CHAPTER 1
THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS: REVELATION, TRADITION AND HERMENEUTICS

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Introduction
In this chapter, we first shed some light on the concept of revelation that Ratzinger developed at the time of the Second Vatican Council. Afterwards we will present his thoughts on the development of tradition and the hermeneutics of scripture and tradition. We will pay special attention to his elaborations on the creative, providential synthesis Christianity established during the patristic period between Christian faith and Hellenistic thinking, and the problems for biblical and theological hermeneutics that occur when Christianity (including this synthesis) is confronted with modernity.

1.1 Revelation, Scripture and Tradition
In one of his earliest articles in 1958, which stemmed from the period after he finished his doctoral dissertation on Augustine and the conclusion of his habilitation thesis on Bonaventure, Joseph Ratzinger was already speaking about revelation, scripture, and tradition.1 Beginning with a reflection on Bonaventure, and in dialogue with Thomas Aquinas, the rule of Benedict, and the works of Augustine, Ratzinger takes a position in the discussion concerning the material sources of revelation. He raises questions concerning the idea that tradition would be the second material principle next to scripture. To that end, he turns to Bonaventure’s concept of dynamic revelation. After all, revelation cannot be fixed and objectified from outside but is an (at least partially – he carefully adds) internal event.2 Revelation, as the turning of God toward humanity, effectively continues to this day – even after the closure of objective revelation. It is therefore

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2 Ibid., p 26.
necessary to understand scripture and tradition from this dynamic concept of revelation. Only in this way can the theological discussions mired in controversy productively gain new perspectives necessary for creative development.

Ratzinger adopts a similar position during the Council in his booklet *Revelation and Tradition*, published with Karl Rahner in 1965. Here he again advocates that only when scripture and tradition as ‘positive’ sources are brought into relation with their ‘internal source’ (revelation) can the pre-conciliar questions influenced by the controversies with the protestants be answered. To this end, he unfolds five theses, concisely presented below. In the following we quote from this booklet, and for the sake of the argument, we have integrated the fragments into an overall presentation of the structure of the text.

**Thesis 1:** According to Ratzinger, the Christian tradition exists by the grace of the fact that there is incongruence between revelation and scripture. Scripture is exceeded by revelation in a twofold manner: from above by God’s speaking and acting; from below by what revelation realizes in the faith event itself, beyond the boundaries of scripture.

A first thesis on this set of problems might be formulated as follows, bearing in mind the patristic conception of scripture and revelation. The fact that ‘tradition’ exists is primarily based on the non-identity of the two realities, ‘revelation’ and ‘scripture’. Revelation means God’s whole speech and action with man; it signifies a reality which scripture makes known but which is not itself simply identical with scripture. Revelation, therefore, is more than scripture to the extent that reality exceeds information about it. It might also be said that scripture is the material principle of revelation (perhaps the only one, perhaps one side by side with others – a question that can be left open for the moment), but that it is not revelation itself. [. . .]


5 This statement is not meant in a sense that would make scripture simply an unsubstantial report of facts that remain entirely external to it. On the contrary, it should remain abundantly clear (as we hope what follows will show) that the reality of revelation is a ‘word-reality’, and that in the word of preaching the reality of revelation comes to the individual. The fact remains, however, that the mere presence of the word of scripture is not the reality of revelation itself, which is never simply ‘there’. The above remark is simply meant to draw attention to the difference between scripture and the reality, which makes itself known in scripture, a difference which is not annulled by the verbal character of revelation.
There can be scripture without revelation. For revelation always and only becomes a reality where there is faith. The unbeliever remains under the veil of which Paul speaks in 2 Corinthians 3.6. He can read scripture and know what it contains. He can even understand, purely conceptually, what is meant and how its statements cohere, yet he has no share in the revelation. Revelation is in fact fully present only when, in addition to the material statements which testify to it, its own inner reality is itself operative in the form of faith. Consequently revelation to some degree includes its recipient, without whom it does not exist. Revelation cannot be pocketed like a book one carries around. It is a living reality which calls for the living man as the location of its presence.

In view of what has been said, we may, therefore, affirm that revelation goes beyond the fact of scripture in two respects: as a reality deriving from God it always extends upwards into God’s action; as a reality which makes itself known to man in faith, it also extends beyond the fact of scripture which serves to mediate it.

This non-coincidence of scripture and revelation makes it clear that quite apart from the question whether scripture is the sole material source or not, there can never really, properly speaking, be a sola scriptura in regard to Christianity. As we have already said, that was still clear in principle to the great Reformers, and only fell into oblivion in what has been called Protestant orthodoxy. Scripture is not revelation but at most only a part of the latter’s greater reality.

Thesis 2: For the early Christians the Old Testament remains scripture, but is read from the perspective of the Christ event, which is experienced as the fulfillment of scripture. In Jesus Christ, scripture is completed and exceeded. It ceases to exist as gramma, i.e. objectifiable, closed, and completed revelation. Christ, as pneuma, reveals its true and living content and meaning.6

Thesis 3: In the strict sense, only Jesus Christ is the revelation of God. To receive revelation then means to enter into the reality of the Christ-mystery. Scripture is not revelation but testifies that revelation essentially has to do with faith and the Church.

The actual reality which occurs in Christian revelation is nothing and no other than Christ himself. He is revelation in the proper sense: ‘He who has seen me, has seen the Father’, Christ says in John (14:9). This means that the reception of revelation is equivalent to entering into the Christ-reality, the source of that double


7 In this regard, Ratzinger refers to 2 Cor 3:6–18. Paul argues that scripture – the law – kills exactly because of this objectification. The pneuma causes life, ‘for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life’ (2 Cor 3:6).
state of affairs which Paul alternately describes with the words ‘Christ in us’ and ‘we in Christ’. [. . .]

The reception of revelation, in which the Christ-reality becomes ours, is called in biblical language ‘faith’. From this point of view perhaps it is clearer why, for the New Testament, faith is equivalent to the indwelling of Christ. If we firmly hold that for scripture the presence of revelation is equivalent to the presence of Christ, a further step follows. We find the presence of Christ designated in two further ways. It appears on the one hand, as we have already seen, identical with the faith (Eph 3:17), in which the individual encounters Christ and in him enters the sphere of influence of his saving power. But it is also hidden under the Pauline term of ‘Body of Christ’ which of course implies that the community of the faithful, the Church, represents Christ’s continued abiding in this world in order to gather men into, and make them share, his mighty presence. These two aspects taken together mean, therefore, that faith is entry into Christ’s presence, into the abiding reality of Christ to which scripture bears witness but with which scripture itself is not simply and solely identical. It also follows that the presence of revelation is essentially connected with the two realities ‘faith’ and ‘Church’, which themselves, as is now clear, are closely connected. This in turn leads back to what was stated in the first thesis, that revelation goes beyond scripture in two respects, in relation to God and in relation to its human recipient. That statement, which at first was rather indefinite, is now found to possess an essentially concrete meaning in relation to actual Christian realities.

Thesis 4: What then is tradition? This is essentially the explanation of the ‘Christ-reality’ in a twofold way: an explanation of the Old Testament from the Christ-event and of the Christ-event itself from the pneuma, i.e. from the ecclesial present. After all, Christ lives in his Church, which is his body, and in which his Spirit works. From this follows that there are three sources and four levels of tradition.

Summarizing what has been said, we can now observe several sources of the reality called ‘tradition’ and, consequently, several strata within it.

First source: The extent to which the reality of ‘revelation’ is more than ‘scripture’.

Second source: The specific character of New Testament revelation as pneuma, as opposed to gramma, and consequently what one might call in Bultmann’s terminology, the impossibility of objectivizing it. This state of affairs has been expressed in the Church’s practice and, as a consequence, in mediaeval theology, by the placing of fides above scriptura, that is to say, of the creed as rule of faith above the details of what is written. The creed appears as the

9 On this question, the best that has been said as regards to the Fathers will still be found in A. V. Harnack, Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte, v. 2. Freiburg: Akademische Verlagbuchhandlung von
hermeneutical key to scripture which without interpretation must ultimately remain
dumb.

Third source: The character of the Christ-event as present and the authoritative
enduring presence of Christ’s Spirit in his Body the Church and, connected with
this, the authority to interpret Christ yesterday in relation to Christ today, the origin
of which we have observed in the Church’s reinterpretation by the apostles of the
message of the kingdom.

Corresponding to these three sources of the concept of tradition (or, better, of
the reality which we term tradition), the following strata in tradition can perhaps
be discerned.

(i) At the beginning of all tradition stands the fact that the Father gives the Son
over to the world and that the Son for his part allows himself to be given over
to the ‘nations’, as a sign. This original paradosis, in its character as judgment
and gift of salvation, is continued in the abiding presence of Christ in his Body,
the Church. To that extent the whole mystery of Christ’s continuing presence
is primarily the whole reality which is transmitted in tradition, the decisive
fundamental reality which is antecedent to all particular explicit expressions
of it, even those of scripture, and which represents what has in fact to be
handed down.

(ii) Tradition then exists concretely as presence in faith, which again, as the
in-dwelling of Christ, is antecedent to all its particular explicit formulations
and is fertile and living, thus developing and unfolding throughout the ages.

(iii) The organ of tradition is the authority of the Church, that is, those who have
authority in it.10

(iv) Tradition also exists, however, as actually expressed in what has already
become a rule of faith (creed, fides quae), by the authority of faith. The
question whether certain express affirmations were transmitted from the
beginning side by side with scripture, whether, therefore, there is a second

J. C. B. Mohr, 1931, pp. 84–116. Harnack actually says, p. 87, note 3: “The “Canon” was originally
the rule of faith; scripture has in truth intervened, yet in such a way that its authority had a significance
lying still further back, namely, in the Old Testament and the words of the Lord”. I have tried to
show that this was still true in the Middle Ages, and that here (together with the concept of revelatio,
which will be dealt with in the next chapter) the placing of “fides” (the creed) higher than scriptura
represents the essential form of the idea of tradition. See my essay: “Wesen und Weisen der auctoritas
im Werk des heiligen Bonaventura” in Corsten, Froitz and Lindens (eds), Die Kirche und ihre Ämter

10 This line of thought cannot be developed in greater detail here, as it really needs to be, for we are
only concerned with indicating the basis of the concept of tradition. In view of the limitation of
the theme, I have been content in the preceding theses to develop the matter to the point where it
becomes evident that tradition is concerned with the ‘Church’ (cf. theses 4 and 5). What that means
could only be explained in more precise terms by an analysis of the concept of the Church, which
must be taken for granted here. Cfr. my article on ministry and unity of the Church mentioned in
note 6 above; in it I attempted a few observations on the matter.
material principle besides scripture, independent from the beginning, becomes quite secondary in comparison; but it would probably have to be answered negatively.

Thesis 5: The function of exegesis has to be seen from the given that tradition, within whose authority the Church participates, is essentially an explanation 'according to scripture.' Concerning the ecclesial explanation of scripture in tradition, there exists, complementary to the 'safeguarding function of the Church and her witness under the Spirit', the safeguarding function of exegesis. Ratzinger even sees therein an expression of the autonomy of scripture vis-à-vis the ecclesial teaching office, since what can be demonstrated univocally through scientific exegesis should be seen as a criterion of truth that the magisterium should also take into account.

1.2 The Formation of Tradition

We now go deeper into Ratzinger’s vision of the concrete form that tradition has adopted and its significance for faith and theology today. (a) First, we discuss the question of how far the Hellenistic culture in which the Christians of the first century lived co-determined the specific form of Christianity. Especially important in this regard is the conversation with Greek philosophy. (b) Then we investigate the significance of the Church Fathers for contemporary theology. (c) Finally, we look at dogma and Ratzinger’s view on dogmatic hermeneutics.

(a) The God of Faith and the God of the Greek Philosophers

In Chapter 3 of his Introduction to Christianity, Ratzinger recounts how Jewish-Christian faith and Greek thinking found each other in the first centuries of Christianity. Christianity chooses the God of reason over the gods of mythology. In its conversation with reason, Christian theology not only borrows from Greek thought about God but also changes it to suit its purposes: to assist faith in the biblical God by reason. For Ratzinger, the decision of the early Christians is still of major importance, and is therefore to be qualified as providential.11

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1. The decision of the early church in favour of philosophy. Christianity boldly and resolutely made its choice and carried out its purification by deciding for the God of the philosophers and against the gods of the various religions. Wherever the question arose as to which god the Christian God corresponded, Zeus perhaps or Hermes or Dionysus or some other god, the answer ran: To none of them. To none of the gods to whom, you pray but solely and alone to him to whom you do not pray, to that highest being of whom your philosophers speak. The early Church resolutely put aside the whole cosmos of the ancient religions, regarding the whole of it as deceit and illusion, and explained its faith by saying: When we say God, we do not mean or worship any of this; we mean only Being itself, what the philosophers have expounded as the ground of all being, as the God above all powers – that alone is our God. This proceeding involved a choice, a decision, no less fateful and formative for ages to come than the choice of El and yah as opposed to Moloch and Baal had been in its time, with the subsequent development of the two into Elohim and toward Yahweh, the idea of Being. The choice thus made meant opting for the logos as against any kind of myth; it meant the definitive demythologization of the world and of religion.

Was this decision for the logos rather than the myth the right one? To find the answer to this we must keep in view all our previous reflections on the inner development of the biblical concept of God, the last stages of which had in essentials already determined that the position to be taken up by Christianity in the Hellenistic world should be this one. On the other side, it must be noted that the ancient world itself knew the dilemma between the God of faith and the God of the philosophers in a very pronounced form. Between the mythical gods of the religions and the philosophical knowledge of God there had developed in the course of history a stronger and stronger tension, which is apparent in the criticism of the myths by the philosophers from Xenophanes to Plato, who even thought of trying to replace the classical Homeric mythology with a new mythology appropriate to the logos. Contemporary scholarship is coming to see more and more clearly that there are quite amazing parallels in chronology and content between the philosophers’ criticism of the myths in Greece and the prophets’ criticism of the gods in Israel. It is true that the two movements start from completely different assumptions and have completely different aims; but the movement of the logos against the myth, as it evolved in the Greek mind in the philosophical enlightenment, so that in the end it necessarily led to the fall of the gods, has an inner parallelism with the enlightenment that the prophetic and Wisdom literature cultivated in its demythologization of the divine powers in favor of the one and only God. For all the differences between them, both movements coincide in their striving toward the logos.

The opposing fates of myth and Gospel in the ancient world, the end of myth and the victory of the Gospel, are fundamentally to be explained, from the point of view of intellectual history, by the opposing relationship established in either instance between religion and philosophy, between faith and reason. The paradox of ancient philosophy consists, from the point of view of religious history, in the fact that intellectually it destroyed myth but simultaneously tried to legitimize it afresh as religion; in other words, that from the religious point of view it was not revolutionary but, at the most, evolutionary, that it treated religion as a question of the regulation of life, not as a question of truth.

Religion did not go the way of the logos but lingered in myths already seen to be devoid of reality. Consequently its decline was inevitable; this followed from its divorce from the truth, a state of affairs that led to its being regarded as a mere institutio vitae, that is, as a mere contrivance and an outward form of life. The Christian position, as opposed to this situation, is put emphatically by Tertullian when he says with splendid boldness: 'Christ called himself truth, not custom.'13 In my view this is one of the really great assertions of patristic theology. In it the struggle of the early Church, and the abiding task with which the Christian faith is confronted if it is to remain itself, is summed up with unique conciseness.

2. The transformation of the God of the philosophers

Of course, the other side of the picture must not be overlooked. By deciding exclusively in favour of the God of the philosophers and logically declaring this God to be the God who speaks to man and to whom one can pray, the Christian faith gave a completely new significance to this God of the philosophers, removing him from the purely academic realm and thus profoundly transforming him. This God who had previously existed as something neutral, as the highest, culminating concept; this God who had been understood as pure Being or pure thought, circling around forever closed in upon itself without reaching over to man and his little world; this God of the philosophers, whose pure eternity and unchangeability had excluded any relation with the changeable and transitory, now appeared to the eye of faith as the God of men, who is not only thought of all thoughts, the eternal mathematics of the universe, but also agape, the power of creative love. In this sense there does exist in the Christian faith what Pascal experienced on the night when he wrote on a slip of paper that he henceforth kept sewn in the lining of his jacket the words: 'Fire. "God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob", not "of the philosophers and scholars".'14 He had encountered the burning

13 'Dominus noster Christus veritatem se, non consuetudinem cognominavit.' De virginibus velandis I, 1, in Corpus Christianorum seu nova Patrum collection (CChr) 2:1209.
14 The text of the 'Mémorial', as this slip of paper is called, is quoted in R. Guardini, Chriithes Bewusstein (2nd edn.). Munich: Kosei, 1950, pp. 47f; on p. 23 there is a facsimile, reduced in size, of the original; cf. also Guardini’s analysis on pp. 27–61. This is supplemented and corrected by
bush experience, as opposed to a God sinking back completely into the realm of mathematics, and had realized that the God who is the eternal geometry of the universe can only be this because he is creative love, because he is the burning bush from which a name issues forth, through which he enters the world of man. So in this sense there is the experience that the God of the philosophers is quite different from what the philosophers had thought him to be, though he does not thereby cease to be what they had discovered; that one only comes to know him properly when one realizes that he, the real truth and ground of all Being, is at one and the same time the God of faith, the God of men. [. . .]

To sum up, we can say that, in the deliberate connection with the God of the philosophers made by the Christian faith, purely philosophical thinking was transcended on two fundamental points:

a. The philosophical God is essentially self-centered: thought simply contemplating itself. The God of faith is basically defined by the category of relationship. He is creative fullness encompassing the whole. Thereby a completely new picture of the world, a completely new world order is established: the highest possibility of Being no longer seems to be the detachment of him who exists in himself and needs only himself. On the contrary, the highest mode of Being includes the element of relationship. It is hardly necessary to say what a revolution it must mean for the direction of man’s existence when the supreme Being no longer appears as absolute, enclosed autarchy but turns out to be at the same time involvement, creative power, which creates and bears and loves other things [. . .]

b. The philosophical God is pure thought: he is based on the notion that thought and thought alone is divine. The God of faith, as thought, is also love. His image is based on the conviction that to love is divine.

The logos of the whole world, the creative original thought, is at the same time love; in fact this thought is creative because, as thought, it is love, and, as love, it is thought. It becomes apparent that truth and love are originally identical; that where they are completely realized they are not two parallel or even opposing realities but one, the one and only absolute. At this point it also becomes possible to glimpse the starting point of the confession of faith in the triune God.

(b) The Enduring Importance of the Fathers of the Church

The establishment of the original and creative synthesis between Christian faith and Hellenistic philosophy, and thus of theology, is only one of the accomplishments of the Fathers of the Church. They are also responsible for the canon of scripture, the first creeds, and the constitutive forms of the liturgy. Because of these accomplishments, they have a lasting influence and normative importance for Christian faith and theology. The Fathers of the Church have indeed offered a first and constitutive ‘response’ to the offer of revelation (‘the Word’) in Christ as witnessed to in scripture. The following text illustrates this point.

Word and response: the content of this formula by which we have attempted to express the relationship between scripture and the Fathers can be made more concrete from the perspective of history. At the same time, it will become even clearer wherein lies the permanent value, the indispensability, of these ecumenical teachers of the faith whom we call Fathers of the Church. The uniqueness of their proto-response can be summarized in four fundamental facts.

(a) The canon of Holy Scripture can be traced back to them, or, at least, to the undivided Church of the first centuries of which they were the representatives. It is through their efforts that precisely those books that today we call the ‘New Testament’ were chosen as such from among a multitude of other available literary texts, that the Greek canon of the Jewish Bible was joined to them as the ‘Old Testament’, that it was interpreted in terms of them and that, together, the two Testaments came to be known as ‘Holy Scripture’. The establishment of the canon and the establishment of the early Church are one and the same process but viewed from different perspectives. A book was recognized as ‘canonical’ if it was sanctioned by the Church for use in public worship. By the Church: that meant that the numerous Eastern Churches which, in the beginning, each had her own custom with regard to liturgical reading, all came, in the end, to accept this one book. The fact that a given book was selected while another was rejected presumes, however, a process of intellectual winnowing and deciding and a dramatic tension such as we can hardly conceive today when we read, on the one hand, the Gnostic gospels that aspired to become scripture and, on the other hand, the anti-Gnostic writings of the Fathers in which what seems to us such a clearly drawn dividing line then divided the Church in two and for the recognition of which she had to struggle and suffer.
By the end of the second century, this process of winnowing and deciding—Augustine compares it to the dividing of the waters above from the waters below by the vault that turned chaos into cosmos17—had already more or less come to an end, although its offshoots extended far into the following centuries, which expanded, deepened and gave final form to the earlier decisions. This means that the canon, as canon, would be inconceivable without the intellectual movement to which patristic theology bears witness. The canon is the product of this movement: to accept it is, therefore, of necessity to accept also those basic intellectual decisions that formed it. Word and response are here inseparably united—and this despite the fact that the Fathers were always careful to keep their response distinct from the proclaimed word in contrast to the intermingling of the two that was so characteristic of gnosis and appears, in a particularly classic manner, in the mixture of tradition and interpretation in the so-called Gospel of St Thomas.18 Where the writings of the New Testament are read as canon and the Old Testament is read as the Christian Bible, there we find ourselves in the intellectual ambience of the struggle of the first centuries; there we have as Fathers those who were then teachers of the Church.

(b) In selecting the writings that were to be recognized as constituting the Bible, the early Church made use of a norm that she designated, in her own words, as the κανὼν τῆς πίστεως, regula fidei. Certainly not the least of the functions of this canon was to lead to a discrimination between false and genuine sacred writings and, in this way, to help establish the canon of ‘the’ Scripture. The regula, for its part, continued to function in the many different symbola, whether conciliar or extraconciliar, in which the effort of the ancient Church to determine what actually constituted Christianity found its binding expression. In addition to her role in laying down the canon of the Bible, then, the Church of the Fathers may also be characterized as the time that gave birth to the fundamental symbola of all Christendom. As long as these symbola continue to be prayed, as long as Christianity continues to confess Jesus Christ as both God and man and to worship God as one God in three Persons, just as long are these Fathers its Fathers. When the ‘basis’ of the ecumenical council of the Church of Jesus Christ speaks of Jesus as ‘God and Savior’ and determines the mission of the Church as being, in the language of the doxology, ‘to the glory of God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit’,19 the heritage of the great early Christian symbola is present in and basic to this new attempt at

17 St. Augustine, ‘Confessionum Libri XIII’, bk. 13, chap. 15, sec. 18 (pp. 251–252) and sec. 22 (pp. 253–254) in CCchr 27 (1981); ‘Enarratio in Ps. CIII’, 8, in CCchr 40 (1956): 1479.
a kind of minimum-symbolum. Whenever the Church confesses her Lord in
the words of the symbolum, she is always reminded of those who first made
this confession of faith and, in the affirmation of faith that it signifies, likewise
formulated the renunciation of a faith that was false.

[c] In the ancient Church, the reading of scripture and the confession of faith
were primarily liturgical acts of the whole assembly gathered around the
Risen Lord. That brings us to our third point: the ancient Church created the
fundamental forms of the Christian liturgical service, which are to be regarded
as the permanent basis and indispensable reference point of every liturgical
renewal. The liturgical movement between the two world wars, which, in
Catholic as well as in Protestant Christianity, led to a new concentration
on the nature and form of the Christian liturgy, resulted, on both sides, in a
decisive orientation toward the great liturgies of the ancient Church. Today,
however, when so much of what was then hoped for has become a reality, a
new tendency is making itself felt: the desire to compose for this technical age
a liturgy that will not only transcend the exuberance of the Middle Ages but
will also consider it necessary to begin again from the beginning and to free
itself from the heritage of the ancient Church. If war is thereby declared on
a certain archaism, a romantic glorification of antiquity that certainly existed
in the liturgical movement, and, in its place, a spiritual freedom is proposed
that would not be bound to antiquity and would not feel compelled to adopt
what is old just because it is old—if all this is true, we can only applaud it.
But if the bond with the basic forms of ancient Christian prayer and ecclesial
prayer through the centuries is thereby to be severed, we must be firm in our
resistance. The findings of Protestant liturgists of our own time, who have long
since made similar experiments and can speak from their own experience, can
stand us in good stead here. Of the many judgments available to us, two will
suffice. First, that of so unromantic a theologian as Wellhausen, who came
to the conclusion that the Protestant liturgical service is, at bottom, Catholic,
but with the heart cut out.20 Secondly, the opinion of A. Benoît: ‘The sixteenth
century was too brutal in destroying the bridges that linked it to the past, and
the liturgical tradition of Protestantism found itself, in consequence, not merely
impoverished but reduced almost to nothing.’21 Liturgical renewal that does
not seek to disintegrate and destroy or to replace the unifying power of the
liturgical service by a general antagonism cannot ignore the liturgical heritage
of the patristic age. Benoît is right in summarizing his reflections on patrology
and liturgy in the words: ‘The return to the ancient tradition, to the tradition of
the as yet undivided Church, is one of the ways that lead to unity.’22

20 Quoted in Wilhelm Averbeck, Der Opfercharakter des Abendmahls in der neueren evangelischen Theologie.
21 Ibid., p. 75.
22 Ibid., p. 77.
(d) To these three facts—that we owe to the Church of the Fathers the canon of Scripture, the symbola and the basic forms of liturgical worship—a final comment may be added as a kind of appendix. By comprehending faith as a philosophia and placing it under the rubric Credo ut intelligam, the Fathers acknowledged their rational responsibility for the faith and thus created theology as we understand it today, despite all the differences in individual methodologies. This turning to a rational responsibility, moreover, is not to be regarded lightly. It was, in fact, the precondition for the survival of Christendom in the ancient West, and it is the precondition for the survival of the Christian way of life today and tomorrow. This ‘rationalism’ of the Fathers has been often enough criticized, but its critics have, nevertheless, been unable to abandon the course it set, as we see most clearly in the work of Karl Barth, with its radical protest against every effort to find rational explanations and its simultaneous and fascinating struggle to find a deep-rooted understanding of what God has revealed. Thus, by its very existence, theology will always be indebted to the Fathers and will have cause to return again and again to these masters. We have now considered the most important formal perspectives on which is based the lasting significance of the Fathers for contemporary theology and for every theology of the future. In many respects, it would be desirable now to begin again from the beginning in order to make the whole content as concrete as possible. We should discuss the problem of patristic exegesis,23 we should comment on the structure of patristic thought, its unique union of biblical, liturgical and theological attitudes; we should deal with the question of the relationship between critical thinking and thinking based on faith. Some secondary, but not therefore unimportant, aspects of the questions should be included, for instance, the fact that, even in a purely historical way of thinking, no satisfactory conclusion can be reached if we place a vacuum between ourselves and the Bible and try to forget that the Bible comes to us by way of history. Only by acknowledging history can we transcend it. If we try to ignore it, we remain entangled in it;24 we cannot possibly read the Bible in a way that is truly historical however much we may seem to be applying historical methods. In reality, we remain bound to the horizon of our own thinking and reflect only ourselves. But to do all this would be to exceed by far the limits of this small work. Instead, I should like to conclude these

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23 Cf. especially, in this context, the various writings of Henri de Lubac and Jean Daniélou (especially Sermontum futuri. Paris: Beauchesne, 1950); Rolf Gögler, Zur Theologie des biblischen Wortes bei Origenes. Düsseldorf: Patmos, 1963. See also the bibliographical material in all of the above.

reflections with the thought with which André Benoît concludes his important study of the relevance of the Fathers and with which I am in total agreement. He says there: 'The patrologist is, without doubt, the individual who studies the first centuries of the Church, but he should likewise be the individual who prepares the future of the Church. That, at least, is his mission.'\(^2\) Indeed, working with the Fathers is not just a matter of cataloguing in a museum dedicated to what has been. The Fathers are the common past of all Christians. And in the rediscovery of this common possession lies the hope for the future of the Church, the task for her—and our—present.

\(c\) Doctrine and History: Dogma as a Community Constituting Linguistic Phenomenon

The unfolding of the truth revealed by God through Jesus Christ continues even after the period of the Church Fathers. Revelation takes on an historical character; is contained in human language and limited by the possibilities of that language.\(^2\) However, the character of this truth possesses an eternal dimension; her historical shape is always conditioned by space and time. As such, this truth knows its own historical unfolding in tradition. 'The timeless is realized for men [sic] existing in time only through constantly renewed bonds with time . . . . The true task of the Church is to restate the timeless in the up-to-date conditions of time'.\(^2\)

At this point, it is interesting to recall Ratzinger’s 1968 reflections on the status of dogmas and the task of dogmatic hermeneutics: dogma is a linguistic phenomenon that, as in every faith language, functions as a symbol – it refers to the other and as such, makes unity possible. At the same time, dogmas are linguistic phenomena formed throughout history and for that particular reason they cannot be put aside or changed by the faithful or by theologians; change becomes irreducibly part of a process through which the faith community ultimately mediates and is mediated.

‘On the question concerning the historicity of dogmas’
We can very succinctly say what ['historicity of dogma'] entails in four summarising

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theses that highlight the fruits of the previous considerations.

1. Dogma is essentially a phenomenon of language. Because its job is to bring about the community of the intellect through the community of the word, its emphasis lies just as much on the word as on the idea; the word is not an incidental and random accoutrement of dogma, but rather dogma is precisely there for the sake of the word, as the idea having its say. This linguistic character of dogma simultaneously and inseparably establishes both dogma’s particular form of historicity and its particular form of immutability.

2. Human language exists as a process of the history of language. As the self-expression of the historically existing human mind, language likewise needs tense-overlapping continuity through which it can effect understanding and facilitate the intellect’s communication from the past, via the present, into the future, like change whose power is testified to in the language of each generation and in which it leaves its traces. Language without continuity would lose its function, as would language without the timeliness of new speech developments. At the same time it is true that language precludes the caprice of the individual while still needing and thriving on the individual’s living, personal, speaking-with.

3. As a phenomenon of language, dogma participates in the dual nature of language: continuity and identity. But it must also be a forward-looking process of new adoption and transformation. Thus, dogma is ‘historical’ in the twofold sense of this word: history implies continuity and unity as well as the open-ended process of progress and its transformations.

4. The boundaries of historicity, and of the possibility of transformation, thus lie (a) in the fact that Faith itself is only one and that therefore the language of Faith can only ever refer to that one, the one of which it is the language. They lie (b) in the fact that in cases where the modification of language may be necessary, not only can this not happen without the common struggling and shared suffering of individuals, but on the other hand it can also never happen as a result of just the caprice of the individual. The unifying function of the word can only be preserved if it is not left to private caprice, i.e., such a modification can only happen through the community, and then not without the individual, his courage and his patience. We need both of these in equal measure today in a situation in which, together with an epoch of the human intellect, an epoch of human language also seems to be coming to an end. Patience without courage remains without a future, and a courage that loses
patience becomes destructive and cheats itself of its own work. To remain patient in courage and courageous in patience, this appears to be the real task of the hour. Only in this way can what Paul proclaimed to be Faith’s perpetual mission also be fulfilled in our generation: ‘so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ’ (Rom 15:6).

According to Ratzinger, ecclesial dogmatic formulations thus form a community-shaping language phenomenon. The shape that the inaccessible has adopted in language can be coincidental; however, through its community-shaping character it has also become binding even if it needs to be explained repeatedly. A hermeneutics of tradition should therefore distinguish between what essentially belongs to the salvific truth – to be preserved in the received historical shape of the deposit of faith – and what can be ascribed to cultural mediation.

In interpreting the salvific truth, theology should not allow itself to be carried along by modern forms of tradition criticism that, in the name of enlightened reason, sanitize the tradition of all so-called irrational elements or that even reject all of tradition’s authority. In the following, we elaborate on Ratzinger’s critical observations in this regard.

1.3 Christian Faith Challenged by a Modern Context

The Scandal of Christian Faith in a Modern Context

‘For people of all ages, the Christian faith is a scandal: that the eternal God concerns himself with us people and knows us, that the intangible has in the man Jesus become tangible, that the immortal one has suffered on the cross, that resurrection and eternal life awaits us mortals: this belief is an exhilarating prospect for humanity’. It is because of this scandal that Christianity will be met by the criticisms of modernity.

Joseph Ratzinger becomes increasingly aware of the irreconcilability of a number of modernity’s premises and the structure of Christian faith. In the following chapters of this reader, and particularly Chapter Two, this point will be the focus of attention. Ratzinger’s great fear consists in the fact that because of this irreconcilability on the one hand, and the all-too-eager willingness of the faithful and theologians to adapt faith to modernity on the other, eventually Christian faith will be eroded. Much

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30 Translated from J. Ratzinger, Einführung in das Christentum (Introduction to Christianity) – Das neue Volk Gottes, p. 317. This text (pp. 302–319), titled Der Katholizimus nach dem Konzil – Katholische Sicht, was Ratzinger’s lecture at the Katholikentag in Bamberg in 1966, and was later published in Auf Dein Wort hin. 81. Deutscher Katholikentag. Paderborn, Bonifacius, 1966, 245-266.
of his work can therefore be understood as an ongoing concern and effort to defend the integrity of faith against modern adaptation.

An example that illustrates this concern of the loss of (the core of) tradition, which was previously mentioned in the Introduction of this volume, is found in Ratzinger’s *Introduction to Christianity*, where he uses the fairy tale of ‘Clever Hans’ to underscore the threat for the Christian tradition in a modern context.

The question of the real content and meaning of the Christian faith is enveloped today in a greater fog of uncertainty than at almost any earlier period in history. Anyone who has watched the theological movement of the last decade and who is not one of those thoughtless people who always uncritically accept what is new as necessarily better might well feel reminded of the old story of ‘Clever Hans’. The lump of gold that was too heavy and troublesome for him he exchanged successively, so as to be more comfortable, for a horse, a cow, a pig, a goose, and a whetstone, which he finally threw into the water, still without losing much; on the contrary, what he now gained in exchange, so he thought, was the precious gift of complete freedom. How long his intoxication lasted, how somber the moment of awakening from the illusion of his supposed liberation, is left by the story, as we know, to the imagination of the reader. The worried Christian of today is often bothered by questions like these: Has our theology in the last few years not taken in many ways a similar path? Has it not gradually watered down the demands of faith, which had been found all too demanding, always only so little that nothing important seemed to be lost, yet always so much that it was soon possible to venture on the next step? And will poor Hans, the Christian who trustingly let himself be led from exchange to exchange, from interpretation to interpretation, not really soon hold in his hand, instead of the gold with which he began, only a whetstone that he can safely be advised to throw away?

To be sure, such questions are unfair if they are posed in too general terms. It is simply not correct to assert that ‘modern theology’ as a whole has taken a path of this sort. But it is just as undeniable that there is widespread support for a trend that does indeed lead from gold to whetstone. This trend cannot be countered, it is true, by merely sticking to the precious metal of the fixed formulas of days gone by, for then it remains just a lump of metal, a burden instead of something offering by virtue of its value the possibility of true freedom. This is where the present book comes in: its aim is to help understand faith afresh as something that makes possible true humanity in the world of today, to expound faith without changing it into the small coin of empty talk painfully laboring to hide a complete spiritual vacuum.

The Dissonance Between Faith and Modernity.

What then is the real problem with Christian faith? Why is the plausibility of Christian faith the subject of discussion? Ratzinger seems to believe the fundamental issue is with its particular features, which he sees as being at odds with modern sensibilities. Firstly, Christian faith is about an invisible God in a world marked by visibility, and secondly, it is its past that is constitutive for the present. It is here that the peculiarity of the Christian scandal becomes all too apparent: the very positivity of Christian faith, of revelation, the fact that it is in the concrete history of a particular human being that God has comprehensively communicated and revealed in fullness Godself.

On top of the gulf between ‘visible’ and ‘invisible’ there comes, to make things harder for us, the gulf between ‘then’ and ‘now’. 32 The basic paradox already present in belief as such is rendered even more profound by the fact that belief appears on the scene in the garb of days gone by and, indeed, seems itself to be something old-fashioned, the made of life and existence current a long time ago. All attempts at modernization, whether intellectual, academic ‘demythologization’, or ecclesiastical, pragmatic aggiornamento, do not alter this fact; on the contrary, they strengthen the suspicion that a convulsive effort is being made to proclaim as contemporary something that is, after all, really a relic of days gone by. It is these attempts at modernization that first make us fully aware just how old-fashioned what we are being offered really is. Belief appears no longer as the bold but challenging leap out of the apparent ‘all’ of our visible world and into the apparent ‘void’ of the invisible and intangible; it looks much more like a demand to bind oneself to yesterday and to affirm it as eternally valid. And who wants to do that in an age when the idea of ‘tradition’ has been replaced by the idea of ‘progress’?

We touch here on a specific element in our present situation that is of some importance to our question. For intellectual circles in the past, the concept of ‘tradition’ embraced a firm program; it appeared to be something protective on which man could rely; he could think himself safe and on the right lines if he could appeal to tradition. Today precisely the opposite feeling prevails: tradition appears to be what has been laid aside, the merely out-of-date, whereas progress is regarded as the real promise of life, so that man feels at home, not in the realm of tradition, of the past, but in the realm of progress and the future . . . . From this point of view, too, a belief that comes to him under the label ‘tradition’ must appear to be something already superseded, which cannot disclose the proper

sphere of his existence to a man who has recognized the future as his real obligation and opportunity. All this means that the primary stumbling block to belief, the distance between the visible and the invisible, between God and Not-God, is concealed and blocked by the secondary stumbling block of Then and Now, by the antithesis between tradition and progress, by the loyalty to yesterday that belief seems to include.

That neither the subtle intellectuals of demythologization nor the pragmatism of the aggiornamento can supply a convincing solution certainly makes it clear that this distortion of the basic scandal of Christian belief is itself a very far-reaching affair that cannot be easily settled either by theories or by action. Indeed, in one sense it is only here that the peculiarity of the specifically Christian scandal becomes visible; I refer to what might be termed Christian positivism, the ineradicable positivity of Christianity. What I mean is this: Christian belief is not merely concerned, as one might at first suspect from all the talk of belief or faith, with the eternal, which as the 'entirely Other' would remain completely outside the human world and time; on the contrary, it is much more concerned with God in history, with God as man. By thus seeming to bridge the gulf between eternal and temporal, between visible and invisible, by making us meet God as a man, the eternal as the temporal as one of us, it understands itself as revelation. [. . .]

At first glance this really seems to be the maximum degree of revelation, of the disclosure of God. The leap that previously led into the infinite seems to have been reduced to something on a human scale, in that we now need only take the few steps, as it were, to that person in Galilee in whom God himself comes to meet us. But things are curiously double-sided: what at first seems to be the most radical revelation and to a certain degree does indeed always remain revelation, the revelation, is at the same moment the cause of the most extreme obscurity and concealment. The very thing that at first seems to bring God quite close to us, so that we can touch him as a fellow man, follow his footsteps and measure them precisely, also becomes in a very profound sense the precondition for the ‘death of God’, which henceforth puts an ineradicable stamp on the course of history and the human relationship with God. God has come so near to us that we can kill him and that he thereby, so it seems, ceases to be God for us. Thus today we stand somewhat baffled before this Christian ‘revelation’ and wonder, especially when we compare it with the religiosity of Asia, whether it would not have been much simpler to believe in the Mysterious Eternal, entrusting ourselves to it in longing thought; whether God would not have done better, so to speak, to leave us at an infinite distance; whether it would not really be easier to ascend out of the world and hear the eternally unfathomable secret in quiet contemplation than to give oneself up to the positivism of belief in one single figure and to set the salvation of man and of the world on the pinpoint, so to speak, of this one chance moment in history. Surely a God thus narrowed down to one point is bound to die definitively in a view of the world that remorselessly reduces man and his history to a tiny grain of dust in the cosmos, that can see itself as the center
of the universe only in the naive years of its childhood and now, grown out of
carelessness of dreaming and now, grown out of
childhood, ought finally to have the courage to awake from sleep, rub its eyes,
shake off that beautiful but foolish dream, and take its place unquestioningly in
the huge context in which our tiny lives have their proper function, lives that should
find new meaning precisely by accepting their diminutiveness?

It is only by putting the question in a pointed form like this and so coming to
see that behind the apparently secondary stumbling block of ‘then’ and ‘now’
lies the much deeper difficulty of Christian ‘positivism’, the ‘limitation’ of God to
one point in history, that we can plumb the full depths of the question of Christian
belief as it must be answered today. Can we still believe at all? Or rather – for the
question must be posed in a more radical fashion – is it still permissible to believe?
Have we not a duty to break with the dream and to face reality? The Christian
today must ask himself this question; he is not at liberty to remain satisfied with
finding out that by all kinds of twists and turns an interpretation of Christianity can
still be found that no longer offends anybody. When some theologian explains
that ‘the resurrection of the dead’ simply means that one must cheerfully set about
the work of the future afresh every day, offense is certainly avoided. But are we
then really still being honest? Is there not serious dishonesty in seeking to main-
tain Christianity as a viable proposition by such artifices of interpretation? Have we
not much rather the duty, when we feel forced to take refuge in solutions of this
sort, to admit that we have reached the end of the road? Are we not then bound
to emerge from the fog and to face straightforwardly the abiding reality? Let us
be quite plain about it: An ‘interpreted’ Christianity of this kind that has lost all
contact with reality implies a lack of sincerity in dealing with the questions of the
non-Christian, whose ‘perhaps not’ should worry us as seriously as we want the
Christian ‘perhaps’ to worry him.

Dimensions of the Theological Conflict with Modernity

In the modern context, it is indeed the survival of Christian faith and
tradition that is at stake, and on many occasions, in many of his speeches
and publications on diverse topics, Ratzinger warns of the dangers of a
too-easy adaptation to modernity, which puts the very integrity of the
truth of Christian faith at risk. In this regard he is highly critical of many
modern theological developments that would seem to measure Christian
faith by the normativity of modernity (and especially the modern scien-
tific method and worldview), rather than the opposite. The same concerns
have preoccupied Ratzinger with regard to contemporary exegesis. In
the following, we first present his criticisms in this regard (a). Then we
present his comments regarding the deplorable state of theology today,
and the remedies he proposes: theology needs to reconsider its relation
to philosophy (b), it should be more aware of the limits of theological
hermeneutics (c), and it should remember its ecclesial embodiment, and thus its relation to the magisterium (d).

(a) Biblical Interpretation in Crisis

While in 1965 Ratzinger still pleads for the safeguarding function of exegesis, from the 1980s his trust in historical-critical exegesis is thoroughly shocked. He complains that the Bible is no longer read; there is no room for faith in the exegetical method; God is not assigned a role in historical events. The exegete tries to distill the ‘real’ out of the stories by applying source criticism, but eventually one does not hear the text speak anymore but rather the one who explains the text, based on hypothetical sources behind the biblical writings that serve as his or her criterion. Other symptoms of the decay of exegesis are the so-called ‘materialist’, ‘feminist’ and ‘psychoanalytic’ approaches to scripture. These forms of exegesis do not ask for the truth anymore but arbitrarily seek in the texts elements to underpin a self-chosen praxis.

If Rudolph Bultmann used the philosophy of Martin Heidegger as a vehicle to represent the biblical word, then that vehicle stands in accord with his reconstruction of the essence of Jesus’ message. But was this reconstruction itself not likewise a product of his philosophy? How great is its credibility from a historical point of view? In the end, are we listening to Jesus or to Heidegger with this approach to understanding? Still, one can hardly deny that Bultmann seriously grappled with the issue of increasing our access to the Bible’s message. But today certain forms of exegesis are appearing which can only be explained as symptoms of the disintegration of interpretation and hermeneutics. Materialist and feminist exegesis, whatever else may be said about them, do not even claim to be an understanding of the text itself in the manner in which it was originally intended. At best they may be seen as an expression of the view that the Bible’s message is in and of itself inexplicable, or else that it is meaningless for life in today’s world. In this sense, they are no longer interested in ascertaining the truth, but only in whatever will serve their own particular agendas. They go on to justify this combination of agenda with biblical material by saying that the many religious elements help strengthen the vitality of the treatment. Thus historical method can even serve as a cloak for such maneuvers insofar as it dissects the Bible into discontinuous pieces, which are then able to be put to new use and inserted into a new montage (altogether different from the original biblical context).

What the exegete forgets here is that the application of the historical-critical method needs to be complemented with an understanding of the text for today. An exegesis should search for the internal coherence between historical analysis and hermeneutical synthesis. Moreover, a real synthesis is possible only if one begins to see the Bible again in close connection with the living Church community. Synthesis needs to have as a point of departure the fact that the faith of the Church be in sympathy with the text, without which there is no opening to its real significance. There can be no conflict between the interpretation of scripture and of tradition. The connection with dogma is no threat but rather a guarantee of a correct exegesis. In our following text, again taken from *Biblical Interpretation in Crisis*, Ratzinger reflects on the relation between ‘event’ and ‘word’, and develops the biblical view on it as normative for contemporary exegesis. Finally, he also formulates five hopes, which are in fact five conditions that enable a correct hermeneutics of scripture.

The exegete should not approach the text with a ready-made philosophy, nor in accordance with the dictates of a so-called modern or ‘scientific’ worldview, which determines in advance what may or may not be. He may not exclude a priori that (almighty) God could speak in human words in the world. He may not exclude that God himself could enter into and work in human history, however improbable such a thing might at first appear.

He must be ready to learn from the extraordinary. He must be ready to accept that the truly original may occur in history, something which cannot be derived from precedents but which opens up out of itself. He may not deny to humanity the ability to be responsive beyond the categories of pure reason and to reach beyond ourselves toward the open and endless truth of being.

We must likewise reexamine the relationship between event and word. For Dibelius, Bultmann, and the mainstreams of modern exegesis, the event is the irrational element. It lies in the realm of mere facticity, which is a mixture of accident and necessity. The fact as such, therefore, cannot be a bearer of meaning. Meaning lies only in the word, and where events might seem to bear meaning, they are to be considered as illustrations of the word to which they have to be referred. Judgments which derive from such a point of view are certainly persuasive for people of today, since they fit nicely into their own patterns of expectations. There is, however, no evidence in reality to support them. Such evidence is admissible only under the presupposition that the principle of scientific method, namely...
that every effect which occurs can be explained in terms of purely immanent relationships within the operation itself, is not only valid methodologically but is true in and of itself. Thus, in reality there would be only ‘accident and necessity,’ nothing else, and one may only look upon these elements as brute facts.

But what is useful as a methodological principle for the natural sciences is a foregone banality as a philosophical principle, and as a theological principle it is a contradiction. (How can any or all of God’s activity be considered either as accidental or necessary?) It is here, for the sake of scientific curiosity, too, that we must experiment with the precise contrary of this principle, namely, that things can indeed be otherwise.

To put it another way: the event itself can be a ‘word,’ in accord with the biblical terminology itself. From this flow two important rules for interpretation.

(a) First, both word and event have to be considered equally original, if one wishes to remain true to the biblical perspective. The dualism which banishes the event into wordlessness, that is meaninglessness, would rob the word of its power to convey meaning as well, for it would then stand in a world without meaning.

It also leads to a docetic Christology in which the reality, that is the concrete fleshly existence of Christ and especially of man, is removed from the realm of meaning. Thus the essence of the biblical witness fails of its purpose.

(b) Secondly, such a dualism splits the biblical word off from creation and would substitute the principle of discontinuity for the organic continuity of meaning which exists between the Old and New Testaments. When the continuity between word and event is allowed to disappear, there can no longer be any unity within the Scripture itself. A New Testament cut off from the Old is automatically abolished since it exists, as its very title suggests, because of the unity of both. Therefore the principle of discontinuity must be counterbalanced by the interior claim of the biblical text itself, according to the principle of the analogia scripturae: the mechanical principle must be balanced by the teleological principle.

Certainly texts must first of all be traced back to their historical origins and interpreted in their proper historical context. But then, in a second exegetical operation, one must look at them also in light of the total movement of history and in light of history’s central event, Jesus Christ. Only the combination of both these


methods will yield understanding of the Bible. If the first exegetical operation by the Fathers and in the Middle Ages is found to be lacking, so too is the second, since it easily falls into arbitrariness. Thus, the first was fruitless, but the rejection of any coherence of meaning leads to an opinionated methodology.

To recognize the inner self-transcendence of the historical word, and thus the inner correctness of subsequent rereadings in which event and meaning are gradually interwoven, is the task of interpretation properly so-called, for which appropriate methods can and must be found. In this connection, the exegetical maxim of Thomas Aquinas is quite to the point: ‘The duty of every good interpreter is to contemplate not the words, but the sense of the words.’

In the last hundred years, exegesis has had many great achievements, but it has brought forth great errors as well. These latter, moreover, have in some measure grown to the stature of academic dogmas. To criticize them at all would be taken by many as tantamount to sacrilege, especially if it were to be done by a nonexegete. Nevertheless, so prominent an exegete as Heinrich Schlier previously warned his colleagues: ‘Do not squander your time on trivialities.’ Johann Gnilka gave concrete expression to this warning when he reacted against an exaggerated emphasis by the history-of-traditions school.

Along the same lines, I would like to express the following hopes:

(a) The time seems to have arrived for a new and thorough reflection on exegetical method. Scientific exegesis must recognize the philosophic element present in a great number of its ground rules, and it must then reconsider the results which are based on these rules.

(b) Exegesis can no longer be studied in a unilinear, synchronic fashion, as is the case with scientific findings which do not depend upon their history but only upon the precision of their data. Exegesis must recognize itself as a historical discipline. Its history belongs to itself. In a critical arrangement of its respective positions within the totality of its own history, it will be able, on one hand, to recognize the relativity of its own judgments (where, for example, errors may have crept in). On the other hand, it will be in a better position to achieve an insight into our real, if always imperfect, comprehension of the biblical word.

(c) Philological and scientific literary methods are and will remain critically important for a proper exegesis. But for their actual application to the work of criticism—just as for an examination of their claims—an understanding of the philosophic implications of the interpretative process is required. The


self-critical study of its own history must also imply an examination of the essential philosophic alternatives for human thought. Thus, it is not sufficient to scan simply the last one hundred and fifty years. The great outlines of patristic and medieval thought must also be brought into the discussion. It is equally indispensable to reflect on the fundamental judgments made by the Reformers and the critical importance they have had in the history of exegesis.

(d) What we need now are not new hypotheses on the Sitz im Leben, on possible sources or on the subsequent process of handing down the material. What we do need is a critical look at the exegetical landscape we now have, so that we may return to the text and distinguish between those hypotheses which are helpful and those which are not. Only under these conditions can a new and fruitful collaboration between exegesis and systematic theology begin. And only in this way will exegesis be of real help in understanding the Bible.

(e) Finally, the exegete must realize that he does not stand in some neutral area, above or outside history and the church. Such a presumed immediacy regarding the purely historical can only lead to dead ends. The first presupposition of all exegesis is that it accepts the Bible as a book. In so doing, it has already chosen a place for itself which does not simply follow from the study of literature. It has identified this particular literature as the product of a coherent history, and this history as the proper space for coming to understanding. If it wishes to be theology, it must take a further step. It must recognize that the faith of the church is that form of “sympathia” without which the Bible remains a closed book. It must come to acknowledge this faith as a hermeneutic, the space for understanding, which does not do dogmatic violence to the Bible, but precisely allows the solitary possibility for the Bible to be itself.

(b) The Need for a New Relationship between Philosophy and Theology

The rise of modern thought has put the original synthesis between faith and reason as established in the patristic era under pressure. Philosophy and theology have become two disciplines, each having gone its own way. Moreover, new philosophical approaches that are extremely critical of ontological thinking make fruitful engagement between philosophy and theology much more difficult, and this is to the detriment of the latter. In his reflections on the current crisis of theology, Ratzinger sees the need for establishing a new relationship between theology and philosophy, because both suffer from the modern antithesis between the two. It is again his former work on Bonaventure that offers the inspiration to establish a way out: apart from the problem of death and the question
of God, it is especially love, and in particular the love for truth, at the heart of Christian faith, which makes room for an intimate relationship between philosophy and theology. In short: against the developments of modern philosophy and theology, Ratzinger pleads for what one could legitimately call a restoration of the original synthesis between faith and reason.

In the foregoing, we began by giving a rough sketch of the distinction between philosophy and theology. While we did so, it became apparent that in the history of the two disciplines this distinction has increasingly tended to take the form of an antithesis. It also became clear, however, that the development of an opposition between philosophy and theology has itself transformed the two sciences. In the wake of this evolution, philosophy tends more and more to cast off ontology, that is, its own primordial question, while theology discards the fundamental principles which originally made it possible, in its characteristic double tension between revelation and reason. In contrast, we affirmed that philosophy as such cannot do without ontology and that theology is no less obliged to have recourse to it. The exclusion of ontology from theology does not emancipate philosophical thinking but paralyzes it. The extinction of ontology in the sphere of philosophy, far from purifying theology, actually deprives it of its solid basis. Contrary to the common hostility toward ontology, which is apparently becoming the sole link between contemporary philosophers and theologians, we held that both disciplines need this dimension of thought and that it is here that they find themselves indissolubly associated.

We must now render this general diagnosis somewhat more precise and concrete. After having thoroughly investigated the aporia of the antithesis, we must frame the question positively: In what sense does faith need philosophy? In what way is philosophy open to faith and oriented from within toward dialogue with its message? I would like to sketch very briefly three levels of an answer to these queries.

a. We have already encountered a first level of correlation between philosophical and theological inquiry in our glance at the earliest images of faith: both faith and philosophy confront the primordial question which death addresses to man. Now, the question of death is only the radical form of the question about how to live rightly. It asks whence man comes and whither he is going. It seeks an origin and a destination. Death, the one question which it is impossible to ignore forever, is thus a metaphysical thorn lodged in man's being. Man has no choice but to ask what might be the meaning of this

final limit. On the other hand, it is clear to every thinking person that only someone with firsthand knowledge of what lies beyond death could give a well-founded answer to that question. In consequence, if faith knows that such an answer has in fact been given, it demands the attention and joint reflection which are the special activities of questioning inquiry. Such an answer by no means causes the shipwreck of inquiry, as Jaspers opines. On the contrary, questioning founders when there is no hope of finding an answer. Faith hears the answer because it keeps the question alive. It can receive the answer as such only if it is able to understand its relevance to the question. When faith speaks of the resurrection of the dead, what is at stake is not a more or less abstruse assertion about an unverifiable future place and an unknown future time but the comprehension of man's being within the whole of reality. The fundamental problem of justice is therefore also in play, and this is inseparable from the problem of hope. The central concern is the relationship between history and ethos, between human action and the unmanipulable character of reality. The sort of questions involved here, which, though formulated diversely from period to period, remain essentially the same, can mark progress only in the exchange between question and answer, philosophical and theological reflection. This dialogue of human thought with the prior givens of faith will have one aspect when it is conducted in strictly philosophical terms and another when it is expressly theological. But both kinds of dialogue must maintain a mutual relationship, and neither can wholly dispense with the other.

b. We have likewise already alluded to the second level of correlation in the preceding reflections: faith advances a philosophical, more precisely, an ontological claim when it professes the existence of God, indeed, of a God who has power over reality as a whole. A powerless God is, in fact, a contradiction in terms. If he cannot act, cannot speak and be spoken to, he may be considered the concluding hypothesis of the reasoning process but has nothing to do with what the religious belief of mankind means by 'God'. The scope of the assertion that there is a God who is the creator and savior of the whole universe reaches beyond the religious community which makes it. It is not intended as a symbolic representation of the unnameable, which looks one way in this religion and another in that, but as a statement about reality as it is in itself. This breakthrough in thinking about God to a fundamental claim on human reason as such is wholly evident in the religious critique of the prophets and the biblical wisdom literature. If the prophets ridicule man-made idols with mordant acerbity and set the only real God in contrast to them, in the wisdom books the same spiritual movement is at work as among the pre-Socratics at the time of the early Greek enlightenment. To the extent that the prophets see in the God of Israel the primordial creative ground of all reality, it is quite clear that what is taking place is a religious critique for the sake of a correct understanding of this reality itself. Here the
faith of Israel unquestionably steps beyond the limits of a single people’s peculiar worship: it puts forth a universal claim, whose universality has to do with its being rational. Without the prophetic religious critique, the universalism of Christianity would have been unthinkable. It was this critique which, in the very heart of Israel itself, prepared that synthesis of Hellas and the Bible which the Fathers labored to achieve. For this reason, it is incorrect to reduce the concepts logos and aletheia, upon which John’s Gospel centers the Christian message, to a strictly Hebraic interpretation, as if logos meant ‘word’ merely in the sense of God’s speech in history, and aletheia signified nothing more than ‘trustworthiness’ or ‘fidelity’. For the very same reason, there is no basis for the opposite accusation that John distorted biblical thought in the direction of Hellenism. On the contrary, he stands in the classical sapiential tradition. It is precisely in John’s writings that one can study, both in its origins and in its outcome, the inner movement of biblical faith in God and biblical Christology toward philosophical inquiry.40

Is the world to be understood as originating from a creative intellect or as arising out of a combination of probabilities in the realm of the absurd? Today as yesterday, this alternative is the decisive question for our comprehension of reality; it cannot be dodged. Whoever, on the other hand, would draw faith back into paradox or into a pure historical symbolism fails to perceive its unique historical position, whose defense engaged both the prophets and the apostles in equal measure. The universality of faith, which is a basic presupposition of the missionary task, is both meaningful and morally defensible only if this faith really is oriented beyond the symbolism of the religions toward an answer meant for all, an answer which also appeals to the common reason of mankind. The exclusion of this common appeal inevitably puts an end to any communication to men which touches upon ultimate realities. The question of God, therefore, obliges theology to take a position in the philosophical debate. When it gives up the claim to the reasonability of its fundamental assertions, it does not return to a purer attitude of belief but rather betrays a fundamental element of its own constitution. By the same token, a philosophy which wishes to remain true to its object must open itself to faith’s claim on reason. The coordination of philosophy and theology is indispensable on this second level as well.

c. Finally, I would like to suggest a few remarks on the controversy which this issue aroused in medieval theology. In the works of Bonaventure there are two principal answers to the question whether and why it is legitimate to attempt a comprehension of the biblical message using methods of philosophical

40 Important observations on these questions are offered by H. Gese, ‘Der Johannesprolog’ in Zur biblischen Theologie. München: Kaiser, 1977, pp. 155–201.
truth which has important consequences for theology and philosophy. Christian faith can say of itself, I have found love. Yet love for Christ and of one’s neighbor for Christ’s sake can enjoy stability and consistency only if its deepest motivation is love for the truth. This adds a new aspect to the missionary element: real love of neighbor also desires to give him the deepest thing man needs, namely, knowledge and truth. In the first part we took as our starting point the problem of death considered as the philosophical thorn in the side of faith. We then discovered in the second part that the God question, together with its universal claim, is the place of philosophy in theology. We can now add a third element: love, the center of Christian reality on which ‘depend the law and the prophets’, is at the same time eros for truth, and only so does it remain sound as agape for God and man.

(c) Realizing the Theological Limits of the Hermeneutics of Tradition

All too easily are elements of the faith tradition that offend modern human beings considered as belonging to an out-of-date worldview and thus not binding for today’s believer. A radicalized hermeneutics panders to these circumstances: theologians try their utmost to interpret away elements that contradict the modern Zeitgeist and the mood of the marketplace. One example of this, according to Ratzinger, is Abschied vom Teufel (Farewell to the Devil) by Herbert Haag, an Old Testament exegete from Tübingen University.44 For Haag, ‘Satan’, ‘devil’, and ‘demon’ are framed in the outdated Jewish worldview and are, in terms of the contemporary worldview, images for evil and sin. For Ratzinger, Haag does not come to this position as an exegete but as a contemporary; the modern worldview cannot accept the existence of the devil. In his critique, Ratzinger outlines several criteria for dealing with the conflict between worldviews and for maintaining a respect for the integrity of the tradition.

This raises the question: How can one resolve this [conflict]? How can one avoid a repetition of false and harmful encounters such as the Galileo controversy?45 Conversely, how can one prevent Faith being amputated for the sake of Modernity . . . . There are no standards that one can apply immediately and with absolute