

# **POSTMETAPHYSICAL HERMENEUTICS**

## **When Practice Triumphs Over Theory**

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1. The postmodern is hidden in the modern: the Enlightenment, with its empiricism and historicism transformed the classic concept of theory. From Plato to Hegel theory was generated from an abstract standpoint. It was the transformation of a vision of the whole into a system of purported knowledge identical to the order of reality. Explanations for observable states of affairs were referred back to rational speculation about first causes and universal forms. Inferences from first causes and universal forms were assembled into foundational systems which were said to be essential to any knowledge of reality. But the emergence of scientific thinking as we know it, following Bacon, Newton, Maxwell and Einstein, bolstered by nominalist and pragmatist categories, slowly began to cast off such metaphysical foundations for itself. Metaphysical thinking sought to refine itself both through references to scientific data and epistemological reflection but by the end of the nineteenth century, metaphysics in philosophy ceased to supply a foundational set of categories for the practice of science. Quite simply, the universe became intelligible in practice apart from references from or to metaphysical foundations.

Hermeneutics has come forward as that comprehensive standpoint from which to view all the projects of human learning. For those of us who have been puzzled by the new intellectual dominance of hermeneutics, the key is that the term no longer refers to the interpretation of texts only but encompasses all the ways in which subjects and objects are involved in human communication. From "theories of everything"<sup>1</sup> in natural science, to the textualizing of every act of communication, hermeneutics has become an essential reflection upon knowledge claims and a recategorization of the act of making knowledge claims. Under this conceptuality, hermeneutics or interpretation has come to be regarded as shorthand for all the practices of human learning.<sup>2</sup> Entailed in this penchant for interpretation is its practical bent, for interpretation is an offering of both meaning and justification for some course of action.

The purpose of this paper will be to discuss some of the leading implications of these developments in the practice of interpretation. The outlook I will be interacting with here is variously known by the terms neo-pragmatism, consensus theory, communicative theory. Basically they are all aspects of a pragmatist impulse that is international and divergent in its views. I am thinking here particularly of the rivals Richard Rorty and Jürgen Habermas. Rorty embodies a certain skeptical type of pragmatism and winds up a thoroughgoing relativist--or better, a radical subjectivist. Habermas, indebted to Gadamer for maintaining the inseparability of interpretation and application, is very positive, and reasons from successful learning practices. Habermas functions with an essential "background realism" in his account of interpretive practice.

But what do these developments have to do with theological hermeneutics? I argue that the communal or churchly nature of theological hermeneutics must be its functional base. I believe that at the end of the twentieth century we must press on from our highly individualized theological contexts to those which are *church-shaped*. As such, theology will more naturally reflect the limits and truth of its nature as the interpretation and application of the gospel. We may be reminded of the Petrine caution that "no interpretation is a private matter"(2 Pet 1:20), that the individual witness of the theologian to the

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. John D. Barrow, *Theories of Everything. The Quest for Ultimate Explanation* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1991).

<sup>2</sup> This is signalled very helpfully by Anthony Thisleton in his recent monumental study, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics*(Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), cf. especially 4-7.

truth of God is occasioned by and is meaningful first and foremost in the context of the Christian church. In considering this point further, I cite examples from the doctrinal expositions of Thomas F. Torrance and Wolfhart Pannenberg. But let us return to some tracing of the outlines of our present situation.

Consigned by Kant to the practical,<sup>3</sup> metaphysics gradually became marginalized or defunct through the second half of the nineteenth century. Epistemology became in a certain sense a tenuous philosophical enterprise because of the capacity of the scientist or inquirer to directly engage his subject. Entering the twentieth century, the function of theory became precisely understood as explanations which illumine and improve scientific processes. Although metaphysical *beliefs* such as realism and rationality remained vital, they came to function as "background beliefs" about reality which cannot be embodied in theory, let alone be demonstrated to be or not to be the case. The compelling nature of these beliefs however was always present in the practicalities and common sense of learning. Of course, no appeal to realism could prevent those who wished to descend into the abyss of radical contextualism where all perspectives merely coexist with one another as in Foucault's model of "micropolitics."<sup>4</sup>

That the modern is hidden in the postmodern is detectable particularly in the ongoing debate about realism: the claim that we know an objectively existing world outside of us. Realism as an epistemological assumption is the epistemological perspective of preference among the vast majority of those at work within the natural and human sciences. While affirming our realist belief or attitude, we must also acknowledge the place of

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<sup>3</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*. Tr. Lewis White Beck (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1950); cf. "Therefore in metaphysics, as a speculative science of pure reason, we can never appeal to common sense, but may do so only when we are forced to surrender it and to renounce all pure speculative knowledge which must always be theoretical cognition, and thereby under some circumstances to forego metaphysics itself and its instruction for the sake of adopting a rational faith which alone may be possible for us, sufficient to our wants, and perhaps even more salutary than knowledge itself. For in this case the state of affairs is quite altered. Metaphysics must be science, not only as a whole, but in all its parts; otherwise it is nothing at all; because, as speculation of pure reason, it finds a hold only on common convictions. Beyond its field, however, probability and common sense may be used justly and with advantage, but on quite special principles, the importance of which always depends on their reference to practical life." 120.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Todd May, *Between Genealogy and Epistemology. Psychology, Politics and Knowledge in the Thought of Michel Foucault* (University Park, PA: University Press, 1993), 111-126; cf. Bruno Latour's tricky little book, *We Have Never Been Modern*. Tr. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1993), 113, where he states, "The universalists [moderns] defined a single hierarchy. The absolute relativists made all hierarchies equal."

such belief in our research. The eminent philosopher John R. Searle notes, "The conditions of intelligibility of our practices, linguistic and otherwise, cannot themselves be demonstrated as truths within those practices. To suppose they could was the endemic mistake of foundationalist metaphysics."<sup>5</sup> Instead, *background realism* serves something like Arthur Fine's "natural ontological attitude"<sup>6</sup> supporting the practices of the sciences within the human community. Postmetaphysical hermeneutics then does not entail the end of metaphysical beliefs, but signals the passage of metaphysical foundations for the construction of theories for the practice of human learning.

The change in the nature of theory from a generation of abstract systems to understanding the practice of learning in particular contexts has been called the "interpretive turn."<sup>7</sup> The interest in interpretation has led in the second half of our century to the erasure of the hard line between understanding and interpretation: the traditional domains of the natural and human sciences respectively. The interpretive turn indicates the final removal of speculative philosophy from the center of common, everyday understanding of the world. The continuing practice of metaphysical and traditional philosophy has had to take its place within the larger context of expert practices of understanding. Jürgen Habermas' statement on this point is instructive:

What remains for philosophy, and what is within its capabilities, is to mediate interpretively between expert knowledge and an everyday practice in need of orientation. Philosophy must operate under conditions of rationality that it has not chosen. It is for this reason unable, even in the role of an interpreter, to reclaim some sort of access to essential insights that is *privileged* in relation to science, morality, or art; it now disposes only over knowledge that is fallible....there can no longer be, after Kant, a metaphysics in the sense of "conclusive" and "integrating" thought.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>5</sup> John R. Searle, "Rationality and Realism, What is at Stake?" *Daedalus* (1991) 80.

<sup>6</sup> Arthur Fine, *The Shaky Game. Einstein, Realism and the Quantum Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1987); the NOA ("natural ontological attitude") corresponds to the scientist's belief "in the existence of those entities to which his theories refer." 130. He continues, "NOA helps us to see that realism differs from various antirealisms in this way: realism adds an *outer* direction to NOA, that is, the external world and the correspondence relation of approximate truth; antirealisms add an *inner* direction, that is, human-oriented reductions of truth, or concepts, or explanations. NOA suggests that the legitimate features of these additions are already contained in the presumed equal status of everyday truths with scientific ones, and in our accepting of them both as *truths*. No other additions are legitimate, and none are required." 133.

<sup>7</sup> David R. Hiley, James F. Bohman, and Richard Shusterman, eds., *The Interpretive Turn. Philosophy, Science, Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell, 1991), 11. "Philosophy's interpretive turn is...a practical turn, one that insists on the philosophical centrality of practice.... In the Continental tradition, this practico-interpretive turn is identified as philosophical hermeneutics, and in Anglo-American philosophy it sees itself as a renewal of pragmatism."

<sup>8</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *Postmetaphysical Thinking. Philosophical Essays*. Tr. William Mark

Not intending pessimism, Habermas is pursuing a qualified objectivity about the nature of modern knowledge and what philosophy is capable of.<sup>9</sup>

The learning practices of the sciences and their gains in knowledge, quite simply then, are not dependent upon any foundational theory. This means that the rationality of these practices is always apparent in the context and consequences of their operation. Their rationality is not a mere construction of a community of scholars. Instead, the effectiveness of language and the intersubjectivity of the scholars and the larger public display rationality within the successful exchange of understanding. Knowledge claims which appeal to the available standards of rationality submit to relatively modest limits of demonstration and explanation. But let us not restrict the scholarly enterprise to the professional. Indeed, one of Calvin's chief characterizations of the church was the "School of Christ," in which all teachable believers are his scholars. To the extent that hermeneutical philosophy can be a useful tool in refining learning practices, we come to understand the much heralded displacement of *theoria*, speculative metaphysics, for *phronesis*, or practical wisdom. Theologically, this is very much like Luther's rejection of a *theologia gloriae* for a *theologia crucis*.

2. Many of us who accept the reality of divine revelation in Scripture reject some of the tendencies of the interpretive turn outright: subjectivism, relativism and even nihilism. But this should not prevent us from acknowledging the limits of truth claims given certain standards of demonstration and, more importantly, the growing recognition of the concomitant limits of human observation and the contextuality of all persons. Essential to this contextuality is not mere finitude, but the fact that all research programs are driven by various human interests of inquiry. Still more important to this understanding is the integration of application in the hermeneutic enterprise.

Gadamer's great contribution to understanding the interpretive turn<sup>10</sup> has been the inclusion of aspects of application to interpretation. He

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Hohengarten (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1992), 17-18.

<sup>9</sup> I believe Donald McIntosh in his article, "Language, Self and Lifeworld in Habermas' *Theory of Communicative Action*," *Theory and Society* 23 (1994) 1-34, completely misunderstands Habermas' understanding of the role of language in defining human lives. It is a primary aspect that brings out the nature of our existence and labors but does not wholly define them.

<sup>10</sup> In his new collection of essays, Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Heidegger's Ways*. Tr. John W. Stanley (Albany, NY: SUNY, 1994), 55, he even identifies Heidegger as basically recapitulating the turn which began with Kant.

claims "that interpretive understanding is always already application, since the situation that prestructures interpretation always calls for an application, always demands some response from us in the pursuit of the purposes through which we encounter the situation."<sup>11</sup> Indeed, one of Gadamer's followers identifies a leading motivation in the hermeneutic project as the overcoming or displacement of epistemology. When we hear that hermeneutics has become anti-foundationalist, this is the sense which is meant. Madison sums up Gadamer's approach using three central theses: 1) "To understand is in fact to interpret...," 2) "All understanding is essentially bound up with language...," 3) "The understanding of the meaning of text is inseparable from its application..." "Suffice it...to remark on how they entail a decisive break with...metaphysics...in that they render meaningless the metaphysical notions of meanings that would be timeless and invariant..."<sup>12</sup> I do not take the denial of the timeless here to refer to truth but rather to meanings and how they are assigned to words and larger forms of reference. The important assertion here is that interpretive theory "...is founded on practice and itself constitutes practice."<sup>13</sup>

Rorty believes metaphysical reference "presupposes an ordered ground. This presumption makes Western Philosophy 'logocentric'--that is, concerned with the articulation of the source of order and structure in things."<sup>14</sup> Rorty's is a "pragmatism without method,"<sup>15</sup> so that one may describe the way in which persons pursuing a particular object of inquiry freely attempt heretofore untried inferences and imaginative connections (e.g., Derrida's association of Hegel with Genet or the scholastics' association of Aristotle with the Scriptures). This is what Rorty calls the practice of recontextualization. This also becomes his occasion for rejecting essentialism: what science or hermeneutics tells us has to do with describing essences of things. Rorty wants to catch all theories within a net fine enough to hold them merely at the level of linguistic usages. Modifications in scientific theory or hermeneutic practices, for him, are merely shift of expression about various subjects,

<sup>11</sup> Hiley, Bohman, Shuster, *The Interpretive Turn*, 12.

<sup>12</sup> G. B. Madison, *The Hermeneutics of Postmodernity* (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1990), 108-111.

<sup>13</sup> Hiley, Bohman, Shusterman, *The Interpretive Turn*, 12.

<sup>14</sup> David L. Hall, *Richard Rorty. Prophet and Poet of the New Pragmatism* (Albany: SUNY, 1994), 204.

<sup>15</sup> Hall, *Richard Rorty*. 212, quoting Rorty, *Papers* (1) 63-77.

objects and social relations, i.e., recontextualizing.<sup>16</sup> All that counts for Rorty is a kind of ethno-centric improvement of public relations through developments of relatively coherent conversations. "Given this postmodernist picture, it takes fancy footwork to try to avoid charges of pernicious relativism and irrationalism."<sup>17</sup>

Habermas' response to Rorty is extremely important.<sup>18</sup> He goes beyond Reward by identifying the proper realist basis of contextual thinking in his account of communicative action. Habermas states, "all languages offer the possibility of distinguishing between what is true and what we hold to be true. The supposition of a common objective world is built into the pragmatics of every single linguistic usage." Whenever we participate with others in the pursuit of a common understanding this background realism is always in evidence. But even more crucially, "the validity claimed for propositions and norms transcends spaces and times, but in each actual case the claim is raised here and now, in a specific context, and accepted or rejected with real implications for social interaction."<sup>19</sup> These real implications are the concrete sharing of understanding, the formulation of common goals and the corporate accomplishment of them. What Habermas is saying is that although interpretation must conform to the modest limits of scientific demonstration, the determination of beliefs and actions in practical life always exceeds these limits. The significance of this way of thinking is that context has set the agenda for thought rather than metaphysical systems or foundations.

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<sup>16</sup> Cf. Richard Rorty, "Inquiry as Recontextualization: An Anti-Dualist Account of Interpretation," 59-80 in Hiley, Bohman, and Shusterman, *The Interpretive Turn*; he states that we have "...little...choice about using our ability to recontextualize." "This is the desire [to dream up as many new contexts as possible] to be as polymorphous in our adjustments as possible, to recontextualize (following such examples as Herdotus, Johann Gottfried von Herder, Laurence Sterne, James Joyce, Margaret Mead, and Derrida) for the hell of it. This desire is manifested in art and literature more than in the natural sciences, and so I find it tempting to think of our culture as an increasingly poeticized one, and to say that we are gradually emerging from...scientism...into something else, something better. But as a good anti-essentialist, I have no deep premises to draw on from which to infer that it is, in fact, better--nor to demonstrate our superiority over the past, or the nonwestern present. All I can do is to recontextualize various developments in philosophy and elsewhere so as to make them look like stages in a story of poeticizing and progress." 80.

<sup>17</sup> Charles B. Guignon, "Pragmatism or Hermeneutics? Epistemology after Foundationalism," 81-101 in Hiley, Bohman, and Shusterman, *The Interpretive Turn*, 98; cf. also his tasty quote from Kafka (probably from his diaries), "They were offered the choice between becoming kings or couriers of kings. The way children would, they all wanted to be couriers. Therefore there are only couriers who hurry about the world, shouting to each other--since there are no kings--messages that have become meaningless." (81)

<sup>18</sup> Hiley, Bohman, and Shusterman, *The Interpretive Turn*, 133-139.

<sup>19</sup> Hiley, Bohman, and Shusterman, *The Interpretive Turn*, 138, 139.

3. We now must move on to more strictly theological issues. As with other modes of inquiry, theological hermeneutics has precious little to do with metaphysical foundations. There are a number of questions which we could ask in the contemporary vein. How do we justify the privileged status of biblical texts? How can a text be said to be an instrument of revelation? Do theological statements somehow participate in this instrumentality? How do we make claims for universal application of the universal claims of the biblical text? Can theology build bridges of meaning from its own particular knowledge of God in the gospel to some philosophical account of God? As Avery Dulles points out, the entire history of the church has produced no privileged metaphysical standpoint in its exposition of doctrine.<sup>20</sup> This is not to say that certain metaphysical perspectives will not be preferred or even privileged, e.g., that of Augustine or varieties of thomistic theism, but these, more and more, have been found to be non-essential to the theological tasks of theologian and church. This is quite obviously the case with exegetes who contribute to biblical theology. But it is also emphatically so in theology proper since the washout of both liberal and conservative modernist perspectives in the radical politicizing and eschatologizing of Christ through most of our century.

The only way to provide determinative answers to the above questions is through contexts where the scriptural revelation is taken up through concrete forms of church life in which it is proclaimed, believed and practiced. This is not to make a case for some sort of corporate fideism, only to assert that no metaphysical system provides demonstrations of these claims hidden within these questions. Only God, at the close of the age will do so. Instead, these claims are taken as clear implications of scriptural teaching in the cognitive life of churches. Through the teaching gift of the Body of Christ, a vast communicative activity takes place whereby in-depth or expert knowledge of faith attains greater and greater clarity and effectiveness. As the claims of doctrine attain this increasing clarity and effectiveness through this interaction of many selves, there takes place a determination in the form of consensus not unlike the interactive learning processes of the sciences.

The consenses, built up through the aid of those in the churches who are given gifts of the Holy Spirit, embody legitimating meanings

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<sup>20</sup> Avery Dulles, *The Craft of Theology* (New York: Crossroad, 1993), 119-133.

and justifying applications. By legitimating meanings I intend to say that, in "consultation" with the great interpretive traditions of the past embodied in, e.g., the Nicene Creed, the confessions of the Reformation and modern statements such as Barmen, the contemporary theologians and their churches continue the faithful work of achieving interpretation through consensus. This is not to say that the interpretation of a text is inaccessible to a studious individual, but that such interpretation is incomplete until it seeks the proper application of that intent in the context of the church. Although we are no longer ignoring larger perspectives which embody something like this, especially canonical hermeneutics, we must recognize that even this perspective is ultimately determined by a churchly or Christian communal context. By justifying applications I mean the functioning of that aspect of theological hermeneutics which recognizes that faithful interpretation is inseparable from application by individuals within the communities of Christ the Lord. The *consensual* meaning is itself the result of pursuing this particular application.

3.1 The privileged status of the Bible is argued in only slightly varied ways among the Christian theological traditions. As revelation, in which we hear a real word from God, one could almost say that the designation "privileged" is an under-determination of the status the Bible has been accorded. If we retain the term, our privileged text engages us not only in the matter of cognition and assent but also in the matter of will and action. Christian truth in the form of doctrine implies both knowledge in the form of public doctrine and obedience in the form of the mission of Jesus Christ. But of course doctrines and principles of doing mission do not exhaustively express the contents of Scripture. Nothing can substitute the faithful reading of the whole Bible nor its exposition in preaching and teaching "the whole counsel of God." (Acts 20:27 ) In the process of rereading the Bible in these dimensions, which includes the multinational churches and new translations, fresh readings emerge. In the West, we have barely begun to take these into consideration. Nida's great translation aids point toward this possibility which extends far beyond very narrow readings, such as liberation theology. Fresh readings of the Bible find an inseparable unity between meaning and application naturally to be operative.

3.2 The Bible as the instrument of revelation and precisely the theological account of it extends beyond the realm of biblical studies. Historical and grammatical research cannot determine how the church is to construe its doctrine. This should be evident upon any perusal of the doctrines of

Trinity, Incarnation and Church among the Christian confessions. Nevertheless, these quite fallible confessions always purport to be valid and normative interpretations of the revelation. They do not make any effort to show how that revelation claim is justified--that was once the task of the Christian university. What the confessions can show is how a revelation claim operates *a posteriori*. The community of believers in effect must show this in its practice: embodying the truth in worship, mission and cultural life, that a real word from God has determined the outcome of their understanding and probably of the whole world.

3.3 Finding our way theologically can begin by considering Calvin's concern for using faith as a hermeneutical tool. Thomas Torrance's ground-breaking study on the hermeneutics of John Calvin is instructive here. In recounting Calvin's chief point of opposition to the Catholic church, Torrance states that "the interpretation of the Scriptures is allowed to be handicapped by a prior decision (*praeiudicio gravari*), and that the seat of authority becomes shifted from the Word and Truth of God to the interpreters themselves."<sup>21</sup> Torrance cites Calvin's *De Scandalis* as an example of his theological hermeneutics. This work sets forth a method of interpretation which arises out of a combination of descriptive and explicatory aspects of inquiry. Torrance recounts,

...a method that is determined by the nature of the given reality and directed by the unfolding of the subject-matter, one in which the inquirer lets his own mind come under the attack of what he seeks to know that he may know it out of itself ... he is aware of being interrogated by the object to which he must render account in the obedience of his mind.<sup>22</sup>

The import of this insight is something which is often left out of the considerations of theological hermeneutics. What in recent non-theological thought had already been recognized as issues of application inseparably bound to those of determining meaning, were always in place. I believe that the over stringent definition of propositional truth which tended to eclipse the dimension of application or subjectivity--bound by the objective truth of Scripture--is exposed by this insight which aids in overcoming what amount to some inhibiting habits of thought in this whole area.

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<sup>21</sup> Thomas F. Torrance, *The Hermeneutics of John Calvin* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1987), 154.

<sup>22</sup> Torrance, *The Hermeneutics of John Calvin*, 154.

4. The role of Christian confessions, theologian exemplars (doctors of the church), the universal claims of the revelation in Scripture are all the larger essential context of theological hermeneutics: what was once called normativity and authority. We must recognize that these confessions have come to be understood as congregationally dependent for their functional authority and guidance. Without the consensus of the believers as community, they cannot be shown to be true confessional communal documents. They become either irrelevant or relegated to the level of private statements whose truth claims thereby are rendered quite limited in application. Because we find ourselves in an ecumenical context, we cannot discuss a common confession that does not exist. Instead we must seek out, through a *Konfessionskunde* approach, a working set of doctrines as embodied, e.g., in systematic theology which, while arising from a particular confessional base, nevertheless, takes its ecumenical context seriously and interacts as far as possible with that reality.

The test case for our conception of hermeneutics is in systematic theology which has the special task of demonstrating how the Bible and churchly doctrine are related. Wolfhart Pannenberg's recent contribution is especially helpful in this matter.

5. Pannenberg makes an arresting claim at the beginning of his *Systematic Theology*:

For modern historico-critical exegesis...the biblical writings are basically documents of a past era. In principle the present relevance of their content can no longer be decided within the framework of historical exposition. Thus the weight of the question as to the truth of talk about God has shifted over entirely to dogmatics. Naturally...there were signs of this shift prior to the modern era. What it means for theology, however, has only just become apparent. Even today it is hard for dogmatics to come to terms with what has happened and to take the full load upon itself. But it has to carry the burden not merely in order to be true to its own task but to serve theology as a whole. It has to establish the specifically theological character of all the theological disciplines. For these are theological precisely to the degree that they share in the dogmatic task of theology.<sup>23</sup>

The subject matter of Scripture is not accessible apart from interpretation. But the dogmatic task of theology, in the service of the gospel, must function as the practico-theoretical center of this context.

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<sup>23</sup> Wolfhart Pannenberg. *Systematic Theology*. Vol. I. Tr. Geoffrey Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 8.

In basic interpretation, Pannenberg unambiguously asserts the biblical author's intention has to be the standard of interpretation.<sup>24</sup> But in relation to the Christian practice of interpretation, the full churchly context and the doctrinal trajectory of interpretation must be grasped.

Pannenberg goes on to equate the expositions of doctrine with scientific hypotheses, for the both must be regarded as revisable.<sup>25</sup> The strict exegesis of biblical passages could never supply the necessary adjudication between the rival doctrinal claims of Arius and Athanasius. Only that standpoint which regards doctrine as well-established working theory, but therefore revisable, can bridge the gap between the text of Scripture and its proper contemporary interpretation. Proper interpretation and teaching by theologians, whether pastors, professors or other teachers of the church implies that they have been entrusted with a relative authority to expound doctrine by the congregational context. In every case, however, they cannot show the nature of their authority apart from their own wider churchly context of consensus documents of doctrine and the will of the congregations as a whole which employ these documents as standards and norms.

Pannenberg however, will not accept a certain relativistic reading of the contextual or congregational determination of Christian truth. He is careful to make this distinction relative to the meaning of truth statements embodied in traditional doctrines and confessions. They have always had merely relative authority and have always been revisable. But the objective knowledge of God in his revelation in Jesus Christ is and could not be determined in any other way than through the human or historical context. If we had been wondering about the young Pannenberg and the "history as revelation" statements of the sixties, we need to make a radical revision of our assessments of him. Two prime assertions which I would discuss here if space allowed are the emergence of the reality of God in Christ among the world religions and the doctrine of the Trinity as the precise nature of that reality.

We have seen that we can no longer leave out of our theories of theological hermeneutics the fact that this practice is fully contextualized by communal rules of doctrine and a dynamic but abiding order of relationships and tasks. In addition, we acknowledge that interpretation

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<sup>24</sup> Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 15.

<sup>25</sup> Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 56.

not only arises out of this context but also is applied back to it in order to achieve its own purpose. So, while individual believers are those who are held by conscience directly to the Person of God, they are obligated for conscience sake in both teaching and learning to the consensus of all believers together in the church of Jesus Christ.

6. Allow me to offer a reference to the trinitarian theology of Thomas F. Torrance and his account of the hermeneutics behind the development of doctrine. Those familiar with Torrance know his strong attachment to the theology of the church father, Athanasius. He shows how Athanasius is quite aware of the speculations of the philosophers, but, like the other early theologians, stands in judgment over their conclusions on the basis of revelation. Not at all adopting a metaphysic or foundation for interpretation from pure philosophy, Athanasius recognized that the revelation of God in Christ comprised an entire foundation in and of itself. (cf. 1 Co 3:11) Scripture is the divinely ordained instrument by which believers move into direct knowledge of Christ through spiritual and cognitive union with him. Our knowledge of God is a "sharing in God's knowledge of Himself."<sup>26</sup> The nature of hermeneutics is not the provision of a visionary system, but rather a laying out of the rules for receiving this cognitive and spiritual revelation.

In what we might consider today as a quite postmodern, or better, postmetaphysical hermeneutic, Athanasius commends two rules for proper interpretation of the revelation: **godliness** and **precision**. Far from being a mere "language game," the appropriateness and justification for theological statements is grounded in the degree to which they correspond to the revealed reality of the triune God. Far from being the mere construction of concepts from the context of a religious community, the theological endeavor must take godliness upon itself as its own only proper "natural attitude."

The theological burden to which Pannenberg refers is greater than many of us realize. The modern foisting of theology into the context of the research university led unfortunately to its cutting away from its true context in the church. This is an immense story which will have to

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<sup>26</sup> Thomas F. Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith. The Evangelical Theology of the Ancient Catholic Church* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988), 52; cf. also my discussion of Torrance in this area, Kurt Anders Richardson, *Trinitarian Reality. The Interrelation of Uncreated and Created Being in the Thought of Thomas Forsyth Torrance* (Published dissertation of the University of Basel) (Wake Forest, NC: Ethne Group, 1993), 173-198.

be told later.<sup>27</sup> Needless to say, the historicizing and neutralizing of theology has led to a reduction of its truth content to the barest minimum of resort--if at all--to revelation. Among evangelicals, Stanley Grenz's recent contribution: *Theology for the Community of God*,<sup>28</sup> is a turning in the direction I am after here. The focus on the churchly context of theology is much more than a mere "recovery of tradition."<sup>29</sup> This point was missed in the church-political conflicts of the early decades of our century.

At the turn of the century, the so-called modernism which took a relatively indifferent stance toward doctrine infected both wings of American Protestantism. This was a very complex development, but suffice it to say that doctrinal indifference became a common characteristic of both liberalism and fundamentalism in different ways. Liberal theology reduced doctrine to the question of public theology in the face of Protestantism's massive cultural losses. The Five Fundamentals reduced doctrine to the question of supernaturalism and certainly the rise of the neologism of the "doctrine" of separatism, exploded doctrinal coherence almost entirely. This is not surprising however, because when it appears that the consenses of doctrine are no longer operative, everyone will begin to appeal to something else, Biblical authority became the standard bearer for evangelicals, but we now see how it had to contend with overblown ecclesiological and eschatological doctrines.

Many evangelicals are beginning to acknowledge the doctrinal disorientation which they inherited and are slowly recognizing their classic ties with the orthodoxy of historical Christianity. This is the reason for appeals to "catholicity" in doctrine and for collaborations in service to Christ interdenominationally. Such appeals would have been unimaginable a generation ago. All of this reflects changes but more importantly refinements, in the evangelical hermeneutical context. Most importantly, evangelicals are recognizing the import of theological partnership with theologians from the global context of the multinational

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<sup>27</sup> This does not include the medieval university which was founded on a universal churchly basis. A very thought-provoking book in this area is Donald Wiebe's, *The Irony of Theology and the Nature of Religious Thought* (Montreal: McGill, 1991), 213-227.

<sup>28</sup> Stanley J. Grenz. *Theology for the Community of God* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994); cf. especially 5-32.

<sup>29</sup> Gillian R. Evans, Alister E. McGrath, and Allan D. Galloway, *The Science of Theology*. Vol.1. *The History of Christian Theology*. Ed. Paul Avis (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 348-349.

churches. Based upon a *global congregational model*, the context for theological hermeneutics has acquired a much wider and diverse set of characteristics.<sup>30</sup> This context is now the proper trajectory of application and already should determine whether or not an interpretive task in theology is complete.

7. What of metaphysics, finally, particularly in the case of Christian theism? Habermas does not discount the potential for engaging in any philosophical project, metaphysical or otherwise, and neither should Christian theologians. The difference with the past, however, consists in relegating all of these projects to a non-foundational role.

The non-necessity of establishing metaphysical foundations for our learning practices in no way precludes the philosophical pursuit of ultimate questions. Reasoning about God from the contingency of existing things,<sup>31</sup> about the linkage of mathematics and the "natural structure" of the universe,<sup>32</sup> or even the evidence for God's existence from the Big Bang hypothesis<sup>33</sup> are quite fruitful projects. The projects of Christian theism and studies in the nature of religious experience will continue, but nothing about their transcendent claims will likely ever again set the agenda for theology.

## ABSTRACT

Postmetaphysical hermeneutics introduced in this paper asserts that metaphysical theories no longer function to inform or guide theology. This states of affairs has come about as the result of a positive, practical development of proper understanding in the scientific encounters of knowing subjects with objects. While a background realism cannot be dispensed with, the theologian must allow for the distinctive claims of Scripture as interpreted in the practical life of the church to determine all theological meaning. While it is assumed that metaphysics will continue to be practiced in philosophy, the author concludes that it can never again set the agenda for theology.

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<sup>30</sup> Cf. the excellent multi-authored work by William A. Dyrness, *Emerging Voices in Global Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994).

<sup>31</sup> E.g., Barry Miller, *From Existence to God. A Contemporary Philosophical Argument* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

<sup>32</sup> Barrow, *Theories of Everything*, 197.

<sup>33</sup> William Lane Craig and Quentin Smith, *Theism, Atheism, and Big Bang Cosmology* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993); note Craig's interesting summation of his critique of Hawking: "What price, then, for no Creator?" 300.

## 撮 要

作者在本文討論的「後形上詮釋學」，是主張形而上學的理論不再發揮督導或指引神學的功能。這情況是因人正確理解以客體認識主體的科學方法，而帶來的正面、實際發展的成果。雖然實在主義的背景是不可或缺的，但神學家必須容許教會以其獨特的釋經法，就教會現實的情況，來決定所有神學的意義。雖然有人認為形而上學會繼續影響哲學的發展，作者卻認為形而上學在神學上永遠不會再有主導作用。