoritative narrators or singers. These tellers adapt the content and pattern of a common story in their own individual ways usually under formulaic constraints imposed both by linguistic conventions and by the absence of all ironic distance between narrator, story, and audience. Tellers and listeners are part of the same symbolic and enacted world, so that the conditions for self-referencing authorial or listening perspectives are lacking.[1]

Not all oral epics can become candidates for the status of "sacred stories" within "sacred texts," especially if one accepts the speculative theory that the distinction between "profane" and "sacred" is universal as well as primitive,[2] so that "folktales" come to be distinguished from "myths," which are of the same narrative order but include sacred themes.[3] However, the easy and natural fusion of historical tradition, myth, and social custom in ancient folktales makes for the natural inclusion of some of them in sacred texts, once the transition from oral to literate culture takes place.

However one speculates, in this or other ways, about the origins of sacred stories—and speculation it remains—most literate cultures have them and include them in their sacred texts. Contact and conflict among religions within the same demographic area or cultural family typically result in a parasitic takeover in altered form of the elements of one such text by a later, or even a contemporaneous, religious group as part of its own scripture. So it was between Hinduism and Buddhism, between Hebrew and Christian Scripture, and between Hebrew and Christian Scripture and the Qur'an. Sacred stories are obvious targets for such scriptural transformation. The adherents of Jesus did not obliterate the story of John the Baptist, assigning him instead the role of forerunner and witness in the story of Jesus and thus a secure, if subordinate, place in the Christian New Testament.

I. The Primacy of the Literal Sense in Christian Interpretation

The most striking example of this kind of takeover in the history of Western culture is the inclusion of Jewish in Christian Scripture by means of "typology" or "figuration," so that not only "Old Testament" narrative but its legal texts and its prophetic as well as wisdom literature are taken to point beyond themselves to their "fulfillment" in the "New Testament." The Jewish texts are taken as "types" of the story of Jesus as their common "antitype," an appropriating procedure that begins in the New Testament, notably in the letters of Paul, the letter to the Hebrews, and the synoptic Gospels, and then becomes the common characteristic of the Christian tradition of scriptural interpretation until modern times.

Two features in this process are especially striking. First, in contrast to Hebrew Scripture and the Rabbinic tradition, in which cultic and moral regulations tend to be at once associated with and yet relatively autonomous from narrative biblical texts, Christian tradition tends to derive the meaning of such regulations—for example, the sacraments, the place of the "law" in Christian life, the love commandment—directly from (or refer them directly to) its sacred story, the life, teachings, death, and resurrection of Jesus the Messiah. This narrative thus has a unifying force and a prescriptive character in both the New Testament and the Christian community that, despite the importance of the Exodus accounts, neither narrative generally nor any specific narrative has in Jewish Scripture and the Jewish community.

Second, it was largely by reason of this centrality of the story of Jesus that the Christian interpretive tradition in the West gradually assigned clear primacy to the literal sense in the reading of Scripture, not to be contradicted by other legitimate senses—tropological, allegorical, and anagogical. In the ancient church, some of the parables of Jesus—for example, that of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37)—were interpreted allegorically as referring latently or spir-

itually to all sorts of types, and more especially to Jesus himself, but this could only be done because the story of Jesus itself was taken to have a literal or plain meaning: He was the Messiah, and the fourfold storied depiction in the gospels, especially of his passion and resurrection, was the enacted form of his identity as Messiah. Thus, by and large, except for the school of Origen in which the Old Testament received a kind of *independent* allegorical interpretation, allegory tended to be in the service of literal interpretation, with Jesus the center or focus of coherence for such reading. In that way, allegory remained legitimate up until the Reformation, even in its supposed rejection by the school of Antioch. Typological or figural interpretation, which was applied not only to the Old Testament but to the meaning of extrabiblical life and events, including one's own, stood in an unstable equilibrium between allegorical and literal interpretations. An event real in its own right and a meaning complex and meaningful in its own right are nonetheless understood to be incomplete, and thus "figures" of the event-and-or-meaning that fulfills them in the story of Jesus or in the universal story from creation to eschaton, of which it was the effectually shaping centerpiece.

The title of James Preus's important book on the history of Christian Old Testament interpretation, *From Shadow to Promise*,[4] points out a basic distinction between two kinds of allegorical and typological interpretations in Christian "Old Testament" reading. The "Old Testament" could be understood as "mere" letter or shadow, a "carnal" figure in the most derogatory sense, to which the "New Testament" stood in virtual contrast as the corresponding "spiritual" or genuine reality, and the all but direct contrary of its prefigured representation. There is often considerable similarity between orthodox Christian allegorical reading of the Old Testament and its hostile, negative interpretation on the part of Marcion, even though the orthodox, in contrast to Marcion, insisted on retaining the Old Testament as part of Scripture. However, other Christian exegetes thought they were honoring the Old Testament texts for their mysterious, many-sided, and spiritual profundity in reading them allegorically. For others yet, allegory and thus the "carnal" tales of the Old Testament were an educational means by which God accommodated himself to an early, crude, and temporary human condition—a theme that resurfaced during the Enlightenment era.

Whenever the Old Testament is seen as "letter" or "carnal shadow," spiritual and literal reading coincide, and figural and allegorical reading are one. "Spiritual reading" in this context is that of those who are in the first place privy to the truth directly rather than "under a veil," and who know, secondly, that the reality depicted is "heavenly," spiritual or religious, rather than earthly, empirical, material, or political. But since it is the story of Jesus taken literally that unveils this higher truth, the "literal" sense is the key to spiritual interpretation of the *New Testament.* In this as in some other respects, "letter" and "spirit" turn out to be mutually fit or reinforcing in much orthodox Christianity, despite the superficially contrary Pauline declaration (2 Cor. 3:6).

On the other hand, rather than as *shadow,* the Old Testament could be understood as *promise,* that is, as pointing to a state of affairs literally meant but only incompletely or not yet actualized at the time it was written, such as the prophecy in Jeremiah 31:31ff., "The days are coming when I shall make a New Covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah: After those days, saith the Lord, I will put my law in their inward parts and write it in their hearts." Not only was this saying taken to indicate the fulfillment of an earlier by a later historical event in a chronological sequence, but earlier and later are at the same time related as trope to true meaning; tablets of stone are a preliminary, imperfect figure for their *telos,* tablets of flesh. Much Reformation and orthodox Protestant exegesis was governed by this outlook. Figure and fulfillment, or type and antitype, are related along a temporal as well as a literary or metaphorical axis.

Interpretive traditions of religious communities tend to reach a consensus on certain central texts. We have noted that the literal reading of the gospel stories was the crucial instance of this consensus in the early church. What is striking about this is that the "literal" reading in this fashion became the normative or "plain" reading of the texts. There is no a priori reason why the "plain" reading could not have been "spiritual" in contrast to "literal," and certainly the temptation was strong. The identification of the plain with the literal sense was not a logically necessary development, but it did begin with the early Christian community and was perhaps unique to Christianity. The creed, "rule of faith" or "rule of truth" which governed the Gospels' use in the church asserted the primacy of their literal sense. Moreover, it did this right from the beginning in the *ascriptive* even more than the *descriptive* mode. That "Jesus"— not someone else or nobody in particular—is the subject, the agent, and patient of these stories is said to be their crucial point, and the descriptions of events, sayings, personal qualities, and so forth, become literal by being firmly predicated of him. Not until the Protestant Reformation is the literal sense understood as authoritative—because perspicuous—in its own right, without authorization from the interpretive tradition.

The upshot of this ruled use of the New Testament stories was of course bound to entail the expropriative rules for the interpretation of Jewish Scripture which we have noted, and all three cases of the procedure—shadow and reality, prophecy and fulfillment, metaphorical type and literal antitype—came to present modern Christian biblical reading with two enormous problems. First, how is one to acknowledge the autonomy of the Jewish scriptural tradition without a collapse of Christian interpretation? Even if you brutalized it, you needed Jewish Scripture; for what is a fulfillment without antecedents that need to be fulfilled? Christians could neither do without Jewish Scripture nor accord it that autonomous status that a modern understanding of religions calls for. The second problem is a natural extension of the first, and it has been mentioned by commentators from Gotthold Ephraim Lessing to Frank Kermode, by some in an upbeat, by others in a deeply pessimistic mood: Suppose now that the literal sense of the New Testament only prefigures a still newer reading that displaces it in turn, developed by a new set of inside interpreters who transcend the now old (i.e., New Testament), exoteric, or carnal to reach a new spiritual sense which, because it refers to the truth in its real and not veiled form, is identical with the *true* literal sense. That new reading could be a new religion, with a new story ranged onto the old—who knows, perhaps the Unification Church. On the other hand, it could already be history, for example the Ottoman Turks carrying the Qur'an westward, except that their hermeneutical triumph stopped short at the gates of Vienna. The new reading could also be the product of a vision of a new humanity in which the previous difference between insiders and outsiders, esoteric and exoteric, or spiritual and carnal reading would disappear: All humanity would be the true new church, reading past Scriptures in the light of their eternal and universal transformation. As Lessing envisioned it: "It will surely come, the time of a new eternal gospel, which is promised us even in the primers of the New Covenant itself." We will all be insiders on that climactic day.[5]

On the other hand, such a new reading could involve the discovery that the only inside information we have is that, Lessing notwithstanding, we are all outsiders to the truth, and the only point at which literal and true spiritual senses coincide therefore is not—as Christians have claimed—in the Gospel narratives, nor in any later substitute, but in the shock of recognition that, the road to truth being barred, there must be an end to the literal sense. Rather than all humanity being insiders, we are all outsiders, and the only thing we know is that the truth is what we do not know.[6] The very notion of a true referent of the narrative texts of the New Testament— historical or ideal, accessible or not—and of the textual meaning as possible truth in that sense is an illusion. For Kermode it is a persistent and haunting, perhaps even inescapable, illusion, since readers of narrative texts are forever caught up in their dialectical alternation of divinatory disclosure and foreclosing secrecy. For Deconstructionists, by contrast, the discovery of the illusory character of linguistic meaning as truth is liberating, and

with that liberation comes a way of reading a text which reverses the prior belief that texts open up a world, into the conviction that the world (or a world) must be seen as an indefinitely extended and open-ended, loosely interconnected, "intertextual" network, a kind of rhetorical *cosa nostra.*

II. Hermeneutical Theory, Deconstruction, and the Literal Sense

This destruction of "normative" or "true" reading means an end, among other things, to the enterprise called "hermeneutics." Right from the beginning of that enterprise in the early nineteenth century, the notion of a unitary and systematic theory of understanding (contrasted to the older view of hermeneutics as a set of techinal and ad hoc rules for reading) had been anything but neutral with regard to the Bible as a source of profound meaningfulness and truth. All texts are "understood" in accordance with their "meaning," and "meaning" in turn is a systematic and dialectical partner or counterpart to "understanding," rather than a textual equivalent of a Kantian thing-in-itself. To include the Bible under this polar subject-object pattern for interpretation was no problem in the systematic hermeneutical tradition, for the Bible belonged in this view to a certain class of texts that illustrated the structure paradigmatically. Indeed, it was often taken to be *the* text above all others whose "meaning" raised "understanding" to its very limit at the edge of mystery, to its diacritical self-questioning level, and thereby brought about in a single "event" the full coincidence of disclosive textual force with the understanding self's ultimate interpretive and self-interpretive act.

The older tradition of hermeneutics had long since been transmogrified. In one of its shapes it ended up in this century as Anglo-American "New Criticism," denying all creative status to the second-order activity which was now called "criticism" rather than "interpretation," and banishing (usually, but not consistently) the notion of textual reference to a contextual world, together with intentional and affective fallacies. The literary text itself had an unchangeable, almost sacred, status conferred upon it and became a self-enclosed imagistic world, structured by such devices as paradox and irony, which the second-order commentator must, above all, leave as they are and not translate into some didactic "meaning" by way of prose paraphrase. For all its difference from hermeneutical theory, this outlook shares with it a belief in the possibility of valid, if not invariant, reading and (despite itself) a sense of a common, humanistic world shared by the "literary" work and the reader. However, it is hermeneutical theory that has been the most recent, vocal defender of that tradition. A brief summary of that position, within which biblical narrative becomes a "regional" instance of the universally valid pattern of interpretation, looks like this:

(1) All texts are "discourse," even if, being inscribed discourse, they gain freedom from the person of the author. (2) The obverse side of "discourse" is "understanding," from which "discourse" and its meaning never gain freedom: The basic condition of the possibility of understanding texts is the transcendentally grounded universal dialectic between understanding and the subject matter to be understood. In other words, though the status of the text is one of freedom from the author, and it is therefore possessed of its own meaning—"utterance" meaning in contrast to "utterer's" meaning, in Paul Ricoeur's terms[7]—utterance meaning is inherently related to an appropriating understanding. "If all discourse is *actualized* as an event, all discourse is *understood* as meaning."[8] Understanding (or interpretation) is an internal event; it is nothing less than the centered self or transcendental ego in that particular and basic mode. The dialectic in which this event is operational is when the understanding stands "before" a text, so that the text is its equal or superior and not a replaceable phenomenon controlled by the ego's own interests or cultural location, such as historical inquiry into the social or psychological genesis of the text. (3) Language is, of course, indispensable to this discourse-and-consciousness process or event, but linguistic "sense," that is, the semiotic structures and se-

mantic patterns of discourse, must also be related to its function as an expression of preconceptual consciousness or experience. (4) There is therefore a thrust within language and natural to it, both in utterance meaning and its appropriation, by means of which it transcends itself *qua* semiotic structure and semantic sense (beginning with the sentence) through such instruments as symbol and metaphor and "refers" to a real world. (5) But obviously it is actually *we,* the language users, who refer linguistically, so that the reality referent of language is at the same time a mode of human consciousness or of our "being-in-the-world." Language is the way of realizing or enacting self-presence in the presence of a world of meaning and truth, which is at the same time "distanced" from us having its own referential integrity. (6) By a natural extension, metaphor and symbol (i.e., "poetic" language) are taken to be the modes in which language (and experience) can express the creative thrust of the centered self toward an absolute limit and the "world" espied at that limit. In other words, there is a "split reference" in symbol and metaphor, to self-presence and its being-in-the-world, and—through one of its modes, the mode of limit experience and language—to the disclosed presence of the transcendent as the limit or self-transcending instance of the "secondary" world accessible through poetic language. The "objective" world of "descriptive discourse" is consigned to a decidedly peripheral and ambiguous status in the situation of "limit disclosure." Theoreticians in this tradition of phenomenological hermeneutics tend to be as critical of "outmoded" views of metaphor that stress a descriptive rather than a creative role for it as they are of those who reduce metaphor to a rhetorical or decorative function. The "limit" and "disclosure" situation in which transcendence and understanding come together is the class to which biblical writings belong, and to which the concept "revelation" is at least "homologous."[9] This view is strikingly reminiscent of the "doctrine of revelation" of liberal and neoorthodox religious apologists a generation ago, who held that "revelation" is a "spiritual event" rather than a historical or metaphysical prepositional claim; it is, in fact, the hermeneutical equivalent of this outlook.

One should note three consequences of this outlook when it is applied to a literal reading of the Gospels. First, if the literal sense means that the story of Jesus is above all about a specific fictional or historical person by that name, and therefore about his identification through narrative descriptions which gain their force by being ascribed to him and no one else as the subject of those dispositions, words, actions, and sufferings, then the hermeneutical position we have described entails a view of him as ascriptive subject chiefly in the form of consciousness, that is, of his selfhood as "understanding." Obviously, this view of what it is to be a person is consistent with, if not indispensable to, the hermeneutical scheme of "meaning-and-understanding." Like anyone else, Jesus is here not in the first place the agent of his actions nor the enacted project(s) that constitute(s) him, nor the person to whom the actions of others happen; he is, rather, the verbal expressor of a certain preconceptual consciousness which he then, in a logically derivative or secondary sense, exhibits in action. For example, *that* Jesus was crucified is not a decisive part of his personal story, only that he was so consistent in his "mode-of-being-in-the-world" as to take the risk willingly. One would not want to deny the latter as part of the story, but it is surely a one-sided simplification of what it is to be a person in a world or a character in a plot. The personal world in the hermeneutical scheme is one in which the status of happenings is that of carnal shadows of the true "secondary" world of "meanings" " understood" in "disclosure."

On a technical and specifically hermeneutical level, what is wrong with this scheme is simply its claim to inclusiveness and adequacy for the interpretation of all texts depicting persons in a world, quite apart from doubts one may entertain about the claims to foundational, inclusive, and certain status of any hermeneutical framework for the interpretation of all narrative texts. The hostility to all interpretation of narratives, in which "descriptive discourse" is not "subverted" in favor of "creative metaphoric discourse" "referring" to (or "disclosing") a "secondary world," is a natural, perhaps even necessary, consequence of this hermeneutics produced

by a phenomenology of consciousness. By and large, the Christian tradition of literal reading, even in the late, liberal and historical-critical states of "reconstructing" the "actual historical" Jesus "behind" the texts, has resisted this reduction of the subject of the narrative to consciousness (and consciousness as "event") rather than agent-in-occurrence, and of descriptive to metaphoric discourse in the presentation of the way in which this subject was significantly related to a world about him.

Second, it seems that *any* kind of literal ascription of "meaning" to a personal subject within the narrative world is highly tenuous, if not simply dissolved, under this hermeneutical governance. The clearly and irreducibly personal focus within this scheme is constituted not by the "meaning" of the narrative but by the interpreter—that is, the "understanding" to which "meaning" is related. What narratives present (whether or not "literally") is not in the first place ascriptive selves that are the subjects of their predicates, not even really the self-expressive, centered consciousness or transcendental ego, but the "mode-of-being-in-the-world" which these selves exemplify and which is "represented" by being "disclosed" to "understanding." In the words of David Tracy, a theologian whose New Testament hermeneutics is a close reading and precise regional application of Ricoeur's general hermeneutics:

> One may formulate the principal meaning referred to by the historically reconstructed re-presentative words, deeds, and destiny of Jesus the Christ as follows: the principal referent disclosed by this limit-language is the disclosure of a certain limit-mode-of-being-in-the-world; the disclosure of a new, and agapic, a self-sacrificing righteousness willing to risk living at that limit where one seems in the presence of the righteous, loving, gracious God re-presented in Jesus the Christ.[10]

Not that one can have any such "mode" without personal ascription either within the story or in appropriation (is that perhaps the point of the solecism, "the principal referent disclosed ... is ... the disclosure …"?), but the ascription in the story is simply a temporary personal thickening within the free-flowing stream of a general class of describable dispositional attitudes. "Jesus" in the statement quoted names a meaning, namely (the disclosure of) a generalizable set of attitudes (self-sacrificing righteousness, etc.), rather than these attitudes being referred to, held, or actuated, by "Jesus." What is being set forth here in technical language is a view of the Gospel narratives which is far closer to traditional allegorical than literal reading: Certain virtues or dispositions are hypostatized, that is, they are the significant referents of certain statements, but to maintain the narrative rather than didactic shape of these statements there has to be a personal embodiment, an "archetype" Kant called it, to exemplify them. But the archetype is identified by the virtues, not they by him through his self-enactment in significant temporal sequence. At best the link between meaning-reference and ascription to a personal subject within the story is tenuous in this view. At worst it is eliminated. The irreducibly personal element comes only in the "represented" "disclosure" situation, that is, in "understanding" appropriation of the text.

As with dispositional description and ascription, so with the "kerygmatic" verbal expression of consciousness "re-presented" by the Gospels. To "limit" *experience* there corresponds metaphoric "limit" *language,* and the two have the same "referent." Traditionally, "the Kingdom of God" in Jesus's preaching and Jesus himself have been understood to identify or "refer" to each other. By contrast, in hermeneutical theory one subsumes Jesus's preaching, especially the parables of the Kingdom of God, under a more general reference. In Ricoeur's terms, there is an "extravagance" in the denouement and the main characters that contrasts with the realism of the narrative and constitutes the parables' specific "religious" trait.[11] Religious language redescribes human experience: "The ultimate referent of the parables, proverbs, and eschatological sayings is not the Kingdom of God, but human reality in its wholeness. Religious language discloses the religious dimension of common human experience."[12]

Whether in the form of described dispositions, such as those exemplified by Jesus, or in the form of redescribed experience originally expressed in nondiscursive symbols or metaphorical discourse, such as Jesus's parables of the Kingdom of God, the narrative texts' meaning, that is, their referent, is a reality or world transcending the teller within the story, the character within the plot, and the descriptive dimension of the narrative language (in the case of the parables). "Human reality in its wholeness" will in one way or another be the subject matter instead each time, though perhaps a bit more obliquely and allegorically in the case of the narrated ascriptive subject called "Jesus," and more metaphorically and directly evocatively in the case of the parables and the experience they express.

Even Aristotle's *mimesis* has therefore to be understood as creative or magnifying rather than reduplicative imitation in narrative: It becomes "a kind of metaphor of reality."[13] Released from its moorings in or as descriptive world, historical or history-like fictional narrative, depicting and ascribing plot and character, refers actually to the general transcendental condition which constitutes the underlying possibility of such stories, namely, the "historicity" of humankind in general and of each self severally. And what is that? "We belong to history before telling stories or writing history." "Historicity" is finally neither reference to specific events, nor a pattern in specific stories; it is their ingredient in or unity with the logically prior general condition of self as consciousness within a diachronic frame, which stories—indispensable but logically subsequent—then bring to expression.[14] Once again, "meaning-as-reference" is not only not true but meaningless without its polar relation to "consciousness-as-understanding," but at this point (perhaps one of several), the polarity is actually transcended into the unity of the two. "Historicity" is the referential meaning *and* the consciousness or understanding of it. As personal, ascriptive subject "historicity" is at once (positively) particular and (transcendentally) general; it is at once irreducible (as understanding) and eminently transcendable (as universal, metaphorically subverted descriptive reference).

In sum, then, the view that the notion of being human is inseparable from that of being an agent becomes highly problematic in a general anthropology of consciousness and its hermeneutics; but the irreducibly *descriptive* as well as any irreducibly personal *ascriptive* character of literal reading is even more problematic in this hermeneutical setting. Yet one variant or another of this theory, more than any other, has been proposed as a general and foundational justification for a revised traditional reading of the narrative texts of the New Testament. Numerous warrants for doing so have been adduced by the theory's adherents: The applicability to these narratives of such concepts as revelation, uniqueness, and yet (simultaneously) generality of meaning; the significance of personal understanding and appropriation; the claim to normatively valid interpretation which transcends, without ignoring, the cultural setting of both texts and interpreters; and the claim to diachronic continuity between presently valid interpretation and a tradition of interpretation reaching back to the text itself, in particular the tradition of interpretation that assigns a distinctive status to Jesus in these stories.

Indeed, this last consideration has been particularly important to those Christian theologians who have adopted this general theory for regional hermeneutical application to the New Testament. They have been motivated by a desire on the one hand to claim the unsurpassability of the New Testament narratives' ascriptive reference to Jesus, so that they do not become exoteric or carnal shadows, in principle surpassable by a later and fuller spiritual "reference" or "disclosure," but on the other to deny that this unsurpassability involves the invidious distinction between insiders and outsiders to the truth.[15] So they try to maintain that Jesus is the irreducible ascriptive subject of the New Testament narratives, while at the same time they make general religious experience (or something like it) the "referent" of these stories.[16] It is an uneasy alliance of conflicting hermeneutical aims. The theory simply cannot bear the freight of all that its proponents want to load on to its shoulders. Whatever may be the case in its other regional exemplifications, when it is applied to the New Testament narrative texts the result is

that the tradition of literal reading is not only stretched into a revised shape, it breaks down instead. It may well be an eminently worthy goal to have a theology that is at once Christian and liberal, but founding its reading of the New Testament on this general hermeneutical theory is not a good means for achieving that aim.

The third consequence of appealing to the general hermeneutical theory as a basis for a literal or revised reading of the New Testament narratives is simply that, no matter how adequate or inadequate the theory turns out to be in actual exegetical application, the very possibility of reading those narratives under its auspices has to stand or fall with the theory's own viability in the first place. It is well to be clear on what this does and does not involve. Paul Ricoeur, like many others but in a more sensitive and systematic way, has drawn attention to certain distinctions that one may summarize as pre-critical, critical, and post-critical stages in reading or, in his own terms, first and second naiveté (with "criticism" in between). A similar (though not identical) distinction is that between the "masters of suspicion" and a "hermeneutics of restoration" or "retrieval." Post-critical reading, reading with that second naivete which is done in correspondence with a hermeneutics of restoration, is the kind of reading that might well wish to be of a "revised literal" sort. It distances the text from the author, from the original discourse's existential situation and from every other kind of reading that would go "behind" the text and "refer" it to any other world of meaning than its own, the world "in front of" the text. And yet, this kind of reading has been through the mill of critically transcending that (first) naive literalism for which every statement on the printed page "means" either because it refers not only ostensively but also correctly, naming a true state of affairs each time, or else because it shapes part of a realm of discourse whose vocabulary one can finally only understand by repeating it and in that sense (if sense it is) taking it at "face value." If the general theory of hermeneutics is to stand, it must persuade us that its appeal to a second naivete and to a hermeneutics of restoration constitutes a genuine option between reading with first naiveté on the one hand and on the other reading with that "suspicion" which regards the linguistic "world," which text and reader may share, as a mere ideological or psychological superstructure reducible to real or true infrastructures, which must be critically or scientifically adduced.

An indispensable part or assumption of the theory, especially in explaining the possibility of reading with second naiveté, is that there can be a coincidence, a "fusion of horizons," in H.-G. Gadamer's phrase, between the strange, distant, in a sense even timeless, world of the text detached from its temporal authorial origin, and the present reader who, though doubtless part of his world, is also the subject transcendental to it. This position is a strong revision of the "Romantic" hermeneutics of Schleiermacher, for whom "understanding" was a direct dialogue between the reader and the spirit of the author, present in the latter's language. "If," writes Paul Ricoeur,

> we preserve the language of Romanticist hermeneutics when it speaks of overcoming the distance, ... of appropriating what was distant, other, foreign, it will be at the price of an important corrective. That which we make our own ... is not a foreign experience, but the power of disclosing a world which constitutes the reference of the text.

> The link between disclosure and appropriation is, to my mind, the cornerstone of a hermeneutic which could claim both to overcome the shortcomings of historicism and to remain faithful to the original intention of Schleiermacher's hermeneutics. To understand an author better than he could understand himself is to display the power of disclosure implied in his discourse beyond the limited horizon of his own existential situation.[17]

The kind of language used to indicate the link between "disclosure" and "understanding" in this theory invariably has a strong component that appeals to the experience of "historicity" or

time consciousness, and the dimension of the link is always that of the present poised between past and future. Appeals to synchronic links or to spatial metaphors are either secondary or diachronically intended in the language of this theory, so that (e.g.) "present" is the antonym of "past" rather than either the synonym of "near" or the antonym of "far." "Distance" and "distanciation" have a clearly diachronic ring in the theory's use of them. In cases such as the interpretation of the New Testament narratives, this temporal outlook is very clear indeed. Their "meaning," we have noted, is "represented" to the understanding. There is no proper understanding of texts from the past, "distanced" or released from their original moorings, except on the model (or, rather, more than the model) of a temporally present event, an event in or of contemporary consciousness.

Why this absolute centrality of the link between disclosure through text and the world to which it refers, and the temporally present event of understanding? No doubt there are many reasons, but surely one of the chief is simply a set of conceptual needs: One *needs to* have the text refer to or open up a (usually diachronic) world, if it is not merely to function as an instance of an internally connected general semiotic system or code in which the specific linguistic content or message ("parole" in contrast to "langue," in Saussure's famous formula) is no more than a trivial surface phenomenon. Furthermore, one *needs* to have the text open up a world independent of the text's cultural origins and every other reductive explanation, if we are going to have a hermeneutics in which understanding a text entails normative and valid exegetical interpretation, in a word a hermeneutics for "second naïvete." One *needs,* finally and foremost, to have a text both atemporally distanced from its moorings in a cultural and authorial or existential past and yet also re-entering the temporal dimension at the point of the present, if it is going to have the capacity to inform an understanding that is itself essentially characterized as present, in a word a hermeneutics of restoration. And yet this present re-entry of the text must not be a function or predicate of the presently understanding self—else it is illusory self-projection. "Disclosure" is a term satisfying these needs: The text is normative, in fact it transcends present understanding *ontologically,* but only in such a way that it is in principle *hermeneutically* focused toward the latter. Textual "disclosure" means that the language of the text "refers," but refers strictly in the mode of presentness. It also means that language, especially metaphoric language, refers creatively without creating what it refers to. "Disclosure" answers the need for and reality of a genuine convergence into coincidence of referential meaning and understanding.

The language of the text in opening up a world is simultaneously opened up by it. That simultaneity prevents language from turning either into simple descriptive, that is, falsely representational ("objectivist") language, or into being captured by purely "subjectivist" and self-projecting understanding. We *must* have "disclosure" if we are to have a hermeneutics that respects Heidegger's affirmation that language speaks because it indwells a world, instead of a hermeneutics that is a linguistic replica of the Cartesian error of separating out a self-contained, self-certain ego of "understanding" from the understood world. In the case of our hermeneutical theory, the Cartesian error can be avoided only if the disclosure that fills this need of text and world "opening up" each other to present understanding is at least possibly true, in order to avoid the conclusion that understanding is simply the bedrock upon which it creates its own world in which it dwells and which it discloses to itself.

The world of the text's reference must be disclosed as a *possibly true* world. Meaning in disclosure has an ontological reference, and it is not clear whether the distinction between "possible" and "actual" truth is very sharp in "meaning as reference." In reference to general or possible truths, the matter is not significant, but only in individual instances, since "possible truth" is logically and ontologically dependent on the priority of "actual truth." In this respect as in others there is for the theory a real parallel to the claims of ostensive reference which, whether true or false in given instances, would make no sense except if there is an actual class

of such items. Likewise, there must be ontological truth in the notion "textual reference to a world in disclosure" generally, if any particular case of it is to be possible and thus meaningful. I take this to be implied when Ricoeur writes: "The text speaks of a possible world and of a possible way of orienting oneself within it. The dimensions of this world are properly opened up by, disclosed by, the text. Disclosure is the equivalent for written language of ostensive reference for spoken language."[18]

Here, then, is the claim to a recovery of that view in which texts can in principle be normatively or validly interpreted because they refer to a truly possible world—a world Kermode declared to be either inaccessible through the text or illusory in the first place, and one which Nietzsche and Derrida have taken, if anything, to be worse than illusory because it is no more than the fruit of a wishful misuse of texts. Neither a set of conceptual *needs* arising out of a certain understanding of language as a sign system, say such critics, nor the supply of a set of *answers* to them are necessarily persuasive because the two, needs and answers, cohere. One might well expect them to do so, because that is the way to meet the need intra-systematically; but that very fact might strengthen the suspicion that this is a case of systematic legerdemain, which is bound to produce a built-in verbal solution for every real or imagined conceptual problem. The system is an all-encompassing structure in which "meaning-and-understanding" have set the foundational, inescapable terms, and "disclosure" is the equally inescapable, universal link between them.

"Disclosure" as an "event" in "understanding" is something of which many people testify they are ignorant. They say that this is not *their* model for what it is to understand, at least not one that holds pervasively. The advocates of the theory tend simply to respond that whether or not they understand that understanding is of this sort, that is in fact the case; and then they reiterate the theory in the hope that the reiteration will evoke the experiential correlate as an echo. And there the impasse remains.

Deconstruction, a deliberate subversion of this theory as of many others, is not identical with the strictly anti-hermeneutical procedure of "suspicion," with which hermeneutical theorists have understood themselves to be in sharp contention. The "masters of suspicion" simply dismiss the immanent, directly fitting *interpretive* structure which supports a textual reading of "second naiveté," supplanting it instead with an independent and wholly external *explanatory* frame. However, unlike Structuralist, Freudian, Marxist, and other theories of suspicion, Deconstruction is not tout court "a modern inheritor of [the] belief that reality, and our experience of it, are discontinuous with each other."[19] Deconstruction is an immanent subversion, rather than an external, all-embracing reductionist treatment of phenomenological hermeneutics, just as it tries to effect the same relation of immanent subversion to Structuralism, and so forth.[20] One may, in fact, see Deconstruction as an exuberant or desperate (depending on the mood) rescue operation designed to pry loose a linguistic humanism hopelessly caught between the Scylla of total captivity to the absolute truth and certainty of "self-presence," and the Charybdis of *anti-humanist* or "scientific" dissolution of that supposed certainty.

"Language," whether as discourse or text, is to be caught out and tripped up in its own metaphorical character precisely at the point where philosophical theorists claim recourse to a close relation between metaphor and technical concept or true meaning. In the case of the hermeneutical theory under discussion, an example of such metaphorical usage would be the phrase "'referent' basically manifests the meaning 'in front of the text,"[21] a turn of phrase whose strikingly spatial character in what is actually a nonspatial pattern of overall thought highlights, through its contrast to "meaning 'behind' the text," at once the distinction and the coherence between "sense" and "reference." The "referent" "in front of the text" is precisely that restorative "sense" of the reading of second naivete, for which text and reader come to share a common referential world ("that way of perceiving reality, that mode-of-being-in-the-

world which the text opens up for the intelligent reader")[22] which they cannot share in critical reading of the "meaning behind the text." Meaning "in front of the text" is a centered world of meaning made accessible and viable to an equally centered self.

In the one case ("meaning behind the text") the spatial metaphor is intended to indicate mutual absence or distance between semantic sense, real referent, and the reader's world. By contrast, the other spatial metaphor ("in front of") is supposed to indicate the overcoming of that distance without a direct—either naive or Romantic—*mergence* of the previously distanced partners. To someone like Derrida, it is clear that even if the one metaphor ("behind" the text) comes close to accomplishing what is wanted from it (which is not to be taken for granted) an indication of distance or absence, the other ("in front of") means simply by oppositional affinity with the first. Insofar as it is supposed to indicate a significant *conceptual* pairing (distance between two linguistic "worlds" which remains while nonetheless being overcome, the reading of second naiveté), it simply spins its wheels. It is a case of "absence" supposedly being "presence" at the same time, a virtual admission of the fault that Deconstructionists espy at the foundation of the edifice of the traditional "signifier/signified" relation. The natural affinity of the second metaphor is not that of a "signifier" with a consistent, intelligible, and normative "signified" but simply that of one signifier or metaphor with another, previous one: Any "meaning" that "in front of" may have is *deferred* along a loosely connected, potentially indefinite metaphorical axis, and in the meantime it is what it is simply by displacing that from which it differs ("meaning behind the text"). It is this displacement or divestment of a signified world into the intertextuality of an indefinite sequence of signifiers—a focal insistence of the Deconstructionists—that is so apt in their critique of phenomenological hermeneutics; the "worlds" that are supposedly "disclosed" actually have the subversive, deconstructing nonreferentiality of pure metaphoricity built into them. Phenomenological hermeneutics, to Deconstructionists, is *malgré lui* a celebration of that very nonreferential purity of textual metaphoricity that it sets out to transcend. Second naiveté, far from being explained and justified, is an illusion, a verbal pirouette.

Such instances of the hermeneutical theory's built-in susceptibility to deconstruction are crucial to the Deconstructionists' cumulative argument that the general bearing of hermeneutical theory is one for which "understanding" as self-presence is the indispensable and irreducible counterpart to textual "meaning" as linguistic presence, and vice versa. Language as signifier has life or spirit breathed into it by its immediate relation to self-presence, and that in turn allows it to take the shape of the signified, the means by which it attains meaning as referent or ontologically present truth. Conversely and simultaneously, "disclosure" is the bridge over which truth as presence in turn travels to present itself as meaning to self-presence now. To Deconstructionists, this linguistic polarity of self-presence and presence is equally endemic to hermeneutical theory when language is taken as discourse and when it is understood as written text. But, they say, precisely that polarity guarantees the actual priority of speech over writing in either version of the theory. The indispensability of understanding as self-presence builds the very notion of presence into language ineluctably and thus constitutes an assertion of speech rather than written text as the original and natural form of language, and of the text as a deformation of speech. What is already written is not a present event, as understanding what is written is; it must be raised to the level of present communicative event, and thereby the textuality of the text is reconverted (in obverse form) into speech.

To realize the deconstructive susceptibility of this self-enclosed, presence/self-presence, scheme is, Deconstructionists tell us, to learn with metaphorical force (or, to an outsider to the whole argument, exaggeration) the drastic difference between speech and writing, and indeed—in contrast to the absolute connection between speech as linguistic origin and the mode of self-presence in hermeneutical theory—of the independent *priority* of writing over speech. Such metaphorical and rhetorical vehemence alone will suffice to indicate the chasm opened

up by the immanent subversion of the phenomenological theory of hermeneutics. Not the unreachable goal of a particular strategy but the instability and emptiness of an entire categorial scheme in which mutually indispensable conceptual devices sustain each other—and nothing else, is being proposed by the deconstruction of phenomenological hermeneutics. The Deconstructionists simply deny the stability of the theory's presuppositions.

If "meaning" implies absence and *difference* instead of centeredness or presence, then self-presence or "understanding"—its indispensable polar correlate in the theory—is bound to be just as hollow. Not that Deconstructionists necessarily deny the "reality" of centered selfhood, or even of experienced self-consciousness as its basic mode, after the fashion of the masters of "suspicion." Rather, strictly and simply as part of a way of explaining and justifying "interpretive" textual reading, specifically in the mode of second naiveté, this ingredient simply dissolves; like "presence," self-presence turns into absence, the absence of centeredness and of its "now," in relation to textuality and intertextuality.

One may well be sceptical about Derrida's and his followers' consignment of the *whole* Western linguistic tradition to the supposed metaphysical or "ontotheological" prioritizing of "phonocentric," and "logocentric," discourse over text and writing. But deconstruction does provide a strong case against the theory at issue. Indeed, at times it seems as if Deconstructionists, in their enthusiasm to consign philosophy to an awkward ancillary status to their own kind of literary reading, believe that Western metaphysics and philosophy of language from pre-Socratic days on were a grand and connected conspiracy aiming all along to arrive at the thought of Husserl and Heidegger, with only slightly camouflaged detours by way of Plato, the New Testament, Rousseau, and Saussure, and that the Deconstructionist duty is to smoke it out, root, and branch. In the process, and whatever its philosophical strengths and weaknesses, Deconstructionist association of Christianity (in contrast to Judaism) with ontotheology tout court has all the appearance of overkill, as sweeping generalizations usually do. Christianity, especially in its Reformation Protestant rather than liberal or neo-orthodox forms, is very much a "religion of the text," for which the textuality of the Bible is not systematically or metaphysically, but only in quite informal fashion, coordinated with linguistic meaning of a logocentric sort. In fact, the grammatical literalism of the "unfallen" biblical text, together with its textual autonomy from and priority over the *viva vox* of the interpretive tradition—all of which the Reformers proposed—may bear a remote resemblance (doubtless no more!) to the Deconstructionists' "textuality" and "intertextuality," which the latter have so far apparently not discerned. On the other hand, the affirmation of the textuality of the biblical text does not preclude a self-dispositioning of Christian language in other contexts that makes traditional and heavy drafts on "ontotheology" (especially in its Platonic and Neoplatonic versions). The integrity of textuality does not involve a systematic denial of ontotheology as one fit articulation among others for Christian doctrinal language. In other words, a Christian theological observer will want to resist a tendency toward global and foundational claims on behalf of inclusive theories, which Deconstructionists seem to share in practice, whatever the theory, with other theorists.

I do not propose to claim a decisive victory for the Deconstructionist subversion of phenomenological hermeneutics, nor to claim that Deconstruction is the ultimate mode of literary theory (nor, I believe, do Deconstructionists of the saner variety). Furthermore, it is obvious that Deconstruction is anything but universally helpful to a Christian reading of Christian Scripture, even though it may be useful *selectively,* just as hermeneutical theory may be similarly and modestly appropriate. (One thinks, for example, of aspects of experiential selfhood and self-understanding in the Gospel of John, in the reading of which a phenomenological interpretive scheme might have limited but significant applicability.) It is doubtful that *any* scheme for reading texts, and narrative texts in particular, and biblical narrative texts even more specifically, can serve globally and foundationally, so that the reading of biblical material would

simply be a regional instance of the universal procedure. The contrary hermeneutical claim is, as we saw earlier, doubtful enough when it is judged by criteria of coherence and adequacy in regard to restorative or revised-literal reading of *New Testament* narratives. But now one also has to add that its very claim to adequate status as a universal and foundational theory justifying the restorative reading of "second naiveté" has been rendered highly dubious by the immanent subversion of its philosophical into a metaphorical turn at crucial points.

The threat to hermeneutical theory is that *either* "second naiveté" is no concept but simply a misleading term, and restorative hermeneutics explains or justifies no way of reading, or that if one is to hold out for anything like it, one had better invent a more adequate theory to support the claim. (Even so global, astringent, and telling a critic of Deconstruction as John Searle concedes the pertinence of Deconstructionist critique of phenomenology, especially in its Husserlian form.)[23] There is of course another option: One may want to claim that a notion similar to "second naivete" (though not necessarily isomorphic with it) is indeed meaningful, but not because it is part of, or justified by, any general theory. But that is a position which neither hermeneutical Phenomenologists nor Deconstructionists will tolerate.

Closely interwoven with the hermeneutics of meaning-and-understanding is a position in modern liberal Christian theology, for which proper theological articulation has always to be the fruit of careful coordination of present cultural self-understanding, that is, a phenomenology of the contemporary cultural life-world, with an interpretation of the normative self-understanding inherent in Christianity, its sources, traditions, and historically varying external manifestations.[24] A paradoxical challenge now awaits the attention of this theology. Its proponents are understandably anxious to grasp the present intellectual, cultural, and spiritual "situation" (understood as possessing a kind of cohesive, describable essence) in its distinctiveness and its latest shape, as it may just be crafting the future immediately ahead of us. Hence, there are frequent references to the present situation as "post-modern," "post-critical," "post-theological," and so on. One may well entertain serious doubts about the wisdom of this procedure as a basic and systematic theological strategy. But that issue aside, in the context of our discussion the challenge now to the advocates of this theology of coordination or correlation is to consider seriously the possibility that the present cultural situation is among other things a *post-hermeneutical* and no longer a hermeneutical situation, and to frame their hermeneutical outlook in accordance with it, both for the sake of the technical credibility of hermeneutical theory and for the broader purpose of the cultural credibility of the theology itself.

Up to now this challenge has gone unmet among the theory's theological advocates; they have seen no need for serious modification of their views. Characteristically, they consider the possibility of such powerful high-cultural symptoms as deconstruction, or Foucault's elimination of interior unity in historiography in favor of "systems of dispersion,"[25] as well as many other basic orientations toward the relation between selfhood and culture differing drastically from that proposed under the rubrics of phenomenology, only to return to their previous analytical fruits. One way or another, the normative permanence of unique, irreducible, and shared interior experience remains the basic ingredient in any cultural life-world they discover. The depictions offered by other options may be temporary interruptions in that field of vision, but they are never potentially basic disturbers or immanent threats to this remarkably assured view of the compatibility of self-understanding with an analysis of apparently any present cultural situation. In the end, drastically "other" options usually become coopted—illustrations despite themselves both of the need for the phenomenological agenda and its perennial discoveries.

Just as in hermeneutical and phenomenological theory "understanding" as an event of self-presence remains a basically unquestioned category, and a cultural world is always a particular collective understanding, so in the theory's cultural-theological version religious experi-

ence or something like it remains a serenely assured category with an ever pertinent, ever available cultural correlate in every situation, including that which is post-hermeneutical or post-religious. So, for example, in the words of David Tracy, "We must keep alive the sense of the uncanny—the post-religious, religious sense of our situation."[26] It seems never really to have been in question in the first place.

III. Prospects for the lateral Sense

What of the future of the "literal reading"? The less entangled in theory and the more firmly rooted not in a narrative (literary) tradition but in its primary and original context, a religious community's "rule" for faithful reading, the more clearly it is likely to come into view, and the stronger as well as more flexible and supple it is likely to look. From that perspective, a theory confined to describing how and in what specific kind of context a certain kind of reading functions is an improvement over the kind of theoretical endeavor that tries to justify its very possibility in general.

Hermeneutical theory obviously belongs to the latter kind, but so also do those arguments for and against the historical factuality of the (perhaps!) history-like or literal and (perhaps!) historical narratives of the Bible that have generated so much religious and scholarly heat since the eighteenth century. As arguments claiming general validity they have usually been governed on both sides by the assumptions that "meaning" is identical with "possible truth," and that if a story belongs to the genre of history-like or "realistic" narrative, its meaning *qua* possible truth belongs to the class called "factuality." The necessary obverse is that if stories are not judgeable by this criterion, they are finally not realistic but belong to some other genre and therefore make a different kind of truth claim. (This is finally the cutting edge of the reading of the New Testament by the proponents of the "second naivete" of "restorative" hermeneutics. In their reading, the "historicity" of human being and human narratives "discloses" the truth and reality of a secondary and transcendent world that differs totally from the narrative description, transforming the latter into metaphor instead. Hence their preference in the synoptic Gospels for the metaphorical and disclosive character of the parables over the realistic, literally descriptive character of the passion and resurrection narratives.)

A recent proposal in the argument about the mutual bearing of realistic narrative and historical fact claim in respect of biblical stories, especially the synoptic Gospels, represents a transition from a high-powered to a less ambitious kind of general theorizing. It holds that the Gospel stories as well as large portions of Old Testament narrative are indeed "realistic," but that the issue of their making or not making factual or, for that matter, other kinds of truth claims is not part of the scope of hermeneutical inquiry. "Meaning" in this view is logically distinct from "truth," even where the two bear so strong a family resemblance as the designations "history-like" and "historical" imply. The factuality or non-factuality of at least some of these narratives, important as it is no doubt in a larger religious or an even more general context, involves a separate argument from that concerning their meaning.[27]

Two related assumptions are implied when this move is made as part of a plea on behalf of realistic or literal (as well as figural) reading. First, there is a suspension of the question whether "truth" is a general class (over and above specific true items), to which all reasonable people have equal access as a set of proper conclusions drawn from credible grounds, by way of rational procedures common to all (except that, unlike myself, not everybody has found right reason yet). But second, "meaning," unlike "truth," *can* be affirmed to be such a general class allowing across-the-board access to all reasonable people who know how to relate genus, species, and individual case properly. One appeals first to a qualitatively distinct genus of text (and meaning) called "literary" and then argues both historically and in principle that

within it there is a species called "realistic narrative" that is quite distinct from, say, romance or heroic epic. To this species then, biblical narrative is said to belong; indeed it is often said to be its original and paradigm.[28]

The resemblance of this view to Anglo-American "New Criticism" is obvious and has often been pointed out. Both claim that the text is a normative and pure "meaning" world of its own which, quite apart from any factual reference it may have, and apart from its author's intention or its reader's reception, stands on its own with the authority of self-evident intelligibility. The reader's "interpretation" can, and indeed has to be, minimal, reiterative, and formal, so that the very term "interpretation" is already misleadingly high-powered. "Criticism" is a far more appropriate term because it is more low-keyed and leaves the text sacrosanct, confining itself to second-order analysis, chiefly of the formal stylistic devices which are the "literary" body of the text. In the case of the "realistic" novel these are devices such as temporal structuring, the irreducible interaction of character and plot, ordinary or "mixed" rather than elevated style, and so forth. These devices are said to be of the very essence of the text and of its quality as a linguistic sacrament, inseparable from the world that it is (rather than merely represents), but also the means by which that world is rendered to the reader so that (s)he can understand it without any large-scale "creative" contribution of his/her own.

This outlook is less high-powered than hermeneutical theory, not only because it is confined to "meaning" as logically distinct from "truth" but because the formal features of realistic narrative about which it generalizes are as often as not implicit rather than explicit, so that they must be *exhibited* in textual examples rather than *stated* in abstract terms. But even though less high-powered, general theory it remains: The Gospel narratives "mean" realistically because that is the general literary class to which they belong. Rut precisely in respect of generalizing adequacy this theory has grave weaknesses. First, the claim to the self-subsistence or self-referentiality of the text apart from any true world is as artificial as it may (perhaps!) be logically advantageous: Moreover, the view is usually not held consistently, for New Critics argue not only for the integrity but the truth of their approach when challenged by contrary reductionist views such as Historicism, Structuralism, or Deconstruction. Despite their anti- or non-philosophical bearing, in fact many of them espouse a theory of a purely aesthetic kind of truth in literature. Second, it is similarly artificial and dubious to claim a purely external relation of text and reading, which in effect sets aside the mutual implication of interpretation and textual meaning (as hermeneutical theorists would have it) or of reading and the textuality of the text (in terms of the Deconstructionists). If a narrative or a poem should "not mean but be," avoiding paraphrase as the proper means to the realization of this ideal comes close to enthroning verbal repetition as the highest form of understanding.

In short, the less high-powered general theory that upholds the literal or realistic reading of the Gospels may be just as perilously perched as its more majestic and pretentious hermeneutical cousin. There is a greater problem yet with the more modest view. The resemblance of New Criticism to, indeed its partial derivation from, Christian theology (especially Aristotelian modes of that theology) has often and rightly been pointed out. Endowing the text with the stature of complete and authoritative embodiment of "truth" in "meaning," so that it is purely and objectively self-referential, is a literary equivalent of the Christian dogma of Jesus Christ as incarnate Son of God, the divine Word that is one with the bodied person it assumes. Here is a general theory about texts of which the paradigm case is not only in the first instance not textual but, more important, is itself the *basis* rather than merely an *instance* of the range as well as cohesion of meaning and truth in terms of which it is articulated. It has always been clear in Christian tradition that if the truth of such a dogma as that of the incarnation is to be affirmed, it has to be done by faith rather than rational demonstration. Less evident but equally true is that if the dogma is to be held consistently, its very *meaning,* that is, its logical as well as ontological conceivability is a matter of faith, and therefore of reason strictly in the

mode of faith seeking understanding. Suppose one affirms that a partial but fitting second-order redescription of the Gospel narratives may be carried out under the general and distinct ontological categories of infinite or divine and finite, or human "natures" (and there is no reason to think that this set of categories is either worse or better than a number of others for what may aptly, if modestly, be termed "interpretation" of the dogma): The implicit rule of religious use or "rule of faith" under which it will be done is that the conceivability of the unity of the two categories in personal ascription, without compromise to their distinctness *qua* categories, is dependent on the/act of that unity. Conversely, then, it has to be denied that the fact is logically dependent on the conceivability of the categories' unification. All descriptive endeavors to show didactically or abstractly, rather than to reiterate narratively, *how* the unity is such as not to compromise the categories' distinction, or how they are inherently fit for unification, will break down or else, a better alternative, remain incomplete. The "rule" for the statement of the dogma and the deployment of categories in the process will therefore always have a reserved or negative cast: Nothing must be said in the proper philosophical articulation of the dogma such that the rightful priority of the categories' coherence in unitary personal ascription over their abiding logical distinctness would jeopardize the integrity of the latter. The implication of this reserve is that the full, *positive explanation* of the rule's rational status, while not at all an inappropriate aim, will have to await another condition than our present finitude. For now, the faith articulated in the dogma is, under this assumption, indeed not irrational, "paradoxical" or "fideistic," but rather rational yet fragmentary. The formal statement of the dogma's logic is of a (modestly) transcendental sort.

The irony of New Criticism (and it is not the first instance of this kind) is to have taken this specific case and rule and to have turned them instead into a general theory of meaning, literature, and even culture, in their own right. Detached from the original that is the actual, indispensable ground and subject matter of its meaning, the specific rule is turned about instead into its very opposite, a scheme embracing a whole class of general meaning constructs, from a Christian culture (in the religiously imperialistic and more than mildly fantasizing visions of T. S. Eliot's cultural-theological writings) to genres of literature. They are all understood "incarnationally" or "sacramentally." As a result, the original of this process of derivation, the doctrine of the incarnation of the Word of God in the person and destiny of Jesus of Nazareth, has now become an optional member within the general class, in which those who subscribe to the class may or may not wish to believe.

There may or may not be a class called "realistic narrative," but to take it as a general category of which the synoptic Gospel narratives and their partial second-order redescription in the doctrine of the Incarnation are a dependent instance is first to put the cart before the horse and then cut the lines and claim that the vehicle is self-propelled. The realistic novel, in which history-likeness and history prey on each other in mutual puzzlement concerning the reality status of each and their relation (so that Balzac could claim that his novels are true history, while Truman Capote could invent a category called the nonfictional novel for his reports on a series of gruesome murders in rural Kansas) is, from the perspective of the rule of faith and its interpretive use in the Christian tradition, nothing more than an appropriate even if puzzling as well as incomplete analogy or "type" of their "anti-type," the coherence between linguistic or narrative and real worlds rendered in the Gospel stories. In that tradition, the ascriptive literalism of the story, the *history-likeness* if you will, of the singular agent enacting the unity of human finitude and divine infinity, Jesus of Nazareth, is taken to be itself the ground, guarantee, and conveyance of the truth of the depicted enactment, its *historicity* if you will—if, that is, in the wake of the Enlightenment these are the categories of descriptive meaning and referential truth one wishes to employ. The linguistic, textual world is in this case not only the *necessary* basis for our orientation within the real world, according to the Christian claims about this narrative, and this narrative alone; it is also *sufficient* for the purpose. This is hardly the sort of claim which one would want to turn into one instance of a general class, either in

historical theory or theory of the novel, even if it is an antitype to serve a host of imperfect, partial types.

Whatever one may think of the phenomenologists' hermeneutical theory, it *is* a general theory; however, under its auspices the literal reading of the Gospel narratives vanishes, both because in application the theory revises it into incoherence and out of existence, and because the theory *qua* theory cannot persuasively make good on its claim to the availability of the revisionary literalism of a "second naivete." As for the New Criticism, a literal reading of the Gospels is appropriate under its auspices, but only because and to the extent that it is in fact a disguised Christian understanding of them and not a reading under a general theory, not even a more low-level theory of meaning than the general hermeneutical scheme.

Rather than an example of an explanatory theory of meaning at work on the status and possibility of a specific case under its auspices, what we have in the *sensus literalis* is a reading about which one needs to say first that it governs and bends to its own ends whatever general categories it shares—as indeed it has to share— with other kinds of reading (e.g., "meaning," "truth," as well as their relation). It is a case-specific reading which may or may not find reduced analogues elsewhere. Second, it is not only case-specific but as such belongs first and foremost into the context of a sociolinguistic community, that is, of the specific religion of which it is part, rather than into a literary ambience. Both considerations involve lowering our theoretical sights yet further to the level of mere description rather than explanation, to the specific set of texts and the most specific context, rather than to a general class of texts ("realistic narrative") and the most general context ("human experience").

That exercise in self-restraint should not be difficult to state, despite the complexity of the exposition up to this point. Nor does it preclude inquiry into either the fact or the character of possible truth claims involved in the literal reading of the Gospels. It is simply an acknowledgment of the inescapably ambiguous or problematic *philosophical* status of such claims when they are analyzed under the auspices of general theories. The theoretical task compatible with the literal reading of the Gospel narratives is that of describing how and in what context it functions. In that regard we need to do little more than return to the beginning of the essay: Established or "plain" readings are warranted by their agreement with a religious community's rules for reading its sacred text. It is at best questionable that they are warranted, except quite provisionally, under any other circumstances: Theories of realistic narrative for example are not likely to be highly plausible except in tandem with an informal cultural consensus that certain texts have the quasi-sacred and objective literary status of "classics," which form the core of a broader literary "canon." The plausibility structure in this case is a literary imitation of a religious community's authority structure; it rests on a tradition, reinforced by communal, usually professional, agencies authorized to articulate the consensus about what is to be included within the canon and what is to be especially exalted within that privileged group as "classic." The pleas by advocates of phenomenological hermeneutics that the status of a "classic" is warranted when a work provides a "realized experience of that which is essential, that which endures"[29] is little more than a tacit acknowledgment that the temporary cultural consensus is already on the wane, and agreed upon or "plain" readings with it. As a warranting argument it is a last-ditch holding operation, no matter how sound it may be as a report of how people are likely to experience works that already (or still) have the cultural status of classics.

In the tradition of Christian religion and its communal life, scripture has played many parts; it has been a guide to life, an inspiration to heart and mind, a norm for believing. The (largely but not wholly) informal set of rules under which it has customarily been read in the community, in the midst of much disagreement about its contents, has been fairly flexible and usually not too constrictive. The *minimal* agreement about reading the Scriptures (as distinct from

their status or scope) has been as follows: First, Christian reading of Christian Scriptures must not deny the literal ascription to Jesus, and not to any other person, event, time or idea, of those occurrences, teachings, personal qualities and religious attributes associated with him in the stories in which he plays a part, as well as in the other New Testament writings in which his name is invoked. This ascription has usually also included the indirect referral to him of that "Kingdom of God," the parabolic proclamation of which is attributed to him in the texts, and of which he himself was taken to be (in a phrase of Austin Farrer's) the "self-enacted parable" both in word and deed. Second, no Christian reading may deny either the unity of Old and New Testaments or the congruence (which is not by any means the same as literal identity) of that unity with the ascriptive literalism of the Gospel narratives. Third, any readings not in principle in contradiction with these two rules are permissible, and two of the obvious candidates would be the various sorts of historical-critical and literary readings.

Whether or not there are exact parallels in other religions to this sort of governed use of scriptures for the edification, practical guidance, and orientation in belief of the members, it is at least a typical ingredient in a recognizably religious pattern.[30]

In days long past, observers used to put the practices and beliefs of differing "high" religions side by side, in order to compare and contrast discrete items such as the nature of the divine or the character of salvation. This procedure rightly came to be seen as naive and wooden because it ignored questions of the criteria for comparison. The result of the quest for criteria was a rash of theories of the relation of religion to human nature, to the character of society, to the course of human history at large (are religion and history evolutionary?) or to the specific host or guest cultures with which specific religions intertwined (are religions unique and relative and therefore incomparable because cultures are?). The strength of phenomenology of religion has been to propose a new option: While there is an irreducibly self-identical, universal "essence" of religion, it is not found in the empirically given surface data or manifestations of religion—which remain culture-specific—but in the depth experience of which they are the symbolic forms. That essence or quality has to be adduced from them but is in fact logically prior to them. Religion is precognitive, it is at home in the transcendental dimension in which selves apprehend themselves by way of the indispensable instrumentalities of culture (art, ritual, myth, etc.). In contrast to other ways of seeing religion, this outlook is able to appreciate both the unity and diversity in the spectrum of the world's religions, always of course on the twin assumptions of the priority of the unity and its transcendental or experiential character: To understand the unitary essence of religion is identical with being, in however attenuated a form, religious.

Scepticism about this view—its assignment of primordial status to the self and its experience, its claim to a native religious cohabitation of the self and "the sacred" or "transcendent," the unpersuasiveness of its hermeneutical ventures—need not entail a return to understanding religions as the products either of identical mechanisms in institutional behavior patterns or of distinctive and therefore incomparable cultures. With phenomenologists one may agree that religions (and cultures, for that matter) are personal and interpersonal activities—even if not perhaps primarily experiences— rather than impersonal or superpersonal entities with independent causal powers, without adhering to a strongly developed general theory of the self or of understanding in phenomenological fashion. At the same time one may agree with interpretive social scientists who hold that a "culture" (including a religion) is like a language, a multi-level communicative network that forms the indispensably enabling context for persons to enact both themselves and their mutual relations. As in the case of phenomenology concerning selfhood, so in the case of social science concerning culture, it is best to postpone the generalizing tendency that raises theory from the descriptive to the explanatory power. ("Reductive" explanation of cultures and especially religions may or may not be compatible with interpretation or exposition from a merely descriptive point of view; the point is that it is a tran-

sition to a very different and generalizing stage of reflection. One only has to take care that the integrity and complexity of the description does not get lost in the transition. Reductive theoreticians, or masters and disciples of "suspicion" are usually better at starting at a point past the transition and looking back than at actually making or explaining the transition.)

The descriptive context, then, for the *sensus literalis* is the religion of which it is part, understood at once as a determinate code in which beliefs, ritual, and behavior patterns, ethos as well as narrative, come together as a common semiotic system, and also as the community which is that system in use—apart from which the very term ("semiotic system") is in this case no more than a misplaced metaphor. Clifford Geertz calls culture an "acted document," and the term applies also to religion.[31] Geertz calls the low-level theoretical effort at describing culture, which we have also affirmed for religion, "thick description" (using a term of Gilbert Ryle's). It is, first, description of details as parts of "interworked systems of construable signs . . . within which they can be intelligibly . . . described."[32] Second, it is description from the actor's, participant's, or language user's point of view, yet without mimicry or confusion of identity on the part of the interpreter.[33]

Those who follow this low-level use of theory for "placing" religions as symbol systems are persuaded that the description and critical appraisal of a religion from within the religious community itself, and external "thick" description, while certainly not identical, are not wholly disparate. Yet their congruence does not require—on the contrary it eschews—the elaborate synthesizing requirements of a more general, explanatory theory. To understand a religion or a culture to which one is not native does not demand a general doctrine of the core of humanity, selfhood, and the grounds of inter-subjective experience. There is of course the need for normal human sensitivity and respect. But beyond that, in Geertz's words:

> Whatever accurate sense one gets of what one's informants are "really like" comes . . . from the ability to construe their modes of expression, what I would call their symbol systems. … Understanding the form and pressure of ... natives' inner lives is more like grasping a proverb, catching an allusion, seeing a joke—or. . . reading a poem—than it is like achieving communion.[34]

This is understanding without "empathy" or "transcultural identification with our subjects."[35] George Lindbeck has called this low-level theoretical deployment in the analysis of religions a "cultural linguistic approach" to the topic,[36] and has used the term "intratextual" to describe the kind of theology—the "normative explication of the meaning a religion has for its adherents"—that is not identical but congruent with it.[37] The congruence lies in the persuasion that

> Meaning is constituted by the uses of a specific language rather than being distinguishable from it. Thus the proper way to determine what "God" signifies, for example, is by examining how the word operates in a religion and thereby shapes reality and experience rather than by first establishing its prepositional or experiential meaning and reinterpreting or reformulating its uses accordingly.[38]

"Intratextuality" in many of the "high" religions is used not only in an extended or metaphorical but in a literal sense, for they are in varying degrees "religions of the (or a) book." "They all have relatively fixed canons of writings that they treat as exemplary or normative instantiations of their semiotic codes. One test of faithfulness for all of them is the degree to which descriptions correspond to the semiotic universe paradigmatically encoded in holy writ."[39]

The direction in the flow of intratextual interpretation is that of absorbing the extratextual universe into the text, rather than the reverse (extratextual) direction. The literal sense is the paradigmatic form of such intratextual interpretation in the Christian community's use of its

scripture: The literal ascription to Jesus of Nazareth of the stories connected with him is of such far-reaching import that it serves not only as focus for inner-canonical typology but re-shapes extratextual language in its manifold descriptive uses into a typological relation to these stories. The reason why the intratextual universe of this Christian symbol system is a narrative one is that a specific set of texts, which happen to be narrative, has become primary, even within scripture, and has been assigned a literal reading as their primary or "plain" sense. They have become the paradigm for the construal not only of what is inside that system but for all that is outside. They provide the interpretive pattern in terms of which *all* of reality is experienced and read in this religion. Only in a secondary or derivative sense have they be-come ingredient in a general and literary narrative tradition. The latter is actually not only a provisional but a highly variable set of contexts for these texts; it is not foundational for their meaning, and there is no intrinsic reason to suppose that any given general theory for their reading in that context, be it hermeneutical or anti-hermeneutical, ought to be assigned pride of place—including that of New Criticism with its logical dependence on Christian theology. Equally clearly it is once more a case of putting the cart before the horse— but this time the wagon is theological rather than literary—if one constructs a general and inalienable human quality called "narrative" or "narrativity," within which to interpret the Gospels and provide foundational warrant for the possibility of their existential and ontological meaningfulness. The notion that Christian theology is a member of a general class of "narrative theology" is no more than a minor will-o'-the-wisp.

"Meaning" in a cultural-linguistic and intratextual interpretive frame is the skill that allows ethnographer and native to meet in mutual respect; if they happen to be the same person, it is the bridge over which (s)he may pass from one shore to the other and undertake the return journey; if they are natives from different tribes, it is the common ground that is established as they learn each other's languages, rather than a known precondition for doing so.

To return to the beginning: The third of these tasks is perhaps the most immediately pressing for Christian interpretation and for the future of its use of the literal sense. For the next-door neighbor to Christianity in all its various forms is Judaism with its own diversity, and they share those parts of a common scripture which Christianity has usurped from Judaism. The most pressing question from this vantage point is not the fate of the literal sense in the event of a new, perhaps more nearly universal, spiritual truth that would also constitute a new literal reading and threaten to reduce the Christian reading of the New Testament to exoteric, carnal status. This is unlikely, for we have noted that religions are specific symbol systems and not a single, high-culture reproduction of symbol-neutral eternal "truth." Lessing's "eternal gospel" is a noble ideal, but his appropriation of a story form for the purpose of advocating historical and religious progress is not a supplanting of one scriptural narrative by a later and better one; it is instead the substitution of a philosophy of history for an intratextual interpretive scheme.

A far more urgent issue for Christian interpretation is the unpredictable consequences of learning the "language" of the Jewish tradition, including the nearest Jewish equivalent to Christian literal reading. To discover Midrash in all its subtlety and breadth of options and to understand *peshat* (the traditional sense)[40] may well be to begin to repair a series of contacts established and broken time and again in the history of the church, whenever linguistic and textual Old Testament issues became pressing in intra-Christian debate. Perhaps the future may be better than the past as a result of the intervening period of liberal scholarship and the persuasion that the two religions, even though closely intertwined, are quite distinct, each with its own integrity. The convergence of distinctness and commensurability between them has yet to be discovered, and attention to Midrash and to the literal sense may play a significant part in the discovery.

In addition to the inter-religious enrichment for which one may hope from such joint inquiry, certainly for Christianity, the secular gains may be surprisingly large, even if strictly speaking incidental or secondary. The Protestant theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher called Judaism a fossil religion, in part at least out of the animus which many Rationalist, Romantic, and Idealistic thinkers bore toward Jewish particularism. And yet it is now conceivable that that "fossil" may bear more of the future of the culture of the West in its hands than Christianity, and its traditional, particularistic forms may not be adventitious to the fact. Cultural, religious, and historical parallels are dangerous and speculative. Nonetheless there may be a lesson here, at least to the effect that the relation between Christianity and Judaism—including the complex issues of the relation between their Scriptures and scriptural interpretations— may play an indispensable part in the process of Christian recovery of its own intratextual or self-description. Whether with or without the aid of such a discussion, the most fateful issue for Christian self-description is that of regaining its autonomous vocation as a religion, after its defeat in its secondary vocation of providing ideological coherence, foundation, and stability to Western culture. Beyond that, however, the example of Judaism in the modern Western world might be a beacon to a reconstituted Christian community. One never knows what this community might then contribute once again to that culture or its residues, including its political life, its quest for justice and freedom—and even its literature. If the priori- ties are rightly ordered, the literal sense may be counted on to play a significant part in such a less pretentious enterprise. It will stretch and not break.

NOTES

1. Cf. Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg, *The Nature of Narrative* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960), pp. 50ff.

2. Cf. Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (Cleveland: World, 1963), ch. I, *inter rnulta alia.*

3. Cf. Northrop Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1982), pp. 31ff.

4. James S. Preus, From *Shadow to Promise. Old Testament Interpretation from Augustine to the Young Luther* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1969).

5. G. E. Lessing, "The Education of the Human Race," *Lessing's Theological Writings,* translated and introduced bv Henry Chadwick (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1967), p. 96. The same message is of course a large part of the parable of the rings in Lessing's *Nathan The Wise.*

6. Cf. Frank Kermode, *The Genesis of Secrecy. On the Interpretation of Narrative* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979), pp. 18ff., 45ff., 143ff., passim.

7. Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976), pp. 12ff.

8. Ibid., p. 12.

9. Cf. Paul Ricoeur, "Toward a Hermeneutic of the Idea of Revelation," *Essays on Biblical Interpretation,* ed. Lewis S. Mudge (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), pp. 73-118.

10. David Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order. The New Pluralism in Theology* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), p. 221.

11. *Semeia 4: Paul Ricoeur on Biblical Hermeneutics,* ed. J. D. Crossan (Missoula, Mont.: Scholars Press, 1975), p. 32.

12. Ibid., pp. 127ff.

13. Paul Ricoeur, "The Narrative Function," *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences,* ed. and tr. by J. B. Thompson (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 292.

14. Cf. ibid., pp. 293ff.

15. Tracy, op. cit., p. 206. Cf. supra, pp. 102-115 for a statement of the issue.

16. Tracy's statement of the matter, op. cit., pp. 205-207, is quite typical. If the tenor of the passage quoted above (note 10) is to turn 'Jesus' into an allegory of "universal meaning-fulness" in the shape of an event or disclosure (cf. ibid., p. 106), Tracy's subsequent *The Analogical Imagination. Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), part II, chs. 6 and 7, tends to redress the balance and stress 'Jesus' as the unsurpassable ascriptive subject of the narratives manifesting and proclaiming the "Christ event" as an event "from God." However, since that event qua event must always be a "present experience," the movement toward universal meaningfulness as the referent of the stories and thus toward the allegorical use of 'Jesus' begins again right away (cf. ibid., p. 234, passim). It is not at all clear that Tracy's hermeneutical procedure manages to co-ordinate these two simultaneous referents, but what is clear is that if their coordination is indeed a problem and as a result one becomes the chief referent and the other its satellite, then it is the tendency toward allegorization that receives Tracy's favorable nod.

17. Paul Ricoeur, "The Model of the Text: Meaningful Action Considered as a Text," P. Rabinow and W. M. Sullivan (eds.). *Interpretive Social Science* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), p. 98.

18. Ibid.

19. Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory, An Introduction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), p. 108.

20. Cf. Christopher Morris, Deconstruction. *Theory and Practice* (London and New York: Methuen, 1982), p. 31.

21. Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order,* p. 51, passim.

22. Ibid.

23. John Searle, "The World Turned Upside Down." *The New York Review of Books,* XXX, 16, October 27, 1983, pp. 74-79.

24. Cf. Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination,* p. 340.

25. Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (Harper Torchbook, 1972), pp. 37f.

26. Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination,* p. 362. For Tracy's remarks about Derrida, cf. ibid., pp. 117ff., 220ff. (note 17), 361ff., passim.

27. This position is implied by the present writer in *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), and made explicit in *The Identity of Jesus Christ* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975).

28. The classic statement of this case is Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis. The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953).

29. Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination,* p. 108.

30. For an interesting parallel see Gerhard Böwering, *The Mystical Vision of Existence in Classical Islam* (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1980), pp. 140H.

31. Clifford Geertz, The *Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), p. 10.

32. Ibid., p. 13.

33. Ibid., pp. 13, 27.

34. Geertz, "From the Native's Point of View: On the Nature of Anthropological Understanding," P. Rabinow and W. M. Sullivan (eds.), op. cit., pp. 240ff.

35. Ibid., p. 226.

36. George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984), pp. 32ff. I wish to acknowledge my profound indebtedness to this book and to its author.

37. Ibid., p. 113.

38. Ibid., p. 114.

39. Ibid., p. 116.

40. Cf. Raphael Loewe, "The 'Plain' Meaning of Scripture in Early Jewish Exegesis," *Papers of the Institute of Jewish Studies in London* I (Jerusalem, 1964), pp. 140-185, esp. pp. 180ff.

Source: *The Bible and the Narrative Tradition*, edited by Frank McConnell (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), pp. 36-77.