

THE TRIUMPH OF THE IRRATIONAL IN POSTENLIGHTENMENT THEOLOGY

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This essay advances the idea that a dualism between faith and reason has come to characterize the postenlightenment theological enterprise.¹ This severance of faith and rationality is rooted in philosophical and not biblical modes of thought.² The result of this dualism is the triumph of the irrational in the interpretation of religious symbols. It would appear that the rigid confinement of faith and reason to autonomous spheres of operation leads to the ascendance of nonhistorical, nonconceptual, nonpsychological, and nonrational interpretations of biblical concepts.³

Historical Development of Dualism in Knowledge

The interplay of rationality and irrationality in the realm of religion has been analyzed by the conservative Christian apologist Francis Schaeffer. In his *Escape from Reason*, Schaeffer traced the development of a dualism between faith and rationality beginning with Saint Thomas

¹The term postenlightenment is used to include both modern and postmodern theological developments. Schleiermacher, Bultmann, Barth, and Tillich are representative of the modern viewpoint; Lindbeck is representative of the postmodern camp. Gerhard Hasel, in a summary of the objections to historical criticism raised by E. Krentz, says, "Faith and the historical-critical method have differing means of determining reality. Thus, acceptance of historical criticism leads the Christian into intellectual dualism and forces him to live in two worlds that clash" (*Biblical Interpretation Today* [Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1985], 82); see also Wolfhart Pannenberg, "Faith and Reason," in *Basic Questions in Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), 47.

²George Lindbeck holds that "in modern times, propositional understandings of religion have long been on the defensive and experiential-expressive ones in the ascendancy. . . . The origins of this tradition in one sense go back to Kant, for he helped clear the ground for its emergence by demolishing the metaphysical and epistemological foundations of the earlier regnant cognitive-propositional views" (George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984], 19-20).

³A classic example of this is Rudolph Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Nonrational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational*, trans. John W. Harvey (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969).

Aquinas and ending with the twentieth-century existentialists.⁴ Schaeffer conceptualized this dualism as advancing in a series of dichotomies: grace/nature, freedom/nature, and finally faith/rationality.⁵ He argued that grace, freedom, and faith referred to knowledge of the immaterial realm ("upper storey" knowledge), while nature and rationality referred to knowledge of the material realm ("lower storey" knowledge).⁶ Schaeffer argued that this dualism gradually resulted in a radical discontinuity between "lower storey" and "upper storey" knowledge, and that ultimately reason became confined to the natural, physical, observable, empirical realm. The corresponding development was the relegation of religion to the "upper storey" realm of knowledge with the consequence that faith became thoroughly nonconceptual and nonrational.⁷ Schaeffer perceived that the equation of faith with the nonrational represented a serious challenge to the doctrinal and conceptual elements of the biblical text. It is, no doubt, true that if faith is essentially nonrational, the cognitive element of religion is necessarily subordinate to the affective element. In this way experience becomes the criterion of truth without significant reference to the rational content of that experience.

The epistemological dualism between faith and rationality appears to be related to the distinction in historical criticism between "Scripture" and "Word of God." This distinction was first articulated by Johann Semler in the 1770s and has been maintained through a powerful tradition, including such influential thinkers as Rudolph Bultmann and Karl Barth.⁸

The Philosophical Basis of Dualism

The philosophical foundation which prepared the way for the equation of faith with the nonrational mind was the transcendental philosophy of Immanuel Kant. In the *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics* Kant highlighted the main tenets of his philosophical system.⁹ He explained that the primary purpose of the transcendental philosophy was "to determine the whole sphere of pure reason completely and from

⁴Francis Schaeffer, *Escape from Reason* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1968).

⁵Ibid., 42.

⁶Ibid., 16.

⁷Ibid., 73-77.

⁸I am indebted to Professor John Baldwin of the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary at Andrews University for this insightful analysis.

⁹Immanuel Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*, trans. Paul Carus (Chicago: Open Court, 1996).

general principles, in its circumference as well as in its contents.”¹⁰ Central to the thesis of this massive undertaking was Kant’s insistence on “the subjective basis of all external phenomena.”¹¹ He attributed this “subjective basis” of human reason to “sensibility itself.”¹² To this seminal idea Kant referred repeatedly throughout the *Prolegomena*, of which I will cite three particularly clear statements.

It is indeed . . . incomprehensible how the visualizing of a present thing should make me know this thing as it is in itself, as its properties cannot migrate into my faculty of representation.¹³

Whereas I say, that things as objects of our senses existing outside us are given, but we know nothing of what they may be in themselves, knowing only their appearances, i.e., the representations which they cause in us by affecting our senses.¹⁴

The object always remains unknown in itself; but when by the concept of the understanding the connexion [*sic*] of the representations of the object, which are given to our sensibility, is determined as universally valid, the object is determined by this relation, and it is the judgment that is objective.¹⁵

It is clear that for Kant “objective” knowledge is related exclusively to the “faculty of representation” or “judgment” and not to the “objects of our senses existing outside us.” This idea represents both a “limitation” and an “extension” of the power of human reason. It is a limitation in that the critical faculty is confined to appearances but cannot penetrate into realities. It is an extension in that the mind is credited with the power of imposing its conceptual grid on all of reality. As Kant remarked, “The understanding does not derive its laws (*a priori*) from, but prescribes them to, nature.”¹⁶ Thus transcendental philosophy erected an impenetrable barrier between reason and the reality of “things in themselves.” If it is true that the rational faculty imposes its own image on the external world, then it is limited as a means for comprehending anything outside the domain of its own operations. This means that anyone looking for anything other than “subjective” knowledge would have to seek it apart from the rational capacity.

¹⁰Ibid., 8.

¹¹Ibid., 42.

¹²Ibid.

¹³Ibid., 34.

¹⁴Ibid., 43.

¹⁵Ibid., 56.

¹⁶Ibid., 82.

The Psychological Basis of Dualism

William James, in the Gifford Lectures on Natural Religion, delivered at Edinburgh in 1901-1902, dealt at length with the relation of religion to the human mind. In a lecture titled "The Reality of the Unseen" he argued that the "subconscious and non-rational" mind is dominant "in the religious realm."¹⁷ It would appear that this assertion was based in part on a dualistic notion of human nature. Said James: "If you have intuitions at all, they come from a deeper level of your nature than the loquacious level which rationalism inhabits."¹⁸ In making that observation James was expressing an influential idea in the history of postenlightenment thought. If religion springs from a deep, nonrational region of the human mind, it follows that reason has in fact little to offer religion. If religion is primarily a function of the nonrational capacity of the mind, the articulate formulation of the grounds and content of belief is a peripheral and secondary matter. This is the conclusion reached by James in his lecture 18 he said that "feeling is the deeper source of religion, and in which philosophic and theological formulas are secondary products."¹⁹ In essence James argued that religion is a function of the affective, imaginative, nonrational capacity of the human mind and is not in any substantive way rooted in reason. In such a system of thought the interaction of faith and reason appears to be superficial. For James faith exceeds "verbal formulation," and reason fails to apprehend the "deeper level" of religious experience.²⁰

In his analysis, reason and faith are placed in the context of the antipathy between rationalism and mysticism.²¹ In his lecture on "Mysticism," James stated that "religious experience has its root and center in mystical states of consciousness."²² He explained that mystical consciousness "defies expression," in the sense that "no adequate report of its contents can be given in words," and mediates "insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect."²³ The identification of religion with mysticism gives prominence to the nonverbal, nonintellectual, nonconceptual aspects of the religious experience. In this way the rational articulation of the faith is subordinated to the affective experience. As James

¹⁷William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1928), 74.

¹⁸Ibid., 73.

¹⁹Ibid., 431.

²⁰Ibid., 456, 73.

²¹Ibid., 73.

²²Ibid., 379.

²³Ibid., 380.

put it, "Instinct leads, intelligence does but follow."²⁴ It would appear that the psychological foundation of the dualism between faith and rationality is rooted in an anthropological dualism.

Friedrich Schleiermacher: Cognition and Religion

Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), a Prussian theologian, has been credited with setting the agenda of postenlightenment theological enquiry.²⁵ One of the critical issues that Schleiermacher's writings raise is the relation of cognition and religion.²⁶ In his first influential work *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers*, he attacked rationalism and dogmatism by advancing the notion that "ideas and principles are all foreign to religion."²⁷ The sentiment thus expressed was not merely a rhetorical device reflecting the Pietist influences of his upbringing but central to the main argument of the *Speeches*. That argument was articulated by Schleiermacher in the *First Speech*:

I maintain that in all better souls piety springs necessarily by itself; that a province of its own in the mind belongs to it, in which it has unlimited sway; that it is worthy to animate most profoundly the noblest and best and to be fully accepted and known by them.²⁸

The "province of its own in the mind" from which piety "springs" is, according to Schleiermacher, an immediate understanding, "immediate feeling," and "immediate consciousness" of the "Infinite and Eternal" presence that pervades all of life.²⁹ It seems that this "immediate consciousness" of the "infinite" transcends rationality, for it refuses to recognize the antitheses that "morality," "philosophy," and systematic theology acknowledge. He states:

Only when the free impulse of seeing, and of living is directed towards the Infinite and goes into the Infinite, is the mind set in unbounded liberty. . . . In this respect, it is all worthy of preservation and contemplation, however much, in other respects, and in itself, it is to be rejected. To a pious mind religion makes everything holy, even unholiness and commonness, whether it is embraced in his system of

²⁴Ibid., 74.

²⁵Keith Clements, *Friedrich Schleiermacher: Pioneer of Modern Theology*, The Making of Modern Theology (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 7.

²⁶Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers*, trans. John Oman (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1958), 43-49.

²⁷Schleiermacher, *On Religion*, 46.

²⁸Schleiermacher, *On Religion*, 21.

²⁹Ibid., 90, 15-16, 36.

thought, or lies outside, whether it agrees with his peculiar mode of acting or disagrees. Religion is the natural and sworn foe of all narrowmindedness, and of all onesidedness.³⁰

For Schleiermacher there could be no equation of a sacred text and the dynamic, essential element in religion:

Not every person has religion who believes in a sacred writing, but only the man who has a lively and immediate understanding of it, and who, therefore, so far as he himself is concerned, could most easily do without it.³¹

In his view, texts are merely "propositions which arose purely out of reflection upon the religious emotions."³² It would seem that for Schleiermacher the rational formulation of the faith represented so much wasted ink, for "all forms are too rigid, all speech-making too cold and tedious."³³

Schleiermacher's contribution to hermeneutics should not be overlooked. He viewed the hermeneutical task as both a philosophical enterprise and a form of art.³⁴ "Understanding a speech," according to Schleiermacher, "always involves two moments: to understand what is said in the context of the language with its possibilities, and to understand it as a fact in the thinking of the speaker."³⁵ Corresponding to these two "moments" is the interpreter's "linguistic competence" and "ability for knowing people."³⁶ Schleiermacher's comment on the latter skill is particularly illuminating. "One's ability to know people refers especially to a knowledge of the subjective element determining the composition of thoughts."³⁷ Because of this "subjective element" between the thought and the written word, it followed that the interpreter ultimately had "no direct knowledge of what was in the author's mind."³⁸ However, this was of no real concern for Schleiermacher because all religious documents are only "the handiwork of the calculating understanding . . . not the character of

³⁰Ibid., *On Religion*, 56.

³¹Ibid., *On Religion*, 91.

³²Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1948), 82.

³³Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Christmas Eve: Dialogue on the Incarnation*, trans. Terrence Tice (Richmond, VA; John Knox, 1967), 85.

³⁴Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics: The Handwritten Manuscripts*, American Academy of Religion Texts and Translations (Missoula: Scholars, 1977), 95-96.

³⁵Ibid., 159.

³⁶Ibid., 161.

³⁷Ibid.

³⁸Ibid., 112.

religion.”³⁹ The severance of faith and rationality in Schleiermacher is most evident in his insistence on the primacy of “immediate feeling.”

Rudolph Bultmann: Demythologized Faith

Rudolph Bultmann (1884-1976) is best known for his demythologizing of the NT. This method of biblical interpretation aimed to “recover the deeper meaning behind” such “mythological conceptions” as the virgin birth, preexistence, divinity, and second coming of Jesus Christ, as well as other biblical ideas rejected by modern science.⁴⁰ For Bultmann the modern scientific conception of the world as a closed “nexus” of “cause and effect” is “presupposed as axiomatic.”⁴¹ This “scientific” presupposition admits of no visible, historical, or objective activity of God in the world. Bultmann affirmed: “The whole of nature and history is profane. It is only in the light of the proclaimed word that what has happened or is happening here or there assumes the character of God’s action for the believer.”⁴² For Bultmann objective events in the real world only assume the “character of God’s action” by faith in the “proclaimed word.” Thus “faith” is not directed toward the objective events but toward interpreted events.

For what we call facts of redemption are themselves objects of faith and are apprehended as such only by the eye of faith. They cannot be perceived apart from faith, as if faith could be based on data in the same way as the natural sciences are based on data which are open to empirical observation.⁴³

It is instructive to look at Bultmann’s demythologization of NT Christology as an example of how “faith” and “empirical observation” are distinguished.

It is precisely the mythological description of Jesus Christ in the New Testament which makes it clear that the figure and the work of Jesus Christ must be understood in a manner which is beyond the categories by which the objective historian understands world-history, if the figure and the work of Jesus Christ are to be understood as the divine work of redemption.⁴⁴

For Bultmann the “categories by which the objective historian understands world-history” are incompatible with the biblical (mythological)

³⁹Schleiermacher, *On Religion*, 15.

⁴⁰Rudolph Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1958), 14-18.

⁴¹Rudolph Bultmann, *Faith and Understanding*, ed. Robert W. Funk, trans. Louise Pettibone Smith (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 1:247-248.

⁴²Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology*, 85.

⁴³*Ibid.*, 72.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, 80.

description of the divine person and work of Jesus Christ. Because of this, "Jesus Christ must be understood in a manner which is beyond" these "categories." But rather than accept "the mythological description of Jesus Christ in the New Testament" as trustworthy, Bultmann insisted on reinterpreting the divine person and work of Christ along secular historical lines. He fully recognized the paradoxical nature of this endeavor. "This is the paradox of faith, that faith 'nevertheless' understands as God's action here and now an event which is completely intelligible in the natural or historical connection of events."⁴⁵

It is astonishing that Bultmann could identify "an event which is completely intelligible in the natural or historical connection of events" with "God's action." But it is crucial to note that this identification was not a rational observation but the "nevertheless" of faith. For Bultmann, faith was a decision to believe in the divine activity in the world in spite of rational knowledge to the contrary.⁴⁶ He noted: "For it is beyond the sphere of historical observation to say that this Word and its proclamation are God's act."⁴⁷ For Bultmann the dualism between faith and reason was crucial to his program of demythologization.

Karl Barth: "Faith Alone" Epistemology

Karl Barth (1886-1968) exerted tremendous influence on twentieth-century theological thought through his "dialectical" theology. Dialectical theology is essentially a rejection of natural revelation in theological epistemology, i.e., the refusal to acknowledge any human source of the knowledge of God.⁴⁸ Barth crystallized this rejection in his sharp response to an open letter by Emil Brunner titled "Nature and Grace," which argued for a legitimate natural theology. "Real rejection of natural theology does not form part of the creed. Nor does it wish to be an exposition of the creed and of revelation. It is merely an hermeneutical rule, forced upon the exegete by the creed . . . and by revelation."⁴⁹

According to Barth, the problem with natural revelation is that it added to "the knowability of God in Jesus Christ," the "also" of "his

⁴⁵Ibid., 65.

⁴⁶"Faith in God, indeed, is never a possession, but rather always a decision." Rudolph Bultmann, "The Crisis of Faith," in *Rudolph Bultmann: Interpreting Faith for the Modern Era*, ed. Roger Johnson (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 251.

⁴⁷Ibid., 254.

⁴⁸Clifford Green, *Karl Barth: Theologian of Freedom* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 151.

⁴⁹Karl Barth, "No! Answer to Emil Brunner," in *Natural Theology* (London: Centenary, 1946), 76.

knowability in nature, reason, and history.” As he pointed out in his criticism of the “German nature and history myth” underlying the Nazi ideology, the “also” is in reality an “only.”⁵⁰ For Barth the “also” of natural revelation rivaled the exclusivity of *sola Scriptura*, *sola fide*, and *solus Christus*. “An idea, constructed with the claim to be an idea of God, is as such, not as an idea but simply because of this claim, an idol from the standpoint of the exclusiveness expressed in the biblical testimonies.”⁵¹

The concept that “an idea of God” is “an idol” is a virulent expression of Barth’s understanding of “rationality” as the antithesis of “revelation.” In his explosive commentary on *Romans* he laid the foundation for his massive assault on reason. Barth acknowledged that his exposition of *Romans* was essentially a systematic recognition of the “infinite qualitative distinction” (a phrase borrowed from Kierkegaard) between the human and the divine.⁵² Notice in particular the concept of “truth” that emerged from the crucible of this dialectic:

The truth, in fact, can never be self-evident, because it is a matter neither of historical nor of psychological experience, and because it is neither a cosmic happening within the natural order, nor even the most supreme event of our imaginings. Therefore it is not accessible to our perception: it can neither be dug out of what is unconsciously within us, nor apprehended by devout contemplation, nor made known by the manipulation of occult psychic powers.⁵³

The assertion that “truth” is not “historical” or “psychological,” and ultimately “not accessible to our perception,” is stunning. And yet this insight lies at the heart of Barth’s theology, which is consistently framed using the language of paradox. In defining truth as nonhistorical and nonpsychological he struck a blow against liberalism’s insistence on the “knowability of God in nature, reason, and history” and defended the unpopular notion of supernatural divine revelation. However, the argument itself revealed Barth’s acceptance of the dualism between faith and rationality that has permeated the thought of postenlightenment culture. If “truth” is neither “historical” nor “psychological,” it would follow that it is not rationally accessible or even communicable. How is truth then to be received? Barth provided an answer in a statement dealing with NT Christology: “Jesus is presented to us unmistakably as the Christ,

⁵⁰Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/I, trans. G. T. Thomson (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1957), 173, 174.

⁵¹Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I/I, 449.

⁵²Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), 99; Green, *Karl Barth*, 17.

⁵³Barth, *Romans*, 98.

but his Messiahship is also presented to us as a sharply defined paradox. It is a matter for faith only.”⁵⁴

The concept of *sola fide* expressed here is extremely important for Barth. He understood “faith alone” as the ultimate ground of any authentic knowledge of God. Barth’s work *Anselm: Fides Quaerens Intellectum* is a careful analysis of Anselm’s Proof of the Existence of God and a statement of the importance of *sola fide* for theological epistemology. Anselm’s approach to the question of God’s existence is cited approvingly by Barth: “Grant me to understand—as much as Thou seest fit—that Thou dost exist as we believe Thee to exist, and that Thou art what we believe Thee to be.”⁵⁵

Notice that for both Anselm and Barth, faith (“we believe Thee to exist”) precedes understanding (“grant me to understand”). Barth argued persuasively that Anselm’s proof was in fact a rational, intellectual articulation of the “thought of the existence and nature of God,” which was first accepted as “credible on other grounds.”⁵⁶ The “other grounds,” on which the existence of God is accepted, is faith alone. For Barth “faith alone” meant an acceptance of the “givens” of divine revelation with no psychological, historical, or rational assurances.

Faith is the faithfulness of God, ever secreted in and beyond all human ideas and affirmations about him, and beyond every positive religious achievement. There is no such thing as mature and assured possession of faith: regarded psychologically, it is always a leap into the darkness of the unknown, a flight into empty air, . . . a leap into the void.⁵⁷

For Barth the severance of faith and rationality was the epistemological equivalent of the doctrine of justification by faith alone.

Paul Tillich: “Ultimate Concern” without Content

Paul Tillich (1886-1965) sustained a lifelong theological interest in the relationship between religion and culture. One of the primary objectives of his writings was the articulation of a theology of culture, a “theonomy,”⁵⁸ which he explained in the following terms: “A theonomous culture expresses in its creations an ultimate concern and a transcending

⁵⁴Ibid., 105.

⁵⁵Karl Barth, *Anselm: Fides Quaerens Intellectum* (London: SCM, 1960), 13.

⁵⁶Ibid., 75.

⁵⁷Barth, *Romans*, 98-99.

⁵⁸Paul Tillich, *The Protestant Era*, trans. James Luther Adams (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), 55-65.

meaning not as something strange but as its own spiritual ground.”⁵⁹ Tillich referred to his cultural theology as “a fresh interpretation of the mutual immanence of religion and culture within each other.”⁶⁰ His concept of “transcending meaning” as the “spiritual ground” of culture is crucial. For Tillich “transcendence” was not something outside of human reality but entirely within the realm of time, history, and culture. Because “transcendence” is the “spiritual ground” of all finite reality, the concept of supernatural or special revelation was rejected by Tillich. “If it is the nature of fundamental religious experience to negate the entire cognitive sphere and affirm it through negation, then there is no longer any place for a special religious cognition, a special religious object, or special methods of religious epistemology.”⁶¹ Having discarded the concept of special revelation, Tillich redefined revelation within the context of his theonomy. “Revelation is the manifestation of the ultimate ground and meaning of human existence. It is not a matter of objective knowledge, of empirical research or rational inference.”⁶²

It is significant that the rejection of “special” revelation, the negation of the “entire cognitive sphere,” and the divorce of revelation from empirical, rational, objective knowledge go hand in hand. This would seem to indicate that for Tillich, reason is inadequate as a means of apprehending the “ultimate concern” of religion. He stated directly that rationality does not “give the content” of theology and that “every debate that remains only in the rational plane does not penetrate to the essence” of reality.⁶³ For Tillich reason is exclusively related to only one level of knowledge. “There is a level in life, the most and ultimately the only important one, which cannot be approached directly. It is the level of gnosis or sapientia or ‘wisdom,’ in distinction from the level of episteme or scientia or ‘science.’”⁶⁴ He approvingly cited examples of those who, like him, were engaged in the search for this gnostic knowledge at the deepest level of reality.

⁵⁹Ibid., 57.

⁶⁰Ibid., 55.

⁶¹Paul Tillich, “On the Idea of a Theology of Culture,” in *Paul Tillich: Theologian of the Boundaries*, ed. Mark Kline Taylor (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 41.

⁶²Paul Tillich, “The Problem of Theological Method,” in *Four Existential Theologians*, ed. Will Herberg (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday, 1958), 275.

⁶³Ibid., 276; Paul Tillich, “Basic Principles of Religious Socialism,” in *Political Expectation*, ed. James Luther Adams (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 61.

⁶⁴Tillich, *The Protestant Era*, 65.

Theories of intuitive knowledge, classicist and romantic revivals of ancient or medieval forms of thought, phenomenology, the philosophy of life (aesthetic or vitalistic), the "theory of Gestalt," some types of the psychology of the "unconscious"—all these seek for the inner power of things beyond (or below) the level at which they are calculable and dominable.⁶⁵

Ultimately, for Tillich the incalculable essence of all life was a revelation of the "infinite depth and the eternal significance of the present."⁶⁶ However, such an insight was "possible only in terms of a paradox, by faith, for, in itself, the present is neither infinite nor eternal."⁶⁷ Faith is an "immediate awareness" of the unconditional ground of being.⁶⁸ However, such faith is "empty," "undirected," "absolute," "undefinable," and impervious to doubt because it has "no special content" that can be scientifically or philosophically challenged.⁶⁹ For Tillich the ultimate concern of religion was not a matter of cognitive knowledge but of incomprehensible theonomous reality.

George Lindbeck: Rationally Vacuous Faith

The classic expression of postmodern or postliberal theology is George Lindbeck's *The Nature of Doctrine*.⁷⁰ In it he compares preliberal cognitive-propositionalism, liberal experiential-expressivism, and postliberal cultural-linguistic theories of doctrine.⁷¹ Cognitivism holds that "church doctrines function as informative propositions or truth claims about objective realities."⁷² This approach to religious truth was historically dominant until experiential-expressivism became the regnant viewpoint after Kant.⁷³ Expressivism represents a shift toward subjective experience.

Thinkers of this tradition all locate ultimately significant contact with whatever is finally important to religion in the prereflective experiential depths of the self and regard the public or outer features of religion as

⁶⁵Ibid., 71.

⁶⁶Ibid., 78.

⁶⁷Ibid.

⁶⁸Tillich, "The Problem of Theological Method," 276.

⁶⁹Ibid.; Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952), 176.

⁷⁰George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984). See also idem, *The Nature of Confession: Evangelicals and Postliberals in Conversation*, ed. Timothy R. Phillips and Dennis L. Okholm (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996).

⁷¹Ibid., 16, 112.

⁷²Ibid., 16.

⁷³Ibid., 19-20.

expressive and evocative objectifications (i.e., nondiscursive symbols) of internal experience.⁷⁴

Lindbeck finds both cognitive and expressive approaches to religion unsatisfactory. Apparently through ecumenical dialogue he felt “compelled by the evidence . . . to conclude that [doctrinal] positions that were once really opposed are now really reconcilable.”⁷⁵ This situation led to the search for a new paradigm in which to understand religious truth.

Postliberal cultural-linguistic theories of religion draw from “anthropological, sociological, and philosophical literature” to highlight those “respects in which religions resemble languages . . . and are thus similar to cultures.”⁷⁶ The result of this culturalism is that the conceptual element of religion is subordinated to other elements.

Thus while a religion’s truth claims are often of the utmost importance to it (as in the case of Christianity), it is, nevertheless, the conceptual vocabulary and the syntax or inner logic which determine the kinds of truth claims the religion can make. The cognitive aspect, while often important, is not primary.⁷⁷

The propositional truths of religion are not primary, because “its inner structure” is “far richer and more subtle than can be explicitly articulated.”⁷⁸ This “inner structure” is composed of “first-intentional” or subconscious “cognitive activities.”⁷⁹ Official church doctrines represent “second-order discourse” on “first-intentional uses of religious language.”⁸⁰ Lindbeck acknowledges that postliberalism leads to an “informational vacuity” in significant church doctrines.⁸¹ For example, notice how he deals with the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus:

The significatum of the claim that Jesus truly and objectively was raised from the dead provides the warrant for behaving in the ways recommended by the resurrection stories even when one grants the impossibility of specifying the mode in which those stories signify.⁸²

For culturalism “objective” truth is not related to the “significatum” (the

⁷⁴Ibid., 21.

⁷⁵Ibid., 15.

⁷⁶Ibid., 17-18.

⁷⁷Ibid., 35.

⁷⁸Ibid., 35.

⁷⁹Ibid., 38.

⁸⁰Ibid., 69.

⁸¹Ibid., 67.

⁸²Ibid., 67.

proposition) but to the “significator” (the language in which the proposition was articulated). Doctrines make “intrasystematic rather than ontological truth claims.”⁸³ The example that Lindbeck uses to illustrate “intrasystematic” truth is significant. “Similarly, to cite yet another parallel, the statement “Denmark is the land where Hamlet lived” is intrasystematically true within the context of Shakespeare’s play, but this implies nothing regarding ontological truth or falsity unless the play is taken as history.”⁸⁴

For culturalism the truth of Scripture is “immanent” as a “semiotic universe paradigmatically encoded in holy writ.”⁸⁵ This “categorical truth”⁸⁶ is rationally and informationally vacuous and thus is not subject to any external criteria of evaluation. Even Lindbeck recognizes the irrational tendencies of culturalism.

If there are no universal or foundational structures and standards of judgment by which one can decide between different religious and nonreligious options, the choice of any one of them becomes, it would seem, purely irrational, a matter of arbitrary whim or blind faith; and while this conclusion may fit much of the modern mood, it is antithetical to what most religions, whether interpreted in liberal, preliberal, or postliberal fashion, have affirmed.⁸⁷

It seems clear that for cultural-linguistic theories of religion, faith and reason continue to be conceived in a dualistic sense.

Hermeneutical Triumph of Irrationality

What are the implications of the idea that faith and reason function in two totally separated and mutually exclusive domains of the human consciousness? What are the ramifications of a dualistic anthropology which severs faith and reason? In particular, what is the significance of the concept that reason cannot plumb the depths of religion? Although comprehensive answers to these questions would require a more thorough treatment than can be given in this essay, at least one response can be advanced. In the interpretation of sacred texts the epistemological dualism of reason and faith and the identification of religion exclusively with the nonrational domain of the human mind lead to the hermeneutical triumph of the irrational. It would seem that an identification of religion with the nonrational mind might result in the treatment of a religious text as a mere rational, verbal, superficial expression of a profoundly deep and inexpressible experience. This deeper meaning of the religious text is rationally impenetrable and incommunicable and can only be apprehended by the

⁸³Ibid., 80.

⁸⁴Ibid., 65.

⁸⁵Ibid., 114-116.

⁸⁶Ibid., 51.

⁸⁷Ibid., 130.

nonrational, subconscious capabilities of the human mind. In this way the irrational mind comes to dominate and control the interpretive enterprise. This is, then, in reality the kind of thought that has come to dominate the postenlightenment theological enterprise.

As has been seen in the philosophical, psychological, and theological documents examined in this essay, postenlightenment thought has tended toward the complete severance of faith and rationality. While rendering faith's claims impervious to the criticism of historical reason, this situation has also placed faith squarely in the realm of the nonrational.

From this perspective it could be argued that the historical-critical study of the Word of God has led to the formation of a faith that is nonhistorical, nonpsychological, and nonconceptual. It would appear that in the contemporary period faith has become the equivalent of a stubborn insistence on the "truth" of that for which there is ultimately no rational foundation. It is not at all clear that this is a desirable development.

Biblical Anthropology Precludes Epistemological Dualism

A critique of the severance of faith and rationality must necessarily begin with an examination of the biblical materials relevant to this issue. Since it is beyond the scope of this study to offer a comprehensive treatment of this topic, the discussion is limited to a brief examination of a few of the relevant biblical themes and passages.

The first chapter of Genesis lays the foundation of a biblical anthropology. "The Lord God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being (Gen 2:7, literal translation).

In this perspective the human being is an indissoluble unity of material (dust of the ground) and immaterial (breath of life) components.⁸⁸ The physical, mental and spiritual existence of the individual is woven into a single fabric of being (1 Thess 5:23).⁸⁹ In the totality of its existence, in every sphere of its being, the human creature in its original perfection was made in the "image of God" (Gen 1:27). This represents the seminal expression of biblical anthropology and

⁸⁸This is often referred to as Hebrew "totality thinking." See James Barr, *The Garden of Eden and the Hope of Immortality* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 36-38. The classic study on the psychosomatic unity of human nature in Scripture is Oscar Cullmann, *Immortality of the Soul or Resurrection of the Dead? The Witness of the New Testament* (London: Epworth, 1958). For a modern treatment of this subject from an Adventist point of view, see Ginger Hanks-Harwood, "Wholeness," in *Remnant and Republic: Adventist Themes for Personal and Social Ethics*, ed. Charles W. Teel, Jr. (Loma Linda, CA: Loma Linda University, 1995), 127-144.

⁸⁹Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible texts are taken from the New International Version (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978).

is relevant to the severance of faith and rationality in at least two ways. First, it precludes any sharp dualism which would rigidly compartmentalize the various aspects of the human personality. The Genesis creation narrative does this by its insistence that the human person (*nephesh* = living being) is a composite unity of body and spirit. These dimensions of human existence are indivisible as far as their functions and spheres of operation are concerned. From this perspective the characterization of faith and reason as mutually exclusive and independent in operation is an illegitimate distinction. Second, as a creature in the "image of God" the human has, in every dimension of its being, a contact point with the transcendent Creator. Because of this, rationality is not in any sense to be considered as an inferior instrument in the quest for truth and understanding.

The creation of human beings in the image of God does not entirely exhaust the biblical perspective on the relationship of faith and reason. Although human beings are made in the image of God, they are not of the same nature as God. The categories that best express the distinction between Creator and creature are infinite and finite. The biblical witness is consistent in its insistence on the radical discontinuity of the human and the divine (1 Tim 1:17). The obliteration of this crucial distinction is the essence of idolatry (Rom 1:24-28).

An important extension of the distinction between the infinite God and the finite human being is the limitation of the powers of the human mind. Isaiah expressed this concept powerfully. "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the Lord. "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts" (Isa 55:8-9).⁹⁰ In this utterance the prophet employed the category of infinite space to convey the distinction between the mind of God and the mind of the human being. This insistence on the incomprehensibility of God might appear, on the surface, to bolster the rift between faith and reason that we have traced in this essay. If God is infinitely beyond all human powers of comprehension, surely the conceptual and rational character of theological knowledge must be secondary to relational, experiential, immediate knowledge.

The function of biblical language which emphasizes God's incomprehensible transcendence is not meant to relativize all rational epistemologies but to instill appropriate humility in the human mind. God's transcendence does not render conceptual, propositional knowledge meaningless but rather safeguards it from a presumption that borders on idolatrous arrogance.

⁹⁰Von Rad views this text as one among other "references to the incomprehensibility of Jahweh" in the OT. Gerhard Von Rad, *Old Testament Theology: The Theology of Israel's Historical Traditions*, trans. D.M.G. Stalker (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1962), 453. Brueggemann believes this text contains a "sapiential motif" which teaches that "God's capacity to hide things outdistances the capacity of the kings to find out" (Walter Brueggemann, *Old Testament Theology: Essays on Structure, Theme, and Text*, ed. Patrick D. Miller [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992], 295).

The insight that human thought is not divine is monotheism's answer to idolatrous polytheism. It is not a critique of the content of human thought but of its character. The comprehending powers of the human mind are not rendered insignificant because of their finite nature. However, a realization of the finiteness of the rational apparatus is a prerequisite for a stimulating mental encounter with the transcendent God.

Cultural Faith or Biblical Faithfulness?

Faith in the postenlightenment period, as was seen in the analysis of significant thinkers, is often explained in terms of paradox. It appears to have the connotation of an acceptance of that for which there is ultimately no empirical, historical, psychological, scientific, or rational verification. In this epistemology faith begins where reason ends. This aspect of the severance of faith and rationality should also be critiqued in the light of the biblical witness. The Bible does draw a sharp distinction between those who see only with the empirical eye and those who see with the eye of faith.⁹¹ In fact, the new birth or conversion is explicitly identified as the prerequisite for those who would "see" the kingdom of God (John 3:14). However, this distinction between natural and spiritual vision should not be interpreted ontologically. This would lead to an anthropological dualism that would strictly compartmentalize the spiritual insight and the physical optical capacity. Although the two modes of seeing are not identical, they are not unrelated. And for this reason faith is not completely divorced from the physical, visible, material realm of event and activity. As Paul wrote, "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him"—but God has revealed it to us by his Spirit. The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God."⁹²

According to the apostle Paul, that which was previously invisible, inaudible, and inconceivable had in his preaching of the gospel now become visible, audible, and conceivable by a gracious action of God's Spirit. It is in the realm of historical, sensual knowledge that God discloses transcendent meaning. The knowledge of God is mediated through the five senses in exactly the same way as all other knowledge. "For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse" (Rom 1:20).

Faith, in its future orientation, is related to that which is not yet visible or audible but only potential in the form of promise (Heb 11:1). However, this eschatological dimension of faith is presented in the context of a rehearsal of

⁹¹2 Cor 4:18; 5:7; Eph 1:18; Heb 1:1.

⁹²1 Cor 2:9, NIV. Cf. Job 12:22; Dan 2:22, 28; Amos 4:13.

the faith experiences of Israel's heroes, which in every instance are related to some specific historical event or activity (Heb 11:2ff). Thus we can reason that faith, even though oriented toward the future for its ultimate fulfillment, is grounded on the historically, psychologically, and rationally discernible events of the past history of the people of God.

Summary and Conclusion

In this essay we have traced the sharp dualism of faith and reason in postenlightenment theology. This dualism is rooted in philosophical and not biblical modes of thought. In every instance this dualism has led to a devaluation of the conceptual character of religious belief. The result is that a primary connotation of faith in the contemporary period is the acceptance of religious claims for which there is ultimately no convincing historical, conceptual, psychological, or rational evidence.

On one level this phenomenon appears to be some sort of intellectual gnosticism intent on subverting an entire dimension of human existence, i.e., the rational life of the mind. On another level such faith has been secured from the attacks of scientific criticism because reason has been granted its own autonomous sphere of operation which excludes the realm of faith, and vice versa. In such an epistemology faith and reason are neither friend nor foe. Although such neutrality may serve a positive political and social function in a pluralistic world, it does not appear to aid in the serious quest for truth. The question that must be addressed is whether the price of a rationally vacuous faith is not too high.

An intellectually satisfying and biblically sound alternative to the postenlightenment severance of faith and reason must be sought. Religious beliefs should not be embraced irrationally, and reason should not be employed unfaithfully. As persons made in the image of God and redeemed by the sacrifice of Christ, Christians should engage their affections and cognitions in the quest to understand and obey the psychologically, historically, conceptually, and ultimately rationally revealed will and Word of God.