

THE TRIAL OF THE WITNESSES

The Rise and Decline of
Postliberal Theology

Paul J. DeHart

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THE TRIAL OF THE WITNESSES

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The Trial of the Witnesses: The Rise and Decline of Postliberal Theology Paul DeHart

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Postliberal Theology

Paul J. DeHart



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FOR RORY

And when they bring you to trial and deliver you up, do not be anxious beforehand what you are to say; but say whatever is given you in that hour, for it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit.

Mark 13:11

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Preface

Thomas Sherlock, Bishop of Bangor, wrote *The Trial of the Witnesses of the Resurrection of Jesus* in 1729. Directed against Thomas Woolston and calling forth a counter-blast from the unfortunate Peter Annet, this particular salvo in the anti-deism campaign had a loud report, heard in England, on the continent, and even in the colonies. Sherlock lived to see some thirteen editions through the presses: a “best seller.” His brief was to defend the apostles from the charge of falsifying the reports of Jesus’ resurrection; his methods were all too typical of the defenders of orthodoxy during the age of reason. Historian John Hunt complained that the book “had so much of a lawyer’s special pleading, that it was probably the work which suggested Dr. Johnson’s famous remark, that the apostles were once a year tried for forgery and acquitted” (*Religious Thought in England*, III: 81). Mark Pattison, in his famous contribution to *Essays and Reviews*, was more eloquent, and more exasperated.

One might say that the apologists of [Sherlock’s] day had in like manner left the bench for the bar, and taken a brief for the Apostles. They are impatient at the smallest demur, and deny loudly that there is any weight in anything advanced by their opponents. In the way they override the most serious difficulties, they show anything but the temper which is supposed to qualify for the weighing of evidence. The astonishing want of candour in their reasoning, their blindness to real difficulty, the ill-concealed predetermination to find a particular verdict, the rise of their style in passion in the same proportion as their argument fails in strength, constitute a class of writers more calculated than any other to damage their own cause with young ingenuous minds.

(“Tendencies of Religious Thought,” p. 45)

If I have taken the liberty of borrowing Sherlock’s title, it is obviously with no intention of resurrecting the style of Hanoverian apologetics. Pattison

was right: "A little consideration will show that the grounds on which advocacy before a legal tribunal rests, make it inappropriate in theological reasoning" (p. 43). So I take a different approach to the ongoing two-millennium trial of the resurrection's witnesses, attempting to bring to light a model of "theological reasoning" which takes with complete seriousness what Rowan Williams has called "the judgment of the world."

Of course theology must in one sense always "advocate" for the faith; but an attorney is not under oath, and is not directly implicated in the jury's verdict. Theology cast in such a mode finds it fatally easy, as Pattison suggests, to evade the "difficulties" inherent in bearing witness. Forgetting that it can only stand *with* those in the witness box, it is tempted to imagine itself free from their often agonizing constraints: free to ignore the transcendent elusiveness of the One to whom testimony must be borne, or to fashion that testimony without really hearing the questions and challenges of the world to which it must be directed. The irony of the present is that this illusion of theology mastering the situation of contemporary proclamation without undergoing the rigors of trial before the world is no longer just the preserve of apologists. It can take a less familiar form precisely among the enemies of all apologetic, some of whom proudly wave the banner of something called postliberalism. But that is to anticipate.

In 1984 a slim volume appeared from a distinguished theological historian and ecumenist at Yale, proposing a new way of thinking about theology he dubbed "postliberal." The scholarly murmur which greeted its arrival grew within a few years to a dull roar. The author, George Lindbeck, was hardly a household name; though well-known at Yale and in the circles of Catholic-Lutheran dialogue in which he had been active, the 57-year-old had certainly not been accounted a seminal figure in systematic theology. The book soon changed that, though its bold proposal for a new way of doing theology was rather innocuously tucked away in the final chapter of what purported to be a study of the way doctrines function in religious communities. This proposal was obviously if obliquely influenced by the work of Lindbeck's colleague at Yale, Hans Frei, though he, too, was no systematist. Thanks to his pioneering study of the effect of modernity on biblical interpretation, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, he was better known as an historian of post-Enlightenment Christianity. At any rate, it was quickly agreed among interpreters that Lindbeck's book was synthesizing and systematizing the insights which Frei and others at Yale had been quietly developing for years.

The opinion soon established itself that the theological world was witnessing, for good or ill, a new school, a "Yale School" of theology. Under the discernible influence of Karl Barth and Ludwig Wittgenstein, it chal-

lenged the basic assumptions of the liberal theologies reigning in academic circles. Those perceiving themselves to be under attack were not slow to respond, led by David Tracy of the University of Chicago, one of the most respected theorists of progressive theology in the United States. For over a decade “Yale vs. Chicago” was a familiar theme of discussion in the scholarly journals. As the polemical heat of the quarrel intensified, so too did the lack of agreement over just what the basic issues were. By the late 1990s a sense of exhaustion had evidently begun to set in. The lack of substantive methodological follow-up work from Lindbeck’s pen was exacerbated by Frei’s sudden and untimely death only a few years after the appearance of Lindbeck’s book. He had been working on his own magnum opus which many hoped would clarify the discussion. His death resulted in a lacuna inadequately filled by posthumous publication of scattered notes, papers, and the tantalizing records of his last public lectures at Princeton and at Birmingham in England.

Even though the deeper issues remained stubbornly elusive, the opposition obviously had something to do with how theology balanced the twin demands for faithfulness and change, and with the role in striking this balance of modern thought-forms, uncommitted or even potentially hostile to Christian claims. The results of the postliberal intervention are still very much with us. To be sure, the heated discussion among its supporters and detractors which animated the American theological scene during the 1980s and 1990s has tapered off, but there is no sign that the basic oppositions have gone away. Though the label itself is not thrown around nearly as much anymore, the idea continues to lead a somewhat fitful existence despite its invincible vagueness. One of the most widely read textbooks surveying contemporary theology (David Ford’s *The Modern Theologians*) confidently devotes a chapter to “postliberal theology” following one on its supposed opponents, “liberals and revisionists.” The recent eruption of “radical orthodoxy” (itself complexly but sympathetically related to postliberal trends) has involved the not-so-disguised return of some of the older disputes.

I have long been interested in the question of how theology can creatively rethink the Christian tradition and yet contribute to the maintenance of its identity; this was the crux of the quarrel which crystallized around Lindbeck’s and Frei’s thought. Throughout my postgraduate studies at both of the rival “headquarters” (Yale and Chicago), and continuing during my years of teaching at Vanderbilt (a long-time “revisionist” outpost), I have experienced both a continuing fascination with the significance of the “Yale School,” and an accompanying frustration with the categories in which the intriguing but often obscure ideas of its two central

figures tend to get interpreted. An insufficiently reflective reliance on the categories “postliberal” and “liberal/revisionist” has characterized (and hampered) both sides of the dispute. The prejudices built up over the course of the debate continue to linger in a way I have come to regard as profoundly unhelpful.

My motivation to write this book grew out of this mixture of fascination and frustration, combined with a sense that it might now be possible to gain some relative distance and clarity on the disputes. My encounters with students and faculty colleagues have convinced me that the adventurousness, the sense of fresh possibility which I continue to see in the work of Frei and Lindbeck has largely been occluded by the stale repetition of the revisionist-postliberal opposition. On the one hand, sympathetic reception and appropriation of these thinkers, still determined by these now-atrophied polemical categories, has often tended toward a kind of sophisticated but defensively conservative confessionalism or traditionalism. In their turn, progressive critics of “postliberalism” are tempted to see this confessionalist retreat as inevitable, a confirmation of the suspicions they have had all along that Frei and Lindbeck were simply peddling a clever form of repristination.

Whether embraced or lamented, their influence remains undiminished if increasingly subterranean. A new and close reading of the work of these two will, I hope, initiate a fresh engagement with their thought, a new appreciation of their openness to theological novelty which will help to rescue their legacy from its association with “postmodern” conservatism. The interpretive angle which will emerge from this reading, imaginatively dominated by the motifs of “witness” and “trial,” is intended to illuminate the perennial tension between conservation and innovation within the Christian tradition of belief and what these have to do with the methods of theology. Witness, the pregnant notion of Christianity as an ongoing act of testimony to the Christ, a traditioned, culturally situated communal interpretive activity which theology seeks experimentally both to extend and orient, is crucial both for reappropriating the contributions of Frei and Lindbeck and for setting up a trajectory which moves beyond the postliberalism they inspired.

It will become clear to the reader by the end of the book that Frei plays a somewhat more positive role for me than Lindbeck. There are two reasons for this. First, it was Lindbeck who erected much of the conceptual scaffolding of postliberalism. More than any other idea, his “intratextuality” has been used to police the supposed postliberal-liberal divide. To which I argue: however illuminating “intratextuality” might be as a broad, heuristic image for certain individual and social processes (and even here it is misleading if unsupplemented), as a criterion of theological judgment it is useless. Second, the too easy assimilation of Frei’s project to that of Lindbeck skewed

interpretation of the former; the discovery of unanticipated depths in his thinking once the optic of postliberalism was abandoned has been the most exhilarating experience for me in writing this book. Viewed from a new angle, Frei affords some powerful if rough-hewn insights into the nature of Christian theology and the way it relates to broader cultural processes. Only in light of these insights do some of Lindbeck's own contributions also show new promise, in spite of the flaws of intratextuality. In short, the book is designed to dismantle the terms of the postliberal controversy and clear the ground of its cluttered remnants in order to enable a new appropriation of their work.

Yet another book on "method" will inevitably appear to some a dismal enterprise. My only apology is that method in theology is inextricably bound up with substantive doctrinal issues, and that relieving some of the methodological obscurities surrounding these two figures will bear dividends in the area of dogmatics. Even so, I am painfully aware of the genuine limitations of this study. It is properly a constructive essay and not a full history of postliberalism, nor a survey of all aspects of the thought of Frei and Lindbeck. My attention has been rigorously directed to the issue of the nature and procedures of theology, leaving much especially of Lindbeck's earlier work (including some important contributions to the history of medieval philosophy) largely undiscussed. There is something awkward about even such a limited "historical" treatment of events within living memory. Obviously, turning it into a proper history would have required interviews and archival work. Nonetheless, I have tried to write the first three chapters in such a way as to allow their detached use for survey purposes. As for the interpretations of Frei, Lindbeck, and postliberalism in the second half of the book, they are at times impressionistic, though I can only say that the impressions are backed up by readings in the relevant primary and secondary literature which extend well beyond the list of works actually cited (including endless book reviews, a revealing though often ignored source). (Sadly, M.A. Higton's important study of Frei, *Christ, Providence and History*, appeared too late for its many insights to be incorporated here.) The final chapter is unavoidably sketchy and speculative, but I believe it indicates some promising directions for future investigation.

Much of positive value in this study is owed to the thought of others. Aside from my former teacher Kathryn Tanner, whose criticisms of certain postliberal moves gave me much food for thought, I will only mention Rowan Williams as someone whose theological "voice," even more than any of his specific positions, has been influential on the overall tone of this study. The "radically orthodox" thinkers have also claimed inspiration from Williams; if my conclusions indicate a rather different theological vision

than theirs that might be because I am more temperamentally inclined toward the stance of Williams's own teacher Donald MacKinnon than they seem to be. I hope to explore such differences more in the future.

Many thanks are due to Vanderbilt Divinity School for generous leave assistance, to Blackwell Publishers and especially series editor Lewis Ayres, and to Todd Green for sterling assistance in proofreading and indexing. My final word of gratitude must go to my wife, Rory Dicker. To reduce her to the status of a "support" for "my work" would be an insult. She has been for me a sun, a source of warmth, radiance, and unanticipated growth. This book is dedicated to her.

Chapter One

Genesis of a Concept: Postliberalism and its Opponents

When *The Nature of Doctrine* appeared in 1984, it offered what seemed to many a genuinely fresh proposal for doing theology, appealing in a quite unaccustomed way to a consensus formed in sociological or anthropological circles. Though its author had not previously been much associated with methodological debates in theology, the book was quickly received among English-speaking theologians as the inaugural gesture of an identifiable new trend. It gave this trend the rudiments of a systematic shape, and a name as well: “postliberalism.” In so doing it became the center of a decade or more of intense debate, especially in the United States, over the proper exercise of Christian theology. A smaller group of observers, however, must have sensed that they had heard things like this before; the light would dawn once note was taken of its provenance: Yale Divinity School. Far from being a bolt from the blue, the book’s recommendations for theological renewal might then all too easily appear as merely a programmatic restatement of ideas long nurtured there. True, the name associated with many of these ideas had been that of Hans Frei, a difficult and sporadically published author; but now, it seemed, a longtime Yale colleague had stepped forward to put his house in order.

The first task of the present study will be to render an account of this slightly uncertain reception, to situate Lindbeck’s book within a tradition of thought to which it was indebted without failing to recognize it as something quite new and distinctive with respect to that development. To grasp at once the tradition and the novelty will be to begin to understand and evaluate the phenomenon of postliberalism, which in the present study will be understood as follows: “postliberalism,” whether negatively or positively evaluated, is *the attempted construction of a distinct approach to Christian theology’s basic procedures and self-understanding which self-consciously and systematically opposes itself to specific and identifiable concepts and methods of academic theology*

(putatively dominant since at least the beginning of the nineteenth century) which are labeled “liberal,” “modernist,” or “revisionist” and which are seen as covertly threatening or undermining the basic theological task of enabling Christian witness.¹

Thus postliberalism in the ensuing chapters will indicate a scholarly discourse, an intellectual construction, a framework within which theology and theologians are discussed and evaluated. In order to understand the nature of the question or the challenge postliberalism has put to contemporary discussion, and the way in which it has affected the way Frei and Lindbeck are understood, it will be necessary to provide a narrative reconstruction of the development out of which it arose, and of the scholarly quarrels which gave it the shape which to a large degree it still has. The present chapter will do this by focusing on the two main figures, Frei and Lindbeck.

The work of these two Yale colleagues has by now become firmly identified with the idea of postliberalism. Though Lindbeck’s book brought earlier developments at Yale firmly before the theological public in the form of an appropriable scheme, it was the penetrating if inchoate insights of Frei which laid the basic groundwork. For the purpose of tracing the development of these ideas, the period between the end of World War II and the present will, with unavoidable artificiality, be divided into six ten-year periods. Each section will briefly remark on significant factors in the institutional and intellectual background before taking up more specifically the productions of Frei and Lindbeck and their reception; in this way a picture will emerge of that intellectual trajectory which ushered in and shaped the discourse of postliberalism.

Preparation: 1945–54

The decade after World War II saw Hans Frei and George Lindbeck both studying at Yale, first as divinity and then as doctoral students.² It is certainly arguable that the unique atmosphere of theological education at Yale at this time was crucial for the future directions of their thought. This atmosphere was the collective product of the most influential theological teachers active

¹ Lindbeck himself defined postliberalism in somewhat different terms. George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984), 112–13, 135 n. 1. All further references to this book will be in the body of the text in parentheses, with page numbers following the abbreviation ND.

² For most of the biographical details which follow see especially George Lindbeck, “Confession and Community: An Israel-like View of the Church,” *The Christian Century* 107, no. 16 (May 9, 1990): 492–6 and John Woolverton, “Hans W. Frei in Context: A Theological and Historical Memoir,” *Anglican Theological Review* 79 (1997): 369–93.

there, three of whom will be discussed in a moment. This general feeling differentiated Yale from its chief rivals in a way probably not so easy to discern at the time, but which demands attention given the later careers of Frei and Lindbeck.

The top five institutions of higher theological education among American Protestants at that time (in terms of size, influence, and the production of seminary teachers) can each be characterized by their relative openness to so-called Neo-orthodoxy. This deeply influential trend was characterized by a sharp questioning of the methods and assumptions of that theological liberalism which had dominated the German, English, and American theological academies since the later nineteenth century. Associated with European figures like Emil Brunner, Paul Tillich, and Karl Barth, and with influential Americans like Reinhold and H. Richard Niebuhr, Neo-orthodox thought found especially congenial homes at Yale Divinity School and Union Theological Seminary. In contrast, it continued to meet stiff resistance throughout the post-war period at the other top theological programs. The University of Chicago staunchly maintained its tradition of “empirical theology” under the influence of Henry Nelson Wieman, just as personalist metaphysics remained the characteristic approach to theology at Boston University, while Harvard’s tradition of liberal unitarianism was distinctly inhospitable to Neo-orthodox influences. These five institutions were arguably the chief trendsetters for the other divinity schools and seminaries.³

In spite of what bound them together over against these other schools, a more subtle distinction could be detected between the intellectual climate at Yale and at Union. The overwhelming influence at Union of its two great thinkers, Paul Tillich and Reinhold Niebuhr, produced a brand of Neo-orthodoxy notable for its hostility to that figure who over time had come to dominate theological debate in Germany: Karl Barth. While it would be grossly misleading to label anyone on the faculty at Yale a “Barthian,” there was nonetheless a level of respect and understanding granted to Barth’s thought which created an atmosphere in which his work, even when sharply criticized, could be taken seriously as a responsible option. H. Richard Niebuhr is especially important as one who was challenged and intrigued by Barth to a far greater degree than Tillich or his brother Reinhold were. He

³ The five listed were the top Protestant producers of doctorates in religion. See Claude Welch, *Graduate Education in Religion: A Critical Appraisal* (Missoula: University of Montana Press, 1971), 90–1; Thor Hall, *Systematic Theology: The State of the Art in North America* (Washington DC: University Press of America, 1978), 60a. See also, especially on Chicago, Conrad Cherry, *Hurrying toward Zion: Universities, Divinity Schools, and American Protestantism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 105–6.

was the dominant theological figure at the Divinity School and one of the three influential Yale thinkers whose vital contributions to the milieu in which Frei and Lindbeck were trained can now be summarized.

Niebuhr famously located himself at the intersection of the problems and possibilities bequeathed to theology by Ernst Troeltsch and Karl Barth.⁴ While fully embracing neither, he was convinced that the way forward for theology lay in somehow doing justice to the very different insights and concerns of both. With Troeltsch he shared a deep conviction of the variety and integrity of historically situated cultures, and of Christian faith in its historically shifting forms as unavoidably embedded within them. The effect of Troeltsch's historicism on Niebuhr was a relativist and confessionalist orientation in theology, which emphasized the perspectival nature of Christian faith-claims (indeed of all claims), and their situation within the "stories" or historical narratives of the communities and individuals which make them. Correspondingly de-emphasized was any attempt to make systematic apologetic procedures central to theology.

In turn, from the early works of Barth still dominating the American scene Niebuhr imbibed a robust suspicion of the late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century "liberal" consensus in theology: an epistemological skepticism underlying faith-claims, a bias against metaphysics, and an orientation toward an historically reconstructed Jesus. He also shared with Barth a never-failing emphasis on the "churchly" nature of the theological enterprise; it must never drift too far from its responsibility toward the living community of faith or mistake itself for a merely intellectual exercise. Niebuhr brought to his Yale classes a sensibility still rooted in the German academic tradition of the previous century, and remained untouched by the cultural defensiveness and refusal of the critical intellect characterizing reprintinators and fundamentalists. But the radicalism both of Troeltsch's historicism and of Barth's Christ-centered ontological realism revealed new horizons. A final point, of some importance for later developments: Niebuhr showed a particular sensitivity to the centrality of "stories" both in the constitution of faithful self-understanding in human selves and communities, and in the scriptural identification of the Christian savior.

The two other key theological influences at Yale in this period were

⁴ H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1941), xi. For the summary which follows see Hans Frei, "Niebuhr's Theological Background" and "The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr" in *Faith and Ethics: The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr*, ed. Paul Ramsey (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1957), 9–116. These two chapters, which in fact comprise a single continuous essay in two parts, will hereafter be cited in the text only as HRN.

probably Robert Lowry Calhoun and the young Julian Hartt. Calhoun was a church historian whose astonishing erudition and grasp of the entire sweep of Christian thought made a deep impression on many students, including Frei and Lindbeck.⁵ His influence lay less in his own specific theological positions than in his overall disposition toward and understanding of the nature of the Christian tradition. Although in many ways he remained more an old-style liberal than a Neo-orthodox proponent, he combined a resolute sense of the reality of God confronting yet transcending human knowledge with an equally firm insistence on the coherence, resilience, and continued relevance of the entire living tradition of Christian thought. Frei was later to argue that this combination enabled Calhoun to resist the epistemological obsessions and quasi-idealistic anthropocentrism of Neo-orthodoxy on the one hand, and yet, on the other, to orient theologians toward the continuation of a robust tradition whose irreducible identity over time was precisely what enabled it to continually assimilate the best in its surrounding cultures without losing itself. This notion of a “strong” tradition perpetually responding anew, but in recognizably continuous ways, to a God who remains elusive yet stubbornly “given” was at the heart of what Frei dubbed Calhoun’s “generous, liberal orthodoxy.”⁶

The philosophical theologian Julian Hartt, who had only recently joined the faculty after receiving his PhD there in 1940, was an influential teaching personality at Yale but (like Calhoun) an elusive presence in the wider academic world due to a reluctance to publish. Hartt’s students learned of the imperative for theology to be philosophically self-aware. He taught them that it was salutary for theology to be brought into invigorating connection with the broader currents of philosophical thought, while at the same time warning that it was not “proper for theologians to make a heavy investment in *any* metaphysical system.”⁷ More so even than Calhoun, and in fruitful tension with Niebuhr’s dominant concern with human history, Hartt stressed the need for Christian theology to work out a conceptual vision of cosmic scope, which refused to constrain the theological horizon to humanity and its history but which nonetheless resisted incorporation within established ontological schemes. Hartt also introduced his students to the creative Neo-thomism of the brilliant Anglican philosophical theologian

⁵ For an appreciation see Hans Frei, “In Memory of Robert L. Calhoun, 1896–1983,” *Reflection* [Yale Divinity School] 82 (November 1984): 8–9. Lindbeck also explicitly acknowledged the influence of Calhoun (and Niebuhr). See Lindbeck, “Confession and Community,” 496.

⁶ Frei, “Calhoun,” 9.

⁷ Julian Hartt, “Austin Farrer as Philosophical Theologian: A Retrospective and Appreciation,” in *For God and Clarity: New Essays in Honor of Austin Farrer*, eds. Jeffrey C. Eaton and Ann Loades (Allison Park, PA: Pickwick Publications, 1983), 2.

Austin Farrer. More will be said about this below, but the important point is that Hartt (joined implicitly by Calhoun) brought a critical realism to theological epistemology to balance Niebuhr's more idealist relativism and perspectivism, as well as a concern for working out an orthodox Christian vision of God in explicit conversation with the best empirical and ontological insights of the day.⁸ (These insights did not yet include, however, two of the most significant developments which were gathering strength in this decade on the Continent and in England respectively: transcendental Thomism, and ordinary language philosophy.)

What did Hans Frei and George Lindbeck bring as students to this rich educational setting? There were some noteworthy parallels in their backgrounds, which placed them in fruitfully oblique relationships to the American brand of mainstream Protestant Neo-orthodoxy (and its German roots) which they encountered at Yale. This "outsider" status is symbolized by the fact that neither was born in the United States; both emigrated from their native lands just before World War II to undertake college education in America. Much can be learned about the thinkers they were later to become by pondering the journeys, personal and ecclesial, which brought them to the United States and to the study of theology at Yale.

Hans Frei was of German birth. But as an immigrant to America who combined a secular Jewish lineage with a Baptist upbringing, his reception of the German intellectual heritage was complex and marked by a deep ambivalence. He was drawn to Yale Divinity School after hearing a talk by H. Richard Niebuhr, and after graduation was pastor of a Baptist church for a couple of years before returning to Yale for doctoral study. He began to read deeply in the current, then untranslated work of Karl Barth (this period saw the publication of the later volumes of the *Church Dogmatics*, III/2, III/3, and IV/1) and was also inspired by Anglican thinkers like William Temple and Charles Gore.⁹ This reading had two effects. First, both Barth and the Anglican thinkers had theological visions which embraced the cosmos, situating the redemptive history of Israel and the church within large-scale speculative constructions encompassing the creative and providential work of God in the entire natural order. Second, the very different cultural and intellectual traditions shaping the Anglican theologians, combined with Barth's highly independent and creative reaction against the foundational assumptions of modern theology (which he dubbed "Neo-protestantism"), began to distance Frei from the German academic tradition still dominant within mainstream Protestant theology in the United States.

⁸ For the contrast between Calhoun as a realist and Niebuhr as an idealist, see Frei, "Calhoun," 9.

⁹ Woolverton, "Frei in Context," 377.

This orientation would continue to mark Frei's work, later influencing his approach to Christology in particular. At this stage it manifested itself in Frei's susceptibility to the sophisticated metaphysical and analogical approach of Austin Farrer's neo-scholasticism, no doubt encountered early on in Hartt's classroom (HRN, 63–4, 71–2). Farrer insisted on the embodied human self as an integral part of the natural process; he also stressed in Thomist fashion the need to work out metaphysically (but always responsible to Christological and Trinitarian orthodoxy) a rigorous language of conceptual analogy between the finite processes of nature, including human will and personhood, and God as their infinite causal ground (HRN, 71–2).

Farrer thus helped alert Frei to two profound limitations of the German romantic and idealist heritage of Schleiermacher and Hegel which had, as Frei saw it, deformed Protestant theology up to his own day. The first was the tendency to isolate the human self and its productions of meaning into an ontologically distinct realm of "spirit"; the second was the transfer of the divine from a cognitive realm accessible to metaphysical (analogical) description and into the role of a transcendental "ground" of the human self, forever cut off from that human cognition now inevitably defined in the Kantian terms of subject confronting object (HRN, 63–4). The transcendental self of romanticism and idealism could be brought into connection with God as its ground only through special modes of non-cognitive "faith" apprehension quarantined from normal patterns of meaningful human traffic with the world. "Revelation" as a non-objective and non-informative "self-disclosure" of the divine was made to interlock closely with the special "faith" disposition of the individual (HRN, 17–21).

Frei saw very early that Barth's own rejection of this entire tradition bespoke a unity with Farrer which ran deeper than the obvious enmity between the former's unremitting focus on special revelation and the latter's brand of natural theology. As a doctoral student he plunged into the history of nineteenth-century theology and began writing an ambitious thesis on the critique of Neo-protestantism in Karl Barth's early theology of revelation. By this time he had been ordained a priest in the Episcopal Church, a move which would make sense in light of a struggle to free his apprehension of Christianity from the stranglehold of Germanic cultural forms. Still laboring on what was to become a sprawling dissertation ("Either one of them would have done," quipped Niebuhr when Frei finally turned it in), Frei departed for Texas to teach at the Episcopal seminary in Austin.¹⁰

¹⁰ Ibid., 383.

George Lindbeck's intellectual trajectory during this period was different from Frei's, but he, too, worked his way into the American theological scene very much from the outside. Born the son of Lutheran missionaries in China, Lindbeck did not come to the United States until his college years. As with Frei, the sheer "fact" of differing cultures and their conundrums thus must have become manifest to him from an early age. The external perspective on Western civilization he imbibed by growing up amid the antiquity and beauty of Chinese culture had a relativizing effect; he became aware of Western "modernity" not as an absolute and unquestionable horizon nor as the highest culmination of humanity's intellectual evolution but rather as one historical and cultural epoch among others.

Nor was his experience of Christianity unaffected. In the highly evolved but utterly distinct Chinese setting the public and communal nature of his own Christian tradition was thrown into sharp relief for him. More importantly, the institutional framework within which his faith was nurtured was not the fading but still tacitly presupposed "Christendom" of the West but that of a missionary diaspora; this latter idea would later influence the way he modeled the relations of church to culture in a post-Christian society. A more immediate impact was made by close and unavoidable encounters with practitioners of Roman Catholicism; against this profoundly non-Christian backdrop reckoning with a quite different brand of Christianity was at once more "natural" and yet somehow more "disorienting" than it would have been in America or Protestant Europe.

The young Lindbeck not surprisingly became fascinated by profound problems posed to Protestants by Catholicism, problems of Christian identity and doctrinal boundaries. How could Catholicism be so distant from the Lutheran gospel and yet still be so evidently Christian? This problem pursued him to the United States, and in college he immersed himself in prominent Catholic thinkers like Jacques Maritain and Etienne Gilson, perhaps earning some quizzical comments from his fellow students and teachers at the very Lutheran Gustavus Adolphus College. Inoculated against an unthinking embrace of modernity by his experiences, he had no stomach for those intellectual traditions he now encountered which in effect canonized the "modern" Western experience as *sui generis*, the cutting edge of historical progress: rationalism, idealism, existentialism (the same strands of thought, so very "German," which Frei was turning away from in his embrace of Karl Barth's proto-postmodernism).¹¹ The medievals (including on his reading the reformers!) and confessionalist Lutherans were

¹¹ Lindbeck, "Confession and Community," 492–3.

more to his liking. He next attended Yale Divinity School seeking Lutheran ordination but, still haunted by the thought world of Catholicism, he immediately thereafter entered the doctoral program at Yale and specialized in medieval Catholic thought, later going abroad to work with the great medievalists Gilson at Toronto and Paul Vignaux at Paris.

Thus in multiple ways Lindbeck's angle of vision on the cultural contours of Christianity was affected by encountering his cultural surroundings as an outsider; he not only participated while growing up in Chinese culture as Christian, but in the US he participated in American Protestant Christianity as "Chinese," so to speak. His highly unusual experience of mission-field Lutheranism in communication with an alien and independent culture converged with his wrestling with Catholicism to lead Lindbeck to a more "Catholic" take on the Reformation roots of his own brand of Christianity. Luther's insights on justification and the living power of the Word of grace must be preserved, but only as internal correctives within a venerable Catholic tradition the basics of which the magisterial reformers never really abandoned: the Christian community united in perpetuating its great dogmatic tradition, embodied vehicle of God's saving gospel, actualized through the sacramental practices of font and table. The seeds of a unique vision of the church were already planted and encountered fertile soil at Yale: sociologically dispersed and intensely socialized yet united by the great Catholic consensus (properly corrected by the Lutheran stress on the external word of the gospel), that same "strong tradition" delineated by Robert Calhoun which impressed his fellow student Frei.

Exploring New Directions at Yale: 1955–64

By 1955 Lindbeck was completing his dissertation on Duns Scotus and had already started teaching medieval thought in the philosophy department at Yale alongside the young philosopher of religion William Christian. The following year Frei would leave Texas and join the Yale Divinity faculty soon after finishing his dissertation on Barth. The Divinity School underwent a number of important personnel developments during this ten-year period; in spite of the continuity implied by an evident preference for hiring Yale graduates, the intellectual direction of the school began to shift unmistakably as some new teachers began making their presence felt. James Gustafson, another of Niebuhr's freshly graduated students, appropriated the master's thought in a way very different from Frei's and much less open to Barth; he began to teach at Yale in 1955 but would eventually depart for Chicago, an indication of which way the wind was blowing. The Old

Testament scholar Brevard Childs arrived from doctoral study in Basel, where theology and the influence of Barth were diffused even among the Bible students. Another harbinger of future directions arrived in 1960: Paul Holmer was among the first thinkers in America to promote Wittgenstein and the ordinary language philosophy gathering strength in England as significant for religious thought.¹² In many ways, an era was coming to an end; longtime Divinity School dean Liston Pope stepped down in the same year (1962) that the school had to weather the blow of H. Richard Niebuhr's death. The next year brought further disruption, as the school's faculty was split by the installation of a separate religious studies department.¹³ Pressing questions about the relation of theology to the intellectual culture of the university became impossible to avoid at Yale, as a wedge was now driven between "professional" divinity training and "academic" doctoral study.

Frei's personal relations with his most important Yale teacher deteriorated soon after joining him on the faculty; his enthusiastic embrace of Barth's radical epistemic realism of revelation and his increasing criticism of Niebuhr's fealty to an epistemology of faith which seemed too redolent of Neo-protestantism rankled.¹⁴ But Frei remained thoroughly engaged with his teacher's thinking, as was evident in the two lengthy essays (of astonishing and precocious depth) he contributed to *Faith and Ethics*, a volume honoring Niebuhr. While calling into question the curtailing of full-blooded dogmatic realism due to Niebuhr's quasi-idealist faith-epistemology, Frei was fascinated by his appeal to the New Testament's narrated portrait of Jesus Christ as uniquely identifying the person of the savior and concretely integrating his saving attributes. This narratively rendered figure was rediscovered as the criterion against which contemporary theorizations of God's presence in and action through Christ had to be tested. Frei became convinced that Christology was the key battleground on which the nineteenth-century Germanic heritage had to be fought; he conjoined Niebuhr's focus on the portrayed, unique human subject Jesus as soteriological touchstone with Barth's "high" Christology, where Christ is not simply a revelation or instantiation of God's salvation but the absolute locus of its worldly possibility and actuality.

So for Frei what salvation means can be apprehended only in the story which identifies this human life and death with a divine act. But then-current theological thought (including Neo-orthodoxy, and even the earlier

¹² On Holmer see Mark Horst, "Disciplined by Theology: A Profile of Paul Holmer," *The Christian Century* 105, no. 29 (October 12, 1988), 891–5.

¹³ Cherry, *Hurrying toward Zion*, 121.

¹⁴ Woolverton, "Frei in Context," 389.

Barth) was still burdened with the nineteenth-century attempt to read off the nature of God's saving act from some quasi-independent anthropological or social analysis of the general "human predicament," followed by the attempt either to amalgamate the kind of salvation thereby postulated with an historically reconstructed "real" Jesus behind the gospel texts, or else, in the name of historical skepticism and "existential" appropriation, to detach understanding of the saving event from the concrete subject of the gospel accounts (HRN, 104–7). Niebuhr's rediscovery resisted these prevalent options. It also bore fruit when Frei attempted to locate those historical junctures at which modern theology began to go off the rails, because it helped solidify his suspicion of any attempt to separate an "essence" of religious faith over against its linguistic and dogmatic embodiment in scripture and tradition.

Frei's 1958 article "Religion: Natural and Revealed" is a good indication of where his thought was on this crucial issue. The divorce of faith from its own scripturally-shaped linguistic world by now appeared as a primal theological mistake, its bitter fruit the deficient Christologies of Neo-protestantism and Neo-orthodoxy alike.¹⁵ Influences from various directions around this time reinforced these convictions. His colleague Brevard Child's critique of attempts to recover scriptural meaning in terms of "myth" was suggestive, as was the acute diagnosis of the aporia in Tillich's symbolist Christology provided by the dissertation of his most promising student, David Kelsey (who on the strength of it was immediately invited to join the faculty).¹⁶ Also, around 1964 Frei discovered in his reading of literary theorist Erich Auerbach a new way of articulating the abiding "force" of the scriptural portraiture in terms of its narrative literary structure, over against its role as historical source or as mythical symbolization of religious "truth."¹⁷ At least equally significant, his anti-idealist understandings of the human self and its linguistic nature received decisive confirmation by his discovery of "ordinary language philosophy" in Gilbert Ryle's *The Concept of Mind* and in Wittgenstein himself, whom Frei began reading "seriously" around 1962.¹⁸

¹⁵ Hans Frei, "Religion: Natural and Revealed," in *A Handbook of Christian Theology*, eds. Marvin Halvorson and Arthur A. Cohen (Cleveland, OH: World Publishing Co., 1958), 314.

¹⁶ Brevard Childs, *Myth and Reality in the Old Testament* (Naperville, IL: Allenson, 1960); later cited in Hans Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 340–1. Kelsey's dissertation was published in revised form as David Kelsey, *The Fabric of Paul Tillich's Theology* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967).

¹⁷ Woolverton, "Frei in Context," 385. Cf. Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

During most of this ten-year period George Lindbeck continued to teach the medieval scholastics in the philosophy department, but theological problems were never far from his mind. His 1961 article “Reform and Infallibility” is a good register of his concerns, and shows that he, like Frei, was becoming particularly concerned with the continuity of Christian identity over time and across cultures. Both were concluding that such continuity-in-change must be a function of the tradition-process itself, through (and not in spite of) its fundamentally public linguistic constitution. But Lindbeck at this time was not so much concerned with modes of interpreting scripture as he was with the force of doctrines as markers of communal identity.

In the run-up to the Second Vatican Council a new breed of Catholic theologian (often concerned with historical or philosophical retrievals of Thomas Aquinas as weapons against neo-scholasticism) had captured the spotlight, and Lindbeck in “Reform and Infallibility” registered his fascination with the way doctrines were coming to be seen: not as timeless propositional assertions of binding truth but rather as communally-agreed and flexibly interpretable boundary markers. Examining Karl Rahner’s practice, Lindbeck was impressed by a reading of dogma as a largely negative, legislative force, perpetually excluding specific positions even as it allowed a range of acceptable and diverse theological interpretations of its positive content. That content, in turn, was supplied to dogma “from outside,” by the interaction of the community’s readings of scripture within contemporary intellectual and social contexts. The “infallibility” of dogma simply means that it can always be given a true content, whereas the statements it denies or excludes cannot: “to assert that a proposition is irreformably true is logically equivalent to asserting that it is not irreformably false.”¹⁹ In spite of the fact that their positive content cannot be determined once for all time, doctrines function collectively as a kind of formal structure determining the proper growth and development of the tradition.

These forays into theological interpretation were soon to catapult Lindbeck well beyond the confines of medieval philosophy, when he was named an official observer for the Lutheran churches at the Second Vatican Council. The various reports and articles which he began to write in response to his experiences in Rome beginning in 1962 not only gained him increased notoriety in ecumenical circles; they also revealed the degree to which the role of doctrines in unifying or separating ecclesial bodies, the

¹⁹ George Lindbeck, “Reform and Infallibility,” *Cross Currents* 11 (1961), 352–3.

intersection of their theological and social functions, had become the central problem of his thinking. All told, 1962 proved a watershed year. The year of the beginning of the council was also when Lindbeck formally departed the philosophy department to become a full member of the Yale Divinity School faculty, where he had already been quite active. Though unnoticed by him at the time, it was also the year in which the philosopher of science Thomas Kuhn published his soon to be famous work on scientific revolutions, a book which, as part of a larger trend in philosophy, would provide important stimulation to Lindbeck's thought during the next period.²⁰

A Tendency Takes Shape: 1965–74

The theological milieu in which Frei and Lindbeck had been trained seemed to be disintegrating during this turbulent period; by its end they would both respond with works in which a clearly distinct and theologically countervailing trend first began to come into focus. The former theological core of the faculty passed from the scene; Kelsey joined in 1965, but Robert Calhoun retired the following year, and Julian Hartt departed for the University of Virginia in 1972. The newly consolidating faculty faced a theological landscape undergoing upheavals every bit as disorienting as those of the society at large. The year 1968 bears great symbolic weight in many contexts, theology among them. A restless search for new freedoms, an agitation for change, had been spreading since the early 1960s, resulting in a bewildering onslaught of intellectual frictions and social perturbations. Resistance to the escalating American involvement in Vietnam and new militancy in the civil rights struggles came to a head that year with the assassinations of Reverend King and Bobby Kennedy. The invigorating period of the Second Vatican Council had issued into confusing developments which took an agonizing turn for Catholic progressives with the release of *Humanae Vitae*, the stunning papal encyclical condemning any form of artificial contraception.

1968 was also the year of Karl Barth's death, an event as symbolically potent among theologians as any of the preceding. As if on cue, a series of highly politicized and influential theological manifestos began roiling up from the agitated academy: James Cone's *A Black Theology of Liberation* in

²⁰ Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2nd edn. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970). Originally published in 1962 as part of *Foundations of the Unity of Science*, comprising the first two volumes of the *International Encyclopaedia of Unified Science*.